

DESTINATIONS

RAIL HOLIDAYS | INDIAN PACIFIC

POSTCARD *Australia*



Fifty years after the opening of the Perth to Sydney rail route, **Tamara Hinson** sets off on a transcontinental train journey on the Indian Pacific

Within hours of stepping on board the Indian Pacific, I'm chuffed to find several myths are busted, starting with the fear I'll struggle to sleep. That afternoon, I enjoy a rarity – an afternoon nap, lulled to sleep by swirls of sand and spinifex (tumbleweed-like grass) flashing past my cabin window.

I blame the huge lunch, which brings me on to another misconception – that the constraints of cooking on a train mean basic bush tucker. True, there are restrictions. Head chef Michael reveals that hot oil isn't allowed, and on the rare occasions when boiling water (for egg poaching, to be precise) is permissible, unwieldy splash guards must be deployed. But the food is fantastic – multi-course celebrations of regional ingredients.

My favourite is an Australian ploughman's, served with Fremantle octopus and Margaret River cheddar, although the chocolate gateau, topped with "red desert dust", comes a close second.

I stretch my legs with forays to the bar, with its panoramic windows, or to my carriage's coffee station, before retreating to my cabin to watch the scenery fly by. Every evening, we're asked to place 'Please make up my room' signs on our doors when we head to dinner, so attendants can flip down beds and place chocolates on pillows.

There's a packed roster of excursions, the most memorable of which is a tour of a place famous for its vast expanse of nothingness: Kalgoorlie, home to the world's third-largest manmade hole, aka the Super Pit gold mine. Here, trucks that guzzle £4 million worth of fuel during their lifetimes have chiselled away, 24 hours a day, since 1929.

Then there's Cook, a ghost town that once had 400 residents but now has four. And Nullarbor Plain, which boasts the world's longest section of dead-straight railway. It's spectacularly barren, barring the odd emu, camel and kangaroo, and that night I set my alarm for 5am, waking to marvel at the starriest sky I've ever seen.

As we near Sydney, I ponder what I'll miss most, starting with my fellow passengers. They include the Yorkshire pensioner with endless stories about his jaunts across Kenya, the savvy Sydney businesswoman one cabin along, and the Japanese engineer who joins me for dinner on my final night.

Then there are the fresh pastries, served on platforms of tiny outback train stations, and the way deserts of kangaroo-dotted red sand morph into rolling vineyard-covered valleys. And Michael's red dust-topped chocolate gateau, obviously. **TW**



BOOK IT

Travel 2 offers a four-day, three-night journey on the Indian Pacific from £949 per person for a Gold Single, £1,059 for a Gold Twin and £2,019 for a Platinum, travelling from Sydney to Perth on January 13, 2021.

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Journey Beyond operates the Indian Pacific and other well-known Australian rail journeys. Find out more at journeybeyondrail.com.au



TOP: The Indian Pacific in the Blue Mountains
ABOVE: A stop at the mining town of Broken Hill

PICTURE: Andrew Gregory