

Golden Quest: Eastern Goldfields Trail of WA

Terry & Meg Dillon

A chance meeting at a petrol station in Norseman introduced us to the Eastern Goldfields. What were the gold rushes like in WA in the 1890s and what was left to see? We had to ramble off to find out and so we drove north to start the search at Kalgoorlie. This modern town with parks, shopping and restored century-old buildings has outgrown its rough and tumble origins as a whoopee town for bearded miners looking for booze and brothels. It's worth several days exploration if you like gracious federation buildings and want to delve into its history. (Hint: Passing through and want a quick coffee or meal? Go to Boulder - the twin city of Kalgoorlie. Smaller, historic, restored, good cafes & pubs and much easier to park, especially if you are pulling a van or trailer.)

We bought the guide to the trail (Golden Quest Discovery Trail Guide Book, \$40, at the Information Centre) and used it as a handy map, while enjoying the stories and CDs while driving.



Starting from Kalgoorlie we arrived at the Broad Arrow Tavern in time to wave to a group of bearded bikies having some mid morning refreshment at the tavern. The trail is about more than gold, it's also the story of bringing steam trains to this remote area far from the WA coast. Railway buffs would enjoy examining the restored water tank (Broad Arrow) used to service the steam engines running on the new line that inched its way east from Coolgardie in 1895 and opened in 1898 at Menzies. Along the route we

would also find railway workers cottages (Goongarrie), a superb C19 station awaiting restoration (Menzies), the Niagara Dam built in 1897 to store water for steam engines and old railway bridges near Malcolm with its new rolling stock hub.

We diverted to Ora Banda to view the historic pub restored in the 1980s by a former internee at Dashau concentration camp. Later in 2002 it was the scene of a tragic shooting, when a member of a bikie gang camping nearby was murdered and later so was the publican, whom the gang suspected of the shooting. The town like so many others we would visit on this trail started life as a gold rush with up to 3000 miners trying their luck with pick and shovels in this dry inhospitable environment. Tent towns would develop to supply them, then iron shacks would be erected and sometimes brick and stone buildings, mostly the pubs that you see still standing or lying in ruins robbed out by later settlers who reused the materials. In fact this is also a story of recycling. Wooden buildings were shifted elsewhere to a new town when the local gold ran out and corrugated iron was a prized commodity that also went. Town locations along the trail are mostly marked with an information board as nothing remains except perhaps a few bottles or other bits of domestic detritus.

Such was Siberia, our next stop. Only a silent cemetery with no headstones remained, separated from the bush by a rough fence. We drove through low hills and beautiful wildflower shrubs in the late afternoon to our overnight stop, Goongarrie Station. These station stays are great for an overnight stop or longer: most have showers, BBQs and camp kitchens. Goongarrie was a former sheep station where sandalwood was also harvested for the incense trade. They are managed by Dept of Environment & Conservation and in the tourist season have resident camp hosts. We stayed for several days exploring the station buildings, driving the 4X4 trails in Goongarrie National Park and walking the homestead track through several types of arid land vegetation.





We also took time to explore Pianto Road well worth a look in the wildflower season because of its spectacular variety of flowering native shrubs. Our big plea is to the Dept of Environment & Conservation: *Please reinstate a watering point at Goongarrie Station for the native birds and animals.* They will die when the current rainwater pools dry up (very soon) unless you do. All the other stations also need this! A permanent watering point for native wildlife should be always installed whenever DEC takes control of a station property. Come on guys-have heart!

Leaving for Leonora we spent time at those goldfield towns on the way that had retained some historic buildings and still had some residents. Menzies had a number of historic buildings that were well preserved and still inhabited, while Kookynie still had a good pub and a few dwellings and lots of robbed out ruins. Both would have been fantastic to see in their heyday with several thousand residents, tents, pubs, shanties, crushing batteries, mines everywhere, dust storms, water condensing plants-water was so scarce they condensed fresh water out of the salt water bores.

Our destination that evening was the very much alive mining town of Leonora. The rich 'Sons of Gwalia' mine is huge and employs most people in the town. The original goldmine 'Gwalia' and its precincts are preserved and fascinating to wander around. If you have time book in for a bed & breakfast at the original mine managers house, a sumptuously and authentically furnished Federation house-originally designed by (later President) Herbert Hoover when he was mine manager there in 1899. Three bedrooms are available and the cost when we were there was less than \$200 per night. We stayed in the very comfortable caravan park for several days getting tips from the many amateur gold prospectors about how to still find gold using metal detectors. Apparently lots of surface gold is still around - but they are cagey about exactly where their favorite spots are.



There are several side trips you can drive from Leonora. All are round 200-300km and are related to old mine sites. The scenery is arid-country red-dirt scrub with flowers in season. We drove to the Eastern Terraces, a dramatic break-a-way range of aged Yalgarn-block fractured sandstone. You could camp at this deserted and dramatic site, but pay respect to the local Aboriginal Australian's beliefs about this site and leave it as you found it.

Time to complete the 300km last leg of the trail. We wanted to look at Granite Creek, a lovely shady creek of red gums and budgerigars. Great for a morning tea break with tables and loo. Then down the road to Snake Hill a low hill that was an excellent lookout of 360 degrees over the surrounding country. A covered shelter, table and BBQ was provided and we lunched there. Beyond it off the road and just visible was Lake Ballard, a dry lake that glittered in the sun with salt crystals. It was here we had to turn off to reach "Inside Australia" a permanent sculpture exhibition of 20 or more contemporary metal human figures spread over a kilometer or so, some anchored in the sand and others on the salt bed of the lake.



Their dramatic setting was heightened by a small perfectly conical natural hill on the edge of the lake. We would have liked to stay overnight and looked at them at dawn but the day was hot and there was little available shade in the scrub along the lake.

Instead we drove on and camped that evening at Rowles Lagoon, another eerie dry lake set in Mallee scrub. Another camper there told us he used to visit it as a child when it was full and water ski on it! Hard to imagine! We lazed here for two nights then set off for Coolgardie the final destination of the trail. On the way we passed through taller forest with lots of mine holes that looked as if prospecting was still going strong and as if a monument to the trip, the ruins of the Premier Hotel at Kunanalling, a luxury hotel of the 1890s that catered to the carriage trade or lucky miners celebrating their new riches. I can envisage that even now some philanthropist and history buff who is also canny at business may like to restore it and tempt the passing tourists to stay and dine. What a comeback for this fascinating trail that documents the rise and falls of rail, the pastoral industry and mining in this harsh but beautiful landscape.



Rotary Club Fishing Camping & Leisure Show

As this was the first time we had attended the show as a Club we weren't quite sure what to expect. The Rotary Club had generously offered us a free site which we expected to be small and out of the way. To our surprise, the site was adjacent to one of the main entrances with plenty of room to spread out. So we used both of the Club's marquees, DJ organised a couple of 4x4s which could be left there for the weekend (thanks Dean C and Tom B) and Craig rounded up six large panels on which to display his collection of photos. It turned out to be a very impressive display which attracted a lot of attention.

Club members who volunteered to help all turned up on time and, even without the public, it was a good social gathering for the club. Many thanks to all of those who helped on the weekend. The public were there in force and I'm sure we left a favourable impression on those who were attracted to the display and stopped for a chat. Many commented that they were unaware that Wangaratta had a 4WD club and we now have a list of people who may be interested in joining us. We were also able to make some useful connections with other exhibitors.

Bruce G

