

Ocean + earth

The Great Australian Bight's beaches, dunes and cliffs were a huge challenge for early explorer Edward Eyre. And, **RON MOON** writes, they were no easier for the LOE crew



Prevailing winds have built these masses of sand into Australia's highest dunes

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INCREDIBLE JOURNEY



Edward John Eyre's expedition across the Bight from Port Lincoln to Albany was one of the most remarkable feats of endurance in Australian exploration history. Leaving Port Lincoln in late 1840 the party established a depot near Streaky Bay. Pushing through thick scrub and travelling past today's Ceduna and Cactus Beach they arrived at Fowlers Bay in November. In late February 1841 with three Aboriginal guides, his trusted lieutenant, John Baxter, 10 horses, a few sheep and a dray loaded with food and water he struck west. By March 2 they had reached Head of the Bight but these high cliffs have no water. They only just made it to the next patch of sand near Eucla where they found some small soaks, and rested for two weeks. They eventually reached Eyre, where today's Bird Observatory is based. Once again they found water amongst the dunes but Baxter was reluctant to carry on.

On March 26 they continued but a few days later, along the stretch of cliffs we now know as the Baxter Cliffs, two of the Aboriginals shot Baxter, stole most of the provisions and disappeared. Eyre and his Aboriginal companion, Wylie, continued and, on May 3, reached the end of the cliffs at Point Culver. They found more native wells along Wylie Scarp before eventually reaching Pt Malcolm on May 19. In early June they discovered a whaling ship anchored just offshore of today's Rossiter Bay. The Mississippi, a French ship, skippered by Captain Rossiter soon had Eyre and Wylie living in luxury. They continued westward, arriving at Albany on July 7. The Nullarbor had finally been crossed. It would be another 30 years before anyone would try it again. In 1877, an overland telegraph line was established following much of Eyre's route with repeater stations built where Eyre had found water.

The sand went spongy and I just knew that underneath that seemingly firm covering was soft, rotten, vehicle-slowing sea weed. I slapped the gear lever back into second and floored the Cruiser; the diesel V8's growl letting me know that the engine was working hard to get us through.

I yelled a warning over the radio to the convoy behind me before bouncing over a wall of dry seaweed just above the tide mark. My target was a narrow strip of dry sand that lay between the beach proper and the close inland scrub.

With momentum slowing, I shifted into first and the Cruiser continued to struggle through the vegetation. Low-range was next and we bulldozed on, as a round bale of seaweed built up under the chassis in front of the rear wheels.

A small depression of sand amongst the weed offered salvation and we finally reached it, dropping onto the much firmer surface. Finally, I had the chance to back

up and clear away the green debris that had built up under the Cruiser.

We were forced off the beach a couple of times that day. It meant following a track that parallels the sand and which ducks between samphire covered flats and occasionally across dry, shallow, lake beds. This track was initially established for the crews maintaining the old overland telegraph line. We spotted the odd wooden pole or wire strand that once provided communication between the east and west coasts.

Later that day, as we pushed further along the long sweep of sand north of Israelite Bay – the same beach that Eyre and Wylie had staggered along so many years before – the sand became firmer and the weed vanished.

Close to where the Wylie Scarp meets the sea, just west of Point Culver, Bilbunya Dunes crowd up to the sheer escarpment. The prevailing southerly winds have built these white masses of sand into Austral-

ia's tallest dunes, their peaks sitting atop long, sinuous, ridges of steep-sided sand.

We wound our way in from the beach along a low gap in the dunes and camped just a few hundred metres back from the beach at the base of these wind blown mountains. It was a brilliant campsite.

Next morning we made our way through tall dunes and scrub to find our way up the Scarp. Rubber belting has now been laid down on the steep soft climb to assist vehicles climbing the Scarp and in fact, makes the whole deal a bit of a doddle. The view from the cliff top is a beauty: white sand and turquoise water rimmed by dark blue ocean stretching away far to the south.

For the next day we were subjected to the slow torture of the cliff tops drive. For Eyre, these cliffs had proved to be a great challenge, with their waterless tracts of country, but to our small group of adventurers the cliff tops were another challenge all together. The narrow and

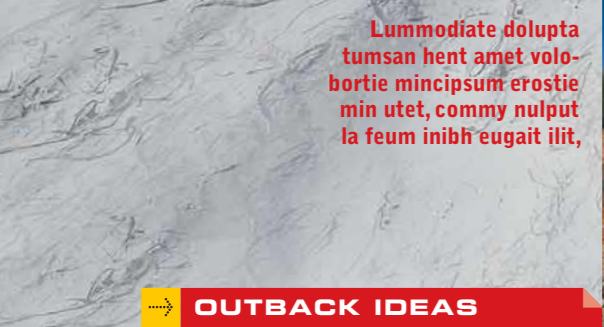


■ I've used a lot of different swags but this one from Southern Cross Canvas is the best one by far. You can just throw it on the ground and unroll it like a basic swag, or if you want you can take a minute to erect it. Like a tunnel tent there's plenty of room inside and it is without doubt the best tent I've used in the rain and bad weather. It was tested regularly in strong winds and rain and passed with flying colours. There's plenty of ventilation with screened windows at each end and with the large canvas side flaps rolled up you can look at the stars overhead. Better still, the mattress is supportive and comfortable for my tired old bones! Priced around \$580, the high quality materials used will ensure you get years of trouble-free service. It's the swag I use all the time now. Check southerncrosscanvas.com.au or call 03 9729 5056 for stockists.

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rough limestone-studded track travelled through thick mallee and tea-tree scrub and it was slow going. Near the miniscule Toolina Cove, with its patch of sand tucked in amongst the high walls of the Baxter Cliffs, we stopped to camp for the night. The beaches' soft sand and weed, as well as the slow cliff-top tracks, had us slipping behind time and we knew more of the same lay ahead. The Baxter Cliffs stretch another 110km east to Twilight Cove, named after an 1867 shipwreck, and from near the cove, big dunes stretch east more than 130km, forming the Nullarbor's largest dune system. The Eyre Sand Patch, as it is known, where Eyre found life saving water, became the Eyre telegraph station site. Today, it is the Eyre Bird Observatory, and is 25km east of Twilight Cove. A few years ago we had entered the big dunes from the beach near the old station and

pushed west. Now, while I wanted to push along the cliffs and through the dunes to the historic site of Eyre, we had another more pressing engagement. And two days later we were there. After a short drive along Eucla beach – and a longer one along the Nullarbor Plain – we camped near dunes just north of Ooldea railway line. Ooldea Soak had long been an important water source for the Aboriginal peoples of the Nullarbor and nearby desert country. Covering an area of about five hectares, the sand hill surrounded depression that contained the soak supplied permanent water from a number of points. The first Europeans to discover it were two well sinkers from Fowlers Bay in 1868. Giles used it in 1875 at the start of his exploration west across the Great Victoria Desert. This permanent soak became the focal point for any expedi-

tion passing through this arid region. In the early 1900s, with the building of the Transcontinental Railway Line, it became a ready source of water for the steam engines plying the route. Such a demand for water meant that 50 wells were sunk and over 45,000 litres of water a day were pumped from the aquifer. By 1926 the soak was salty and unusable. Earlier, in 1919, the indomitable Daisy Bates had arrived at Ooldea as a self-proclaimed 'Protector of Aborigines'. Over the next 16 years Daisy played an important, but often controversial, role in helping the local Aborigines. Known to the people as 'Kabbarli', or 'Grandmother', she later wrote an acclaimed book, *The Passing of the Aborigines*. Today, there's a monument to Daisy Bates on the north side of the railway line. A short distance away the wreckage of the old bores can be found. We spent a few hours searching for the

→ OUTBACK IDEAS

■ Having a tall flag fitted to your vehicle is a great safety feature whether you are in the Simpson Desert, on the CSR, or cruising the beaches of Fraser Island, Robe or Sandy Cape. We fitted our lead vehicle with an Outback Ideas flag and pole just in case we came across anyone unexpected along the way. The three-section pole is a beauty and allows you to make the flag as tall or as short as you would like. See them at your nearest TJM store; check out tjm.com.au.





DUNE CHALLENGE

■ We had so much fun on this LOE trip and we missed out on getting through some of the big dune areas and along some of the beaches that stretch along this wild coast we're going back again in October. You can be a part of this great off-road adventure as we travel from Esperance in WA to Baird Bay in SA. For more details check loe.com.au or call 03 5786 2004.

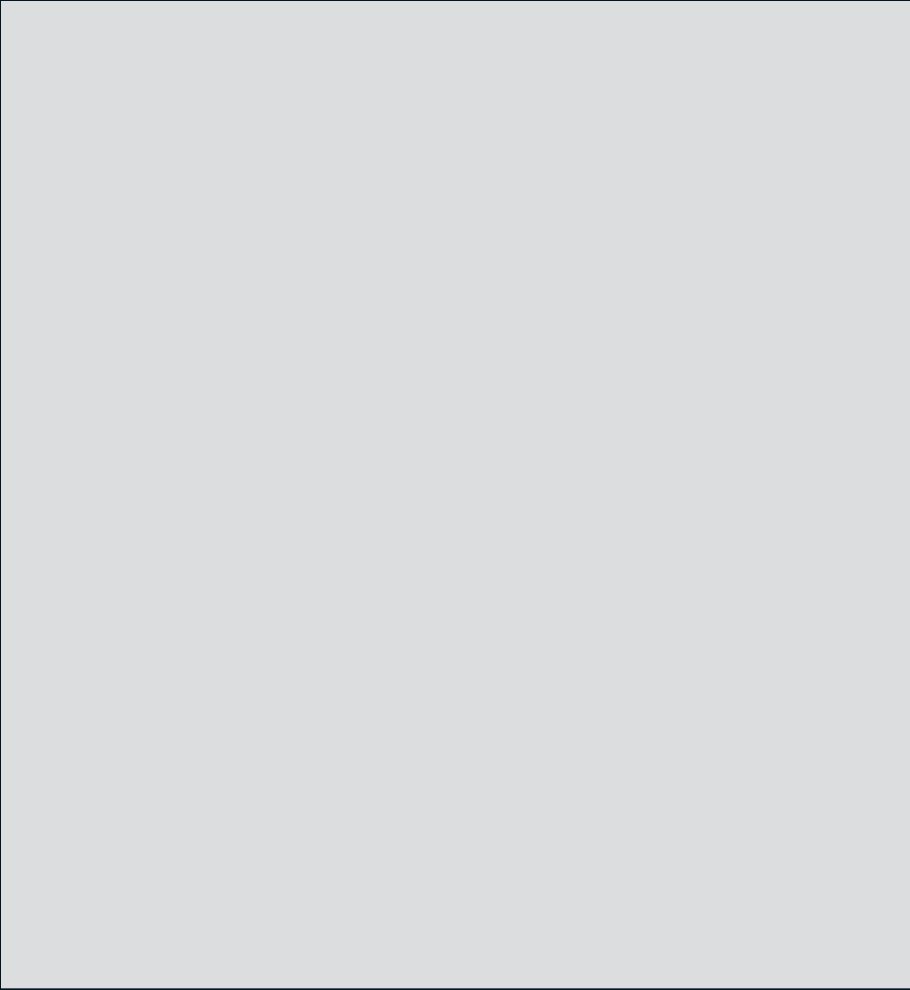


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soak amongst the dunes a little further north. We eventually discovered a small but relatively deep limestone sinkhole in a slight depression. Judging by the old buckets and pots we pulled from it, it must've been an important water point. Had we found the 'real' Ooldea Soak? Further research once we got back home has indicated we probably didn't. The soak is supposedly 7km north-north-west of the railway siding, while any maps of the area and names of wells and bores are just adding to the confusion. It just means I'll have to go back to find the real one. The coast and the sandy tracks of Eyre and his band of men were calling so our small party headed south out of the desert for the challenges of South Australia's far west coast. The off-road fun was just beginning! For the conclusion to this epic tale of history and adventure, check out the June issue of *4X4 Australia*. **4X4**

HEMA'S SOUTH WEST WESTERN AUSTRALIA MAP



0km 20km 40km 60km 80km 100km

