

Bradt travel guides

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Saved by a Frog

An axle snapping sounds a bit like a bone breaking, especially if it's heard as you drive through the desert on the northwest coast of Australia. An agony of silence follows as our old campervan, suddenly powerless, limps to a dead stop.

Sheila and I have been dreading the possibility of this happening for weeks, as we attempt to take our antiquated Winnebago on one last lap of the Australian continent, a journey of over 16,000 kilometres and one of the World's great road trips. Now, almost half way around, disaster strikes in the worst possible location. In either direction, the black ribbon of highway disappears to a vanishing point in the featureless landscape of acacia scrub, spinifex and red earth.

After a short sad wait, a passing truck tows us to Pardoo Roadhouse, a dozen kilometres back along the highway, where we confirm the worst - the axle can't be fixed here. The nearest town is 120 kilometres away and a phone call to the Port Hedland Towing Company yields a promise to send help - in three days time. We spend a long weekend of boredom, frustration and self-recrimination at Pardoo, until our vehicle is finally winched onto the back of a flatbed truck and we make the costly journey to the Port.

Our first view of this outback seaport on the edge of the Indian Ocean is not encouraging. The town is defined by a razor sharp horizon that dissolves into a watery mirage where the brutal hand of industry has transformed the stark wilderness into a post-apocalyptic nightmare, like a scene from Mad Max. Port Hedland is surrounded by bulldozed mountains of sea salt and abandoned heaps of scrap metal; it's fed by freight trains five kilometres long, screeching and growling on tracks beside the highway, their trucks stacked high with dark red iron ore. A tattered windsock blowing in the desert breeze indicates the airport and across a desolate plain of salt, rusty sculptures - Cubist crushing plants, conveyor belts and the funnels and superstructure of freighters - are silhouetted against the merciless blue sky.

At the mechanic's yard our woes are compounded when we learn that it will take a week or more to repair the Winnebago, if they can find the parts. Our first night in Port Hedland is spent in a motel on the windblown outskirts of town, our room a converted steel container called a donga, with sealed windows, two springy beds, and icy cold air conditioning. At dawn we checkout and take a taxi into the town centre in search of a better life.

Nearly every building is stained in a hellish palette of red primer by the pervasive iron ore dust. Even the footpaths are red, as is the grass on the lawns, the leaves on the trees, and the scruffy pigeons hanging about the main street café. Abandoning all hope, we enter the Tourist Information Centre and learn about a local hostel called 'Frog's Backpackers'. The lady in the office gives the owner a call and a few minutes later a battered ute pulls up and out steps a lanky, red-headed man dressed in a T-shirt, tight shorts and big Aussie work boots.

"Gooday," he says, "My name's Frog, hop in an' I'll drive ya to me hostel."

And so, from the depths of despair, we are taken to Frog's - a cool, tranquil retreat overlooking the turquoise ocean, where, under the dappled shade of palm trees we watch the

huge ore ships setting sail for China. Frog's is a place for weary travellers to rest; where friendly folk are drinking cold beer; where I can walk across the road and cast my fishing line into the Indian Ocean and pull dinner from the sea. It's a place where Sheila can sit and read her books and I can strum my guitar and write my story; where we play chess with steelworkers and make lasting friendships. It's all down to one man, Frog, who has created this outback haven, not for profit, but for the pleasure and camaraderie each new traveller brings to such an unlikely place.

In the end we spend three weeks in Port Hedland - the replacement axle is hard to find. Frog's hostel transforms our experience, and we slowly grow fond of the dusty red town, a place we would never have stopped in by choice. I suppose the lesson for travellers is that you will encounter hardships along the way, but you have to make the best of it and with luck, and a bit of serendipity, you might just end up as a guest of someone like Frog. I only wish we could take him with us when we leave Port Hedland, we might just need him again further down the road.