

LONG-HAUL TRAVEL

LONG-DISTANCE TRUCKING IS AN UNUSUAL CHOICE OF JOB FOR A WORKING HOLIDAY-MAKER. MEET ONE GUY WHO TOOK ON THE CHALLENGE – AND VISITED MANY A MINE ALONG THE WAY.

WORDS: RICHARD ASHER

SOMETIMES, while trying not to fall asleep at the wheel at 4am in the middle of the Northern Territory, I would question why I hadn't just followed the herd and copied the other gap year folk. In these dark moments I had to remind myself why I'd chosen to become an outback truckie: the delightful efficiency of getting paid to see Oz, and achieving a silly goal I'd set myself as a teenager.

How had I even got this far? Well, I passed my licence before leaving the United Kingdom, so I'd be ready to roll when I arrived in Australia. And, to cut a long story short, I was legal to drive rigids for three months.

When I first started job-hunting in Perth, though, I felt nothing but despair and rage. Every advert demanded experience. How was I supposed to get that? Then a truckie I'd gotten to know saved the day: "Try hot shots, mate. They're always short of drivers."

A hot shot company, he explained, specialises in emergency deliveries. It doesn't do scheduled runs; it simply responds to drop-everything-and-send-it-now calls by dispatching a

two-driver truck. One that doesn't stop, in other words.

My trucker buddy proved to be spot-on. They practically offered me a job over the phone. And it was too good to be true. I'd be driving unimaginably long distances anywhere across the continent, passing endearing one-pump desert settlements while racking up mileage that would make your brain pop.

Pretty much every trip, it turned out, involved hauling *something* to a mine site. I never grasped what those somethings were. But the recipients did ... sometimes.

Often, they were delirious to receive their thing. But some were strangely underwhelmed, even surprised, to hear that someone had put in a panicked phone call the day before. ➤



Richard funded his travels by working as a truck driver.

My routine went something like this: a co-driver and I would assemble at the yard in Kewdale, grab our instructions and head to a depot. Think Halliburton in Jandakot or WesTrac in Hazelmere. At the place of pick-up, I would try to look useful by fumbling hopelessly with ratchet straps (we writers don't gel with them) before my co-driver did it properly. And then we'd be off.

This being the age of workplace health and safety, it was important to arrive at the mine site – which could be anywhere from Cloncurry to Karratha – correctly kitted. Long trousers, sleeves, steelcaps – none of which you want to be wearing on the Great Northern Highway in January. Hence, the open-air changing ritual I'd go through just before the mine hove into view. If ever you see a truck pulled over just short of a site entrance, and see a man in underwear duck behind the cab, it's likely you didn't dream it.

Still, I never knew if I'd be allowed to join my co-driver inside. I didn't have a hi-vis uniform, and not many knew what to make of my jeans and safari shirt. I frequently forgot my hard hat. Access depended, really, on who was on the gatehouse and how important they considered themselves. Mount Keith was the sort of place where they'd wave you in without a worry. Another Western Australian mine, Telfer, is so remote that the notion of them falling under anybody's jurisdiction at all is faintly ridiculous. They know it, too.

Sometimes it wasn't uniform strife that kept me at the gates – 3am wasn't a good time to arrive

at deserted Jimblebar. Once, we arrived at Brockman to find the internal roads had been rained on, apparently impassable. We sat outside the gatehouse for an entire afternoon, keeping a beady eye on the racehorse-sized goanna lurking in the car park.

I still can't comprehend why, when most mining is in the Pilbara, equipment gets trucked 1000-plus kilometres up from Perth, where there's no mining. If I had a depot, I'd put mine in Port Hedland.

However, some places are equally far from everywhere – like the exploratory rig we visited beyond Innamincka on South Australia's Cordillo Downs Road. For that run we hauled some pipes across the Nullarbor, hung a left and drove for about another day and a half on corrugations so bad I feared my eyeballs might fall out. Epic, though, and enough to warrant a night's sleep in camp. Never has the sight of a bed been so welcome. Ditto the plate of pork chops and veggies.

Apparently, night shift staff tried the pipes while we slept, only to conclude they didn't fit. So they sent them back to Perth with us. But not before adding some pallets to drop off in Adelaide. Which may look like it's 'on the way' on a map of Australia, but it really isn't. Insomnia was not a problem we faced on our return run.

I look back on those experiences with fonder feelings than I may have had at the time. But I wouldn't have had my working holiday any other way. My security induction pass from Mt Whaleback still sits proudly at the top of my souvenir pile. 📷



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FAST FACTS

Hot shot drivers can earn as little as 20 cents per kilometre. That makes a Perth–Newman–Perth run worth \$478 before tax – or \$18 per hour for the run, typically 26 hours at short notice.

Road trains are limited to two trailers between Perth and Wubin, 280 kilometres up the Great Northern Highway. Third trailers, often brought up to Wubin by drivers known as 'dog runners', are attached there for the run north.