

# *Cycling across Australia's* **Nullarbor**

Mike Boles ([www.mikeonbike.wordpress.com](http://www.mikeonbike.wordpress.com)) shares tips, photos and day-by-day road notes with TravellingTwo.com readers.

**A**fter three months of cycle touring in Australia I had sat between enough bar room debaters to accept two absolute truths: Luke Skywalker wasn't a Jedi until he faced Darth Vader and I wouldn't be a cyclist until I rode the Nullarbor.

There's no arguing the cold facts of Happy Hour.

Crossing the Nullarbor Plain isn't just seen as the quintessential outback experience. It's a rite of passage that stretches nearly 1,200 windy and waterless kilometres across one of the most desolate landscapes Australia has to offer.

Add to the mix a narrow highway, behemoth road trains and a few hungry dingoes and you have all the makings of a hard-core adventure, right?

Well, not exactly.

The truth is that anyone can pedal the Nullarbor with proper planning and some old-fashioned leg power. Those who



MIKE'S BIKE IN FRONT OF ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS SIGNS ON THE NULLARBOR PLAIN.

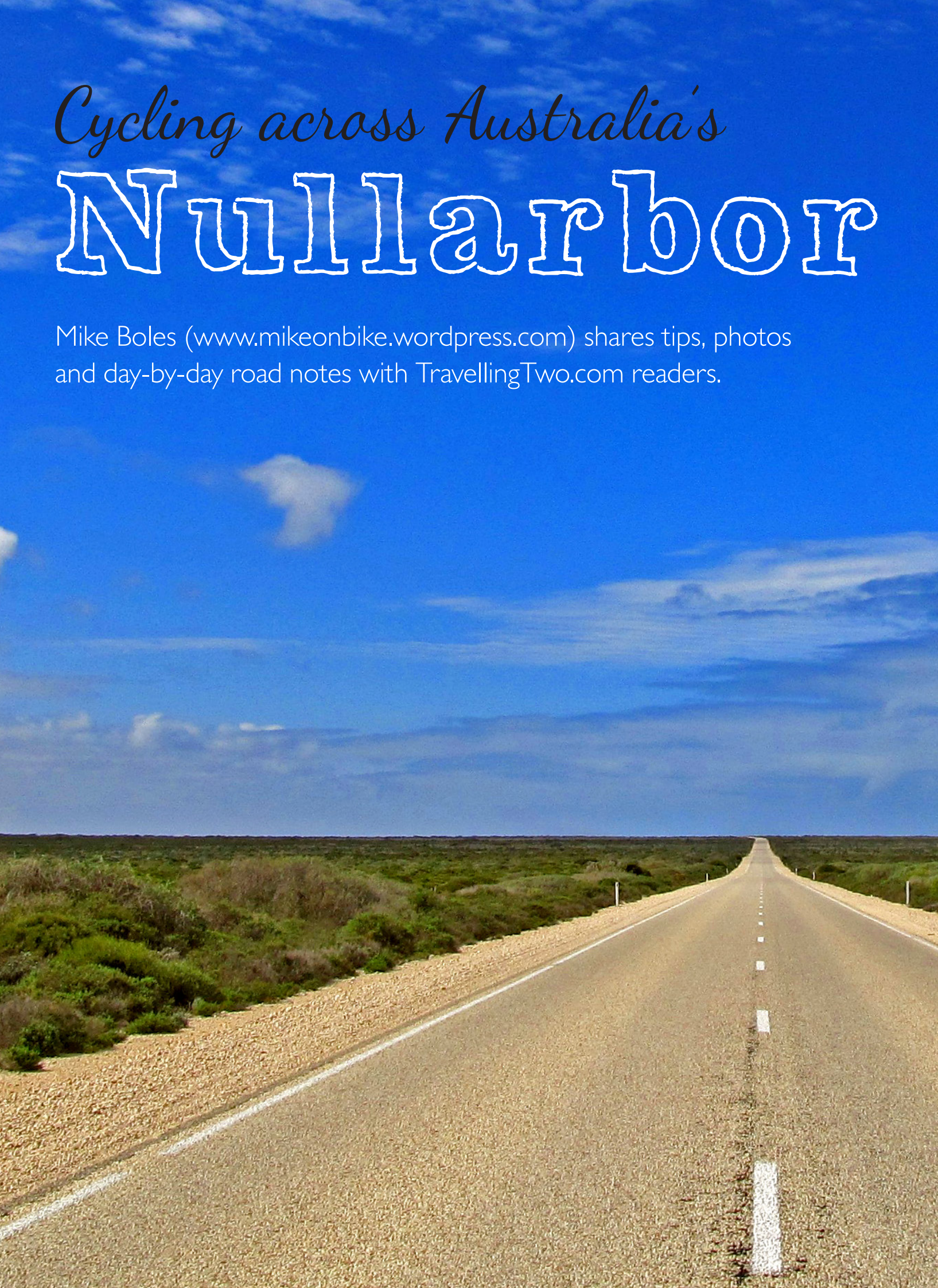
brave its empty spaces will experience not only wonderful generosity, but also the jaw-dropping beauty of unspoiled nature.

The route follows the Eyre Highway (National Route 1) between Norseman, Western Australia, and Ceduna in South Australia. It offers a surprising number of detours including stops at caves, coastal cliffs, his-

torical sites and wildlife viewing areas.

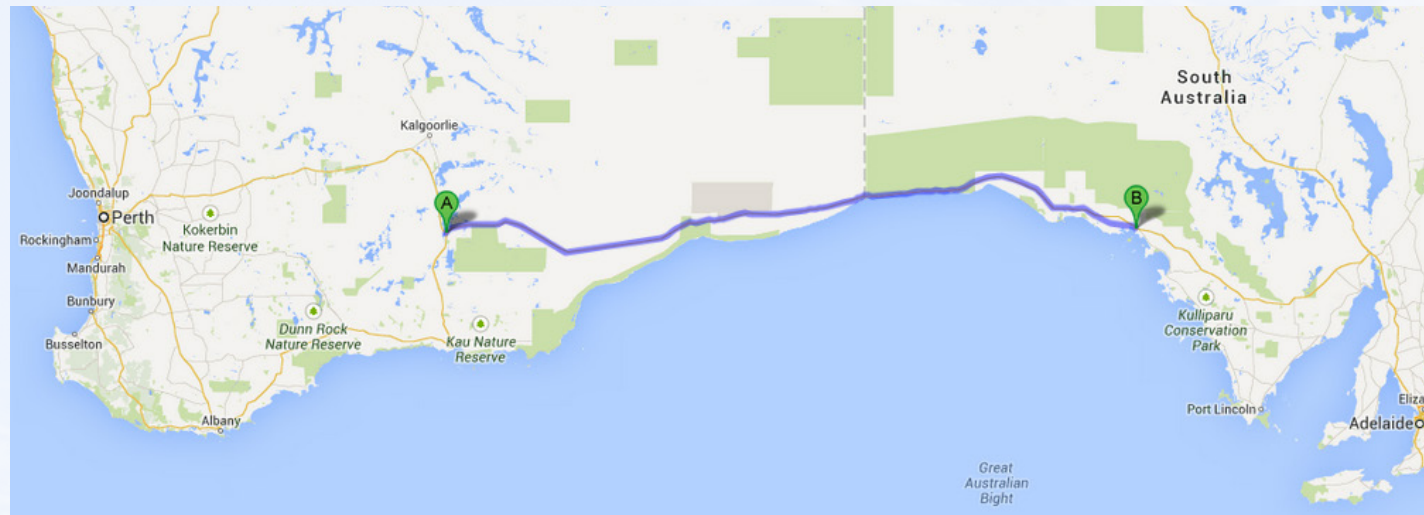
Highlights include the Roe Plains as seen from Madura Pass, the breathtaking Bunda Cliffs and whale watching on the Great Australian Bight. On the other side of the coin, the incessant flies, unfavorable winds and the lack of a proper shoulder in South Australia will test your patience.

LEFT: THE EMPTY ROADS OF THE NULLARBOR. BELOW: WHAT TRAFFIC THERE IS, TENDS TO BE (LIKE THE PLAIN ITSELF) ON A GRAND SCALE. CYCLISTS SHOULD GIVE WAY.





# When, What, Where



## The Basic Facts:

- 1,198 km
- 8 - 14 days (depending on skill level and wind direction)
- Sealed and generally flat roads, though you will encounter a few small hills
- Mixed scenery, from sparse forests and barren plains to sky-blue ocean waters and rolling pastureland
- Infinite wild camping opportunities plus paid accommodation (including showers) at every roadhouse along the way

**When to go:** Unless you're a masochist, you'll want to plan your Nullarbor crossing according to prevailing winds. Between the cool-weather months of May and October, the wind blows from the west or northwest. The trend is generally reversed between November and April, when summer temperatures can soar as high as 45°C.

**What to wear:** Helmets are mandatory in Western and South Australia. You should also wear high-visibility clothing. Be sure to pack warm-weather clothes as nights on the Nullarbor can be very chilly.

**Know your place:** Might is right on the Nullarbor. As the smallest vehicle on the road it is your responsibility to get off the highway so road trains and caravans can pass each other safely. When you see a pilot vehicle with flashing lights, leave the road immediately and then assess the situation from the safety of the ditch. If you shoulder check first, you risk veering into traffic.

**Stay alert:** A mirror can be useful, but on the Nullarbor nothing will protect you better than a sharp ear. It is essential that you hear traffic approaching from behind. For this reason music players and earphones are not recommended.

**Quench that thirst:** The only source of water that can be guaranteed on the Plain is the bottled water sold at roadhouses. Rainwater tanks at rest stops may be empty or contaminated. Tap water is rarely potable. Always carry enough to see you through at least two days of cycling. When in doubt, err on the side of caution. Remember, nothing you carry across the Nullarbor will be as heavy as an empty water bottle.

**Roadhouse rules:** Roadhouse staff are famous for being rude, but like most legends, it just isn't true. Follow this simple rule: If you want good customer service then be a good customer. Don't waste a clerk's time or complain about high prices. Most importantly, try not to ask stupid questions (i.e. one that is already answered by a sign on the wall).

**Animal safety:** Pay attention as you venture off the road for a night of wild camping. Spiders and snakes make a point of avoiding humans but their mood sours considerably when someone steps on their house. Dingoes pose little threat but fatal attacks have occurred in the past. Under no circumstances should you approach them or encourage them to approach you.

**Stay on solid ground:** The cliffs of the Great Australian Bight are stunning but deceptive. Many have overhanging edges that are unstable due to erosion. Stay several meters from the drop-off regardless of how close you are to a perfect photograph.

**Beat the blahs:** The Eyre Highway features Australia's longest straight road: 145.6 km without a bend) and seemingly endless stretches of outright emptiness. It's an easy place to get bored. Keep your sanity by taking plenty of breaks and chatting with the people you meet. If all else fails, count dead kangaroos. It's not elegant but it works.

**Night riding:** Riding at night can be an easy and enjoyable way to rack up extra kilometres if you do it safely. Reflective clothing and fully-functioning lights (front and back) are essential. After dark, traffic is reduced to a trickle of road trains, but they still pose a serious risk. The best policy is to leave the highway when you see one, no matter which way they are traveling.

**Where to sleep:** Camping in treeless areas leaves you at the mercy of overnight windstorms. Whenever possible, pitch your tent behind bushes, rocks or any other natural protection. You'll have a more restful sleep and save yourself a lot of grief as you pack your gear in the morning.

**Leave no trace:** Be a responsible wild camper. Don't make space for your tent by uprooting plants or breaking branches. If fires are permitted, keep them small and ensure they are fully extinguished before you leave. Pack your rubbish and carry it until you can dispose of it at a roadside bin. Last but not least, bury human waste and burn all toilet paper.



These notes give the essential details you need to ride across Australia's Nullarbor plain. Water. Campsites. Whale watching. It's all here. Bike tourist Mike Boles ([www.mikeonbike.wordpress.com](http://www.mikeonbike.wordpress.com)) took the notes and shared them with the community via the cycle touring website [www.TravellingTwo.com](http://www.TravellingTwo.com).

## Day 1: Norseman to Fraser Range Station (99 km)

Norseman's tiny IGA is the last proper grocery store you will see until Ceduna, so stock up with as much food as you can carry. Fill your water bottles at the public facilities beside the Tourist Office and grab some cash at the ATM of your choice.

The local hardware store carries basic bike parts and camping supplies. Specialized goods should be purchased in Esperance or Kalgoorlie.

Norseman's only caravan park offers unpowered sites for \$29. Those on a tighter budget will have no trouble finding a scenic spot to wild camp, particularly around Lake Dundas and Jimberlana Hill.



LAKE DUNDAS, NEAR NORSEMAN.

Leave town by cycling north on Prinsep Street and taking the well-marked turnoff onto the Eyre Highway - it boasts an excellent surface and you can enjoy its wide shoulder all the way to the South Australia border.

From Norseman it is 97 km to the turnoff for Fraser Range Station. The station lies 2 km south of the highway on a well-maintained gravel road. Here you can fill your water bottles (ask staff first) and enjoy a tasty cup of coffee.

Unpowered sites are available for \$22 if you choose to spend the night at the station. Otherwise,

return to the highway and find a comfortable spot to wild camp.



A SIGN WARNING OF LIMITED WATER.

## Fraser Range Station to Balladonia (93 km)

Much of the Eyre Highway is flat - really flat. Ride 1.5 km east of the Fraser Range turnoff and, believe it or not, you'll be atop its highest point - a mere 435 meters above sea level.

The only real area of interest after this is Newman Rocks, 50 km west of Balladonia. Few people will find the area extraordinary (geologists and acid heads excepted) but it's a pretty spot for lunch or a quick hike.

Balladonia Roadhouse has friendly staff who quite rightly brag about serving the best coffee on the Nullarbor. The shop offers basic groceries, takeaway food and an Internet kiosk (\$10 for unlimited use).

Don't forget to visit the free museum displaying remnants of the Skylab space station that crashed north of the highway in 1979.

Unpowered camp sites are available for \$12, but be aware that potable tap water is strictly unavailable, even for guests. Wild camping opportunities abound in every direction.

## Balladonia to Caiguna (178 km)

There are two things you must do before leaving Balladonia: fill your water bottles and pray to the wind gods. The ride to Caiguna is mentally difficult and a headwind will make it downright torturous.

Ride 27 km east of the roadhouse and you will arrive at the head of Australia's longest straight road, which stretches 145.6 km without a single bend. Even Zen masters will go bonkers here. Try to take plenty of breaks, especially short walks that let you look at something other than the highway.

The treeless plain truly begins 120 km east of Balladonia and wild camping opportunities are scarce thereafter. Plan your evening stop accordingly.

The only shelter on your final push to Caiguna is a small gorge (north side of road) 42 km west of the roadhouse. The spot is by no means beautiful but it provides protection from the elements.

Your most important stop of the day will be a rest area 39 km west of Caiguna. The pullout has one of the few rainwater tanks on the Nullarbor. There is no guarantee that the tank will be full, but if it is then fill every bottle you have. Be sure to filter or treat the water before drinking it.

Five kilometres west of Caiguna is a sprawling underground cave, the Caiguna Blowhole. It's worth a visit. Inform roadhouse staff of your plans before you start exploring.

Caiguna Roadhouse offers basic groceries, takeaway food, an Internet kiosk (\$5 for 24 minutes) and even a book exchange. The only drinkable water here is bottled (available for purchase). If you can, hold out until Cocklebiddy, where water is free.

The facility has unpowered sites for \$20 - a bit dear considering the perfect wild camping spot located just across the highway.

## Caiguna to Cocklebiddy (64 km)

Before leaving Caiguna you may consider a detour to the Baxter Cliffs, located 17 km south of the roadhouse on what is rightly called an "extreme off-road" path. Rides can be arranged for a fee.

If that's not your style, don't worry. You will see plenty of spectacular cliffs for free in the coming days.

The ride to Cocklebiddy is straightforward (literally) and there isn't much to see along the way. Still, with a favorable wind it's a good spot to pile up some easy kilometres.

Cocklebiddy (population 8) is a critical stop as it is one of the few roadhouses on the Nullarbor with potable tap water. Plus, for \$4 you can enjoy a well-deserved hot shower. Coin-operated laundry is also available.



COCKLEBIDDY ROADHOUSE: AN UNINSPIRING BUT ESSENTIAL STOP ON THE NULLARBOR PLAIN.

With water and a wash, it's time to press on down the highway. Those lacking the inspiration to leave need only inspect the roadhouse campsites: shadeless plots of gravel that cost \$20 per night.

## Cocklebiddy to Madura (91 km)

Fifteen kilometres east of Cocklebiddy is the turnoff for Australia's most remote bird research station. The Eyre Bird Observatory is open to the public and offers access to more than 240 bird species, plus a wide range of bush-walking and nature trails.

Accommodation is available in the old Eyre telegraph station for \$90 per person, including all meals.

The 29 km track to the observatory is, to be frank, treacherous. If you want to tour the facility, it is best to contact the caretakers ([eyrebirdobs@bigpond.com](mailto:eyrebirdobs@bigpond.com)) several days in advance to organize a pick-up.



Continuing east, the route is all but treeless and offers little protection from the wind. Perhaps the best place to spend the night is an unused gravel pit (north side of road) 27 km west of Madura.

A short 2 km west of the roadhouse is Madura Pass, an almost imperceptible hill if you're biking east. Riders pedaling west will be tested with a tougher but still easily managed climb.

Whichever way you're heading, don't miss the view from the lookout on the north side of the highway. The sweeping panorama of the Roe Plains is nothing short of breathtaking.

After you snap a few photos, take the short descent to Madura. You won't find many groceries, but the restaurant beside the motel offers high-quality fare. Showers are available at the roadhouse for \$4.

Madura tap water is a mystery. The service station manager says you can drink it and a sign in the restroom says you can't. If nothing else, fill a few bottles so you have water in an emergency.

Unpowered sites are available here for \$10 plus a \$10 deposit for the restroom key. If you choose to

wild camp, try to find a spot near the roadhouse as there are few options further east.

## Madura to Mundrabilla (115 km)

Crossing the Roe Plains is a real challenge. The road is almost perfectly straight and there is no protection from the sun or wind. All you can do is lower your head and pedal.

For a bit of distraction, look for abandoned shoes in the ditch. Pick one up and carry it. Trust me.

As you continue east you will see not only kangaroo bones but also a curious variety of seashells. It's hard to imagine but the Nullarbor wasn't always an arid plain. Twenty million years ago the spot you're biking on was ocean floor.

Practical opportunities for wild camping are few. Your best option is Moodini Bluff, 24 km east of Madura, where you will find a grove of trees and a rest area. Less favorable spots can be found 41 km and 63 km east of the roadhouse.

Six kilometres west of Mundrabilla you will finally

see the merits of carrying orphaned footwear. Add your contribution to the famous "shoe tree" and snap a photo of your good deed.



THE FAMOUS 'SHOE TREE' ON THE NULLARBOR PLAIN.

From here, follow the signs to a rest area with rainwater tanks, which is located 3 km west of Mundrabilla. Take what you need if the tanks are full, but remember to treat the water before drinking it.

Mundrabilla is a pleasant stop thanks to its friendly staff. The takeaway menu is huge and the prices reasonable by Nullarbor standards. You will be disappointed, however, if you're craving a quality cup of java. Only instant coffee is available here.

Drinking water is strictly reserved for roadhouse guests. Camp sites are available for \$15 plus a \$10 deposit for the restroom key.

## Mundrabilla to Eucla (65 km)

After Mundrabilla the highway gently climbs until you reach a crest 22 km east of the roadhouse. A leisurely descent will return you to the flat, wide open spaces of the plains.

As you draw closer to your destination, you will see Eucla Pass, a moderately challenging 2 km climb to the next roadhouse. If you're biking west, all you have to do is steer downhill.

Eucla Roadhouse is a perfect place to rest. It has

friendly staff, delicious takeaway food and showers that cost just \$1. Most importantly, the tap water is potable and tasty - an all-too-rare combination on the Nullarbor.

Unpowered sites are available for \$15 but there is no shortage of wild camping spots east of the roadhouse.

## Eucla to Nullarbor (194 km)

Four kilometres south of the roadhouse are the remains of the old Eucla telegraph station, which opened in 1877. After two rabbit plagues the site was swamped with sand, and is now said to be haunted by a nameless ghost. True, you may not see a spirit, but the ruins are well worth a visit.

From Eucla, continue east and pedal the final 12 km to the South Australia border.

Be aware that westbound travelers must dispose of their fresh food (including honey) at the border quarantine station. If you're cycling east, you can hang on to your fruits and veggies until the checkpoint in Ceduna.

The Border Village Roadhouse does not have potable tap water but you will find a wide range of groceries and takeaway meals, plus an Internet kiosk.

Unpowered campsites are available here for \$15.

Note that because the highway has little or no shoulder in South Australia, you must leave the road each time oncoming drivers pass each other. Thankfully, this situation rarely presents itself as traffic is usually light.

Once across the border you will enter Nullarbor National Park, which features the spectacular Bunda Cliffs. The first of three viewing platforms for the cliffs is located 16 km east of the state line.

Pedal 35 km further east and you will come to a rest area with a rainwater tank. The usual rules apply: fill your bottles if you can, but purify the water before drinking it.

The second Bunda Cliffs observation deck is located 650 meters south of kilometre post 75. This is perhaps the least interesting view of the coastline



A VIEW OF THE ROE PLAINS.



but it is still worth a look.

Sheltered wild camping spots are few and far between as you make your way around the Great Australian Bight. One of the better spots is a grove of trees located between kilometre posts 80 and 85.

**Mike’s Treasure-hunt Detour**

*Between kilometre posts 85 and 86 there is an off-road track that leads south toward the ocean. Follow it for 2 km and you will arrive at a T-junction on the coastline. Turn left (east) and ride for 3 km. Near the edge of the cliff you will see four old fence posts. Buried on the north side of the northernmost post is a log book for Nullarbor cyclists.*



*Add your name and your thoughts, then kindly return the book to the ground. This is also a perfect spot to whale-watch from May to October. Chances are you won’t have to wait long for a visitor.*

*Continue east for another 15 km, but ride carefully as there are some nasty sections of exposed rock. When the path intersects with a wide gravel road, turn right (south) and pedal the short distance to the coastline.*

*You will be treated to an incredible view of the Great Australian Bight. From there, follow the same gravel road 2 km north, back to the Eyre Highway.*

The last and arguably the best viewing platform for the Bunda Cliffs can be found 400 meters south of kilometre post 111. If you are lucky you might even see one of the sea lions or ospreys that call the area home.

**NOTE:** Many Nullarbor tourist maps show a rain-water tank at kilometre 142, but as of August 2013 there is NO WATER at this location. The tank is empty and the tap has been removed.

The only remaining point of interest before Nullarbor Roadhouse is the “teddy bear tree” (north side of road) at kilometre 151.5. If you’ve been battling a headwind and need a cuddly hug, this is the place to find it.

The roadhouse has a decent selection of groceries and takeaway food, plus coin-operated showers (\$1 for five minutes) and laundry. Unlike most stops on the Nullarbor, the restrooms here have power points so you can recharge your electronic gear.

Tap water at the roadhouse is not potable. If you’re running low, you’ll have no choice but to buy bottled water.

The area east of Nullarbor is completely barren and you won’t find adequate cover for wild camping for at least 35 km. Unpowered sites are available for \$20 if you choose to stay at the roadhouse.

**Nullarbor to Nundroo (148 km)**

As you ride east of Nullarbor you will enter Yalata Aboriginal land. You are a guest here and should respect all fences and signed warnings.

Located at kilometre 200 is the junction for the Head of the Bight Visitor’s Centre. Turn here. This is one of the top whale-watching destinations in the world and it will quite likely be the highlight of your trip.

The Centre is located 12 km south of the highway on a well-maintained gravel road. Admission prices are \$15 per person during whale season (June to October) and \$7 per person in the off-season (November to May).

During peak season you may see as many as 100 humpback and southern right whales birthing and nursing their young near the Centre’s observation decks. It truly is the experience of a lifetime.

The hilliest section of the Eyre Highway begins at kilometre 218 and extends almost all the way to Nundroo Roadhouse. Though the hills are small, they come one after another and will test muscles you haven’t used since leaving Norseman.

The last rainwater tank on your journey can be found at kilometre 256. As always, remember to treat the water before drinking it.

A gorge just north of the rest stop provides complete protection from the wind, making it a highly recommended spot to camp.

Yalata Roadhouse is 93 km east of Nullarbor, but as of August 2013 it is boarded up and offers no services. There is no consensus on when (or if) the facility will reopen.

Even though much of Yalata land is fenced, there are still plenty of wild camping opportunities. If it’s a roof you crave, you can stop at an abandoned station (north side of road) at kilometre 306.

Although the farm buildings are in various states of disrepair, they still offer excellent protection from

rain and wind. Judging by the number of names scribbled on the walls, you won’t be the first traveler to take refuge there.

As you approach Nundroo, the hilly terrain will be replaced by sweeping pastureland. The roadhouse itself is quaint, offering a small selection of groceries and restaurant food.

Tap water here is potable but it has an unpleasant salty taste. If you can, use it for cooking instead of drinking.

Accommodation at Nundroo is the cheapest among Nullarbor roadhouses. Unpowered sites are available for just \$8, though finding a spot to wild camp is easy if you push further east.

**Nundroo to Penong (76 km)**

Five kilometres east of Nundroo is a turnoff for Fowler’s Bay. The tiny settlement is located 27 km south of the highway on a well-maintained gravel road that passes through Coorabee..

Fowler’s Bay is popular with caravan tourists as it offers whale watching, sport fishing and a picturesque beach. Campsites are available for \$28 and there is a good supply of rainwater.



THE AMAZING BUNDA CLIFFS.



Although this detour is interesting, it's hardly an essential stop.

Your only real challenge on the ride to Penong is coming to terms with the subtle reappearance of civilization. As traffic steadily increases you will begin to see farmhouses and huge flocks of sheep.

Whether it brings you joy or pain, this is where you say goodbye to the solitude of the Nullarbor.

There are still plenty of spots to wild camp, but before you pitch your tent, take a moment to ensure you're not trespassing on private property. Ranchers have every right not to take kindly to such intrusions.

Penong is a small centre famous for its windmills - they provide a great photo opportunity a few kilometres east of town. Most basic services can be found here, including a grocery store, post office and bank.

The local caravan park has friendly owners and plenty of rainwater. Unpowered sites are available for \$18.

## Penong to Ceduna (75 km)

Before your trip is over, you may wish to take a detour to Point Sinclair (also known as Cactus Beach), which is located 20 km south of Penong on a bumpy gravel road. Follow the signed turnoff opposite the town sports oval.

Point Sinclair is one of the premiere surf spots in Australia and its pristine sands make a great place to stretch out and relax. Stick to designated swimming areas, however, as great white sharks have been known to frequent the area.

Basic amenities are available here, but you will need to bring your own drinking water.

East of Penong, the Eyre Highway meanders through flat pastureland. You won't have any trouble ticking off the final kilometre of your Nullarbor adventure.

Give yourself a big pat on the back as you pedal into Ceduna - you have just conquered one of Australia's most challenging cycling routes. Now it's time to relax!

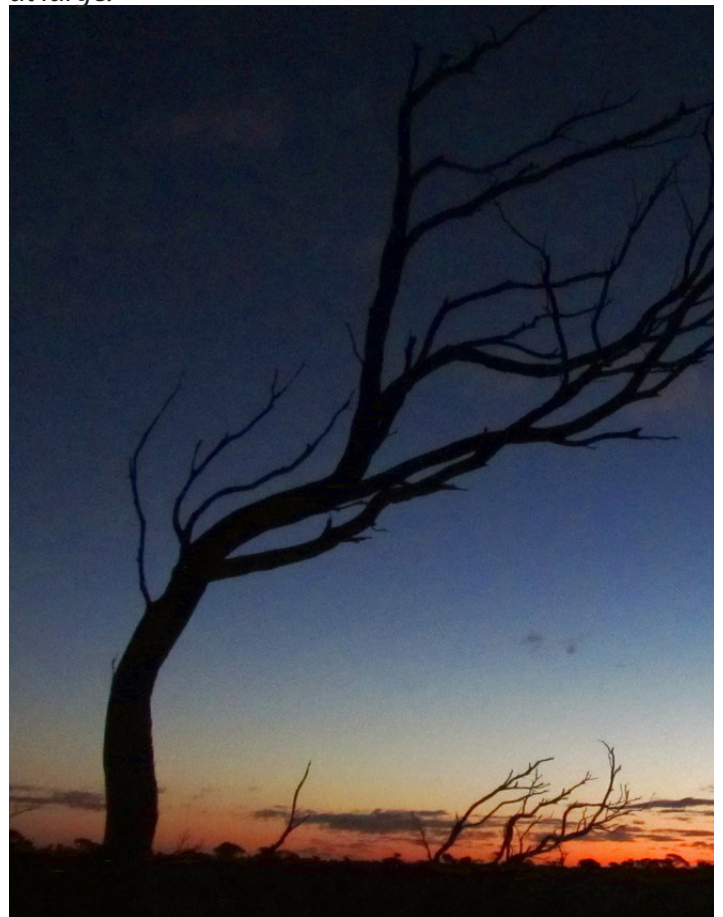
Ask the friendly staff at the Visitor Information Centre (58 Poynton Street) about activities that suit your personal taste. You can also buy a Nullarbor-crossing certificate if you want to commemorate your achievement.

If you need to repair or replace any of your gear, check out the well-stocked sporting goods store located opposite the post office. Spry's Mitre 10 (29 Poynton Street) may also be worth a visit.

The all-you-can-eat Sunday roast at the Ceduna Foreshore Hotel (32 O'Loughlin Terrace) is a must for any hungry cyclist. The three-course meal costs \$19.90 and is worth every penny.

Ceduna offers a wide range of accommodation. The cheapest option is A1 Cabins & Caravan Park (41 McKenzie Street), where amenities are ultra-basic and unpowered campsites cost \$18.

*These detailed notes were written by Mike Boles ([www.mikeonbike.wordpress.com](http://www.mikeonbike.wordpress.com)). He then gave them to the bike touring website [www.TravellingTwo.com](http://www.TravellingTwo.com) to publish and share with the bicycle touring community at large.*



SUNSET ON THE NULLARBOR.