

Outback Queensland



When locals talk about the mystical outback, it could mean just about anywhere west of the Great Dividing Range. Truth is, Queensland's outback does start just a few hundred kilometres in from the coast – and it's huge. It's out here that you'll discover a world away from the madding tourist crowds of the coast. This is what Dorothea Mackellar wrote about when she 'love[d] a sunburnt country'. There are no big towns out here – only small ones separated by long ribbons of road through vast chunks of pastoral land. Where it's possible to graze, this is sheep and cattle country of grasslands and low scrub drained by coolabah-lined rivers. Beneath it all lies the Great Artesian Basin, an enormous underground reservoir whose steaming, pungent waters provide life support for station life.

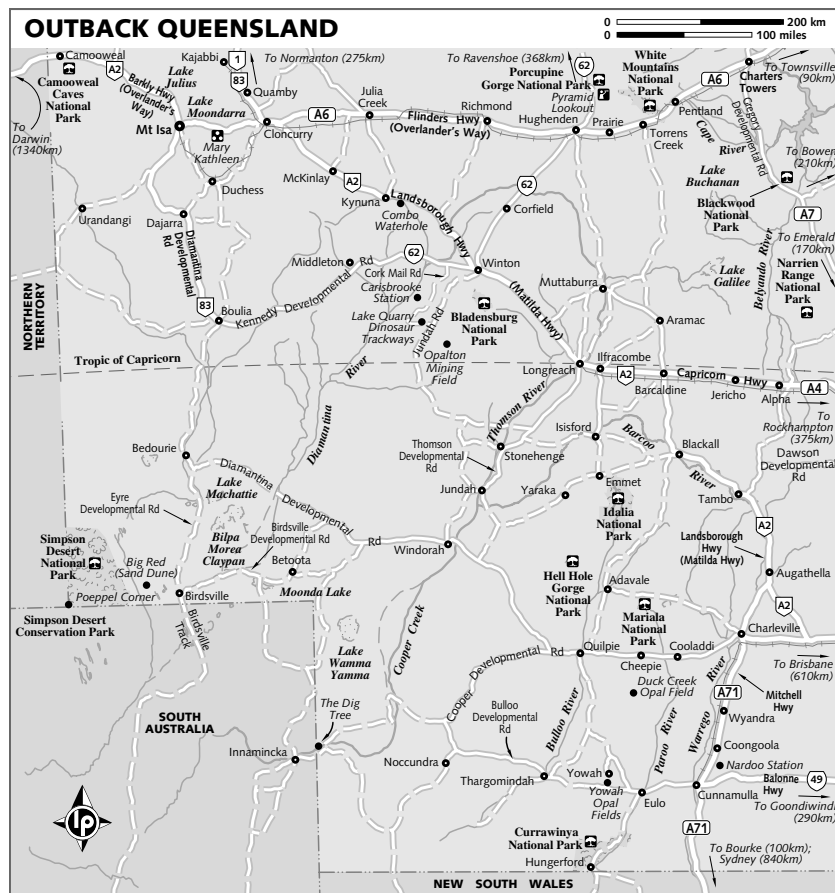
So what's in it for the traveller when you head west of the black stump? For many, the wide, shimmering, pale-blue horizons, fiery sunsets, star-studded night skies and the laconic characters you meet in an outback pub are more than enough reward for all those kilometres. Dinosaur fossils abound in this ancient land, opals can be unearthed by keen fossickers and most towns stage a bucking rodeo as part of their busy winter festival calendar. Attractions out here often showcase the pioneering spirit of the outback, such as the Australian Workers Heritage Centre in Barcaldine, the Stockman's Hall of Fame & Outback Heritage Centre in Longreach, and the Birdsville Working Museum. Travelling the outback isn't about ticking off the towns. It's about immersing yourself in the remoteness and timelessness of the place, escaping the crowds and taking a step back to a simpler time.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Descending into the **Hard Times Mine** (p430) and drilling a rock face at Mt Isa
- Wing-walking on a jumbo jet at the **Qantas Founders Outback Museum** (p437) then discovering the contributions and hardships of outback pioneers at Longreach's **Stockman's Hall of Fame** (p437)
- Following the dinosaur-fossil trail, including the prehistoric stampede, at **Lark Quarry** (p436)
- Making a short pub crawl of the iconic timber pubs of **Barcaldine** (p439)
- Staring at the multitude of stars above **Nardoo Station** (p443) while soaking in a warm artesian spa with a cold beer in hand
- Listening to a yarn and propping up the bar at Charleville's grand **Hotel Corones** (p442)
- Joining in the festivities and revelry at the absurdly popular **Birdsville Races** (p446)



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Climate & When to Go

The best time to travel in the outback is undoubtedly during the cooler months between April and October. Days are warm, with maximum temperatures seldom topping 30°C, and nights are cool to cold – temperatures below freezing are not uncommon. Summer is not only too hot to travel comfortably, with average maximum temperatures over 35°C and frequently topping 40°C, but it's also the time of the Wet, when monsoonal rains far away in the north can fill the region's hundreds of rivers and creeks, sometimes flooding vast areas of the Channel Country and cutting off roads. Rain itself is a relatively rare occurrence in the outback, with the southern areas averaging around 150mm a year.

Winter – mainly June to August – is also the time when local festivals, rodeos, race days and other activities are in full swing.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Qantas (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies daily to Mt Isa, while Qantaslink flies from Brisbane to Barcaldine, Blackall, Charleville and Longreach.

Macair (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) covers most of the outback with flights between Brisbane and Birdsville via Charleville, Quilpie and Windorah; Birdsville and Mt Isa with stops at Bedourie and Boulia; Brisbane and Thargomindah via Cunnamulla; Townsville and Mt Isa direct and via Hughenden,

Richmond, Julia Creek and Cloncurry; and from Townsville to Longreach via Winton. Macair also services the northwestern corner of the state, connecting Mt Isa to Cairns, Doomadgee, Burketown, and Normanton.

BUS

Greyhound Australia (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) has a regular coach service from Townsville to Mt Isa via Hughenden, and from Brisbane to Mt Isa via Roma. From Mt Isa, buses continue to Three Ways in the Northern Territory (NT); from there you can head north to Darwin or south to Tennant Creek and Alice Springs.

Emerald Coaches (☎ 1800 428 737; www.emeraldcoaches.com.au) makes the run from Rockhampton to Longreach (twice weekly) via Emerald.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you like driving, you're in for a treat here, because you'll be doing a lot of it! Although sparsely settled, the outback is well serviced by major roads – the Flinders and Barkly Hwys, which together form the Overlander's Way, connect northern Queensland with the NT; the Capricorn Hwy runs along the tropic of Capricorn from Rockhampton to Longreach; and the Landsborough and Mitchell Hwys, which together make up the epic Matilda Hwy, run from the New South Wales (NSW) border south of Cunnamulla up to Cloncurry and Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria. These main highways are sealed and gradually being improved – apart from the Channel Country in the southwest and the far northwest corner, you can easily travel through large swathes of the outback in a conventional vehicle in the Dry. During the Wet, even good roads can become flooded and impassable so always check conditions locally.

While access has vastly improved from the time of the early explorers, remember that this is harsh, unforgiving country, especially the further west you travel. No matter how safe you feel sitting in your air-con vehicle, always prepare for unexpected delays, extreme temperatures, scarcity of water and isolation. Away from the major highways, roads deteriorate rapidly; services are extremely limited and you must carry spare parts, fuel and water. To get off the beaten track, you're better off with a well-prepared 4WD, but always check road conditions locally and let someone know of your plans.

TRAIN

Queensland Rail (☎ 1300 131 722; www.traveltrain.com.au) has three trains servicing the outback, and all run twice weekly. The *Spirit of the Outback* runs from Brisbane to Longreach via Rockhampton, with connecting bus services to Winton; the *Westlander* runs from Brisbane to Charleville; and the *Inlander* runs from Townsville to Mt Isa.

THE OVERLANDER'S WAY

Passing through the Great Dividing Range and shooting west across an increasingly ironed-out landscape, the 775km Flinders Hwy from Townsville to Cloncurry is the major route across the north of the outback. From Cloncurry, the Barkly Hwy picks up where the Flinders Hwy leaves off and takes you to the low, red hills around Mt Isa, and beyond to Camooweal and the NT. Together they make up the Overlander's Way.

After Torrens Creek the scene flattens out to a seemingly endless backdrop of Mitchell grass plains. Along the way you pass some serious dinosaur-fossil country, with Hughenden and Richmond making the most of local fossil finds.

CHARTERS TOWERS TO CLONCURRY

The 246km route from Charters Towers to Hughenden is a former Cobb & Co coach run, and is dotted along the way with tiny townships that were established as stopovers for the coaches.

It's 105km to the small settlement of **Pentland**, and another 94km to the aptly named town of **Prairie**, which consists of a small cluster of houses, a train station and the quiet little **Prairie Hotel** (☎ 07-4741 5121; Flinders Hwy; unpowered/powered sites \$11/16.50; s/d \$38/50, motel units \$75/85; ♿). First licensed in 1884, this historic pub was originally a Cobb & Co coach stop. It's dripping with atmosphere and memorabilia, and even has a resident ghost.

Hughenden

☎ 07 / 1154

Hughenden is on the banks of the Flinders River, in the same spot where explorer William Landsborough camped in 1862 during his fruitless search for survivors from the Burke and Wills expedition. Today Hughenden is a busy commercial centre servicing the surrounding cattle, wool and grain industries,

DETOUR: PORCUPINE GORGE NATIONAL PARK

Slicing through the surrounding plains north of Hughenden, Porcupine Gorge National Park is a mini oasis in this ancient dry country. The gorge itself was formed by the flow of Porcupine Creek. Stop off at **Pyramid Lookout**, about 65km north of Hughenden, where a path takes you to a lookout point over the triangular sandstone rock outcrop. It's another 11km on to the **camp site** (per person/family \$4.50/18), where there are self-registration sites (book in advance at www.epa.qld.gov.au). From here you can walk down into the gorge via a reasonably well-formed path to the creek (usually running, but dry when we visited in November). It's a steep walk back but there are some fine rock formations to see and it's a peaceful setting.

Porcupine Gorge is just off the mostly unsealed Kennedy Development Rd but the stretch from Hughenden is sealed about half of the way and in reasonable condition the rest.

and reserves its claim to fame as an important region for dinosaur-fossil discoveries – don't be alarmed if you pass a large fibreglass dinosaur while wandering the streets.

The **Flinders Discovery Centre** (☎ 4741 1021; 37 Gray St; adult/child \$3.50/1; ☎ 9am-5pm) doubles as the local visitors centre and a well-presented museum. The star exhibit is a 7m replica skeleton of *Muttaborrasaurus*, one of the largest and most complete dinosaur skeletons ever found in Australia – it was named after the tiny town of Muttaborra, near where the fossils were found. There's also a short film on the creation of Porcupine Gorge (see above) and displays on local history, sheep farming and minerals.

Allan Terry Caravan Park (☎ 4741 1190; 2 Resolution St; unpowered/power sites \$14/17, s/d cabins \$25/35, en suite cabins from \$55; ☎) is a small but grassy park with budget cabins – the local swimming pool is next door.

Royal Hotel Resort (☎ 4741 1183; 21 Moran St; s/d \$71/82; ☎) has spotless motel units at the back and a lively bar and restaurant (mains \$15-25) at the front, open for lunch and dinner.

Hughenden hosts a **Country Music Festival** over the Easter weekend and a **campdraft** (an outback rodeo-type competition where a skilled horseman works a mob of cattle) in April.

Richmond

☎ 07 / 554

In a fossil-rich region at the heart of what was once an immense inland sea, Richmond is halfway between Townsville and Mt Isa, on the Flinders River. The area around Richmond is abundant in sandalwood, and a factory in the town processes the wood for export to Asia, where it is used for incense.

Kronosaurus Korner Information Centre (☎ 4741 3429; www.kronosauruskorner.com.au; 91 Goldring St;

☎ 8.30am-4.45pm) is the town's tourist office and a shrine to the thousands of dinosaur fossils unearthed in the region. With a huge model of a crocodile-like prehistoric reptile out the front, the impressive **Fossil Centre** (adult/child \$12/6), reached through the information centre, houses easily the best collection of marine fossils in the region, most found by local landholders. Pride of place goes to an almost-complete 4.25m pliosaur skeleton – one of Australia's best vertebrate fossils – and a partial skeleton of *Kronosaurus queenslandicus*, the largest known marine reptile to have ever lived here. A video explains some of the prehistory and the background of the finds.

If you want to find your own fossils, there's a small **fossicking area** in a quarry 12km north of town. The visitors centre can give you a free map.

Richmond hosts a biennial **Fossil Festival** in May of even years, featuring the 'World Moon Rock Throwing' competition (moon rocks are spherical limestone formations commonly found in the area), and a **rodeo** in April.

Lakeview Caravan Park (☎ 4741 3772; Goldring St; unpowered/power sites \$17/21, dm \$35, cabins \$55) is centrally located and overlooks a recreational lake.

Opposite the visitors centre, the **Ammonite Inn** (☎ 4741 3932; 88 Goldring St; s/d \$90/99; ☎) is the best of Richmond's half a dozen hotels and motels, and has a good restaurant and bar.

Julia Creek

☎ 07 / 368

It's another flat and featureless 144km through Mitchell grass plains from Richmond to Julia Creek, a small pastoral centre that takes pride in its source of water from the artesian basin – there's a flowing artesian bore just south of

the Flinders Hwy through town, and the local caravan park has an artesian spa.

The **visitor centre** (☎ 4746 7690; www.mckinlay.qld.gov.au; cnr Burke & Quarrel Sts; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat; ☎) has local information and a display on the endangered Julia Creek dunnart. This small, nocturnal marsupial is found only in the Mitchell grass country around Julia Creek and was thought to be extinct until 1992.

There are several accommodation options in town, including a caravan park, a motel and Gannon's Hotel Motel.

CLONCURRY

☎ 07 / 2384

Cloncurry's major claim to fame is as the birthplace of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, and a museum here tells the tale. A more dubious honour is that it had Australia's hottest recorded temperature, a scorching 53.1°C in January 1889. Fortunately it's not always that hot but the air conditioners and pub fridges still get a fair workout.

The 'Curry' was the centre of a copper boom in the 19th century, and was once the largest copper producer in the British Empire. Today it's a busy pastoral centre with a reinvigorated mining industry.

The **Mary Kathleen Park & Museum** (☎ 4742 1361; McIlwraith St; adult/child \$7.30/3.50; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun; closed weekends Oct-Apr) is the tourist information centre. Relics of the Burke and Wills expedition and displays of local rocks and minerals are housed in buildings transported from the former uranium mine of Mary Kathleen (see p430). You can also arrange guided tours of the working **Ernest Henry copper and gold mine** (adult/child \$15/5; ☎ 10am Wed & Fri May-Sep) here. The pit is expected to keep producing ore till 2012.

John Flynn Place (☎ 4742 4125; cnr Daintree & King Sts; adult/child \$8.50/4; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct) commemorates the pioneering work of Dr John Flynn in setting up the invaluable Royal Flying Doctor Service. The building incorporates an art gallery, a cultural centre and a theatre. Flynn's 1924 Dodge ute sits in the courtyard.

A little way out of town on the road to Julia Creek, **Gilbert Park Tourist Village** (☎ 4742 2300; www.gilbertpark.com.au; Flinders Hwy; unpowered/power sites \$16/20, cabins from \$70) is the best of Cloncurry's two van parks.

Wagon Wheel Motel (☎ 4742 1866; fax 4742 1819; 54 Ramsay St; s \$59-70, d \$74-85; ☎) is the oldest

licensed premises in this part of Queensland and is a friendly place with historic charm. There are new, queen-size motel units, and the excellent Prince of Wales Restaurant (mains \$12-27) serves up some of Cloncurry's best meals.

Built from rammed red earth and trimmed with corrugated iron, **Gidgee Inn** (☎ 4742 1599; www.gidgeeinns.com.au; Matilda Hwy; s/d \$118/128) is a modern, spotless motel with a good restaurant.

Bio Cafe & Cinema (☎ 4742 1770; 18 Scarr St; mains \$5-12; ☎ 9am-9pm Tue-Sun) is a local hangout with all-day breakfast, fish and chips and smoothies. Attached is a rustic open-air cinema showing movies on Friday and Saturday (\$11).

CLONCURRY TO NORMANTON

If you're heading to the Gulf, the sealed Burke Development Rd (northern stretch of the Matilda Hwy) heads north for 375km to Normanton.

Quamby, 43km north of Cloncurry, was once a Cobb & Co coach stop and a centre for gold mining, but now there's just the friendly **Quamby Hotel** (☎ 07-4742 5952; s/d \$15/30), with lots of rusting outback paraphernalia, a wooden veranda from where you can toast the occasional passing traffic, and basic rooms at the back. Quamby hosts a **rodeo** in late July.

Continuing north across the rolling hills you reach the turn-off to tiny **Kajabbi**, 29km from Quamby. The focal point is the **Kalkadoon Hotel** (☎ 07-4742 5979; r \$40), while Battle Mountain, about 30km south, is the site of the last stand of the Kalkadoon people, who actively resisted the white invasion during the 1880s.

Nearly everyone stops at the classic **Burke & Wills Roadhouse** (☎ 07-4742 5909; meals \$4-18; ☎ 7am-10pm; ☎), a full-service outback roadhouse with a bar, pool tables, truckie-sized steaks and basic accommodation (unpowered/power sites \$14/18, singles/doubles \$44/55).

From the roadhouse you can strike northwest along the Wills Developmental Rd to Gregory Downs (see p423). Continuing north to Normanton, the route continues over reasonably flat country. However once you get to **Bang Bang Jump-up**, 80km north of the roadhouse, and descend about 40m to the Gulf plains proper, you'll see the meaning of flat. From this point the road stretches across vast, billiard-table-flat plains covered in deep grass, which in the Dry is the colour of gold.

CLONCURRY TO MT ISA

This 117km stretch of the Barkly Hwy has a few interesting stops and detours. Beside the Corella River, 44km west of Cloncurry, there's a **memorial cairn** to the Burke and Wills expedition, which passed here in 1861. Another 1km down the road is the **Kalkadoon & Mitakoodi Memorial**, which marks an Aboriginal tribal boundary.

Another 9km on, you pass the site of **Mary Kathleen**, which was a uranium mining town from the 1950s to 1982 – in 1984 the buildings were sold off and the rest completely demolished, leaving a 'ghost town' with nothing in it but the remaining sealed roads and a few foundations. You can do a quick drive around the eerie remains.

The turn-off to **Lake Julius**, Mt Isa's reserve water supply, is 36km past Mary Kathleen. The lake is on the Leichhardt River, 90km of unsealed road from the highway. It's a popular (well-stocked) spot for fishing and water-skiing, and has a low-key camping resort (☎ 474 2598) below the dam wall.

MT ISA

☎ 07 / pop 18,857

The first things that catch your eye as you drive through the low hills into Mt Isa are the smoke stacks, pointing skyward and puffing away. This is a mining town and the immensely rich lead, zinc, silver and copper ore bodies lying beneath the red ridges west of the city have turned it into Queensland's biggest outback population. The sandy Leichhardt River divides 'townside' from 'mineside' – home from work.

Prospector John Campbell Miles discovered the first deposits here in 1923. He was recovering his wayward horse 'Hard Times' when he stumbled upon the heavy ore outcrop, or so the story goes. Since the ore deposits were large and of variable grade, working them profitably required the sort of investment only a company could afford. Mt Isa Mines (MIM) was founded in 1924. It was during and after WWII that Mt Isa really took off. Job opportunities attracted people of more than 50 different nationalities – mostly men – to this isolated corner and to that end 'The Isa', as it is known locally, has always been a rich multicultural town. Today the mine is part of a global mining empire and is among the world's top producers of silver, copper and zinc. Mt Isa is booming and it's worth spending a day or two to see what all the fuss is about.

Information

Book Country (☎ 4749 0400; 27 Simpson St, Isa Sq) Good bookshop with a decent travel section.

Mt Isa Base Hospital (☎ 4744 4444; 30 Camooweal St; ☎ 24hr)

Mt Isa News (☎ 4743 9105; 25b Miles St; per hr \$5.50; ☎ 7am-8pm) Internet café at the rear; space to plug in your own laptop.

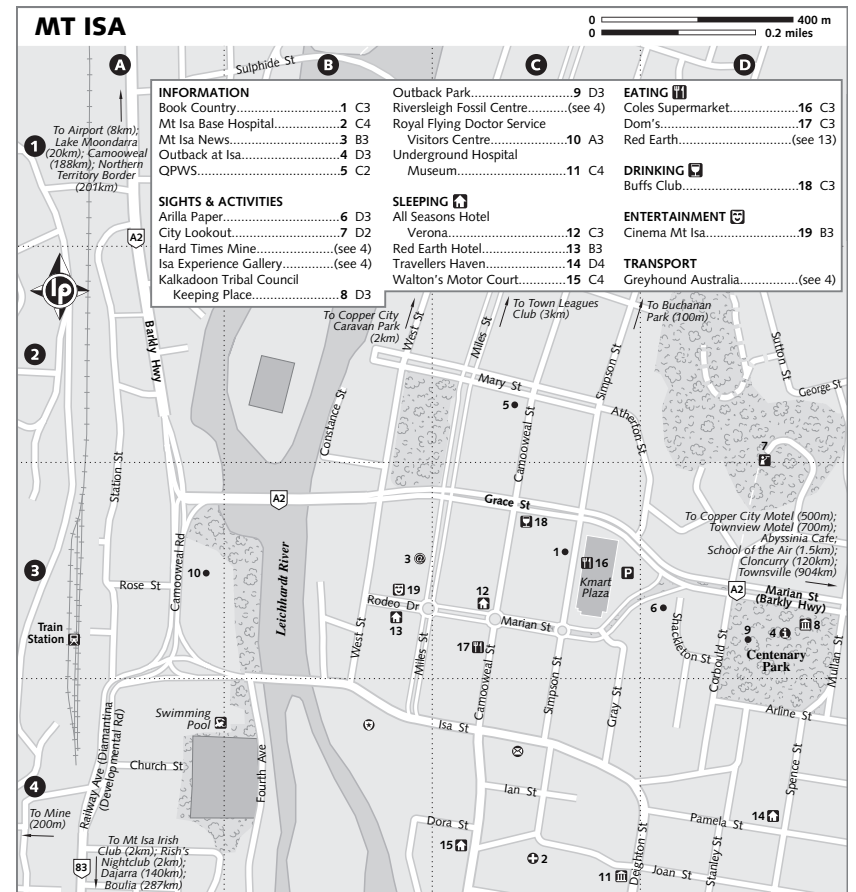
Outback at Isa (☎ 1300 659 660, 4749 1555; www.outbackatisa.com.au; 19 Marion St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) Visitors centre, internet café and the Greyhound long-distance bus terminal.

QPWS (☎ 4744 7888; cnr Mary & Camooweal Sts) Provides information on the national parks in the area, including Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) and Camooweal Caves.

Sights & Activities

To get a great perspective of Mt Isa, take the short drive or stiff walk off Hilary St to the **City Lookout**. There's a 360° view over the town, sprawled out across a flat valley, backed by a series of low hills and watched over by the brooding mine – the best time to see it is sunset as the mine lights flick on and the billowing smoke stacks are silhouetted against a burning orange outback sky.

Not so long ago, Mt Isa's main attraction was gazing out at the mine and wondering what the hell went on deep under the ground. These days you can find out in a remarkable simulated experience at **Outback at Isa** (☎ 1300 659 660, 4749 1555; www.outbackatisa.com.au; 19 Marion St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), which is the gateway to the **Hard Times Mine** (adult/child \$45/26). You get kitted out in fair-dinkum mining attire and head lamps, and descend into a purpose-built – and perfectly safe – underground mine complete with fuming, roaring and rattling machinery. The emphasis is on creating a real mining experience and your entertaining guide will most likely be a local miner. It's hands-on, noisy, damp, dark and great fun. Note that kids must be seven years or older. Also in the complex is the fascinating **Riversleigh Fossil Centre** (adult/child \$10/6.50), where you can see a recreation of Australia's prehistoric fauna, actual fossils, and a working fossil lab. The centre also houses the **Isa Experience Gallery** and **Outback Park** (admission for both adult/child \$10/6.50), showcasing the natural, indigenous and mining heritage of Mt Isa. There's a good-value, two-day Deluxe Pass (adult/child \$55/36) that combines all the attractions. Another option is Lunch Under Isa (\$65/43.50), which includes entry to all of the attractions, plus lunch in the underground crib room.



The **Underground Hospital Museum** (☎ 4743 3853; Joan St; adult/child \$10/4; ☎ 10am-2pm Apr-Sep) is an interesting wartime capsule. With the threat of Japanese bombing raids in WWII, and a ready supply of miners and equipment, Mt Isa Hospital decided to go underground. The bombs never came but the 1940s hospital was preserved and you can descend under the hill to see what the casualty ward might have looked like.

Arilla Paper (☎ 4743 0084; cnr Shackleton & Marian Sts) is an indigenous women's cooperative, where paper is handcrafted from native plants such as the hardy spinifex. There's a shop and gallery displaying the interesting products. The **Kalkadoon Tribal Council Keeping Place** (☎ 4749 1001; Marion St; admission \$2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri),

adjacent to Outback at Isa, has a small gallery displaying local indigenous art, history and artefacts.

The **Royal Flying Doctor Service Visitors Centre** (☎ 4743 2800; Barkly Hwy; admission by \$2.50 donation; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) shows how the needs of remote communities are serviced. Mount Isa's **School of the Air** (☎ 4744 9100; Kalkadoon High School, Abel Smith Pde; admission \$2; ☎ tour 10am Mon-Fri during school term) covers an area of around 800,000 sq km, teaching to kids in remote communities on the airwaves and, more recently, with virtual classrooms over the internet. The guided tour includes listening in on a lesson.

Lake Moondarra, 16km north of town, is a popular spot for swimming, boating, water-skiing, fishing and bird-watching. It's difficult

to find, but ask the locals about the **Poison Waterhole**, a dramatic 15m-high, water-filled quarry east of town.

Tours

Various tours and activities can be booked through the information desk at Outback at Isa (p430).

Yididi Aboriginal Guided Tours offers all-inclusive three-day camping safaris to Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park including the Riversleigh fossil sites (adult/child \$770/385).

Westwing Aviation (☎ 4743 2144; www.westwing.com.au; Mt Isa Airport) takes passengers on its mail-run services. Wednesday's run (\$330, 9am to 5.30pm) to the Gulf has a dozen stops. Friday's run (\$220, 9am to 1pm) flies south-west over the Barkly Tablelands.

Mt Isa Mines Surface Tour (☎ 11am Mon-Sat; adult/child \$27.50/16.50) gives you a taste of the real mining experience and an insight into what makes Mt Isa tick. The bus tour takes you right through the mining, milling and smelting processes. Book at Outback at Isa (p430); tours depart from here.

Festivals & Events

Mt Isa is home to Australia's largest **rodeo** (www.isarodeo.com.au), held at Buchanan Park over the second weekend in August, following on from the Quamby and Cloncurry rodeos. Cheer on the best bronco and bull riders, steer wrestlers and ropers in the state!

Sleeping

Much of Mt Isa's accommodation can be booked solid with mine workers and business travellers, so it's worth calling ahead. For campers, the town has six caravan parks.

Copper City Caravan Park (☎ 4743 4676; 185 West St; unpowered/powerd sites \$17/19, en suite sites \$23, cabins \$53; ☎ ☎) This excellent, shady park backs onto the Warrego about 2km north of the town centre. Facilities include en suite van sites and a camp kitchen.

Travellers Haven (☎ 4743 0313; www.users.bigpond.net.au/travellershaven; 75 Spence St; dm/s/d \$25/40/60; ☎ ☎ ☎) Mt Isa's only real hostel has a mixture of backpackers stopping over on the long haul and itinerant workers. It's nothing flash but it's clean enough and friendly with a decent kitchen, lounge area and pool.

Walton's Motor Court (☎ 4743 2377; 23 Camooweal St; d from \$82; ☎ ☎) One of Mt Isa's better-value

motels is in a quiet location and has standard-issue motel rooms and some self-contained units sleeping up to five people.

Copper City Motel (☎ 4743 3904; www.ccmotel.net; 105 Butler St; s/d \$97/109; ☎ ☎ ☎) This friendly, clean motel has a lovely leafy pool area, cable TV, clean rooms and undercover parking. Self-contained apartments are also available.

Townview Motel (☎ 4743 3328; 103 Marian St; s/d \$120/148; ☎ ☎) The Townview is a tidy, modern motel on the main road through town. Rooms range from standard to spacious spa suites. Its little restaurant has a big reputation.

All Seasons Hotel Verona (☎ 4743 3024; www.allseasons.com.au; cnr Rodeo Dr & Camooweal St; r \$139-195; ☎ ☎) The Verona's box-like facade conceals an ageing but comfortable hotel with good views of the mine from some of the spacious rooms. Ask about special offers on Friday and Saturday nights.

Red Earth Hotel (☎ 1800 603 488; www.redearth-hotel.com.au; Rodeo Dr; d \$195-250; ☎ ☎) The refurbished Boyd Hotel is now the boutique Red Earth, Mount Isa's smartest address. Stylish modern decor in earthy tones combines with good business facilities such as broadband internet. The top rooms have private balconies and spas, and there's an excellent restaurant and coffee shop here.

Eating

Mt Isa is manna for fast-food lovers who haven't had a fix since the coast – McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut are here. Most other dining options are in the town's clubs, or attached to hotels and motels.

Dom's (☎ 4743 4444; 79 Camooweal St; mains \$15-30; ☎) from 6pm Tue-Sat; coffee shop 8.30am-3pm Tue-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) The Isa's most intimate night out, Dom's is an authentic little Italian place serving classics such as pizza and calzones, antipasto, linguini and risotto. By day it's a café with great coffee and cakes. Book ahead for dinner.

Abyssinia Cafe (Townview Motel; ☎ 4743 3328; cnr Marion & Kookaburra Sts; mains \$16-25; ☎) dinner Mon-Sat) Decked out like a thatched hut and swathed in African textiles and decor, Abyssinia styles itself as a world-food restaurant, but the emphasis is firmly on spicy Ethiopian cuisine – something you'd be hard pressed to find anywhere else in the Australian outback.

Mt Isa Irish Club (☎ 4743 2577; www.theirishclub.com.au; Nineteenth Ave) Established by Irish miners

in 1956, the Irish Club has grown into a big venue with bars, a coffee shop, a restaurant and a nightclub. The Tram Stop (mains \$6-10) is a quirky coffee shop in an old Melbourne tram open 10am to 10pm; Keane's Bar & Grill (mains \$23-30) is a more formal bistro open for dinner with good meals including aged beef and fresh seafood; or you can fill up at the buffet in the Blarney Bar, open breakfast, lunch and dinner. The club is 2km south of the centre on the road to Boulia.

Red Earth (☎ 4749 8888; mains \$25-32; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The elegant 50-seat restaurant at the boutique Red Earth Hotel summons up fine Mod Oz cuisine with dishes like lamb rump, oven-roasted quail, and waffles for breakfast. There's also a coffee shop and a cocktail bar at the hotel.

For self-caterers there's a large **Coles Supermarket** (Simpson St; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat) in the Kmart Plaza.

Drinking & Entertainment

Sign in to clubs as a guest – they're for members or 'genuine outta-towners'; all have free courtesy buses.

Bufs Club (☎ 4743 2365; www.buffs.com.au; cnr Grace & Camooweal Sts; ☎) 10am-midnight Sun-Mon, to 2am Fri & Sat) The Carpentaria Buffalo Club is the Isa's most central, with the busy Billabong Bar, a sundeck, a pokie lounge and live entertainment on weekends.

Town Leagues Club (☎ 4749 5455; www.townies.com.au; Ryan Rd) At the north end of town, Townies has a big beer garden with little thatched shelters, a sports bar and a restaurant.

Rish's Nightclub (☎ 4743 2577; Nineteenth Ave) At the bountiful Irish Club, the Rish is Isa's biggest nightclub, with a disco and karaoke bar; free entry before 11pm. If that's too much, go upstairs and kick back in the piano bar.

Cinema Mt Isa (☎ 4743 2043; www.cinemaisa.com.au; 22 Rodeo Dr; adult/child \$12/8.50; ☎) Tue-Sun) Latest mainstream movies shown in the evenings, with matinees on Saturday and Sunday.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Mt Isa Airport (☎ 4743 4598; www.mountisairport.com.au; Barkly Hwy) is 8km north of town. A taxi to town costs about \$15. **Qantas** (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies daily between Brisbane and Mt Isa (from \$250; two hours). **Macair** (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) flies direct from Mt Isa to Townsville, Cairns, Birdsville, Normanton,

Burketown, Cairns, Cloncurry, Richmond and Hughenden.

BUS

The long-distance bus terminal is conveniently central at Outback at Isa. **Greyhound Australia** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) has a regular service to Townsville (\$140, 12 hours) via Hughenden, and to Brisbane (\$187, 26 hours) via Longreach and Roma. For Cairns, change at Townsville. Services also run west to Three Ways in the NT, from where you can head north to Darwin (\$346, 21½ hours) or south to Alice Springs (\$283, 13½ hours).

There are no buses heading north to Burketown, Normanton or Karumba, and no local bus services.

TRAIN

Queensland Rail (☎ 1300 131 722; www.traveltrain.com.au) operates the *Inlander* train twice a week between Townsville and Mt Isa. It departs Townsville on Sunday and Thursday and leaves Mt Isa on Monday and Friday. The full journey takes about 20 hours and costs \$121/180/277 in economy seat/economy sleeper/1st-class sleeper.

CAMOOWEAL & AROUND

☎ 07 / 199

Camooweal, 188km west of Mt Isa and just 13km east of the NT border, was founded in 1884 as a service centre for the cattle stations of the Barkly Tablelands. It's the turn-off for Camooweal Caves National Park, and you can also turn north here for Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park, Gregory Downs and Burketown.

Once you have seen the **Shire Hall** (1922) and checked out **Freckleton's General Store**, you've pretty much covered the sights. The **Camooweal Roadhouse** (☎ 4748 2155; Barkly Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$11/18, s/d \$28/44, motel units \$70/80; ☎) has comfortable motel rooms and a caravan park.

About 8km south of town, along a rough road, is the entrance to **Camooweal Caves National Park** (www.epa.qld.gov.au; admission free). This network of unusual caves with sinkhole openings, which floods during the wet season, is for experienced cavers only. There's a self-registration camping ground (per person \$4.50) with toilets, and information is available from **QPWS Mt Isa** (☎ 4744 7888).

The **Drovers Camp Festival** is a fun outback event held in Camooweal in late August with country music, bush poetry and bronco branding.

THE MATILDA HIGHWAY

The Matilda Hwy is an epic north-south route through outback Queensland, passing through Crocodile Dundee's hotel, dinosaur-fossil sites, vast cattle stations and some of the outback's biggest attractions such as the Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach and the Australian Workers Heritage Centre in Barcaldine. In its entirety, the sealed highway runs north from the Queensland-NSW border for more than 1700km to Karumba on the Gulf.

CLONCURRY TO WINTON

About 14km east of Cloncurry, the narrow Landsborough Hwy turns off the Flinders Hwy and heads southeast to Winton via the one-pub towns of McKinlay and Kynuna. The first section of this 341km route, from Cloncurry to McKinlay, passes through a rugged and rocky landscape of low, craggy hills; these gradually give way to the flat, grassy plains that typify most of the outback.

McKinlay is a tiny settlement that would probably have been doomed to eternal insignificance had it not been used as a location in the amazingly successful 1986 movie *Crocodile Dundee*, and the 1988 sequel. The **Walkabout Creek Hotel** (☎ 4746 8424; Landsborough Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/24, s/d \$77/88; 🍷) has some fading photos and movie memorabilia on the walls, but is otherwise a pretty ordinary outback pub. There's a dusty camping ground out the back and basic air-con dongas (small transportable buildings).

Kynuna, another 74km southeast, isn't much bigger than McKinlay, but it has a cracking pub, a roadhouse and some 'Banjo' Paterson connections. The **Blue Heeler Hotel** (☎ 4746 8650; Landsborough Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$5/10, s/d \$45/75; 🍷) makes a welcome stop for a cold beer and must boast the world's most remote surf life-saving club! There are spotless air-con motel units, and camp sites in the adjacent Jolly Swag-van Park.

AB 'Banjo' Paterson is said to have visited the **Combo Waterhole** in 1895 before he wrote 'Waltzing Matilda' – and it may be the billabong from the song. The turn-off is sign-

posted; it's off the highway about 12km east of Kynuna on Dagworth Station.

WINTON

☎ 07 / pop 1321

Winton makes the most of its connections to 'Banjo' Paterson and Australia's unofficial anthem 'Waltzing Matilda', reputedly written after a visit to the region and first performed at the North Gregory Hotel. It's also the centre of a dinosaur-fossil-rich region (the rubbish bins are plastic dinosaur feet), and it's the closest town to Lark Quarry (p436). Winton's other claim to fame is as the official birthplace of Qantas airlines in 1920. Today, the cattle- and sheep-raising centre is important as a railhead for transporting livestock brought from the Channel Country by road train.

Sights & Activities

Winton's biggest attraction is the **Waltzing Matilda Centre** (☎ 4657 1466; www.matildacentre.com.au; 50 Elderslie St; adult/child/family \$19/8/42; ☎ 9am-5pm), which doubles as the visitors centre. For a museum devoted to a song, there's a surprising amount here, including an indoor billabong recreation – complete with a squatter, troopers and a jolly swagman – talking billy cans, a nifty hologram display oozing nationalism (with guest appearances from Slim Dusty, John Williamson and Herb Elliott), and the **Jolly Swagman** statue – a tribute to the unknown swagmen who lie in unmarked graves in the area. The centre also houses the **Outback Gallery** and the **Quantilda Pioneer Place**, which has a huge collection of fascinating artefacts as well as displays on the founding of Qantas.

The **Corfield & Fitzmaurice Building** (☎ 4657 1486; 63 Elderslie St; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat, 11am-3pm Sun) is a National Trust-classified former general store. It houses a craft cooperative with a gem and mineral collection, a life-sized re-creation of the dinosaur stampede that occurred at what is now Lark Quarry, and a dinosaur-fossil display.

The **Royal Theatre** (☎ 4657 1296; 73 Elderslie St; adult/child \$6.50/4; ☎ 8pm Wed Apr-Sep), at the rear of Wookatook Gift & Gem, is a wonderful open-air theatre with canvas-slung chairs, corrugated tin walls and a star-studded ceiling. It plays a one-hour 'nostalgia' show of old-time movie clips and cartoons once a week. And you can't miss the **world's biggest deck chair** in the corner – about 10m high, it has its name in the Guinness Book of Records

ONCE A JOLLY SWAGMAN

Written in 1895 by AB 'Banjo' Paterson (1864-1941), 'Waltzing Matilda' is widely regarded as Australia's unofficial national anthem. While not many can sing the official anthem, 'Advance Australia Fair', without a lyric sheet, just about every Aussie knows the words to the strange ditty about a jolly swagman who jumped into a billabong and drowned himself rather than be arrested for stealing a jumbuck (sheep). But what the hell does it mean?

To understand the song's origins, it has to be seen in the political context of its time. The 1890s were a period of political change in Queensland. Along with nationalistic calls for Federation, economic crisis, mass unemployment and severe droughts dominated the decade. An ongoing battle between pastoralists and shearers led to a series of strikes that divided the state and led to the formation of the Australian Labor Party to represent workers' interests.

In 1895 Paterson visited his fiancée in Winton, and together they travelled to Dagworth Station south of Kynuna, where they met Christina McPherson. During their stay they went on a picnic to the Combo Waterhole, a series of billabongs on the Diamantina River, where Paterson heard stories about the violent 1894 shearers' strike on Dagworth Station. During the strike rebel shearers had burned seven woolsheds to the ground, leading the police to declare martial law and place a reward of £1000 on the head of their leader, Samuel Hofmeister. Rather than be captured, Hofmeister killed himself near the Combo Waterhole.

Paterson later wrote the words to 'Waltzing Matilda' to accompany a tune played by Christina McPherson on a zither. While there is no direct proof he was writing allegorically about Hofmeister and the shearers' strikes, a number of prominent historians have supported the theory and claimed the song was a political statement. Others maintain it is just an innocent but catchy tune about a hungry vagrant, but the song's undeniable anti-authoritarianism, and the fact that it was adopted as an anthem by the rebel shearers, weigh heavily in favour of the historians argument.

(we reckon it should be out on the main street like the Big Banana). Even if you're not here on a Wednesday, take the **Opal Walk** (admission \$3; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat Oct-Mar), an illuminated passageway display of opals and opal mining, and poke your head into the theatre.

Arno's Wall (Vindex St) is Winton's quirkiest attraction: a 70m-long work-in-progress by local sculpture artist Arno Grotjahn featuring a huge range of recycled industrial and household items, from TVs to motorbikes, ensnared in the mortar. Find it behind the North Gregory Hotel.

Sunset Opal Factory (☎ 4657 1655; 46 Elderslie St), next to the Matilda Centre, is the best place to see the sort of opals that can be found in the region. There are opal-cutting demonstrations and opal jewellery or stones for sale, including the valuable boulder opals found only in outback Queensland.

Festivals & Events

Winton's major event is the five-day **Outback Festival** held every odd year in the September school holidays, and the **Bush Poetry Festival**, held annually at the same time. The annual **Winton Camel Races** are held in late July.

Sleeping & Eating

Matilda Country Tourist Park (☎ 4657 1607; 43 Chirnside St; unpowered/powerd sites \$18/23, cabins \$75; 🍷 🍷) This friendly camping ground at the northern end of town puts on regular campfire meals, complete with bush poetry and yarns.

North Gregory Hotel (☎ 4657 1375; www.babs.com.au/northgregoryhotel; 67 Elderslie St; s/d \$44/55, motel units \$77; 🍷) The North Gregory holds its place in history as the venue where 'Waltzing Matilda' reportedly was first performed on 6 April 1895, although the original building burnt down in 1900. The atmosphere in the front bar (TAB and sports screens) is a bit disappointing but it retains some charm. There are basic pub rooms and comfortable en-suite motel rooms upstairs, and the rates include a continental breakfast. There's also free van parking at the rear. The restaurant (mains \$19 to \$23) serves hearty bistro meals of steak, barra and chicken Kiev in the bar or the dining room and puts on an all-you-can-eat buffet dinner (\$15.50) from April to September.

Banjo's Holiday Units (☎ 4657 1213; Manuka St; units \$70-80; 🍷 🍷) These neat little individual holiday units sleep up to four people and have kitchenettes, inhouse movies and private verandas.

THE DINOSAUR TRAIL

Back in 1963 a farmer on Rosebury Downs Station unearthed some fossils that would piece together to become *Muttaborrasaurus*, at the time the largest dinosaur skeleton discovered in Australia. Around the same time, a station owner discovered fossilised footprints at Lark Quarry that would prove to be the world's only recorded evidence of a dinosaur stampede. In 1989, another grazer discovered the Richmond pliosaur at Marathon Station, sparking intense interest in fossil finds. As recently as 2005, the largest dinosaur bones ever found in Australia – from a titanosaurus – were found near Eromanga in southwest Queensland and are now on display in the Queensland Museum.

Outback Queensland is quite literally littered with dinosaur fossils. Landowners play amateur palaeontologist, while scientific researchers sift through the dirt in a quest to unlock the mysteries of Queensland's dinosaur past. More than 100 million years ago, much of central Queensland was a vast inland sea harbouring marine dinosaurs such as pliosaurs and ichthyosaurs, while the area around it was lush and tropical – home to many more land-dwelling species long since extinct.

Today you can visit several excellent museums and fossil sites on a 'dinosaur trail'. Hughenden, Richmond and Winton form a triangle of dinosaur discoveries and each have museums devoted to fossil finds, while the Lark Quarry Dinosaur Trackways are found 100km southwest of Winton. As well as showing you some of the most complete dinosaur skeletons found in Australia, local enthusiasts can point you to potential fossil sites. Who knows, you might find the next big thing.

Twilight Cafe (☎ 4657 1301; 68 Elderslie St; mains \$5-20; ☎ 8am-2pm & 3-8pm) Take a bottle of wine along to the best little café in Winton. The menu is simple enough with steaks, burgers, pizzas and good breakfast fare, and there's a nice walk-through photographic gallery attached.

Getting There & Away

Macair (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) flies to Townsville and Longreach. **Greyhound Australia** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) operates a daily bus from Winton to Brisbane (\$159, 19½ hours) and Mt Isa (\$87, six hours). Buses depart from the Waltzing Matilda Centre.

AROUND WINTON

About 95 million years ago – give or take a few million – when this region was lush, wet and tropical, a herd of small dinosaurs got spooked by a predator and scattered. The resulting stampede left thousands of footprints in the stream bed, which nature remarkably conspired to fossilise and preserve. The **Lark Quarry Dinosaur Trackways** (☎ 4657 1188; www.dinosaurtrackways.com.au; guided tour adult/child \$10/6; ☎ 10am, noon & 2pm), 110km southwest of Winton, is outback Queensland's mini Jurassic Park, where you can see the remnants of the prehistoric stampede. Protected by a sheltered walkway, the site can only be visited by guided tour, con-

ducted three times a day. There are no facilities to stay (or eat) but it's a well signposted drive on the unsealed but well-maintained Winton–Jundah road, suitable for 2WD vehicles in the Dry. Contact the Waltzing Matilda Centre at Winton to book tours.

If you want to go in search of boulder opals, **Opalton Opstop** (☎ 4657 1418; camping \$10, d \$70; ☎) is a caravan park near the Opalton Mining Field, 112km south of Winton. There are toilets, showers and a shop, and the owners can direct you to the fossicking fields. Organise fossicking gear in Winton at Sunset Opal Factory (p435). The remote gemfield is reached by an unsealed road, which is passable to conventional vehicles in the Dry – check road conditions at Winton. It's possible to do an interesting loop from Winton via Lark Quarry and Opalton, a 320km round trip.

Carisbrooke Station (☎ 4657 3885; www.carisbrooketours.com.au; unpowered sites per person \$10, tw without/with en suite \$60/70; ☎) is a sheep and cattle property 85km southwest of Winton where you can experience outback station life. There's camping and accommodation in self-contained units, and the owners run tours of the area. To get there from Winton, head 35km down the Boullia road, turn left at Cork Mail Rd (unsealed) and continue another 50km.

LONGREACH

☎ 07 / pop 3673

Smack in the centre of Queensland's outback and in a prosperous wool- and beef-producing region, Longreach is a busy little town with some big attractions. It was the pioneering home of Qantas early last century, but these days it's equally renowned for the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame & Outback Heritage Centre. The Thomson River offers fishing and cruises, and you can climb on board for a Cobb & Co coach ride.

The **Tropic of Capricorn** passes through Longreach – there's a marker outside the council offices on Eagle St. North of here is the 'torrid' zone, south is the temperate zone.

Orientation & Information

The main street is Eagle St. You'll notice that all streets are named after birds – in fact, north-south streets are named after land birds and east-west streets after water birds.

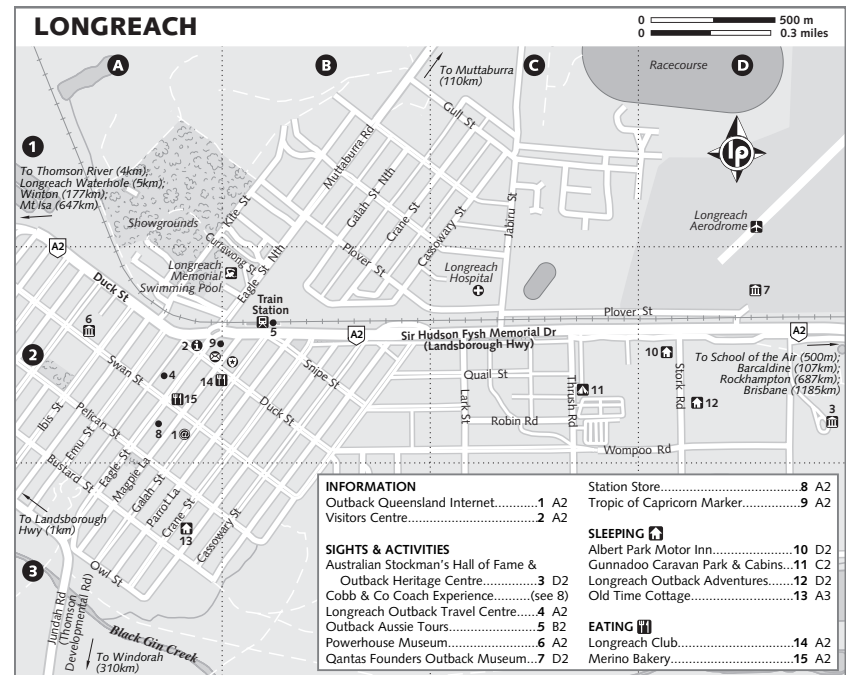
Outback Queensland Internet (☎ 4658 3937; 127 Galah St; per half hr \$3; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Internet access and space to plug in your own laptop.

Visitors centre (☎ 4658 3555; 99 Eagle St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun, closed Sat & Sun Oct-Mar)

Sights & Activities

The **Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame & Outback Heritage Centre** (☎ 4658 2166; www.outbackheritage.com.au; Landsborough Hwy; adult/child/family \$22.50/12/50; ☎ 9am-5pm) is housed in a beautifully conceived building, 2km east of town towards Barcaldine. The centre was built as a tribute to the early explorers and stockmen, but has gradually developed to encompass much more. There are several themed galleries covering Aboriginal culture, European exploration (there's a nifty map showing the trails of Burke and Wills, Ludwig Leichhardt, Ernest Giles and co), pioneering settlers and, of course, stockmen and drovers. Although well presented, there's a lot of information here, so it's just as well the admission ticket is valid for two days.

It's not hard to spot the **Qantas Founders Outback Museum** (☎ 4658 3737; www.qfom.com.au; Landsborough Hwy; adult/child/family \$18/9/40; ☎ 9am-5pm) as you drive along the highway east of



town – it's the one with the enormous Boeing 747-200B jumbo jet parked out the front. The museum is actually alongside Longreach's airport and includes a life-sized replica of an Avro 504K, the first aircraft owned by the fledgling Australian airline. Interactive multimedia and working displays tell the history of Qantas. Next door, in the original 1921 Qantas hangar where six DH-50 biplanes were assembled in 1926, is a mint-condition DH-61. Towering over everything is the bright and shiny retired **747 Jumbo** (adult/child/family \$18/9/40; museum & jumbo tour \$32/16/69; ☎ 9.30am 11am, 1pm & 3pm) where you can step on board and take a guided tour through the cockpit, the first-class cabin and the cargo hold. More adventurous is the **wing walk** (adult/child \$80/50), bookings essential, where you get to tour the jet, then venture out onto the wing wearing a safety harness.

If you like big old machines, the **Powerhouse Museum** (☎ 4658 3933; 12 Swan St; adult/child/family \$8/3/20; ☎ 2-5pm daily Apr-Oct, Sat & Sun Nov-Mar, closed Dec & Feb), in Longreach's former power station, has the goods – huge old diesel and gas-vacuum engines that were used until 1985, as well as local history relics.

School of the Air (☎ 4658 4222; Landsborough Hwy; adult/child \$4.50/2.50; ☎ tours 9am & 3.30pm) takes you into a virtual outback classroom. Guided tours include listening in on a live lesson.

You can smell the oiled leather in the **Station Store** (☎ 4658 2006; 126 Eagle St), which sells stockman's gear, saddles, riding boots and Aussie bush hats and clothing. At the back is the rustic Changing Station Cafe, and the Australian Bush Picture Show (adult/child \$7.50/3.50), where you can watch a classic film. From April to September, this is the place to book on the **Cobb & Co Coach Experience** (adult/child \$44/22; ☎ 10am & 1.30pm Mon-Fri), a 45-minute ride on an authentic replica Cobb & Co coach, which includes morning and afternoon tea and the bush movie. You can also ride the coach on an overnight swag campout with dinner and breakfast included (\$165/85).

Tours

Longreach Outback Travel Centre (☎ 4658 1776; www.lotc.com.au; 115a Eagle St) runs a number of tours including Billabong Cruises (adult/child \$50/36), a sunset cruise on the Thomson River, followed by a two-course meal under the stars and campfire entertainment. The Longreach Lookabout tour (adult/child \$187/154) combines the town's main attractions with the

dinner cruise. There's also an outback station tour to Ilfracombe (\$109/79).

Outback Aussie Tours (☎ 4658 3000; www.oat.net.au; Landsborough Hwy), on the railway platform, offers a variety of multiday tours from the five-day Longreach and Winton tour (from \$1879) to outback garden tours and rail journeys.

Festivals & Events

Longreach, along with Winton, Barcaldine and Ilfracombe, hosts **Easter in the Outback** annually. Longreach also hosts the **Outback Muster Drivers Reunion** on the Labour Day weekend in May.

Sleeping

You can camp for free (four nights maximum) at the Longreach Waterhole, a popular fishing spot on the Thomson River, 5km northwest of town on the road to Winton. The only facilities are barbecues in the adjacent park.

Gunnadoo Caravan Park & Cabins (☎ 4658 1781; 12 Thrush Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$25/27, cabins \$80-150; ☎ ☎) This exceptionally neat, modern park is hard to beat for its three artesian in-ground spa pools in a cave-grotto setting.

Longreach Outback Adventures (☎ 4651 1242; 18 Stork Rd; s/d \$28/45; ☎ ☎) A budget option just opened on the outskirts of town, this is a complex of dongas with a common room, a kitchen and a laundry.

Old Time Cottage (☎ 4658 1550, 4658 3555; 158 Crane St; d \$90; ☎ ☎) This quaint little corrugated-iron cottage is a good choice for a group or a family. Set in an attractive garden, the self-contained home sleeps up to five.

Albert Park Motor Inn (☎ 1800 812 811, 4658 2411; Landsborough Hwy; s/d \$99/116; ☎ ☎) The Albert Park Motor Inn, on the highway east of the centre, has spacious, four-star, well-appointed rooms as well as pools and a spa.

Eating & Drinking

Longreach's pubs do typical country counter meals, and the motels have decent restaurants attached. Eagle St is the place to look for cafés and takeaway food.

Merino Bakery (☎ 4658 1715; 120 Eagle St; light meals \$3-8; ☎ 5am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Busy Merino is the best place for an early breakfast or lunch-on-the-run with fresh-baked bread, imaginative rolls and foccacias, and pies and cakes to die for.

Longreach Club (☎ 4658 1016; 31 Duck St; mains \$17-25; ☎ lunch & dinner) The Longreach Club's

bar and restaurant has a pleasant garden and a more formal dining room; recommended for reasonably priced bistro meals, roasts and buffets.

Getting There & Away

Qantaslink (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies from Brisbane to Longreach daily (from \$180). **Macair** (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) flies to Longreach from Townsville via Winton.

Greyhound Australia (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) has a daily bus service to Brisbane (\$107, 17 hours) via Charleville (\$53, 6½ hours) and Mt Isa (\$101, 8½ hours) via Winton (\$36, three hours) and Cloncurry (\$62, seven hours). Buses stop behind the Longreach Outback Travel Centre.

Emerald Coaches (☎ 1800 28737; www.emeraldcoaches.com.au) makes the twice-weekly (Wednesday and Sunday) run to Rockhampton (\$97, nine hours), returning via Emerald. Buses stop at Outback Aussie Tours next to the train station.

Queensland Rail (☎ 1300 131 722; www.traveltrain.com.au) operates the twice-weekly *Spirit of the Outback* train service between Longreach and Brisbane (economy/sleeper/1st-class sleeper \$180/238/368, 23½ hours) via Rockhampton.

ILFRACOMBE

☎ 07 / 269

The tiny township of Ilfracombe, 28km east of Longreach, modestly calls itself 'the Hub of the West'. The highway through town is lined with all manner of brightly painted old tractors and farm machinery amid several historic buildings from the town's heyday.

The charming **Wellshot Hotel** (☎ 4658 2106; Landsborough Hwy; s/d \$40/50) was the first building in the newly established railway siding in 1890 and it retains an eclectic collection of memorabilia and a wall covered with a long poem, 'The Wellshot & the Bush Pub's Hall of Fame', by Robert Raftery. The pub has clean budget rooms at the back with shared facilities and good pub tucker.

One street south of the highway, the **Wellshot Centre** (☎ 4658 2233; McMaster Dr; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) is a small local museum.

BARCALDINE

☎ 07 / pop 1496

With a picturesque main street lined with old timber pubs, Barcaldine (bar-call-din) is known

as the 'Garden City of the West' – plentiful supplies of artesian water nourish orchards of citrus fruits and in true outback style the streets are all named after trees. The first free-flowing bore in the Great Artesian Basin was sunk at Back Creek near here in 1886 – a working 1917 windmill and a monument stand testament next to the visitors centre on Oak St.

Barcaldine gained an important place in Australian history in 1891, when it became the headquarters of the historic shearers' strike, during which more than 1000 men camped in and around the town. That confrontation led to the formation of the Australian Workers' Party, the forerunner of today's Australian Labor Party.

The **Tree of Knowledge**, a ghost gum outside the train station, was the organisers' meeting place, and stood for more than a century as a historic monument to workers and their rights. Until 2006, that is, when it was mysteriously poisoned and promptly died. Political act? Wanton vandalism? No-one knows for sure, but the heritage-listed tree was removed by the government for preservation and a young tree propagated from the original has since flowered.

Information

Library (☎ 4651 1170; 71 Ash St) With internet access.

Visitors centre (☎ 4651 1724; www.barcaldine.qld.gov.au; Oak St; ☎ 8am-5pm, closed Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) Next to the train station.

Sights

Built to commemorate the role played by workers in the formation of Australian social, political and industrial movements, the **Australian Workers Heritage Centre** (☎ 4651 1579; www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au; 94 Ash St; adult/child/family \$12/7.50/27.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) was opened during the centenary celebrations of the Labor Party in Barcaldine in 1991. Set in landscaped grounds around a central billabong, the centre includes the Australian Bicentennial Theatre with displays tracing the history of the shearers' strike. Other displays include a schoolhouse, a hospital, a powerhouse and a replica of Queensland's Legislative Assembly.

Barcaldine Historical Museum (☎ 4651 1310; cr Beech & Gidyea Sts; admission \$3; ☎ 7am-5pm), in the town's former National Bank, is crammed with a fascinating collection of regional memorabilia. It offers mini-steam-train rides on

the last Sunday of the month from March to November.

Tours

Run by local guide Tom Lockie, **Artesian Country Tours** (☎ 4651 2211; www.artesiancountrytours.com.au) has a highly regarded Aramac and Gracevale Tour (adult/child \$145/65) that visits Aboriginal rock-art sites, lava caves, and cattle stations with a rich historical focus.

Sleeping

Barcaldine Tourist Park (☎ 4651 6066; 51-65 Box St; unpowered/powered sites from \$15/18, cabins \$60; ♻️) This grassy new park has plenty of shady sites for campers, a camp kitchen, fully equipped cabins and cheap wi-fi.

Blacksmith's Cottage (☎ 4651 1724; 7 Elm St; d/tr/q \$70/80/90) This quaint, turn-of-the-19th-century cottage features period furniture and a modern kitchen for the self-serve breakfast.

Ironbark Inn (☎ 4651 2311; 72 Box St; s/d \$69/79; ♻️) A friendly family runs this comfortable motel set in native gardens in a quiet part of town south of the centre. Its 3Ls Bar & Bistro (mains \$14-25) – that's 'liars, larrikins and legends' – is a rustic open shed with wooden bench tables and stockmen's ropes and branding irons on the walls. It serves fresh country-style fare, specialising in juicy steaks.

Landsborough Lodge Motel (☎ 4651 1100; 47 Box St; s/d \$82/92; ♻️) This large, modern motel has spacious self-contained rooms and a good licensed restaurant.

Most of Barcaldine's pubs have basic rooms with shared facilities. **Artesian Hotel** (s/d \$10/20) is the cheapest, while the **Shakespeare Hotel** (☎ 4651 1610; 95 Oak St; s/d \$20/30, en suite units \$50) has the pick of the rooms.

Eating & Drinking

The Queensland outback is full of iconic old pubs but nowhere will you see as many lined up side by side as here. Barcaldine's half-dozen iron-roofed hotels with their wooden verandas line the south side of Oak St in a very photogenic display. The beer is cold, the locals friendly, and the food is filling, if not gourmet.

Drovers Inn Restaurant (☎ 4651 1691; 85 Oak St; mains \$8-15) The quintessential timber Artesian Hotel – the oldest in town, dating from 1887 – has the pick of patio tables in its restaurant.

Witch's Kitchen (☎ 4651 2269; 61 Oak St; mains \$16-23; ☺ lunch & dinner) At the soft of the Union

Hotel, this café-restaurant delivers the best range of bistro grills, pizza, seafood and vegetarian dishes.

Entertainment

Radio Theatre (☎ 4651 2488; 4 Beech St; tickets \$7; ☺ Fri-Sun) This theatre offers an old-fashioned movie-going experience, complete with canvas seats, though it shows recent releases.

Getting There & Away

Qantaslink (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies from Brisbane to Barcaldine three times a week (from \$180).

Greyhound Australia (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) stops at Barcaldine on its daily run between Brisbane (\$131, 16 hours) and Mt Isa (\$126, 9¾ hours), with Longreach (\$21) just over an hour away. **Emerald Coaches** (☎ 1800 428 737; www.emeraldcoaches.com.au) makes the twice-weekly run to Rockhampton (\$79) returning via Emerald. Buses stop at the BP roadhouse at the intersection of the Landsborough and Capricorn Hwys.

Queensland Rail (☎ 1300 131 722; www.traveltrain.com.au) operates the twice-weekly *Spirit of the Outback* train between Longreach and Brisbane. The adult one-way economy seat/economy sleeper/1st-class sleeper fare from Barcaldine to Brisbane costs \$174/232/359, and the trip takes 21 hours.

BLACKALL

☎ 07 / pop 1404

As if any further proof were needed that you're in remote territory, Blackall claims to be the site of the mythical black stump – according to outback mythology, anywhere west of Blackall was considered to be 'beyond the black stump'.

Blackall also prides itself on the fact that it was near here, at Alice Downs Station, that shearer Jackie Howe set his world record of shearing 321 sheep in less than eight hours with a set of hand shears, and he's commemorated with a statue.

The first artesian well in Queensland was drilled in Blackall, although the well didn't strike water at first, and when it did the product was undrinkable. You'll probably agree with most travellers and say it stinks a little. Locals say it's got 'body', and there's no doubting its refreshing qualities as an essential ingredient in Blackall's delicious soft drinks and invigorating aquatic centre.

Information

Blackall visitors centre (☎ 4657 4637; www.blackall.qld.gov.au; 108a Shamrock St; ☺ 8.30am-5pm) Information on regional sights, local services and transport.

Library (☎ 4657 4764; 108 Shamrock St; per half hr \$2.20; ☺ Tue-Sat) Internet access.

Sights & Activities

The **Blackall Woolscour** (☎ 4657 6042; Evora Rd; adult/child \$12/7; ☺ 9am-5pm), the only working steam-driven scour (wool-cleaner) left in Queensland, is 4km northeast of Blackall. Built in 1908, it operated commercially until 1978 when a shift towards greasy wool made it obsolete. The complex incorporates a shearing shed, a wool-washing plant and a pond fed by an artesian bore; guided tours operate every hour on the hour.

The bronze **Jackie Howe Memorial Statue** commemorates the shearer's extraordinary shearing record. When Jack retired in 1900, he bought Blackall's Universal Hotel. The original pub was demolished in the 1950s, but the façade of the **Universal Garden Centre & Gallery** (☎ 4657 4344; 53 Shamrock St; admission \$2; ☺ 8.30am-5pm), built on the original site, reflects the old pub's design and the statue sits out the front. The gallery houses a display of Jackie Howe memorabilia, local Blackall history and souvenirs.

For a dip with a difference, try the **Blackall Aquatic Centre** (☎ 4657 4975; Salvia St; adult/child \$2.75/2.20; ☺ 10am-6pm). The pool and spa are filled with artesian water, which, despite the accompanying aroma, is clean and, some say, therapeutic.

The **black stump display** (Thistle St) is on the site of the original black stump and explains how the mythology came about.

Sleeping & Eating

Blackall Caravan Park (☎ 4657 4816; parnabys@bigpond.net.au; 53 Garden St; unpowered/powered sites \$14/18, en suite cabins \$60-72) This orderly little park is tucked into a quiet corner just off the main street.

Barcoo Hotel (☎ 4657 4197; Shamrock St; s/d \$28/38; ♻️) Basic pub rooms upstairs and an honest bistro menu featuring Friday and Saturday night barbecues.

Acacia Motor Inn (☎ 4657 6022; 110 Shamrock St; s/d \$99/109, apt \$135; ♻️) The immaculate Acacia is right in the centre of town and is the best of Blackall's motels. There's a pool, a spa and wi-fi access.

Getting There & Away

Qantaslink (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies from Brisbane to Blackall. **Greyhound Australia** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) has a regular coach service to Brisbane (\$121, 14 hours), Barcaldine (\$17, one hour) and Mt Isa (\$126, 11 hours).

BLACKALL TO CHARLEVILLE

Continuing southeast, the Landsborough Hwy crosses the **Barcoo River** 42km from Blackall – just off the road there's a nice riverside spot to stop, brew a cuppa or camp. The Barcoo is one of western Queensland's great rivers and must be the only river in the world that becomes a creek in its lower reaches. It flows northwest past Blackall, then swings southwest through Isisford and into the Channel Country, where it becomes Cooper Creek, probably the most famous of Australia's inland waterways.

Both AB 'Banjo' Paterson and Henry Lawson mention the Barcoo in their writings. The name has also entered the Australian idiom, appearing in the Macquarie Dictionary as the 'Barcoo salute' (waving to brush flies from the face).

On the banks of the Barcoo, **Tambo** (population 345) is surrounded by some of the best grazing land in western Queensland, and has some of the region's earliest historic buildings. The old post office (1876) is now the **Old Telegraph Museum** (☎ 4654 6133; 12 Arthur St; admission by donation; ☺ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) and doubles as the visitors centre. You can pick up brochures for heritage and nature walks here. Tambo also has a flourishing teddy-bear industry in **Tambo Teddies** (☎ 4654 6233; www.tamboteddies.com.au; 17 Arthur St; ☺ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat), where hand-made woollen bears have been produced for the past 15 years. Pick up a personalised bear for the kids.

Self-sufficient campers can use the Stubby Bend site down by the Barcoo River free (maximum three nights), but there are no facilities.

Tambo Mill Motel & Caravan Park (☎ 4621 7000; tambomil@bigpond.net.au; 34 Arthur St; powered sites \$22.50, s/d \$95/104; ♻️) is a stylish, modern motel with van sites at the back. The BYO restaurant (mains \$15 to \$28) here is the best place to dine in town. Both the pubs in the main street have budget rooms and standard pub meals.

CHARLEVILLE

☎ 07 / pop 3519

One of outback Queensland's largest towns, Charleville has some grand old buildings

and some interesting nocturnal attractions – namely an observatory and the native bilby. On the Warrego River, 760km west of Brisbane, Edmund Kennedy passed this way in 1847 and the town was gazetted in 1868. Cobb & Co built coaches here between 1893 and 1920, and Charleville is also linked to the origins of Qantas. The airline's first regular flight was between Charleville and Cloncurry. By the turn of the 19th century the town was an important centre for the outlying sheep stations.

Information

Library (☎ 4654 1296; 69 Edward St; ☎ 8.30am–4pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat) Internet access.

Visitors centre (☎ 4654 3057; Sturt St; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm daily Apr–Sep, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri Oct–Mar) In the Graham Andrews Parklands on the southern side of Charleville. Pick up a copy of the heritage walking and driving trails. There are plans to move the visitors centre to the Cosmos Centre by 2009.

QPWS office (☎ 4654 1255; 1 Park St; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri)

Sights & Activities

Stargazers will love the **Cosmos Centre** (☎ 4654 7771; www.cosmoscentre.com; adult/child/family \$10/5/25, observatory session \$20/13/43; ☎ 10am–6pm), 2km south of the centre, off Airport Dr. Here you can tour the night sky through high-powered telescopes in a state-of-the-art observatory. In the centre itself is a theatre, hologram show, meteorite display and entertaining hands-on exhibits (find out your age and weight on other planets). A combination ticket for the centre and observatory is \$26/16/58. Note that night observatory times vary. Great for kids.

Charleville's QPWS has run a captive-breeding program for the endangered bilby and other native species for a number of years, culminating in the new **Bilby Centre** (☎ 4654 1255), due to open next to the Cosmos Centre in 2009. With an education centre and underground and above-ground 'burrows', the centre aims to showcase the bilbies in as natural an environment as possible. The bilby is a long-eared, desert-dwelling marsupial related to the bandicoot. Once common, there are now fewer than 600 in the wild in Queensland.

The foyer of the **Hotel Corones** (☎ 4654 1022; 33 Wills St) is a bit like a museum, with old photographs and costumes on the walls. Its magnificently preserved interior includes a huge public bar, leadlight windows, open fires and timber floors. History buffs will enjoy the nos-

talgic **Scones & Stories Tour** (tickets \$15; ☎ 2pm), for a minimum of four people, where you relive the glorious history of this grand old country pub.

The **Historic House Museum** (☎ 4654 3349; 91-3 Alfred St; adult/child \$4/50c; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, to noon Sat) is crammed with memorabilia and old machinery. In the Bicentennial Park in Sturt St you can see two **Stiger Vortex Rainmaker Guns**, vertical cannons used in a bizarre and futile drought-breaking attempt in 1902.

You can visit the vital facilities at the **Royal Flying Doctor Service Visitor Centre** (☎ 4654 1233; Old Cunnamulla Rd; admission \$2.50; ☎ 9am–5pm) and take a guided tour of the **School of Distance Education** (☎ 4654 1341; Parry St; admission \$2) weekdays at 9.15am.

Sleeping

Evening Star Tourist Park (☎ 4654 2430; Adavale Rd; unpowered/power sites \$15/23) Stay on the working cattle station 'Thurlby', only 9km west of Charleville on the Adavale Rd. Campfire barbecues, station tours (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) and bird-watching.

Bailey Bar Caravan Park (☎ 1800 065 311, 4654 1744; 196 King St; unpowered/power sites \$18/23, cabins \$65–77) Bailey Bar is the best of the town's caravan parks, with plenty of grass and shady eucalypts.

our pick **Hotel Corones** (☎ 4654 1022; www.hotelcorones.com.au; 33 Wills St; s/d \$30/40, with en suite \$50/60, motel s \$59–89, motel d \$69–99; ☎) Staying at this grand old country pub is an experience. Ascend the central staircase to a warren of rooms from a bygone era. The heritage rooms have polished floors and period furniture – go for one opening out onto the magnificent old shared balcony. If you want modern comfort rather than old-fashioned charm, the ground-floor motel rooms are an option. For lunch or dinner it's hard to go past the elegant dining room (mains \$20 to \$27), or have a good-value counter meal in the bar (around \$10).

Mulga Country Motor Inn (☎ 4654 3255; Cunnamulla Rd; s/d \$93/105; ☎) Charleville's four-star motel is on the highway south of the centre. Some of the comfy queen-sized rooms have spas and facilities for travellers with disabilities; all have cable TV.

Other accommodation options: **Waltzing Matilda Motor Inn** (☎ 4654 1720; charlevillewaltzingmatilda@bigpond.com; 125 Alfred St; s/d \$65/75; ☎) A good-value motel with small units arranged around a central courtyard.

Charleville Motel (☎ 4654 1566; 148 King St; s/d \$79/89; ☎) A comfortable motel with a good restaurant.

Eating

Heinemann's Country Bakery & Coffee @ 84 (☎ 4654 3991; 84 Alfred St; meals \$5.50–11.50; ☎ 8.30am–5pm) Charleville's coolest place for fresh pastries, breakfast, pies, sandwiches and cakes.

Young Tiger (☎ 4654 2996; 95 Galatea St; mains \$13–17; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue–Sat) At the Warrego Club, this restaurant will gladden the hearts and tastebuds of travellers who have been in the outback for a while. Genuinely good Thai food sits alongside Aussie bistro tucker.

Getting There & Away

Qantaslink (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies from Brisbane to Charleville (from \$170). **Macair** (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) also flies from Brisbane to Charleville twice a week, on its Brisbane–Birdsville–Mt Isa route.

Greyhound Australia (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) buses run daily between Brisbane and Charleville (\$103, 1½ hours). The daily Brisbane–Mt Isa service stops in Charleville, so you can get to Mt Isa (\$146, 15½ hours) via Barcardine, Longreach, Winton and Cloncurry. Buses leave from the corner of Wills and Watson Sts.

Queensland Rail (☎ 1300 131 722; www.traveltrain.com.au) operates the twice-weekly *Westlander* from Brisbane to Charleville (economy seat/sleeper \$99/158, 16½ hours). The **train station** (King St) is just south of the town centre.

CHARLEVILLE TO CUNNAMULLA

This 194km section of the Mitchell Hwy parallels the coolabah-lined Warrego River and the old railway line, and passes through flat grasslands and scattered mulga trees. About 104km south of Charleville is the lonely community of **Wyandra**, with a pub, a shop and a free camping area.

CUNNAMULLA

☎ 07 / pop 1357
Made famous by a little Slim Dusty song, 'The Cunnamulla Fella', this is the southernmost town in western Queensland and a gateway to the true outback. In the 1880s an influx of farmers opened up the country to sheep farming and today millions of sheep and quite a few cattle graze the open plains around Cunnamulla. The railway arrived in 1898, and since then Cunnamulla has been a major service centre for the district; in good years it is Queensland's biggest wool-loading rail yard.

At Cunnamulla's **visitors centre** (☎ 4655 2481; www.paroo.info; Jane St; ☎ 9am–4.30pm Mon–Fri year-round, 10am–2pm Sat & Sun Apr–Nov) there's a small historical exhibition. You can access the internet at the **Rock Cafe** (☎ 4655 1502; 27 Jane St), a local Christian initiative run by and for the town's youth.

In front of the shire hall is an impressive bronze **statue** of the 'Cunnamulla Fella', sitting on his swag, billy tea in hand. It reflects the lyrics penned by Stan Coster and turned to song by Slim Dusty as a tribute to outback stockmen.

You can see plenty of bird life on the **river walk**, along the banks of the broad Warrego River, just across the Darby Land Bridge on Louise St. The **Robber's Tree**, at the southern end of Stockyard St, is a living reminder of a bungled 1880s robbery.

There's an interesting array of **outback tours** offered out of Cunnamulla, including station tours (\$95), kayaking on the Warrego River (\$65) and multiday trips from three to eight days. Contact the **Stephanie Mills Gallery** (☎ 4655 1679; www.stephaniemillsgallery.com.au; 32 John St).

There are bus services connecting Cunnamulla with the twice-weekly *Westlander* train service between Charleville and Brisbane.

Sleeping & Eating

Jack Tonkin Caravan Park (☎ 4655 1421; Watson St; unpowered/power sites \$16/19, cabins from \$35; ☎) This large, informal park has some pleasant, grassy camp sites and makes up for its distance from the town centre with a handy milk bar across the road.

Warrego Hotel-Motel (☎ 4655 1737; 9 Louise St; hotels/d \$45/55, motel \$65/75, cabins \$80/90; ☎) The Warrego has the town's best range of accommodation with pub rooms, tidy motel-style units and four freestanding cabins at the back sleeping up to five people. The Woolshed Restaurant (mains \$8–24) serves up a reasonable selection of bistro meals for lunch and dinner.

our pick **Nardoo Station** (☎ 4655 4833; www.nardoo.com.au; Mitchell Hwy; unpowered/power sites \$17/20, dm \$27, en suite cabins \$82; ☎) A 45,000-hectare sheep and cattle station, is one of the outback's most accessible station-stays – it's right beside the highway, only 38km north of Cunnamulla. That doesn't make this friendly, family-run station any less atmospheric, and as you're soaking in a hot artesian spa under a billion stars you'll feel a world away from civilisation. The accommodation is well-set up with

spotless converted shearers' quarters and jacareroos' cabins, powered sites, a kitchen and a camp fire and barbecue area. You can take a station tour (\$20), join in station activities, go bird-watching, walking or fishing, or just relax. Most people end up staying longer than they planned. Homestead meals are also available.

THE CHANNEL COUNTRY

The remote and sparsely populated southwestern corner of Queensland takes its name from the myriad channels that crisscross the area. In this inhospitable region it hardly ever rains, but water from the summer monsoons further north pours into the Channel Country along the Georgina, Hamilton and Diamantina Rivers and Cooper Creek. Flooding towards the great depression of Lake Eyre in South Australia (SA), the mass of water arrives on this huge plain, eventually drying up in water holes or salt pans.

The main destination for most is Birdsville, but there are a few interesting towns along the way – and a lot of empty road in between.

Getting There & Around

Some roads from the east and north to the fringes of the Channel Country are paved, but during the October-to-May wet season even these can be cut – and the dirt roads become quagmires. In addition, the summer heat is unbearable, so plan to travel here in the cooler months, from May to September. Visiting this area requires a sturdy vehicle and experience of outback driving. Always carry plenty of fuel and drinking water, and notify the police if you are heading off the main roads.

MT ISA TO BIRDSVILLE

The 300km northern section of the Diamantina Developmental Rd from Mt Isa to Boulia is a narrow but sturdy bitumen road. Halfway along is the small settlement of **Dajarra**, with a pub, a shop and a roadhouse with expensive fuel – better to fill up in Mt Isa or Boulia. This was once a railway siding and Australia's largest cattle-trucking depot, where cattle driven from the NT were railed to markets on the east coast. The rail line closed in 1988 when road trains made it obsolete.

Both Boulia and Bedourie host **camel races** in mid-July.

Boulia

☎ 07 / 205

Boulia is the 'capital' of the Channel Country, and the region is home to a supernatural phenomenon known as the Min Min Light. Said to resemble a car's headlights – but quite often appearing as a green floating light – this 'earthbound UFO' has been terrifying locals for years, hovering a metre or so above the ground before vanishing and reappearing elsewhere. Don't expect to see it yourself – sightings are few and far between (and never in town itself) but locals can tell you a tale of their encounter, especially after a few beers in the Australian Hotel.

The best time to be in town is the third weekend in July, when Boulia holds Australia's premier camel-racing event, the **Desert Sands Camel Races**.

Min Min Encounter (☎ 4746 3386; Herbert St; adult/child/family \$12/8/30; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat & Sun) is an hourly show that tells the story of the Min Min Light in a thoroughly entertaining, laconic Aussie way but with a (relatively) hi-tech show. The 45-minute walk-through show features animatronic characters amid imaginative sets and eerie lighting – it all attempts to convert the nonbelievers and it's all good fun. The centre doubles as the town's tourist information centre and there's a café attached.

The quirky **Stone House Museum** (cnr Pituri & Hamilton Sts; adult/child \$5/3; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat & Sun) has sheds full of outback stuff, space junk, local history, Aboriginal artefacts and the preserved 1888 home of the pioneering Jones family (the Stone House). The fossil collection has bits and pieces collected from around the region, including shark and fish, pliosaurus and plesiosaur, with the most complete specimen being an elasmosaurus. With luck the curator might show you around.

Peer over the fence of the house next to the Shell garage on Herbert St to see a map of Australia made entirely of local moon rocks and showing the inland sea of 100 millions years ago.

Boulia Caravan Park (☎ 4746 3122; Herbert St; swag sites \$7.50, unpowered/powerd sites \$15/18, cabins \$75) is a simple park with shady sites on the banks of the sandy Burke River.

Australian Hotel (☎ 4746 3144; Herbert St; s/d \$33/38, motel units from \$66/77; ☎) has decent pub rooms, motel units and a good bistro. As the only pub in town the bar gets lively on weekends.

Desert Sands Motel (☎ 4746 3000; Herbert St; s/d \$80/90; ☎) is the best of Boulia's accommodation with spacious rooms.

From Boulia, the sealed Kennedy Developmental Rd (Min Min Way) heads 368km east to Winton through an eerily flat and empty landscape punctuated by mirage-like mesas (flat-topped hills). The only stop along the way is the old Cobb & Co staging post of **Middleton**, 175km from Boulia, where there's a pub and fuel.

Bedourie

☎ 07 / 142

Almost 200km south of Boulia, Bedourie was first settled in 1880 as a Cobb & Co depot and is now the administrative centre for the huge Diamantina Shire. You can get tourist information from the **council offices** (☎ 4746 1202; Herbert St; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm). A big attraction is the free public swimming pool and **artesian spa**.

There's a caravan park and comfortable motel units at the **Simpson Desert Oasis** (☎ 4746 1291; 1 Herbert St; unpowered/powerd sites \$12/18, cabins from \$95, d \$130; ☎), a roadhouse with fuel, a supermarket and a restaurant.

BIRDSVILLE

☎ 07 / 115

The most remote town in Queensland, tiny, unprepossessing Birdsville holds an iconic status – it has one of Australia's most famous pubs, the Birdsville Hotel, the nation's most infamous horse race, and the hottest water supply.

Birdsville, only 12km from the SA border, is at the northern end of the 517km Birdsville Track, which leads to Marree in SA. In the late 19th century this was a surprisingly busy place, as it was here a customs charge was made on each head of cattle being driven to SA from Queensland. With Federation, the charge was abolished and Birdsville almost became a ghost town. In more recent times, the cattle industry, 4WD tourism and the Birdsville Races have resurrected the town.

Information

Birdsville Fuel Service (☎ 4656 3236; Adelaide St; ☎ 7am-6pm) Also offers handy banking and postal facilities.

Wirrarri Centre (☎ 4656 3300; Billabong Blvd; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5.30pm Sat & Sun) Tourist information, library and internet access.

Sights & Activities

The **Birdsville Working Museum** (☎ 4656 3259; Macdonald St; adult/child \$7/5; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, tours 9am, 11am & 3pm) is a big tin shed with an impressive private collection of items ranging from old tobacco tins and road signs through to shearing equipment, wool presses and mule-driven rounding yards. Another highlight is the **Birdsville Studio & Big Red Cafe** (☎ 4656 3099; www.birdsvillstudio.com.au; Graham St; ☎ 9am-10pm Jun-Sep; ☎), incorporating the Blue Poles Gallery, where you can inspect and buy outback art by exceptional local artist Wolfgang John, and enjoy coffee, cakes, pasta, curries and a campfire at the café.

On the edge of the Simpson Desert 35km west of Birdsville, **Big Red** is a 30m-high desert sand dune that offers a mighty challenge for 4WDers. Ask for directions and conditions at the Wirrarri Centre.

Sleeping & Eating

Birdsville Caravan Park (☎ 4656 3214; www.birdsvillecaravanpark.com; Florence St; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/25, s/d \$55/77, en suite cabins \$90/110; ☎) Several units overlook the nearby Diamantina River and there are plenty of dusty camp sites. No camping bookings are taken for race day so it's first in.

Birdsville Hotel (☎ 4656 3244; www.theoutback.com.au; Adelaide St; s/d \$110/130; ☎) The Birdsville Hotel stands at the western edge of town, facing the Simpson Desert like some final sentinel of civilisation. Built from sandstone in 1884, the pub is the town's beating heart, full of outback characters and attracting adventurous tourists from far and wide. Its colourful history includes fire and cyclone, and nowadays it is tastefully renovated with modern motel units. Note that there's no accommodation available here during the races.

Getting There & Away

Macair (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) flies between Brisbane and Birdsville via Charleville, Quilpie and Windorah, and from Birdsville to Mt Isa with stops at Bedourie and Boulia.

There are two roads into Birdsville from Queensland: the north-south Eyre Developmental Rd from Bedourie and Boulia, and the east-west Birdsville Developmental Rd from Windorah and Betoota. Both are mostly rough and unsealed and, while a conventional vehicle will do in the Dry, you're better off in a 4WD. The surfaces vary from gravel and dirt

BIRDSVILLE RACES

In 2007, the **Birdsville Races** (www.birdsvilleraces.com) were cancelled for the first time in their 125-year history – thanks to a little bout of flu that started in Sydney a few weeks earlier. The equine influenza (horse flu) outbreak halted racing in Queensland and other eastern states, but that didn't stop the annual party in remote Birdsville. Even with no horses, thousands of people journeyed out here to drink in the dust, cheer on the willing at Fred Brophy's boxing tent and catch up with old mates. Such is the attraction of the outback's most famous event.

The Birdsville Races started in 1882 as a run for stock horses. Today more than 6000 spectators pile into the one-pub town for four days of dusty track racing, and boozing. There's no formal accommodation at Birdsville during the races, so bring a tent or a swag and find a patch of ground. The race weekend is early September – see the website for details.

to soft red sand with frequent cattle grids and potentially perilous dry creek beds.

BIRDSVILLE TRACK

The 517km Birdsville Track stretches south of Birdsville to Maree in SA, taking a desolate course between the Simpson Desert to the west and Sturt Stony Desert to the east. The first stretch from Birdsville has two alternative routes, but only the longer, more easterly Outside Track is open these days. Before tackling the track, it's a good idea to keep friends or relatives informed of your movements so they can notify the authorities should you fail to report in on time. Contact the **Wirrari Centre** (☎ 07-4656 3300) for road conditions.

SIMPSON DESERT NATIONAL PARK

The waterless Simpson Desert occupies a massive 200,000 sq km of central Australia and stretches across the Queensland, NT and SA borders. The Queensland section, in the state's far southwestern corner, is protected as the 10,000-sq-km Simpson Desert National Park, and is a remote, arid landscape of high red sand dunes, spinifex and cane grass.

While conventional vehicles can just about tackle the Birdsville Track in dry conditions, the Simpson crossing requires a 4WD and far more preparation. Crossings should only be undertaken by parties of at least two 4WD vehicles equipped with suitable communications (such as an EPIRB) to call for help if necessary. Alternatively, you can hire a satellite phone from **Birdsville police** (☎ 07-4656 3220) and return it to **Maree police** (☎ 08-8675 8346) in SA.

Permits are required to camp anywhere in the park and are available from the **QPWS** (☎ 07-4652 7333) in Birdsville or Longreach, and Birdsville's service stations. You also need a separate permit to travel into the SA

parcs, and these are available through the **South Australian National Parks & Wildlife Service** (☎ 1800 816 078).

BIRDSVILLE TO CHARLEVILLE

The Birdsville Developmental Rd heads east from Birdsville, meeting the Diamantina Developmental Rd after 277km of rough gravel and sand. The old pub that constituted the 'township' of **Betoota** between Birdsville and Windorah closed its doors in 1997, meaning motorists must carry enough fuel and water to cover the 395km distance.

Just west of Cooper Creek, **Windorah** has a pub, a general store and a basic caravan park. The **Western Star Hotel** (☎ 4656 3166; www.westernstarhotel.com.au; 15 Albert St; pub s/d \$40/50, motel s/d \$80/90; 🍷), originally built in 1878, has pub rooms and motel units. **Yabbie races** are staged here on the Wednesday before the Birdsville Races.

Quilpie is an opal-mining town and the railhead from which cattle are sent to the coast. The name comes from an Aboriginal word for stone curlew, and all but two of the town's streets are named after native birds. The **Quilpie Museum & Visitors Centre** (☎ 4656 2166; 51 Brolga St; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri year-round, 10am-4.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-Nov) has tourist information, historical displays and regular opal-cutting demonstrations. Fossicking tours can be organised here. There are three opal shops in town where you can see quality boulder opals.

THE ADVENTURE WAY

From Cunnamulla, the Adventure Way heads deep into Queensland's remote southwest corner for 640km to Innamincka in SA. The first stage, the all-bitumen Bulloo Developmental Rd, takes you through the small settlements of Eulo and Thargomindah to Noccundra.

Eulo, 68km west of Cunnamulla, is on the Paroo River close to the Yowah Opal Fields. For years the town hosted the World Lizard Racing Championships, but the last one was held in 2004. The Paroo 'race track' is still there, along with a granite monument to 'Destructo' the cockroach, who took on the lizards and won in 1980 but in the aftermath was accidentally trodden on and squashed by a celebrating spectator! Eulo is a one-pub town with an interesting date farm, a general store with fuel, and a caravan park.

Yowah, a tiny opal-mining settlement about 40km northwest of Eulo, is a popular fossicking field where the unique Yowah opal nut (ironstone matrix opal) is found. Yowah has a caravan park, a free camping ground, a general store and a motel.

Thargomindah, 130km west of Eulo on the banks of the Bulloo River, was an important stop for camel trains carting Queensland wool to the steamers on the Darling River at Bourke in NSW. Today the town has a hand-

ful of historic buildings, a pub, motel and a caravan park.

Noccundra, 145km further west on the Wilson River, was once a busy little community. It now has just one hotel supplying basic accommodation, meals and fuel. Continuing on from Noccundra, head 20km north back to the Bulloo Developmental Rd, which continues west for another 75km through the Jackson Oil Field to the Naccowlah Oil Field. The sealed road ends here, but with a 4WD you can continue across to Innamincka on the Strzelecki Track in SA via the site of the **Dig Tree**, of Burke and Wills fame. The Dig Tree is a famous coolibah tree on Cooper Creek where a party from the Burke and Wills expedition waited while Burke and Wills struck north for the Gulf. After waiting more than four months, party member William Brahe decided to depart but first buried provisions beneath the tree and carved the word DIG and the date on the trunk. The route is particularly rough and stony with frequent challenging creek crossings.

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