



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: There's nowhere in the world quite like majestic Uluru; cooling off in the Roper River at Mataranka, the setting for We of the Never Never.

at Lasseter's Hotel in Alice Springs.

Next morning, after a pit stop to have the windscreen fixed, the real road trip begins. Now I'm really going camping – no more cheating.

From Alice, Darwin is 1500 kilometres along the relentless Stuart Highway. On the map, it's a straight line, like a zipper down the middle of Australia. Two lanes with a 130 km/h speed limit. I'm passing road trains, road houses, raptors feasting on road kill, the loneliness of the overland telegraph station at Tennant Creek . . . \$15 hamburgers, an alien-themed caravan park, and a pole-dancing troupe (admission free). The anthills get taller the further north I go. My first night camping is at the Devils Marbles. Arriving at the end of the day in



perfect light, I clamber around the boulders and perch on a warm rock shelf. Kids are playing cricket below. By sun down, all is silent and I'm tucked up, only to be woken later by the howling of dingoes. Through the gauzy porthole of the Landcruiser's pop-top I see a bright silvery moon.

Further north, at Daly Waters, I hit the tropics. It's hot and muggy, the vegetation is more dense and I lose my appetite in the humidity. All I want is water and lemons. Deserted airstrips and abandoned hangars are potent reminders of World War II.

At Mataranka, 400 kilometres south of Darwin, there's the first mention of crocodiles – but only freshies, the non-biting kind I am told. I meet Clair O'Brien of Coodardie Station who's spent years working this land, not far from where Gunn set her memoir.

I've covered more than 1500 kilometres since Uluru and Darwin is not so far off now. But I don't want to stop. I'm getting the hang of camping – and liking it.

MICHELE MOSSOP

The writer travelled as a guest of Tourism NT. See tourismnt.com.au



BAROSSA BUBBLES

There's so much more than wine to discover along the Sturt Highway outside Adelaide.

Some journeys feel like they're over before they've even begun. We've picked up the complimentary Range Rover Sport SDV6 in Adelaide and driven for only 50 minutes or so – about how long it took to master the NASA-standard navigation, radio, window and door systems – when suddenly, signs to the Barossa Valley are upon us.

Easing our schmick armour-plated warrior of a vehicle off the Sturt Highway and turning right, we drop down to 50km/h and poke along Kingsford Road. Within minutes, the 1856 two-storey sandstone Georgian Kingsford Homestead – of *McLeod's Daughters* “Drover's Run” fame – is smack bang before us at the end of the gravel drive.

So much for the road trip.

There's a lot to be said for exploring your country's highways

and byways. Then again, for time-poor desk jockeys looking for a quick-fix rejuvenation, having a local wine and food utopia a mere hour or less from Adelaide's not so bustling airport is ultimately a plus.

Not least with hosts like Pat and Sally Kent of Kingsford Homestead to welcome you with local saucisson, cheese and a cold glass of Australian sparkling wine.

The homestead, hospitality and food at Kingsford are impressive. But the property's prize possession – a magnificent claw-foot bath set in a secluded outdoor location – is the show stopper.

“We got so tired of guests asking exactly where on the property the *McLeod's Daughters* girls took their outdoor baths in the series that we just set one up,” explains a slightly bath trivia-weary Pat.

Move over bush showers – set among the gum trees on a protected hillside, Kingsford's bath rests majestically on a custom-built wooden platform above the local creek, putting a whole new twist on day spas.

With hot and cold running water, a walkie talkie (in case you run out of bath salts or bubbles, both the alcoholic and soapy kind), fluffy towels, a birdwatching book and a locked gate to ensure privacy, it doesn't get much better than this. Definitely worth a 50-minute drive.

FIONA CARRUTHERS

The writer was a guest of the South Australian Tourism Commission (southaustralia.com).



REGION OF PLENTY

Drivers through Victoria's south-west will find an abundance of culinary delights along the way.

The wood-fired oven outside Birregurra Farm Foods is used to bake pizzas and bread for the weekends, when the butchery and provedore converts into a restaurant showcasing local produce.

But owners Miles Hazel and his wife Annie are a resourceful pair, and will happily use the oven to roast to succulent perfection the suckling pig you've just bought from them.

If you happen to be in Birregurra on a weekend, yet another top-shelf culinary experience can be had at Sunnybrae, George Biron's old homestead where a long afternoon can be whiled away over five courses of wonderful produce from the homestead garden.

Not enough time for that? The Birre General Store offers one of the best burgers going and authentic Lebanese pizzas.

There was a time when the



culinary attractions of south-west Victoria were in almost inverse proportion to its natural magnificence. The Great Ocean Road, that historic 250-kilometre route from Torquay in the east to Allansford in the west, truly one of the world's great drives, had to be sustained on a diet of bain-marie and scenery.

Not so today. The region's gastronomic richness – much of it listed in the *Good Food Guide* – is so outstanding, you'll be tempted to spend more time behind the plate than the wheel. Luckily, our BMW 328i – a cracking boss sled lent to ST for our journey – kept us focused on the task at hand.

Two of the best drives in this region are both from Skenes Creek, one through the high point of the Otways to Forrest, the other along Turtons Track to Beech Forest. To the west, the sweeping roads around Timboon are invigorating. Even the Princes Highway has a fascinating stretch through the Stony Rises near Colac with basalt outcrops and convict-built drystone walls.

The Great Ocean Road breaks into sections, where the most scenic ocean-side cuttings are on the run from Anglesea to Lorne. West of Apollo Bay is towering rainforest; the Aire Valley is a European idyll, while the long runs either side of Port Campbell offer the postcard-staple 12 Apostles and Bay of Islands.

ANDREW CORNELL

The writer was a guest of Tourism Victoria (tourism.vic.gov.au).



GREAT SOUTHERN LAND

Taking a new Audi R8 on a trip to the Snowy Mountains is a most appealing proposition.

Hitting the highway in Audi's engineering marvel, the R8 supercar, is best described as blissfully stressful. First there's the police, valiantly doing their job to keep the roads safe from self-confessed revheads determined to discover how a 5.2 litre, V10 engine sounds at 8000 revs a minute.

Then there's the potholes – which you'd think would be easy to spot as the car sits so low to the ground. But they flash by pretty quickly as you try to hit 100 clicks from a standing stop in under four seconds (the cash lane exiting the M5 tollbooth south of Sydney is a good place to try this).

More than that, you need to be up an hour earlier each day for hair and make-up: other drivers stare, pedestrians execute perfect 180s to follow your progress and anyone within 50 metres of the R8's parking spot will wander over for a chat and to touch its carbon-fibre panels. As

Mum would say, “You can't leave the house without lipstick”. Then beg, borrow or steal if you must – but make sure your next road trip is in one of these.

For my weekend getaway from Sydney, I headed for Canberra and the Snowy Mountains. Apart from the attraction of the rolling scenery, the winding mountain roads are a great playground for the all-wheel-drive system. It takes a couple of hours to meander down the Hume Freeway in the direction of Collector, so a stop on the town bypass for something delicious at Grandma's Little Bakery is essential.

The Federal Highway holds other gems – such as the Glenn Murcutt-designed Lerida Estate winery and cafe, with sweeping views across Lake George.

After a day spent acclimatising to the Audi, I snuggled down at the Old Stone House in Bungendore, an 1860s B&B with hospitality as warm as the weather was chilly.

Next day, I headed south of Jindabyne to Moonbah Hut (see below). There are two stone and slab huts – one on the banks of a private trout lake, the other on the Moonbah River 50 metres away. Both have underfloor heating, open fires and all mod cons – but thankfully no TV. The attention to detail – right down to Maggie Beer ice-cream in the freezer – make it the idyllic escape destination.

CLAIRE STEWART

The writer was a guest of Destination NSW (visitrsw.com).

