

The Guardian

An 87-hour bus trip made Australia feel like home for me – now I long to rediscover it

Despite its manifold woes, 2020 has one silver lining: the chance to understand our own country better

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When I spent a year in Australia as a young Brit on a working holiday visa in 2000, I took a bus from Broome to Sydney. It took 87 hours.

We hurtled over rugged red earth to Katherine, pelted down the Stuart Highway to Adelaide, dining with truckies, swooning over outback sunsets and enjoying eccentric tales in quirky roadhouses. From Adelaide we powered east across dry brown plains, honking road trains and knocking kangaroos along the way.

Somewhere in mid-western New South Wales, I plunged into the deep sleep of the highway-hypnotised, waking as we traversed the misty Blue Mountains, before descending into the coastal plains toward Sydney. We'd made it.

I'd arrived in Australia fresh out of university and ready for adventure. The promise of romance made me buy the plane ticket, but the lure of a place relatively easy to travel around and so different from my homeland made me stay.

That first free year I wanted to comprehend its size, feel its emptiness, meet its characters. Travelling at ground level enabled this – and was cheaper.

So I picked grapes at wineries in south-eastern Western Australia while sharing bunks and cask wine with backpackers. I graded potatoes for Australian supermarkets while living on a farm where they hunted emus that dug up the crop (I'll never forget the sight of their spindly legs hanging limp over the kitchen sink in the morning).

I traversed the Great Victoria Desert from Perth to Alice Springs, sleeping in a swag, digging my own toilet and learning about the hydrating qualities of green ants. I walked around Uluru, I swam under Kimberley waterfalls, and I snorkelled on the Great Barrier Reef. I drove the Great Ocean Road, then danced at a sweltering Womadelaide.



Caroline Riches as a working holiday maker on a bus journey through the outback. Photograph: Caroline Riches

Fast forward 20 years and this land is no longer my playground: it's my home. I have Australian children and a blue passport emblazoned with a kangaroo and an emu, animals chosen to symbolise a nation on the move because neither can move backwards easily. I too have moved forward with my life; my cross-country adventures are over.

But they say you always want what you can't have.

With Australia slowly opening up again as coronavirus restrictions ease, with beleaguered businesses desperately in need of the tourist dollar after nine months of fire and pestilence, and after so much time at home, I'm longing to discover this country again.

It seems I'm not alone. Though many interstate borders are yet to open, 65% of Australians are already feeling comfortable to travel within Australia, according to a Travel and Tourism Trends Report commissioned by PayPal, and conducted by ACA Research in June. Just 4% of those surveyed said they would feel comfortable "travelling broadly" overseas. Though numbers have understandably nosedived year on year, in areas of Australia that are less-affected by Covid-19, a snapshot survey by Tourism Research Australia shows that overnight spend by domestic tourists has increased steadily every month from April to June.

I know of colleagues and friends who are already planning big trips around the continent. One optimist has even bought an RV, with plans to continue homeschooling her kids as they cross the country. "We can't go overseas for a while, so for once, we're going to make the most of being in Australia," she says.

It's about time. Many of us have bungee jumped in New Zealand, skied Japan or summered in Europe, but have never seen the Top End.

Pre-Covid-19, the Northern Territory welcomed one million interstate visitors each year, according to Tourism Research Australia. Yet we took 1.5 million trips to New Zealand in 2019, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Why have we always been less interested in our own backyard?

“Australians have wanderlust and a spirit of adventure in their DNA,” says Tourism Australia managing director Phillipa Harrison.

“As an island nation, we’ve always had a yearning to escape our shores and see what the rest of the world has to offer.”

All up, Australians made 11 million overseas trips for leisure in 2019, spending \$65bn, says Tourism Australia. That spending outstrips the money international visitors spent in Australia by \$26bn, according to an August report from Tourism Research Australia.

While Australians alone can’t fully compensate for the loss of foreign visitors to our shores for the time being, we can offer sizeable relief. Domestic travellers typically contribute around 70% of Australia’s near-\$150bn tourism economy, according to the Australian Tourism Industry Council.

“There is a real opportunity to keep valuable tourism dollars in Australia,” says Harrison.

At the same time, foregoing air travel is climate friendly, more flexible (and will save you some cash).

Travel will look a little different for a while. You’ll need to book ahead no matter what you choose to do, so venues can manage numbers. Social distancing rules still apply everywhere, and there’s always a risk your plans (however modest) might have to change.

But if you are able to travel, it is worth it. You should never waste a crisis. Despite its woes, this year has provided a perfect opportunity for new Australians to discover their homeland, and native Australians to better understand it.

I value what I saw of this stunning country before it became my home. With a greater understanding of Australia came a greater attachment.

Whether it’s paddling empty beaches, sipping on world-class wine in South Australia, spotting our uniquely bizarre wildlife, or hearing ancient stories from the world’s oldest continuous living culture, the experiences awaiting us in our vast backyard are endless.

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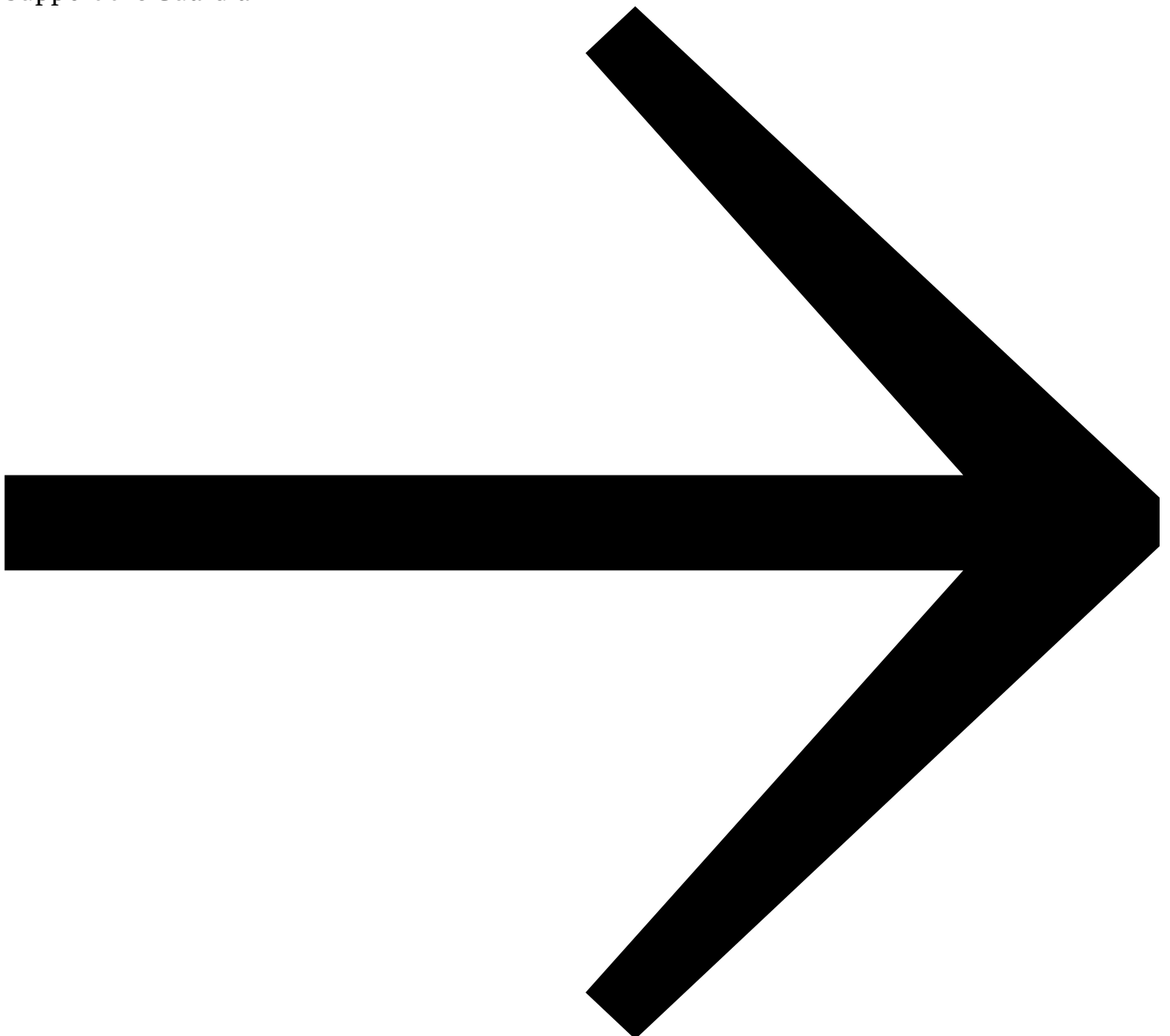
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