



CRESTON NATIVE Teresa Heinz is dwarfed by the immensity of the Nullarbor Plain that surrounds Cook, South Australia.

A Trip Outback

Riding The Indian Pacific Across Oz

By **TERESA HEINZ**
Special to The Daily Record
PERTH, Australia—In Australia, there are four ways to get cross-country from Perth, Western Australia to Sydney in New South Wales.

You can fly; drive for several days along the Eyre Highway, which snakes along the southern coast; take the Greyhound bus; or you can take the train, the legendary Indian Pacific through the Outback to Sydney.

When I planned a trip to Melbourne and Tasmania in late July, my objective was to see Australia's width at a cheap price. Although the Indian Pacific is a 65-hour journey, its half-price tickets for students at Australian schools appealed to both my budget and passion for adventure.

The journey began rather quietly on that winter day of July 21, when I arrived at the East Perth train station with a backpack filled with clothes and food. After placing my bags in the carriage, I walked along the platform to admire the shiny steel train.

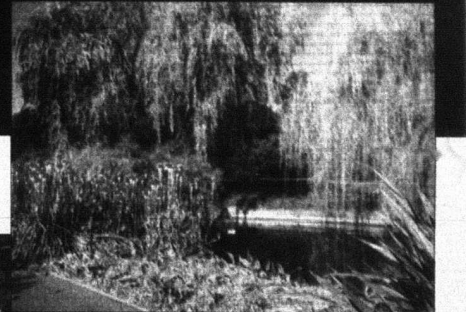
The windows were shielded by double layers of glass, further protected by the desert sun by Venetian blinds. Behind the train were carriages for cars, whose owners shipped them rather than drive the arduous, sometimes sweltering journey across Australia.

When I took my seat, I discovered that I was not only in the first row facing the bathroom, shower, television and cafeteria, but I was alone. I looked forward to a good night's sleep stretched across dou-

ble seats.
 "Excuse me, I got this seat."
 "Huh?" I looked up from my *Sunday Melbourne Age* to see a tall, fair Australian man standing above me. My seat partner.
 I lifted my bags to give him the outside seat. As the train gathered



THE INDIAN PACIFIC (above) refuels on the journey's second day across the Outback in Cook, South Australia. The trip across Australia isn't all desert and sky, however. The city botanical gardens in Adelaide (right) are living proof of that.



THE BISHOP KIRBY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL in Cook is staffed by nurses and served by the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which flies in to the remote town when necessary.

miles of scrub plants, gum trees, and red stone and clay. In fact, Australia's yellow and red hues are like no other landscape I have ever seen.

The Trains And Their History
 These colors must have impressed the first explorers who navigated the country's interior in the 18th century.

In fact, many of the ghost towns along the train route beckon.

Transportation in the vast country was so difficult that transporting goods from the interior to a port sometimes cost more than shipping them from Europe!

Under such conditions, in which the Outback experienced temperatures of 120 degrees and above, the towns could only be reached by sweltering journeys on dirt tracks. By horse, and then car, early settlers founded towns that promised farming and mining trades.

The first steam trains arrived in the mid 1800s. The tracks required thousands of tons of steel laid across hot deserts, but the towns immediately felt stronger links with the outside world.

From its early days, the Indian Pacific permitted communication across the interior. The tracks initially provided electricity for the telegraph, whose prior existence is reflected by the wooden poles still lining the tracks. In recent years,

the telegraph poles have been mostly replaced by solar panels that power the train signals and public phones at depots.

This high-tech convenience contrasts to the trains' crude beginnings with a clumsy track system. Before Australia became a federated nation in 1901, it was governed as six different colonies by administration in London. Consequently, the colonies built their train systems *not* in cooperation with adjacent colonies, but under instructions from the London office.

The result was disastrous. By the time the colonies were federated in 1901, the states' tracks were entirely mismatched. New South Wales, for example, laid tracks with a 5-foot gauge in 1851. When tracks from New South Wales and Victoria met in Albury, New South Wales, in 1883, the Victorian tracks were 7 inches wider! It was, in fact, not until 1962 that a standard gauge track was laid between Albury and Melbourne.

Such examples of the inefficient train system also affected the early Indian Pacific, which can be traced back to Oct. 17, 1917, when construction teams met from opposite directions at the tiny South Australian point of Ooldea on the barren Nullarbor Plain.

Because of the different gauges, the early passengers had to change

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trains at every border.

The constant train changes added to the already slow travel speed. A passenger on my trip told me that when his grandparents took the train to Perth, they could get out, admire some rabbits, and then get back on again, while the train never stopped moving!

The train is not as slow today. After a standard-gauge line was finally laid between Sydney and Perth, the present-day Indian Pacific train began running on Feb. 23, 1970.

The train, which makes 208 journeys of 2,720-miles between Sydney and Perth each year, leaves both cities twice weekly.

The train holds 264 passengers and includes first-, holiday-, and coach-class seating. The first and holiday classes have sleepers and restaurants, while the coach class offers upright seating and a snack bar.

The 17-carriage train, which has 130 doors and travels about 50 mph, is a massive machine stretching almost 1,600 feet (nearly four-and-a-half football fields long).

On my return trip from Adelaide, South Australia, one of the 16 train engineers gave me a tour of the driver's car, with rows of dials, communications equipment, and a CLP Class engine stored in the carriage behind.

For the train aficionado, the Indian Pacific is not Australia's only national route.

The Overland, which I took for the last part of my journey, runs overnight between Adelaide and Melbourne.

The Ghan, on the other hand, has a famous history.

In the 1800s, the only contact that the country's interior (the Red Centre) had with the world was through camel drivers. These Afghan camelers brought vital supplies to the Overland Telegraph stations in the Outback. The main camel route passed from Adelaide to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

By 1929, the camels had been replaced by a steam train travelling into the interior to Alice Springs. The train named The Ghan, in honor of the camelers, began running in 1980. While the present journey takes just 17 hours, the original journey could take three days to three months. Legend has it that if the train was on time, passengers complained!

Although The Ghan began running on modern tracks in the 1980s, the train system's past is apparent today. On the second morning of my journey, our engineer announced: "If you were awakened by a sudden jolt last night, it's because I swerved to miss a herd of camel."

After a moment, I realized a swerve was impossible for a train! However, later that day I looked out onto the red-brown landscape that stretched into the horizon. There I glimpsed two camels running in the distance. They were, undoubtedly, descendants of the Afghan camels.

people about the trains and they'll relate an anecdote or two.

My former landlord in Perth, Cliff Collinson, recalls train trips in the 1970s, when "elderly conductors greeted him in his sleeper with hot meals.

"It was all very British, with older ladies bringing me cups of tea," Collinson said.

By the 1980s, however, efforts to make the trains commercially viable created changes. The new coach (economy) class includes upright seats and discount tickets for students, senior citizens, and other social welfare card holders. While sitting upright for three days can be tedious, the carriages offer televisions and videos, smoking rooms and towels for the showers.

The improvements have paid off. Given that many passengers are tourists and people travelling on discount tickets, 131,079 people took the Indian Pacific and The Ghan between June 1996 and June 1997.

Last October, the system was bought by Australian National Passenger Rail, which plans to further improve the trains' services and market them better.

One of the marketing goals is to advertise the trains as a tourist item overseas. "There is a huge potential market internationally," said Leslie DeWit, Marketing Services Manager for Australian National Passenger Rail. "You have to want to take the train, not as a quick form of transport, but for the experience."

This experience has been captured in books. Two informative, pictorial books are "The Indian Pacific" and "The Ghan" (Lichtbild), by journalists Jim Downes and Berthold Daum. Similar stories and legends also are recounted in "Ribbons of Steel" (Allen and Unwin), which focuses on the trains' historic evolution.

As for my friend and I, the stops in the various towns brought Australian history to life. Halfway through the journey, we paused for two hours at the trip's highlight: the town of Cook in South Australia.

Cook South Australia's Heartland
Cook is like nothing else I had ever seen. It quietly exists as an isolated outpost.

The town, which is surrounded by desert, boasts 40 residents, a train station with fax machine and Coke machine, a grocery store with limited supplies, a public telephone, a hospital run by two staff, a school, a lemonade stand, a sandy golf course, and a souvenir shop that opens when the train comes through.

The town's high school courses are supplemented by the School of the Air, which is a national short-wave service bringing correspondence courses to isolated towns. As for most towns along the route, the Indian Pacific also brings Cook's mail twice a week.

My friend and I stepped down from the train and were met by hot wind and stinging sun. After two days on the train, the passengers walked around slowly, somewhat dazed. But the realization of being in the Outback swept over me like a tidal wave.

This sensation, DeWit said, undoubtedly confronts most first-time visitors to Cook. "For overseas visitors who haven't seen the extent of the Australian Outback, Cook is the highlight," DeWit said.

Cook is spread across one block, with a hospital just on the edge where the town meets miles of endless sandy plains.

A helicopter above startled me. I looked up to see the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which services isolated hospitals like this one. The Flying Doctor is one of the mainstays of Outback Australia, where medical services are extremely limited. In fact, for Cook and other towns the service brings supplies, checks up on staff, or brings patients to the nearest city, often hundreds of miles away.

After watching the helicopter land, I walked toward the lemonade stand in front of the hospital. A handwritten sign read, "Sausage Rolls: 50 cents; Tea, 25 cents." All funds benefited the hospital and Flying Doctor.

I was just about to grasp some loose change when the train's whistle blew. That two-hour stop certainly passed quickly! I gathered my daypack and walked toward the train.

On the way, I passed two signs. To the right, a sign carried the warning, "No food or water for 300 kilometers (180 miles) and to my right was a signpost with two arrows: right for Sydney, left for Perth.

I was standing in the middle of nowhere, and couldn't be happier.

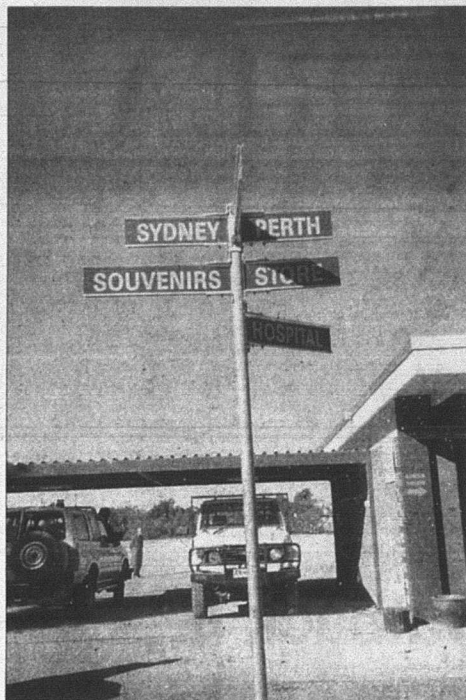
Across Australia: Surprises Along the Way

While Cook was a trip highlight, the multi-faceted journey reveals many aspects of Australia's character.

About twelve hours outside of Perth, the train stops for several hours in Kalgoorlie, the center of Western Australia's mining industry. Kalgoorlie's downtown, with old colonial hotels and pubs, reminded me of an American Western film.

Indeed, Kalgoorlie has a certain rough edge, just near the train station, a string of legal brothels are nestled quietly in an otherwise unassuming neighborhood. In the distance I saw the mines' light, which cast an orange glow across the pancake-flat land.

The day after the Kalgoorlie stop, the train passes through the massive Nullarbor Plain, which surrounds the world's longest segment (298 miles) of straight rail tracks. The



Teresa Heinz photo

MORE THAN A DAY'S TRAVEL in either direction by train, Perth (on the West Coast of the continent) and Sydney (on the East Coast) get equal billing on this signpost in the Outback town of Cook in South Australia.

plain gradually turns to green as the train winds through the Flinders Ranges toward Adelaide.

The Indian Pacific's one-day stopover in Adelaide is a convenient way to see a capital Australian city. Adelaide's graceful, European-like architecture is rare among Australian cities. Courtyards and a luscious city botanical garden complement Adelaide's churches, which span Scottish Presbyterian to Jewish synagogues.

The churches alone speak to Adelaide's multi-cultural past. On that note, one definite stop for visitors is the Adelaide Migration Museum, which offers a good introduction to the city's history of convict settlements, wartime lifestyles, and today's ethnic diversity.

At the end of the museum tour, computers with CD-ROMs describe Adelaide's immigration history, with sections on different migrant groups.

I was surprised to discover that

some American immigrants, who trickled into Adelaide from the Civil War onwards, later became Australian legislators!

While I stayed for just a day, Adelaide is a good base for sightseeing around south central Australia. The Adelaide Hills, a 30-minute drive from the city, are a part of the Mount Lofty Ranges and include historic towns and hiking.

Kangaroo Island lies just off Adelaide's coast. Australia's third-largest island, its beaches, fishing, and wildlife can be reached by plane or ferry.

I did not complete the entire Indian Pacific journey to Sydney, but the train later travels through the Blue Mountains outside that city. The mountains, with a blue haze effect from eucalyptus trees, are described as stunning.

The mountains, however, will have to wait another time for me. That night, I had a train to catch for the final leg to Melbourne.

Something For Everyone
During the last part of my journey, I thought about how I had taken the train for tourism purposes. Many others, like those recently leaving from the East Perth train station on Dec. 5, take it for similar reasons.

Some of the several hundred passengers, like Andrew Cowx and Pamela Wilkie, of Aberdeen, Scotland, were young backpackers. Both said that the train would give them a view of Australia not available from planes.

"I took the train to see more of the country and to meet more people," Cowx said.

Like Cowx and Wilkie, Martin and Barbara Latham, both of London, England, chose the train as part of a holiday package through Trailfinders, a travel agency specializing in Australia. Their package, which illustrates how train travel can be combined with other transport, includes a train trip to Adelaide, car rental for central Australia, and flights to the east and New Zealand.

"We knew roughly where we wanted to go," Martin Latham said. "On the train, I think it is going to be absolutely magnificent crossing the Nullarbor Plain."

The Lathams, both traveling in first-class sleeping cars, will have all meals included in the ticket price. However, the train also suits others like Toni Anderson, of Adelaide, who use the train out of necessity.

"I've taken the bus trip from Sydney to Perth and know what a terrible trip it is. I don't have a car, and I couldn't get a flight over to Adelaide," said Anderson, who is traveling with her son, Aaron, 11.

Anderson, who is riding in coach class, said she is not worried about traveling the long distance with a young child. She has taken the trip before and brings along electronic games for entertainment.

As Anderson gathered her luggage, the Indian Pacific rolled into the station. The departure whistle blew a few minutes later. Some admired the train's immensity and took photos. Others said goodbye to friends.

While remembering my trip several months before, I looked to the front of the train and spotted the familiar eagle emblem. The bird is a Wedge-Tailed Eagle, whose wing-span symbolizes the enormity of crossing Australia by rail.

Teresa Heinz, a Creston native, graduated from Oberlin College in 1994. She completed a master's degree in journalism at the University of Missouri last year. Since February 1997, she has been living in Perth, Australia. She is a visiting post-graduate student in Communications Studies at Murdoch University, where she is an Ambassadorial Scholar sponsored by the Rotary Foundation.

If You Go: Some Tips For Traveling Through Australia, And The Outback

By TERESA HEINZ, Special to The Daily Record
Australia, a country of only 18 million people, is the only nation occupying a continent.

It has seven states: Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Northern Territory, and Western Australia.

The landscape covers mountains, deserts, lush tropics and pastures. While there are many books about Australia, the Internet and travel guides also are good sources of information.

The best travel guide I have found is "Australia," published by Lonely Planet (\$24.95).

This Aussie-written guide includes photos and sections about Australian history, culture, and Australian travel.

Lonely Planet also publishes guides to individual Australian states and regions.

If you have Internet access, the Australian Embassy in Washington, D.C. has a site with visa, travel, and general country information. Address: <http://www.aust-emb.nw-dc.us/>

For general tourist information and pamphlets, the Australian Tourist Commission in New York provides free fact sheets, maps (for a small fee) and several colorful magazines, *On the Loose* and *Australia Unplugged*. The office has a help line where you can get specific information. Address: 25th Floor, 100 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Helpline: (212) 687-6300; Fax: 661-3340.

Planning Your Trip

Americans need a tourist visa to enter Australia. They are valid for three or six months.

Three-month visas are free, while six-month visas are \$29.

Apply for the visa by contacting the Australian Embassy in Washington, D.C. Address: 1601 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 10036. Phone: (202) 797-3000 and Fax: 797-3168.

To get the visa you need a passport and a round-trip ticket to Australia.

Be sure to apply at least a month in advance of your trip.

Check with the embassy if you want a longer visitor's visa (up to 12 months) or a student visa. Both require higher applications fees and a medical examination from your doctor.

Because regional temperatures vary, different states are best seen at various times.

Summer lasts from December through February.

Generally, in summer it is hot in the country's middle and north, while the south is warm with vari-

able humidity.

In the winter (June through August) cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth have temperatures around 30-60 degrees.

The major airlines: Qantas (Australia's international airline), Air New Zealand, and United. Fly from the U.S. to Australia. The flights usually stop over in places such as Hawaii, Japan, Singapore, India, and London.

For better discounts, check with lesser known airlines, such as Air India and Malaysia Airlines.

Students should contact Council Travel and STA Travel for prices. In general, round-trip flights will cost about \$1,500 to \$2,000.

For a creative option, look into around-the-world tickets for just a slightly higher price.

Taking The Trains

Australia's train system is a patch-

work of different services in every state. However, interstate service is coordinated by Australian National Railways, an association of state systems.

The interstate system offers passes, such as the Austral Pass, which allow unlimited rail travel both across the country or in different states.

The Austral Flexipass, on the other hand, allows a set amount of travel days within a six-month period. For more information about train travel, contact your local travel agent.

Quick Tips: Remember that temperatures have little influence on the trains, which have air-conditioning, heating, and thick windows. However, take a small blanket for extra warmth at night. Cafes with snacks and full meals are on the trains.

Because of federal regulations, if you bring food you will have to throw away leftover fruit and vegetables when crossing state lines.