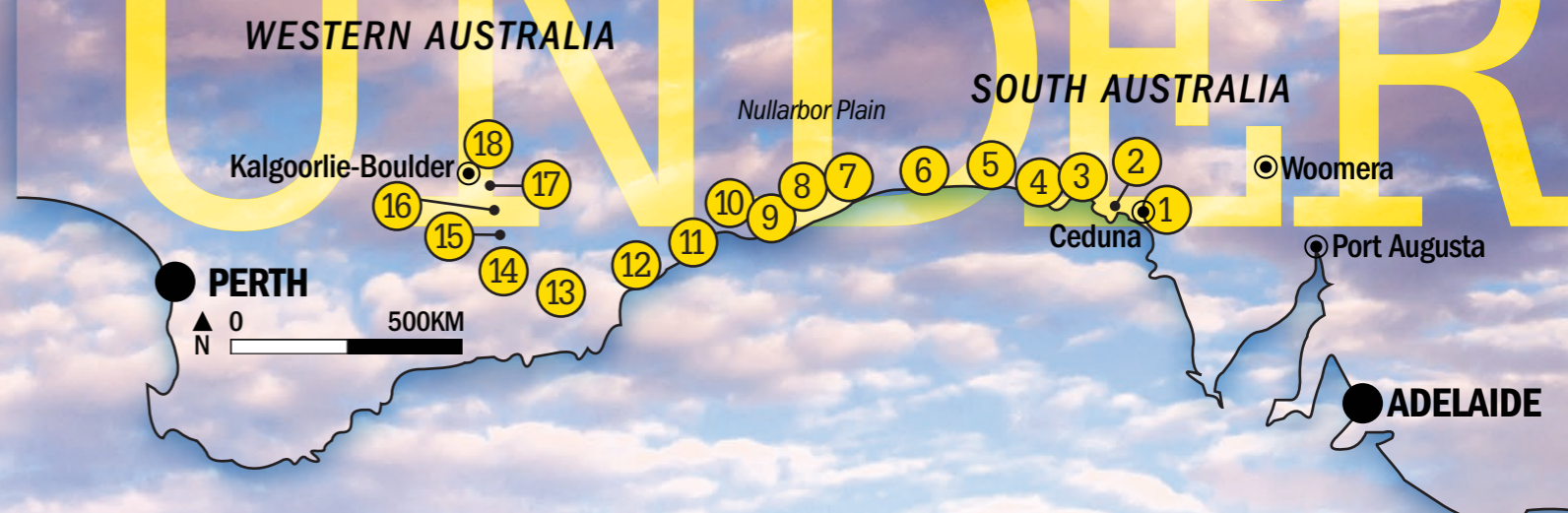


# DOWN UNDER

## Driving

Nullarbor Links in the Australian outback has pretty much all the hallmarks of a standard 18-hole layout – except it stretches over 1 365 kilometres and takes three days to play. Richard Asher takes us on a tour of the world's longest golf course.



There's an enormous kangaroo standing behind my tee-box. He's got a can of lemonade in his paw. He's pretending to look the other way, but he can't fool me. And there is nothing I can do about this gigantic, hulking marsupial. As the youth of today might put it... WTF?

I'm playing my 6th hole on the Nullarbor Links, Australia's self-proclaimed 'world's longest golf course'. It's a claim that seems pretty sound to me – Copperleaf, you have some catching up to do. The Nullarbor is not doing too badly on the surreal either, for the big kangaroo (one of Australia's many giant animal statues, if you're wondering) is just one of the bizarre things I'm facing right now.

This tough 160-metre par three, named Border Roo, is just inside South Australia. It's only a few steps away from the Western Australian frontier, which is pretty exciting because state borders can be a big deal in Australia. This one

is marked by a full-on checkpoint, its raison d'être being Australia's national obsession with restricting the movement of fruit and vegetables – and we've got some illegal apples stashed away. So, there was tension in the air even before I had to deal with teeing off in front of the granddaddy of all Skippies.

Something else weird is happening: I'm being congratulated by Aussie cricket fans. This three-day golfing road trip, you see, is wedged in-between watching Faf du Plessis' monumental match-saving effort in November's Adelaide test match and South Africa's series-clinching win in Perth. Inevitably, I'm wearing my tatty Proteas replica shirt with pride, and two Aussies doing the same journey spot me heading for the tee. They're full of admiration for Faf and the boys. The recent efforts of Trevor, Louis, Charl and Ernie (versus exactly how many Aussie Major winners in the same period?) aren't helping me either.

I'm feeling pressure to live up to my country's sporting reputation, right in front of the old enemy.

With two photographers poised to capture my perfect strike, it's fair to say the whole thing is a bit unusual as a golf experience. It's almost a relief that the hole plays out in familiar fashion: I block my tee shot out into a bush, and end up taking seven.

The Nullarbor Links concept was, fittingly, dreamt up in the bar of Balladonia Roadhouse at the western end of Australia's longest stretch of dead-straight road – aptly named the '90 Mile Straight'. The idea was to spice up the drive between Perth and Adelaide (or vice versa), and it was a pretty good one. Because although it's seen as one of the world's great road trips, the Nullarbor can also be a tad dull. There's nothing there apart from roadhouses (the Aussie equivalent of a no-frills 1Stop), and the scenery varies between northern Free State, classic Karoo

and the Karoo with a few trees.

But since the 1 365-kilometre 'course' opened in 2009 (it has since staged four annual events), tourists have had reason to bring the clubs and stop for a hit every now and then. There are 18 holes along the stretch of road between Ceduna in South Australia and Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. Drives between holes can take a couple of hours, but as with any golf course, you pay a greenfee (A\$70) and get a scorecard. You get your card stamped at roadhouses or designated points along the way, and when you're done, you get a commemorative certificate to go with all those 'I crossed the Nullarbor' knick-knacks you bought in the roadhouses.

Six of the holes are located at proper golf clubs, with manicured Kalgoorlie-Boulder the head-and-shoulders highlight. The rest of the course is made up of single holes with artificial greens, mostly at roadhouses.

You can play the course in either direction, but there's a lot to be said for going westwards, thereby saving the best until last.

The watchword is 'fun'. You'd have to be very unlucky to run into any other golfers out on the course (Kalgoorlie excepted – phone ahead to book a slot), and you can tee the ball up if you want to save your clubs from too much damage from outback stones. There are no rules officials and no prizes, so it's all about enjoying the game.

Playing technicalities become less of a worry as the game goes on. As we head deeper into Western Australia, and the par three at Madura, the challenge comes in the form of one of Australia's mighty road trains. These are the longest trucks in the world – they can stretch to 53 metres – and the driver has parked his one right across the hole. This is not a challenge I ever faced at Westlake Golf Club, and I'm not sure what the R&A would make of it.

Rather than hunt for a rule book or interrupt a grumpy truckie mid-fry-up, I assess the likelihood of getting it up and over the truck with the 9-iron I want to hit. It looks doable, but I know better than to rule out thinning it straight into the cab window. I decide I'll take my chances, and this time respond well to the pressure. This shot, possibly the weirdest I've ever had to hit, is well struck and ends up just behind the green. But I make five – the short game ain't easy on this little links.

By now we're onto the second day of the round, and earlier on we saw the mercury hit 44 degrees. But not long after the road train incident, it's cooled dramatically and the rain arrives. I get to drive the 90 Mile Straight in a downpour, which is probably a good thing from a not-falling-asleep point of view. It's evening and absolutely freezing by the time we get to Sheep's Back, where once again I have kangaroos watching me.

This time they are real ones, perched on the crags surrounding this beautiful par three set near a campsite some way off the highway. Sheep's Back is completely different in character to the rest of the course, more reminiscent of Lesotho than the Karoo.

The next day I round things off with some more forgettable golf at Norseman, Kambalda and Kalgoorlie-Boulder. The latter is a gold-mining town, so don't be surprised to run into a few 'highly skilled' Saffer ex-pats lapping up the dollars. That said, I was nevertheless surprised to hear an unmistakable Capey lilt from the guy working in the pro shop. I couldn't help feeling pride at our golfing exports once again.

Back in town, the lady issuing my completion certificate at Kalgoorlie's tourist info centre assures me that my 123 isn't really so terrible: "I've seen much worse," she says. "We get people coming in here with scores of 160."

Hearing that did make me feel a little better, and reminded me that playing the unique Nullarbor Links is about fun, not earning oneself a tour card. Even if, like me, you've gone into golfing retirement due to the game's impossibility, it's worth emerging for this rather special hit if you're ever over Australia way.

Would a similar concept to the Nullarbor Links work in South Africa? We too have some long drives that could do with a bit of zing, and maybe a trans-Karoo golf challenge is worth some thought. There are enough platteland golf courses along the way that could supply a hole or two, and the odd par three at a 1Stop would be a fun addition. Such a concept might not lure any serious golf tourists away from the Garden Route, but the chance to taste golf Victoria West- or Uniondale-style might just be enough to convince them to drive back to OR Tambo instead of catching a flight from George.



Photographs by Susan Ng



"BACK AT THE ROADHOUSE, IN DARKNESS, A DINGO STOPS TO GIVE US A SUSPICIOUS STARE..."

**1 OYSTER BEDS**  
CEDUNA GC  
PAR FIVE, 485m

The adventure begins at Ceduna Golf Club, which is, by country standards anyway, a proper golf course. Despite Ceduna's oceanside location, the fairways are anything but verdant and the greens are of the sand variety. The opener is a straightforward par five. I smash my tee shot along the ground and straight into a bush. This may be the most unusual golf challenge I'll ever undertake, but it looks like my game is sticking to its mediocre ways. I make seven.

**2 DENIAL BAY**  
CEDUNA GC  
PAR FOUR, 370m

I scatter a flock of pink galah birds with my tee shot, which goes straight down the middle of Ceduna's 18th fairway. But I miss the green with my approach. Sand greens are a bit of a chore, since you have to smooth your line of putt with a rake before you play, but they are an experience. From here, the Nullarbor drive itself begins. Enjoy the wheatland agriculture while it lasts, because it peters out not long after the next hole.

**3 WINDMILLS**  
PENONG GC  
PAR FOUR, 260m

South Australia's windmill capital welcomes the Nullarbor Links player with a par four that is, in theory, driveable. I succeed only in losing my ball off the tee. This is the first of the artificial greens that define the links. They putt pretty well, though some of them are covered in stones. Some exceptional holing out later on leads me to suspect that there's a funnel effect around some of the cups, but I'm not complaining.

**4 WOMBAT HOLE**  
NUNDROO ROADHOUSE  
PAR FIVE, 520m

I get my card stamped in the roadhouse (run by a Scotsman, staffed by European backpackers) and head round the back to play the par five. Not far from the tee lies a collection of burnt-out vehicles. No sign of a wombat, despite the hole's name, but it's one of the few with real contours. The drive is over a crest, after which the hole doglegs left and drops down again. My snap hook doesn't make it over the hill, but I salvage a par here. It will prove to be the high point of my round.

**5 DINGO'S DEN**  
NULLARBOR HOTEL/  
MOTEL  
PAR FIVE, 538m

The most iconic place you can stay at on the Nullarbor, this roadhouse is also home to a lady dog of a par five. Miss the fairway (it's also an airstrip) here and you kiss your ball goodbye. With my slice really hitting its straps now, that's exactly what happens. After a surprisingly good roast dinner, I step across Highway 1 and take a walk across the plains in the direction of the sea. It's quintessential Nullarbor scenery. Back at the roadhouse, in darkness, a dingo stops to give me a suspicious stare before skulking off in the direction of the golf hole. No issues with the hole's name this time, then.

**6 BORDER KANGAROO**  
BORDER VILLAGE  
PAR THREE, 160m

Day two begins with a par three – and it's my worst nightmare. The tee-box is right on the car park, so I have the pleasure of a small gallery. And even if there aren't any people to jeer at your travails, the giant kangaroo statue will certainly be there, hulking above



the tee. Bush surrounds the green, and I make full use of it on my way to a seven. We hop back in the car for our quarantine inspection by the Western Australians, and pass through the border after some frantic fruit and nut guzzling.

**7 NULLARBOR NYMPH**  
EUCLA GC  
PAR FOUR, 315m

Clearly the star turn at Eucla Golf Club, this hole has a beautiful, wide fairway that doubles as a shooting range. Not sure who gets priority if you rock up during gun practice. There are no bushes, but the one time I could actually get away with a mistake, I produce a gem of a drive down the middle. Things unravel from there though, and it's an unremarkable five. Eucla has a pleasant roadhouse, with a view of the sea. As the furious summer heat rises to the low 40s, we take a detour to check out the ruins of the old telegraph station.

**8 WATERING HOLE**  
MUNDRABILLA ROADHOUSE  
PAR FOUR, 330m

Expect to mix it with the local emus when you play this hole, which features a cunning dogleg to the left. To my surprise, I play a straight approach shot, but it gets a miserable kick and misses the green. I make a double. With our Volvo's temperature gauge now showing 44 degrees, I'm just thankful I don't have to play 18 holes all in one go.

**9 BRUMBY'S RUN**  
MADURA ROADHOUSE  
PAR THREE, 125m

I rather like the road train challenge, and figure a 9-iron will be enough to get up and over the trailers. A mishit doesn't bear thinking about. To everyone's great relief, this pressure-filled shot goes without a hitch, and ends up just over the back of the green. Short game's a mess, though, and it's a double-bogey five.

Photographs by Susan Hig

**10 EAGLE'S NEST  
COCKLEBIDDY  
MOTEL**  
PAR FOUR, 347m

Another shock development on one of the world's most arid courses – there's water! Well, it isn't much to write home about, and is probably the result of a temporary plumbing glitch, but that doesn't stop me knocking my ball into it from the tee. This hole is a disaster from start to finish: a glorious succession of duffs and shanks earns me a 14. I'm just happy I am able to finish the hole before dying of old age.

**11 90 MILE  
STRAIGHT  
CAIGUNA**  
PAR FOUR, 310m

The temperature has been dropping – and now there's rain. This is another miserable hole for me, with a lost approach shot. The hole dog-legs left, and it's not the only one where it's hard to know just where to aim. I pick my way to the end, but am semi-drenched by the time I'm back at the car and, hoping the storm will pass before the next hole, which is a long way off, it's time to tackle the famous 90 Mile Straight.

**12 SKYLAB  
BALLADONIA  
HOTEL/MOTEL**  
PAR THREE, 175m

We stagger into this roadhouse after taking on the 145-kilometre straight in torrential rain. It was a good time to be on a road with no corners – I couldn't see anything. The par three at Balladonia is also blind, but there's a sign to aim at. I miss it, end up in a bush and make eight as I start to stop caring. It's really cold, really windy and really wet. Of interest is the roadhouse museum, which details the famous events of July 1979, when a NASA satellite crashed and burned right here at Balladonia.

**13 SHEEP'S BACK  
FRASER RANGE  
STATION**  
PAR THREE, 141m

By now the trees have thickened and we've left any semblance of Nullarbor landscape behind. This hole is a short drive off the highway, in a camping ground rather than a

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Photograph by Monica Bailey



roadhouse. All of a sudden the hills rear up. The scenery is more Scottish highlands than Western Australia, though the illusion is helped along by a howling cold wind and drizzle in the air. It's a lovely hole deep in a valley that has room enough for an 18-hole course of its own.

**14 NGADJU  
NORSEMAN GC**  
PAR FIVE, 436m

For the first time since Eucla, it's back to a proper golf club, albeit another course of the 'country' variety. Not that it makes much difference to me whether the fairway is gravel

or grass: I shank my shot into the woods next to the tee. It's another 'double-par' score for me: 10 on a par five. The game is unravelling beyond recognition and it's becoming increasingly hard to believe I once shot a round in the 70s. Not a good start to the third and final day.

**15 GOLDEN  
HORSE  
NORSEMAN GC**  
PAR FOUR, 354m

Fairway hit! Norseman Golf Club is deserted, so only my snappers witness this rare driving feat. There's a beastly tree blocking my

route to the green, though, and inevitably my approach shot ends up underneath it on my way to a bogey. It's groans and grumbles on the dusty walk back to the car, but the end – and the green, green grass of Kalgoorlie – is in sight.

**16 SILVER LAKE  
KAMBALDA GC**  
PAR FOUR, 392m

From Norseman, we head north through a landscape of forests and semi-dry salt lake beds. Strictly speaking, the Nullarbor is behind us – we're into mining country, as the industrial railroad and regular road

Photographs by Susan Ng

**17 CY O'CONNOR  
KALGOORLIE GC**  
PAR FOUR, 365m

I have half-an-hour's drive to dream of how different it's all going to be when I hit the lush grass fairways of Kalgoorlie-Boulder Golf Course, now a PGA Tour of Australasia host venue.

**18 GOLDEN MILE  
KALGOORLIE GC**  
PAR FIVE, 513m

I'm hoping for a finish that might encourage me not to retire from golf. I hit two of the round's best shots to almost find Kal's par-five

**THE WORLD'S LONGEST GOLF COURSES**

|   |                    |                  |
|---|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. Nullarbor Links                                | Australia          | 1 365 kilometres |
| 2. Jade Dragon Snow Mountain Golf Club, Lijiang   | China              | 7 726.7 metres   |
| 3. International Golf Club (Pines Course), Bolton | Massachusetts, USA | 7 612.4 metres   |
| 4. RTJ at Ross Bridge, Hoover                     | Alabama, USA       | 7 489.9 metres   |
| 5. Antler Creek Golf Club, Colorado Springs       | Colorado, USA      | 7 466.1 metres   |



**RICHARD ASHER** loves sport, but lacking the hand-eye coordination to play anything for Province, this Capetonian opted for the next-best thing: sport journalism. He is also a widely published travel writer, and spends most of his time devising cunning ways to wander the globe watching sport without getting a real job.

2nd in two, and manage to avoid both the fairway and the dirt. But I find the first fairway bunker on offer in the last 1 365 kilometres, and knock a 3-wood into the greenside sand. Sand that's like cement after the previous day's heavy rains. I haven't a clue how to play this kind of lie, and can't escape the sand. Before I know it, I'm pencilling in a 10. Retirement it is, then. But completing the world's longest golf course is the perfect way to sign off – and the drink at the 19th is as well deserved as any I've had. **CG**

**For more on the Nullarbor Links, visit [www.nullarborlinks.com](http://www.nullarborlinks.com).**