

# Wanna Munna

Words: Fiona Lohrbacher  
Images: Juergen and Fiona Lohrbacher

## Found

**A**fter three weeks in Perth, Juergen finally got the call we'd been waiting for; a four-week nursing contract in Newman, a mining town in the Pilbara. Excellent! After four months of travelling the coffers needed refilling. The only snag – we had four days to get there.

Four days to travel 1200 kilometres with three kids and a camper trailer in a 30-year-old Landcruiser that wouldn't do more than 80 km/h. Some people see 100km/h speed signs as a challenge; to us they were a taunt. Glumly we studied the map. The coastal route, one of our favourite parts of Australia, was out. The Pinnacles, Kalbarri, Monkey Mia, we'd have to postpone them for now.

In all our previous travels we'd stuck to the coast. As a Pom I'm not used to being more than 100 kilometres from the sea and the idea of going far inland gives me the heebie-jeebies. Reluctantly, I abandoned my comfort zone and thank goodness I did for we embarked on a fascinating journey into the surreal that would finally take us to one of the most beautiful and amazing places in Australia.

Only an hour out of Perth we passed through a magical portal and were transported through time and space to nineteenth century Spain. We stared in bemused incredulity, dazed and disorientated, as we drove past the highly ornate walls of a Spanish monastery. A black-robed monk strode purposefully along the road. We drove slowly, looking for a sign, anything to explain this outrageous anomaly in the Australian countryside. But other than 'Museum and Art Gallery' there was nothing. I longed to explore, but the clock was ticking and time was a luxury we didn't have. A later internet search of 'monastery near Perth' revealed that we'd stumbled upon Australia's only monastic town, New Norcia, founded in 1847 by two Spanish Benedictine missionaries.

We spent our first night at Dalwallinu, on the edge of the Wheatbelt, and the caravan park was as open, flat and featureless as the Wheatbelt itself. The dawn chorus was the discordant screech of a flock of galahs. Wubin, twenty-one kilometres further, was the last town for 300 kilometres and the last petrol for 150 kilometres. If we thought the Nullarbor was empty it was *nothing* compared to the road between Wubin and Mt Magnet. While the coastal Brand Highway was tail-to-tail caravans full of grey nomads and families racing north for winter, the Great Northern Highway was bare of all but us and the occasional road-train.

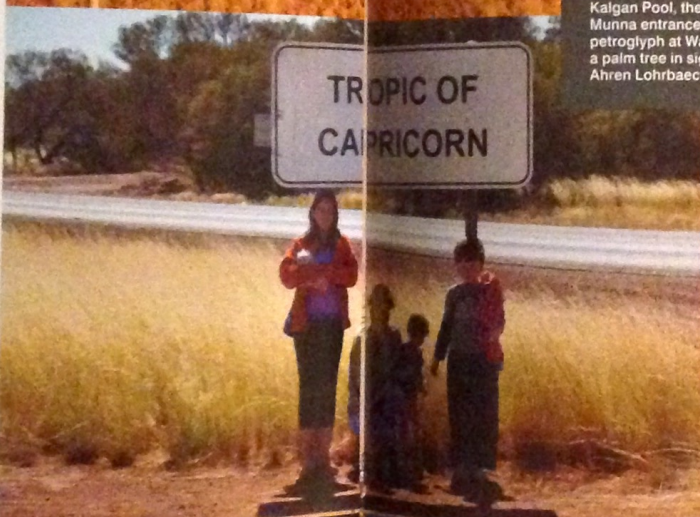
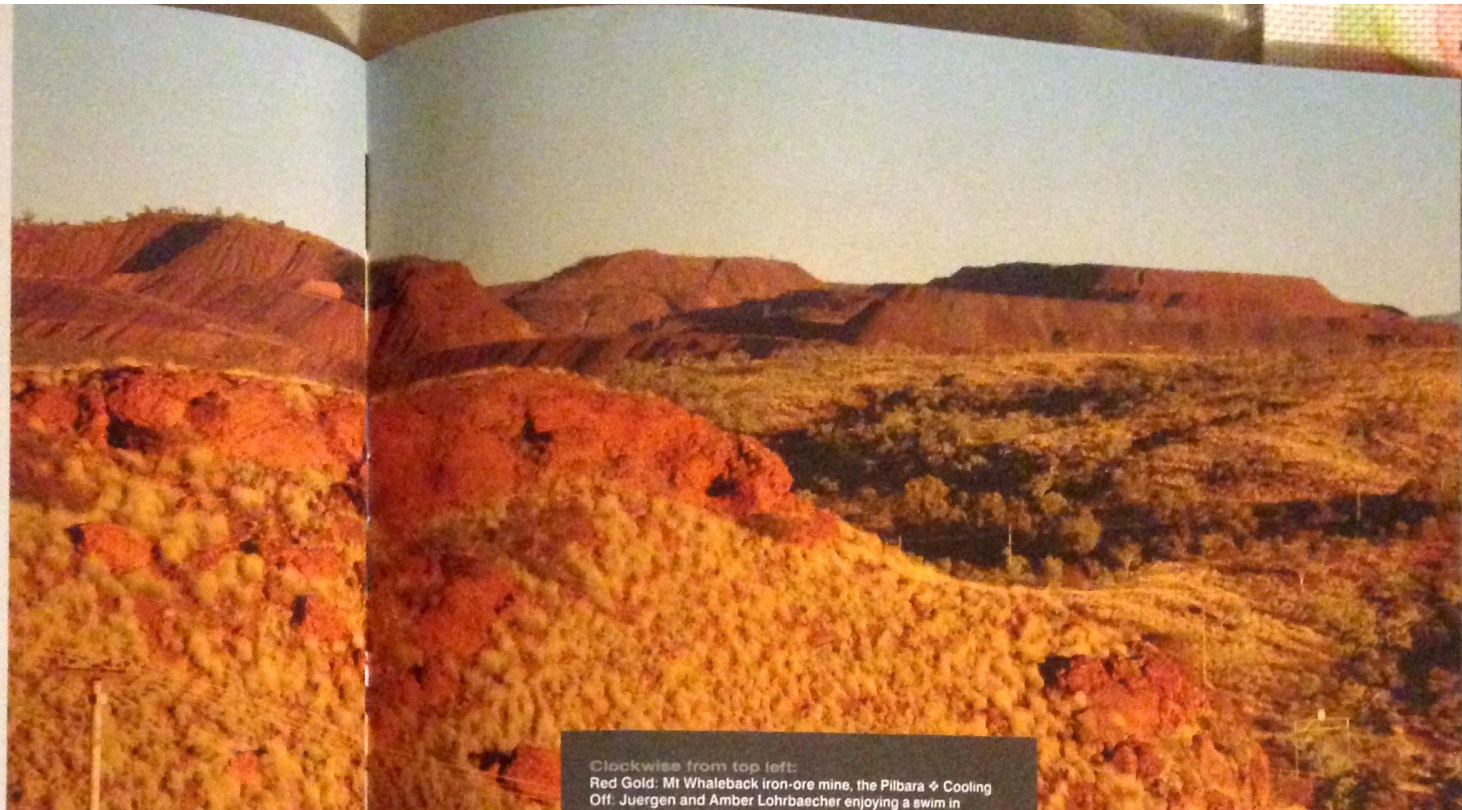
Four months on the road and I still hadn't struck the right balance between drinking enough to avoid constipation and not so much that I had to wee every half hour. It's alright for the boys, they can go bush, but that's no fun for us girls. So, as we approached the Paynes Find Roadhouse, the only roadhouse between Wubin and Mt Magnet, our bladders were singing with joy and Juergen was in dire need of an iced coffee; his drug of choice to get him through those long driving days.

But when we pulled up we found it closed for renovations! So much for the last petrol for 150 kilometres! Good job we'd filled up in Wubin. I asked a girl in the office if there was a toilet we could use. 'There's a donga out the back,' was the incomprehensible answer. Not wanting to display my ignorance I didn't ask what a 'donga' was, I just went out the back to look for anything resembling a toilet. The 'donga' turned out to be a large trailer housing a temporary toilet block.

As twilight approached we rolled into Cue, 80 kilometres past Mt Magnet. This was another surprise, a deserted grand old town in the middle of nowhere. Beautiful historic stone buildings face each other across a wide, wide, trafficless road. However, the biggest surprise was that the town's one caravan park was bursting at the seams and we had to camp in an overflow area.

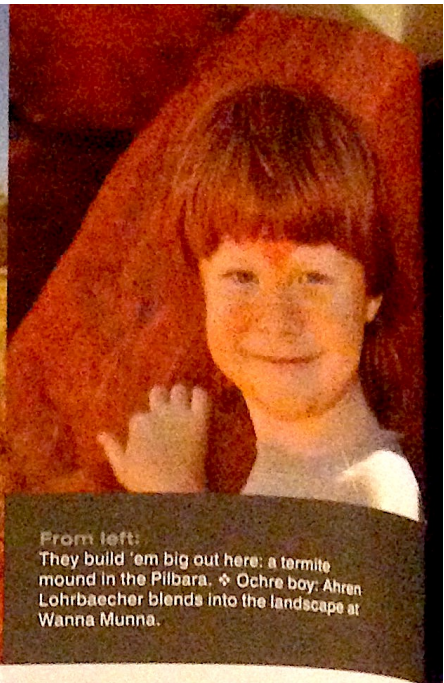
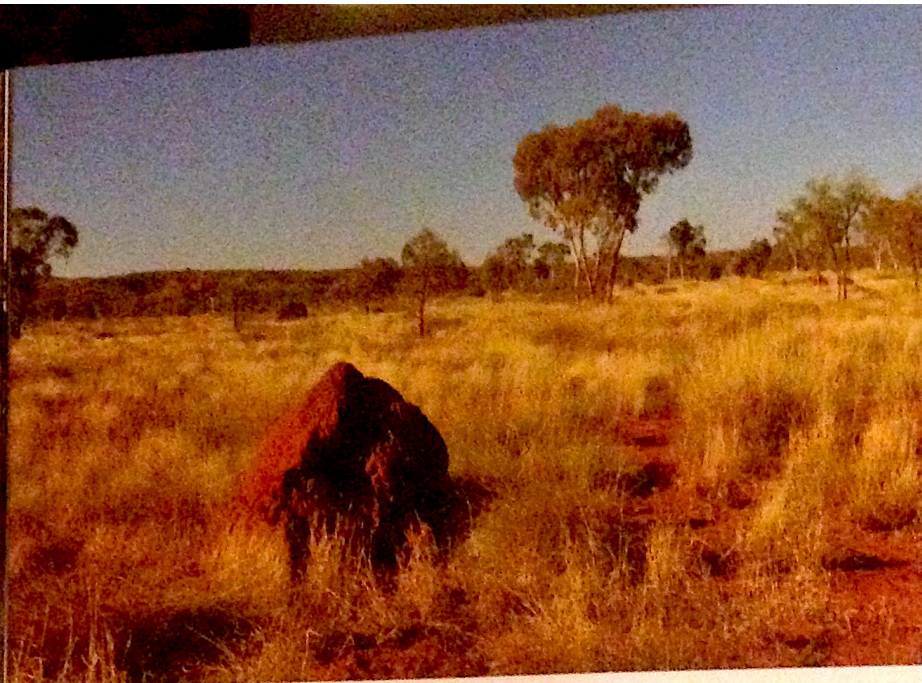
Again there was a surreal feeling of having walked into a dream. The road was empty, the town was empty, just where did all these people come from? Juergen set up the trailer, grabbed a beer and went to chat. He soon discovered we'd muscled in on a gold-fossicking community. Cue was once The Queen of the Murchison, capital of the Murchison gold mining area with a population of 10,000. Now it's reduced to a permanent population of 300 and an itinerant population that spend weeks every year fossicking for gold. Lonely days in the tranquil bush are countered with social evenings sharing a few beers and a few yarns. Some have been coming for 40 years. It's a way of life that appeals strongly to Juergen and I could see him ruefully eyeing the unused gold pan he bought in Sovereign Hill.

After another long day of driving we came to rest at Kumarina Roadhouse, just 145 kilometres before Newman. It's a quaint place with small tin motel rooms that contain a bed, a fridge and nothing else. The ablutions block is a donga with individual toilet and shower compartments, very civilised. The caravan park is a bare, dusty yard and the powered sites cluster around an old water tower with power points underneath it.



Clockwise from top left:  
Red Gold: Mt Whaleback iron-ore mine, the Pilbara ✦ Cooling Off: Juergen and Amber Lohrbaecher enjoying a swim in Kalgan Pool, the Pilbara. ✦ Welcome to Paradise: Wanna Munna entrances visitors. ✦ Guardian of the rock: an ancient petroglyph at Wanna Munna. ✦ The Tropics at last, and not a palm tree in sight. From left to right, Amber, Fiona, Mia and Ahren Lohrbaecher. ✦ Rock spirit: petroglyph at Wanna Munna.





From left: They build 'em big out here: a ferrite mound in the Pilbara. ♦ Ochre boy: Ahren Lohrbacher blends into the landscape at Wanna Munna.

Just before Newman we crossed the Tropic Of Capricorn. Not that you could tell, there were no palm trees and banana plants here, just bare, red iron-ore soil and yellow spinifex grass.

Newman is a mining town, home of Mt Whaleback, the world's largest single pit open cut iron-ore mine. I had my prejudices of a mining town, which were soon smashed. One was about food. 'We won't find any good vegetarian food in the supermarket,' I thought. Was I ever wrong! Newman has a huge, modern Woolworths with a vast array of health and vegetarian foods. We did feel very conspicuous in Woolies, being the only people not wearing fluorescent orange jackets.

With an ordinary three-bedroom home starting at \$700,000 and average weekly rents ranging from \$1000-\$2000, no one but mine workers can afford to live here. Even the caravan parks are packed with miners. All the shop workers, teachers and so forth, are family members of mine workers. It's a strange, surreal world where money has a totally different value to what we're used to. And, on the fringe of all this incomprehensible wealth, like the beggar at the feast, is the Aboriginal settlement, neat and well looked after but distinctly lacking in satellite dishes and swimming pools.

We were lucky the Department of Health provides free accommodation, otherwise the hospital would be empty. So for a month we had the luxury of not having to walk twenty metres to the toilet in the middle of the night standing with crossed legs while our sleep-addled brains desperately tried to remember a security code.

Newman is in the heart of the Pilbara, the dramatic red country immortalised in the movie *Red Dog*. And it is breathtaking country. But you can't forget the presence of the mine even when you're far from it. BHP Billiton owns most of the land around here and when we drove to the popular waterhole, Kalgan Pool, we first had to get a permit to cross mining land.

After rattling for an hour along a bumpy dirt track it was delicious to cool off in the crocodile-free waters of the pool, nestled at the base of a sheer red cliff. But that was not the most exciting thing for me. My 'aha!' moment came when I saw a rock at my feet and, with my archaeological background, recognised it as a 'hammer rock'. As I looked around in breathless excitement I

discovered a whole array of stone implements. Mindful of not disturbing Aboriginal artefacts I took photos of them and left them where they were. But this treasure was nothing compared to our discovery a few days later.

We'd gone seven kilometres past where the turnoff should be. Surely we'd missed it. Juergen pulled over to the side of the road. We looked at the GPS co-ordinates the tourist office had given us. Yes, we'd definitely gone too far. We turned around and headed back, eyes scanning the side of the road for a likely turnoff. We spotted it. A dirt track headed off into the bush, marked by a bright orange traffic cone sitting atop a small pole. This had to be it. We turned off the highway and bumped and jolted our way along the stony track until it forked. Again the way was unmarked. With a shrug we took the left-hand fork, hoping we were still on the right track. We bounced along, down a steep incline, until the track stopped at a clearing overlooking a waterhole. Surely this must be the place. We walked to the hole and there, staring at us from the other side, was a kangaroo. Not a real kangaroo, but an effigy, carved, who knows how long ago, into the sheer red cliff over the waterhole. We'd found it, Wanna Munna.

We'd visited other rock art sites in the Grampians, sites protected by fences, with interpretive signage. While Wanna Munna is protected by the Museum Trust there are no fences, no signs, just dozens of amazing petroglyphs (rock carvings). We spent hours wandering up and down the shallow gorge, exclaiming with awe and delight at each new discovery.

There are animals, people, strange spirit figures, some so worn with age they are barely discernible, others as clear and sharp as if they had been carved last week. We were the only visitors apart from the birds, small red-beaked finches, brightly coloured rainbow bee-eaters, kites, galahs and white cockatoos, their medley of songs the perfect soundtrack in this tranquil and magical dreamlike place.

The peace was sublime, the spirits of the rock carvers strong. We discovered some red ochre and decorated ourselves. We felt grateful and privileged to be able to visit this truly awesome place. It was my trip highlight and I knew we would return before we left the Pilbara. ♦

## FACT FILE



### Getting there

Newman is on the Great Northern Highway, 1186 km north-east of Perth, 455 km south-east of Port Hedland.

### When to go

May – August are the coolest and driest months with temperatures averaging 23–27°C. Overnight temperatures can go down to 8°C. From October to March daytime temperatures average above 35°C and often top 40°C.

### Where to camp

Newman Caravan Park  
phone (08) 9175 1428  
or email [kalgansrest@westnet.com.au](mailto:kalgansrest@westnet.com.au)

### More information

From the Newman Visitor Centre you can get directions to Kalgan Pool and Wanna Munna. The Centre also books mine tours of Mt Whaleback.  
[www.newman.org.au](http://www.newman.org.au)

New Norcia:  
[www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au](http://www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au)

Shire of Cue: [www.cue.wa.gov.au](http://www.cue.wa.gov.au)

