

THE COURSES



EXTREME GOLF

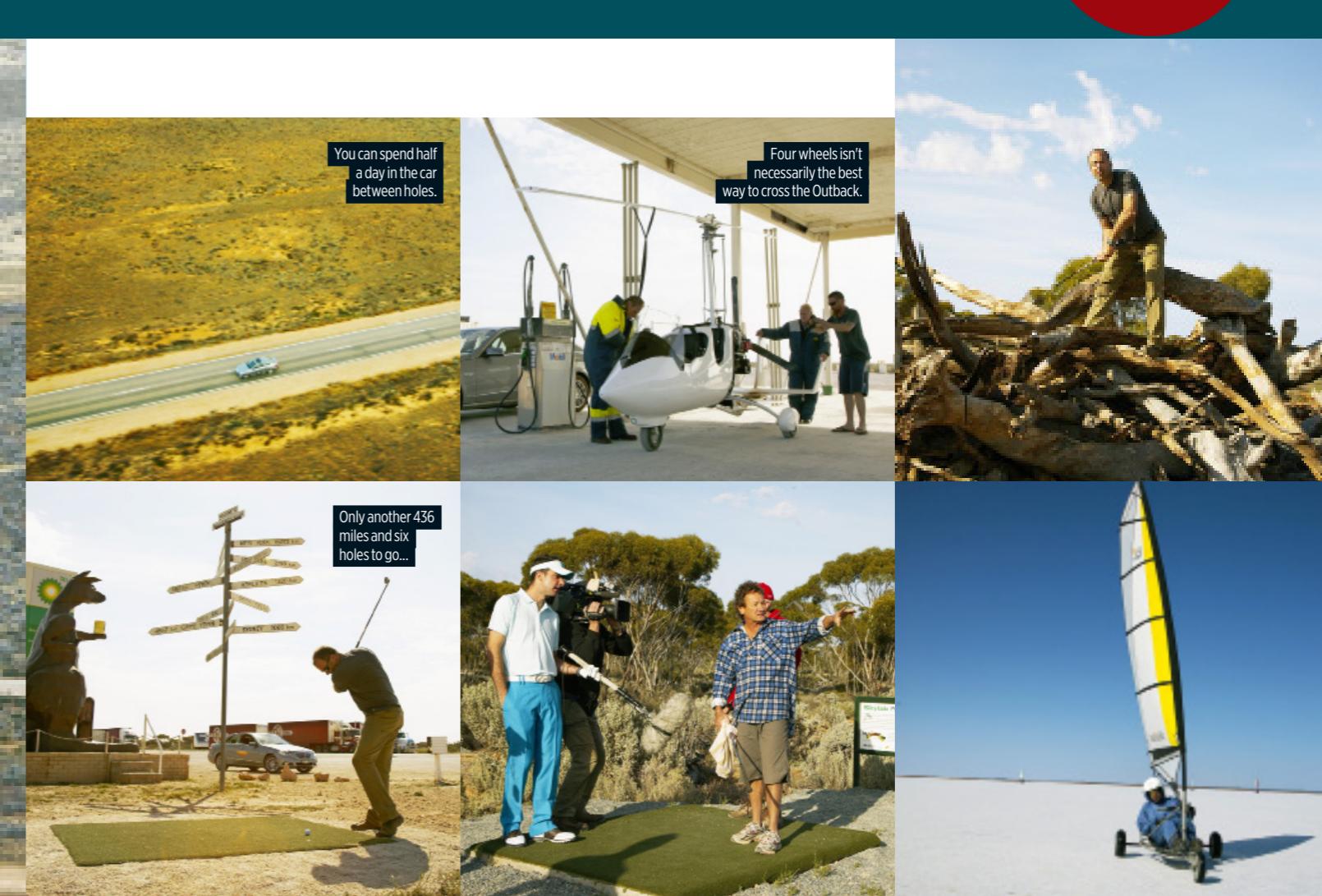
850 MILES

18 HOLES

PAR 72

NULLARBOR LINKS IS THE WORLD'S LONGEST GOLF COURSE, STRETCHING OVER 800 MILES ACROSS SOME OF AUSTRALIA'S HARSHEST OUTBACK. WHAT'S IT LIKE TO PLAY? WE FOUND OUT.

WORDS BY JEREMY HART



For many golfers, negotiating four hours out of the house on a Sunday afternoon to play 18 holes can require UN-style diplomatic talent. You might be lucky – but only once the lawn's mowed and the joint carved – to grab your clubs and get an afternoon pass on the course. Well spare a thought for the Aussie golfer because they do things a little differently down under. When he tells the Sheila he's going to hit a few balls she's lucky if she sees him again in a fortnight.

Nullarbor Links is an 18-hole, par-72 golf course named after the ferociously wild Nullarbor Plain in western Australia. And at a staggering 850 miles, it's the longest golf course in the world – taking in two-and-a-half time zones, desert wasteland, savannah, salt lakes and a frightening number of poisonous lurkers.

To play that far in the UK you'd have to tee off in Portsmouth, hit the ball right across the Watford Gap, past Leicester, Nottingham and Leeds. Hole six would be a tricky par 3 across The Tyne and hole nine would land you firmly in the centre of St Andrews. Pushing on you'd have fantastic views of the Orkney Isles from your 11th

hole vantage point at Thurso, before heading back south again right across the entire length of Scotland. You wouldn't be enjoying your 19th hole pint until reaching the clubhouse all the way back in Darlington.

Down under, Nullarbor Links runs between the gold mining frontier town of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia and Ceduna, great white shark capital of the world, on the Great Australian Bight in South Australia. You can start at either end. I chose Kalgoorlie, and the new E-Class Mercedes to do the drive. It seemed right, somehow, to be sitting in a car that a golfer might actually use, albeit tested in a setting the antithesis of St Andrews.

"Whatever you do," says the guy handing over the keys at Perth's Mercedes dealership, "avoid hitting wombats. They'll rip the front of yer car off. Imagine hitting a cement-filled water trough. I've seen a good wombat write a motor off."

Until then I was confident a solid German tourer would be safe. This one even came with kit, pinging up a picture of a cup of coffee, to warn me I was nodding off – good on sections of the outback road where a straight can be 90 miles long.

The official list of Dos and Don'ts of

Outback driving runs to several pages. Most importantly, pack spare tyres, water and cash. Binoculars also come in handy.

"If you break down in the Outback, the last thing you do is walk," says David Morley, my Aussie travelling companion for this thwack-and-drive epic.

"From the air, a vehicle is much easier to spot than a person. You can set fire to a black tyre. You have shade in a vehicle and water in the engine and wiper tanks. Distances are deceptive. What looks like 1km is 10km. If you walk, you die."

With its Astroturf tee-off areas and fairways sprung with Outback surprises, Nullarbor Links offers a unique golfing challenge. "All the big names want to have a go," says Al Caputo, General Manager of Nullarbor Links. "You don't get lush greens and beautiful bunkers, but this is a real golf course. Tell Tiger to get over here."

I don't know what I was expecting, but rolling fairways and manicured greens this golf course ain't. The first section of fairway at Kalgoorlie is simply "outback-style," – in other words, bush – with flags stuck in holes. The greens are brown and the clubhouse is a hovel. I couldn't see any bunkers, but as there were so many animal



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: THE HOLES

There's a hole in each participating town or roadhouse along the Eyre Highway, between Kalgoorlie in Western Australia and Ceduna in South Australia. You can start at either end. Each hole includes a green, tee and fairway. It incorporates seven holes from existing courses and 11 holes created by the roadside. You can get a card in Kalgoorlie or Ceduna for \$50, and there's a certificate to be claimed for playing the world's longest golf course. Our favourite holes include:

The 1st (Oyster Beds): Par 5, 528 yards Located at Ceduna GC, in a town best known for its 85 hectares of oyster beds which ship seafood all over the world.

The 3rd (Windmills) Par 4, 283 yards Residents obtain

their water from underground basins using 26 windmills. Just south of the hole you'll find the highly acclaimed Cactus Beach, where surfers from all over Australia can be found year-round.

The 4th (Wombat): Par 5, 566 yards Nundroo has the largest population of Southern Hairy Nosed Wombats in Australia.

The 10th (Cocklebiddy): Par 4, 378 yards Lies on the southern edge of Western Australia's vast sheep grazing belt. It has gained an international reputation as a site for one of the world's largest cave systems - unique in that the caves penetrate an aquifer that lies 90m below the Plain.

The 11th (Mile Straight): Par 4, 337 yards Caiguna is said to be derived from an aboriginal word meaning "spear track". At



the roadhouse begins the most famous stretch of road in Australia - it's 90 miles without a bend.

The 12th (Balladonia): Par 3, 190 yards Situated on the Eyre Highway at the Western Australia end of Nullarbor journey. Famous for being the site where Skylab - a space research lab

constructed by NASA - came crashing down to earth in July 1979. **The 16th (Kambalda GC): Par 4, 427 yards** Lake Lefroy is approximately 200 square miles and used for land sailing. It is considered one of the best places to sail a land yacht due to its size and the texture of its surface. According to locals, when wind conditions are right, sailors can achieve speeds of 60mph.

The 18th (Kalgoorlie GC): Par 4, 398 yards Home of The Super Pit - a huge gold mine stretching 2.3 miles in length and a mile in width. You can experience mining first hand, and may even find your own nugget.

holes to contend with, that hardly mattered.

Having played the hole, it was time to set off east. Driving the length of Nullarbor Links, there are three types of scenery: horizon-stretching prairie, gum-tree forest and empty desert scrub. Whichever of these three I was in, I found it repeated for hundreds of kilometres without a break, until I became hypnotised by mind-numbing sameness.

But, as I was to discover, there are plenty of diversions when playing outback golf to break the monotony. For starters, I'd been warned that, on the road, kangaroos can be a "bit of a hazard". This is a gross understatement, especially at dawn and dusk. David paints a terrifying picture: 'At speed, a 'roo will take the front of your car out,' he tells me. 'If he smashes the windscreen and joins you in the driving seat, you hope he's dead. If he's alive, he won't be best pleased. An angry 'roo can open a bloke up with his claws.' Yikes.

Then there's the Aborigines. At my next stop, Norseman, a tough par-4 hole, I come across a local Aboriginal tribe in full warrior make-up. They welcome me with a dance routine consisting of three men beating out a rhythm on sticks, while another plays the didgery-doo. "Ours is the oldest living culture on earth," said James Schultz, their leader. "We're proud to portray it. We're also very happy to have a golf course on our land. I play a lot. It keeps me fit."

Next stop is Balladonia - population nine - comprising of several thousand square miles of empty desert and a roadhouse. Despite offering weary travellers little more than large plates of deep fried stodge and garish tea towels celebrating such icons as "the great Australian dunny", this dusty establishment is still a magnet for passing truckers. After all, the next watering hole is over 100 miles away.

The hole is tricky, snake-infested and 190 yards long. Just as I'm teeing off a pair of hardened Aussies emerge from the bush. Brian and Ralph are unshaven, wearing battered boots and worn rugby shirts. They watch me in disbelief. "If your first hit's no good, you're

buggered," says Brian, helpfully, before advising that I wear boots, thick soles and 'something bright' in case I get lost in the bush. Their approach is pure outback. They're using a set of clubs bought for \$6 from a rubbish tip and their golf bag is a pillowcase they found in the car. As I fish my ball from the undergrowth Ralph yells, 'There are probably tiger snakes in there,' prompting me to worry that my wafer-thin golf gloves might not withstand a bite from one of the world's deadliest reptiles. Fortunately, I never need to find out, and, shouldering my golf bag I head back to the car.

A day or so later I reach the Nullarbor Plain, an expanse of nothingness, that measures 700 miles across at its widest. It looks like the ocean floor, which it once was. All you see is a knee-high blue green scrub stretching to the horizon. Early crossers of the Nullarbor stuck to the coast where they extracted water from sand dunes. It's a bleak coastline. The southern border of the Nullarbor ends abruptly with a 60-metre cliff drop into the Southern Ocean, as if part of Australia has broken off and sunk.

Having no trees to hit on the Dingo's Den hole here counts for little. Nature has found other ways to make the hole hell. Wombat holes pepper the pock marked and grass-free 'fairway'. Teeing off, I quickly find out what is the hole's greatest challenge. As my ball flies through the Outback sky, a crow swoops in, snatches it and flies off. "One family lost eight balls playing here," says local Adam Seeby. Thieving crows? Tiger snakes? Wombat holes? Nullarbor Links makes the relative difficulty of some of the UK courses look like a round of pitch and putt. ■

USEFUL INFO

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For more details on the Nullarbor Links, visit www.nullarborlinks.com

For more details on the Mercedes E-Class visit www.mercedes-benz.co.uk