

Ian Hughes

Across the Wide Brown Land

The Indian Pacific /
Western Australia 2010



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

The Itinerary

We headed west in August 2010, crossing the wide brown land on the **Indian Pacific**, spending a couple of days in **Perth** with side trips to **Rottnest Island** and **Fremantle**, then heading northwards in search of wildflowers before looping back through **Margaret River** for sightseeing and wine tasting.

Thursday, 12 August Bowen > Townsville

Friday, 13 August Townsville > Sydney

Saturday, 14 August Sydney > Broken Hill (Indian Pacific)

Sunday, 15 August Broken Hill > Adelaide (Indian Pacific)

Monday, 16 August > Kalgoorlie (Indian Pacific)

Tuesday, 17 August > Perth

Wednesday, 18 August Rottnest Island

Thursday, 19 August Fremantle

Friday, 20 August Perth > Eneabba

Saturday, 21 August Eneabba > Geraldton

Sunday, 22 August Geraldton > Morawa

Monday, 23 August Morawa > New Norcia

Tuesday, 24 August New Norcia > Busselton

Wednesday, 25 August Busselton > Margaret River

Thursday, 26 August Margaret River

Friday, 27 August Margaret River > Singleton Beach

Saturday, 28 August Singleton Beach > Perth

Sunday, 29 August Perth > Bowen

The Indian Pacific

Preface

While it'd be going too far to suggest that *Hughesy* has a thing about trains, I like rail as an option for long-haul travel.

Sure, flying is quicker and definitely cheaper, but I've never liked or enjoyed flying. It's a means to an end, and not everybody's friend rather than an end in itself.

With the railways, on the other hand, and particularly with long-haul trains, the means can be part of the end.

A couple of recent experiences have reminded me that there are alternatives to flying apart from the long-distance drive.



When *Madam* headed home in **December 2004**, she flew **Cairns** to **Kansai**, while I made a shorter hop in the opposite direction to the **Gold Coast**.

From there, the **Tilt Train** looked like the way to go on the return journey.

When I settled on board, memories of earlier excursions from **Roma Street** came flooding back.

The experience proved to be a civilised if an expensive way of getting from **Brisbane** to **Bowen**.

The rail line follows a substantially different route between **Bundaberg** and **Gladstone**, and from **Rockhampton** to **Mackay** to the all-too-familiar coastal highway.

So the trip served as a reminder that rail travel is also an excellent way to see the countryside.

Our visit to **Japan** in **2008** reinforced that reminder.

It also served as a reminder that there are comfort factors on a long-haul train that you don't get in *Cattle Class* on your average budget airline.

The *Shinkansen* also brought in the speed factor, which is unlikely to be inflicted on Australian rail passengers anytime soon.

That seven-day **Japan Rail Pass** experience brought back memories of earlier, much slower trips between **Brisbane** and **Rockhampton** on our way to visit the grandparents.

Later, an impecunious student rode *The Rattler* between **Townsville** and **Brisbane** on end-of-term breaks from the old **Townsville Teachers College**.

Those trips would be better in a sleeper, but financial considerations ruled that out.

Still, there was a social aspect to travelling on the old *Southbound Student Non-Express*.

Admittedly, it took a while to get there.

The train stopped at all stations and quite a few places that weren't to allow swifter, more significant traffic to pass.

So, once financial constraints associated with paying off the **Little House of Concrete** disappeared, I started thinking of a train trip or two.

The fact that *or two* turned out to be the **Indian Pacific** and **The Ghan** would probably come as no surprise to anybody *au fait* with the options within **Australia**.

There are others, but when you're talking long-haul rail, those are *The Two*.

Madam wasn't entirely convinced.

News that the **Indian Pacific** was celebrating its 40th birthday overcame that hurdle.

The celebration involved a free upgrade from **Red** to **Gold Class** provided we were willing to book a couple of nights' accommodation and a tour in **Perth**.

That enough to persuade her that the idea was a goer, and the relevant bookings were duly made.

The fact that a mid-August departure coincided with the **W.A. Wildflower season** had nothing to do with it.

With pre-departure research in place, **Thursday 12 August** saw us off to **Townsville** for the regulation stay at **The Golfer's Motel** with the two bottle tariff consumed over a barbecue dinner.

That was after *Miss Behaviour* inveigled us into a bottle of a surprisingly acceptable *Rosemount Semillon Sauvignon Blanc* while we waited for our host to clear the nineteenth hole.

The main course went down rather well with a *Pfeiffer 2006 Shiraz* (abundant pepper on the nose and palate).

After that, the *Mitchell 2007 Peppertree Shiraz*, as expected, went down an absolute treat.

The combination saw us retire to the cot suitably anaesthetised.

That, in turn, rendered late-night cogitations on the many and various things that could go wrong unlikely.

Friday 13 August

An unusually inexpensive **Brisbane > Sydney** fare saw us flying **Qantas**, rather than **Jetstar** or **Virgin Blue**.

Not that there was much difference up to boarding time when *Madam* reported a significant difference in legroom.

When you're around the six-foot mark, however, *Cattle Class* still feels like *Cattle Class*.

The first leg of the flight was unremarkable.

An hour's interval in **Brisbane** was a reminder of the difference between the full fare and budget ends of the airline spectrum.

We'd ventured down to the **Qantas** end of **Brisbane Domestic** from time to time before, but this time we were starting from the heart of full fare.

With a little more time on the ground, I may have noted other differences on top of the presence of a **Wine Selectors** tasting booth.

I noted one as we made our way to **Gate 22** without paying too much attention.



When *Madam* returned from a scout around the retail options with the news that there was an actual wine tasting in progress, naturally I felt duty-bound to investigate.

With more warning, I would have got further than the *Ninth Island Sauvignon Blanc* and a *McLaren Vale Chardonnay* whose name escapes me.

Attribute that to the need to keep my wits about me as an attractive female sales rep operated a high-intensity version of the sign-up spiel.

A lesser man would have kept tasting and eventually weakened.

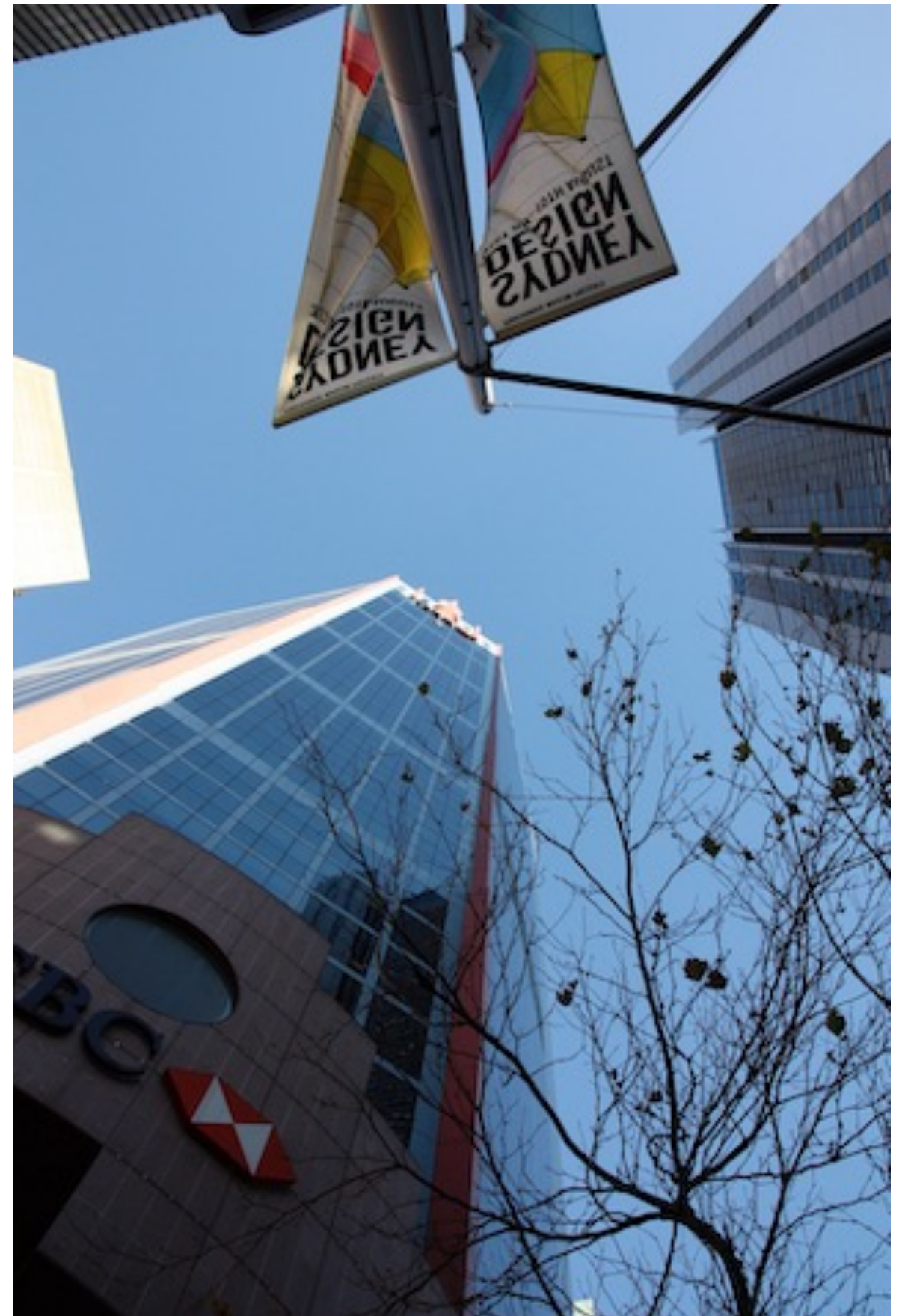
But having dropped out of *The Wine Society Regular Tasting Dozen* so that I could keep buying from small wineries, I decided *discretion was the better part of Valerie*.

Though all of her is nice.

I used the queue that was forming at **Gate 22** as an excuse to make my escape.

Having given thought to us stratagems to adopt in future, I'll be better prepared next time.

That assumes we get to fly full fare again in the next year or two at a time when they're doing a similar promotion.



Brisbane > Sydney on a larger aircraft provided a space differential even *Hughesy* could notice.

A request for red wine (at the regulation \$6) produced a *Mount Langhi Ghiran Shiraz* rather than the usually ubiquitous *Wolf Blass* or *Jacobs Creek*. Another tick for the full fare operator.

Unfamiliarity with the transit arrangements between **Sydney Airport** meant we expected to take the train and scoped out the station en route to the baggage carousel.

Having collected the goods and chattels, we were passing the **Airport Shuttle** booth when an inquiry produced the news that the \$14 shuttle bus would drop us at the hotel. No brainer.

We were booked into the **Great Southern Hotel** just after three, with (possibly) enough time to peruse an art exhibition. But *Madam* felt that wouldn't deliver a proper appreciation.

We ended up heading off along George Street as far as **Queen Victoria Building**, a trek that turned into a quest for **Kinokuniya**.

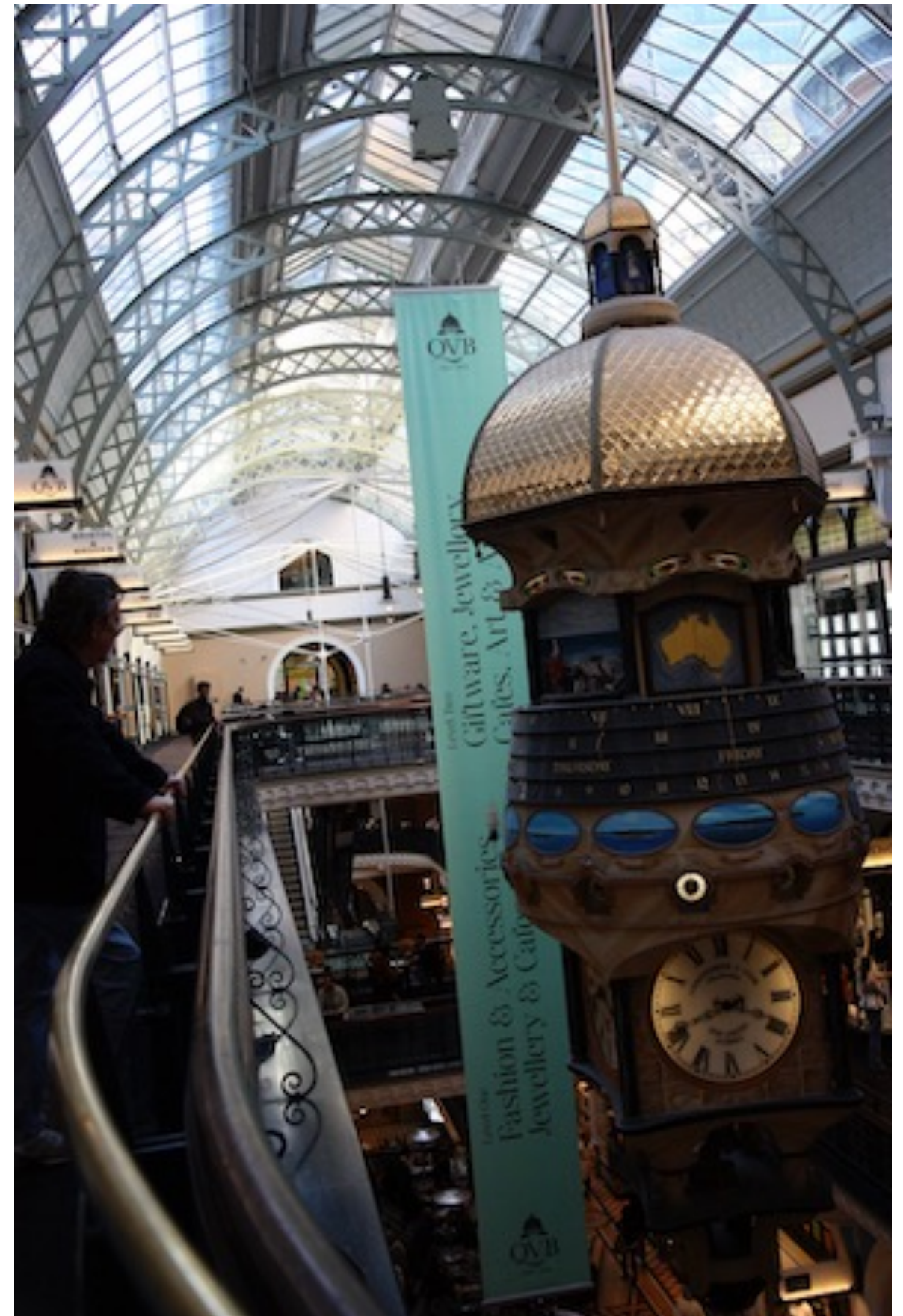
Back at the **Great Southern**, we weren't interested in wandering too far in search of dinner.



A stone's throw from the hotel we found a satisfying serve of *salt and pepper prawns* and two bowls of *short soup* (one *wonton*, one with *dumplings*) which went down very well.

Amazingly we were back and ready for bed by 6:30.

Shortly after that, a surprisingly sober *Hughesy* was pushing up Zs and working his way through the contents of the sawmill.



Saturday, 14 August

The body clock kicked in with the regular 4:30 wake-up, and I was out of bed looking forward to the prospects on offer feeling good.

Predictably a spanner was immediately lodged in the works.

With the laptop powered up, I was about to start on *Our Journey So Far* when I checked the email.

When I did, I was hit with a flurry of messages with subjects like *R.I.P. Richie Hayward*.

It wasn't entirely unexpected news.

Liver cancer, pneumonia, and reports that the case was too severe to risk moving the patient to a larger hospital meant I wasn't confident he'd be back in the drummer's seat for **Little Feat**.

Still, even when developments don't give you much hope, hope you do.





With the email scanned, I started a preliminary draft for the **R.I.P. section of The Music Pages**. I sent off part of it to the **Hoy Hoy mailing list** while *Madam* showered, then took my turn in the *Rain Room* before we set out on a time-killing expedition.

The train wasn't departing until 2:55, so it made sense to cut the next six hours into chunks on either side of checking out of the accommodation.

Madam wanted to give the shutter finger a workout.

Iconic structures and the magnificent waterway close to **Circular Quay** meant that by seven-thirty we were off to **Central**.

Platform 17 was the ticket if we wanted to go past **Town Hall** and **Wynyard** to **The Rocks** by way of **Circular Quay**.

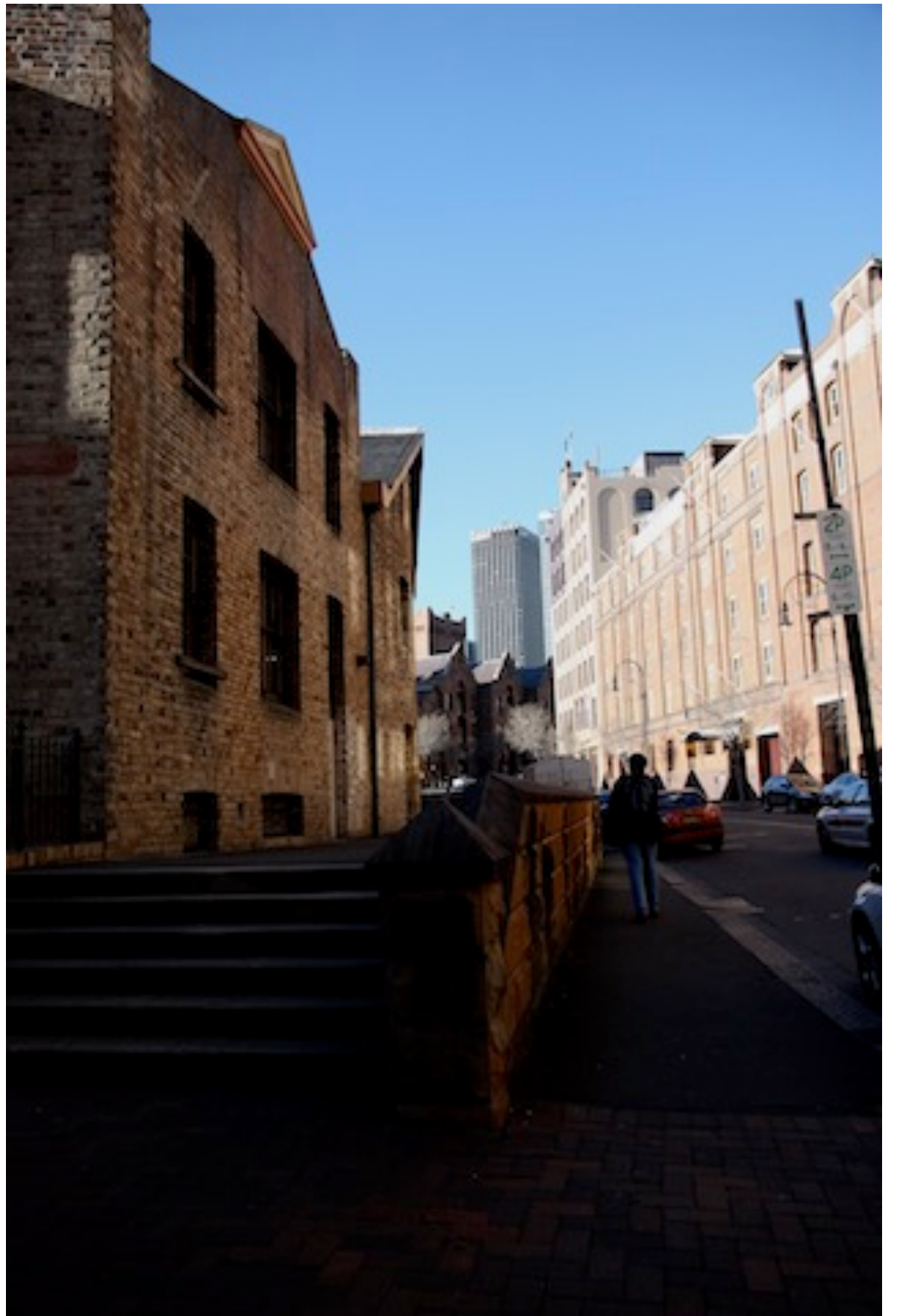
There's no legal way of alighting from the train if you opt to travel on from **Wynyard** until you're across *The Coat-hanger*, so **Circular Quay** was the obvious jumping-off point.

Wandering from **Circular Quay** took us under *The Coat-hanger's* southern pylon.











Madam realised the battery needed a recharge as checkout time loomed, so we made our way back to Great Southern. We were back there around 9:15.

With the battery in charge mode, we made a few adjustments to the luggage and were downstairs checking out around 9:45 when the rush set in.

With two large suitcases and the on the train hand luggage safely stowed in the **Cloak Room**, we set out on *Stage Two of Operation Time-killer*.

There's limited room in sleeper cabins, and there was no way two big suitcases were going to fit.



Well, they *could*, but options for movement would be almost nonexistent.

So we needed to pack a bag with clothing and underwear for three or four days.

We'd settled on a change of good clothes each (for the **Restaurant** and **Club Car**), along with something for the cabin.

Whether that would do remained to be seen, as the monkey remarked while leaving the doorstep.

With four hours until we needed to be at **Central**. once again, *Madam's* research skills came to the fore.

She'd visited the **Sydney Fish Market** on an earlier visit.

She'd also found an online voucher that cut the price of a \$9 day-pass on the light rail to \$6.

That was slightly more than a return ticket to **Lilyfield** and gave us the opportunity of unlimited travel on the line without the risk of being slugged for extra expenditure.

The tram line wasn't hard to find as we made our way to **Capitol Square**, and while we were waiting, I sighted the Haymarket **Harry's Cafe de Wheels**.



That gave me an excuse to go searching the *iPod* for the **Fabulous Nudes** tribute to the institution in a departure from my all-Feat all-day playlist.

It was one that fitted, given the subject matter.

The *Johnny Topper* vocal would possibly have gone down well with *Mr Hayward*.

Not quite *Texas Rose Cafe*, but not a million miles away and a neat way to fill in the waiting time.

The light rail trip to **Lilyfield** and back is, just as you'd expect, a mixed bag as far as the scenic side of things is concerned.

Still, harbour-side views made up for the predictable inner city along the rail line eyesores.

Once we'd made our way to the **Fish Markets**, I had no qualms about the chosen time killer.

And that was before the food factor kicked in.

We took ourselves around the perimeter, passing eateries I would've been happy to stop at.





Then we turned left into a retail outlet where I would've paused to take a photo of *Alaskan King Crab* (a touch under \$50/kilo) to prove I wasn't hallucinating.

Crowd and space constraints meant I gave the concept the flick pass.

But if that was crowded, we hadn't seen anything yet.

The water-front arcade offered more space in the walkways, but the retail outlets were packed.

However, there were places to sit and eat what you'd bought, so the crowding wasn't quite as severe once you'd negotiated a purchase.

We took a loop around the place while *Madam* scoped out the *sashimi*.

Once the relevant decisions almost made, repaired to the bottle shop, where a bottle of *2008 Devils Corner Riesling* set us back a reasonable \$23.

Plastic take away glasses were \$2 each.

In the end, we chose **Peter's** for a dozen large *Sydney rock oysters* (\$16) and *tuna and salmon sashimi* (\$9.80 with chopsticks and soy sauce).





The oysters looked better at the other place, but **Peter's** had seating.

Sashimi involved queueing, and, interestingly, the line contained numbers of *non-Japanese Asians* and approximations of the *Average Aussie*.

The *oysters* were excellent, so I had to go back for another six. The *tuna* finished a short half-head in front of the *salmon* in the *Sashimi Stakes*.

The *Riesling* was sublime, not quite the same slaty citrus notes in *Clare* and *Eden Valley Riesling*. But, being *Tasmanian*, from a much colder climate, it was never going to be entirely in that style.

I like *Tasmanian Riesling*, and would buy more if it was easier to find. This one was a perfect match for the oysters.

I was on my second serve when I recalled *Mr Hayward's* drum kit regularly featured a stuffed cartoon *Tasmanian devil*.

That stroke of serendipity that hadn't influenced the purchase. However, it provided an uplifting antidote to the coincidence of our arrival at the Markets with *Richie's* only lead vocal credit turning up on the *iPod* playlist.





After lunch, the crowd in the arcade was growing.

It was getting towards lunchtime for most people, so we obviously needed to be somewhere else.

A perfectly good somewhere else lay a few stops along the tram line at **Darling Harbour**.

A short excursion on the light rail saw us alighting at the **Convention Centre**.

We took a stroll around the **Maritime Museum**, which has duly gone onto *Hughesy's* list of things I need to take a proper look at.



I noted **H.M.A.S. Vampire**, an **Oberon class submarine** and smaller craft including the **Krait** and a **Vietnamese refugee boat**, all open for (paid) inspection.

Yesterday's walk in the **CBD** had produced less than favourable comparisons to **Melbourne's alleys** and interesting nooks and crannies.

While **Sydney** may have an equivalent it wasn't in evidence anywhere we'd been.

Melbourne, however, has nothing to compare to the **Harbour**.







We were lucky enough to catch it on a sunny day under blue skies we seemed to have brought with us.

By one-fifteen, we were collecting the luggage from the **Great Southern** before the five-minute walk to **Central**, and a check-in process that proceeded the way a well-oiled machine should.

After forty years you'd expect things to be pretty much down pat, and they certainly seem to be.

Given the length of the train (twenty-five carriages) it starts off in two sections for boarding purposes.

Once we were ensconced in **Gold Class Car F Berths 7&8** and unpacked, we had time to gather our thoughts while the front part of the train (ours) was shunted onto the rear end (the cheap seats).

Along the way, we received briefings about the cabin, its features (bathroom and toilet facilities) and matters like mealtimes.

For the uninitiated, **Gold Class** meals on the **Indian Pacific** and **The Ghan** operate in two shifts, **Red** (early) and **Blue** (late) and meal times aren't consistent over the journey.



They don't serve meals while the train's stopped and don't split eating into before and after options (difficult when you're there for two or three hours).

That means one option has you dining rather late after the **Adelaide** stop. The other one has breakfasts earlier than you may prefer.

Day One going west, for example, had the **Red Service** at 6:00 with **Blue** two hours later.

We'd gone the **Blue**, but as I wrote this part of the *Travelogue* heading out of **Broken Hill**, the **Red Service** had just been called (8:30 a.m. C.S.T.).

Subsequent comments from people with a **Red** ticket suggested that staff tended to hurry you through your meal to make room for the other lot.

The first part of the run out of **Sydney** took us through **Redfern** and suburbs that presented an urban landscape, much like the outskirts of any major city.

Sydney's Summer Hill and **Burwood** aren't *that* different to **Brisbane's Yeronga** and **Loganlea**.

Similar examples could probably be cited for **Melbourne**, **Adelaide** and **Perth**.



From where we were sitting, there was nothing around the station at **Homebush** to indicate the area had been hosting **the Olympics** ten years earlier.

By 3:47, we were passing a rail yard at **Clyde** and discovering the westering sun, as it sank towards the horizon, was going to be a real headache.

After a slow start, we were noticeably gathering speed at **Pendle Hill**. By **Blacktown**, we weren't exactly *motoring*.

Still, we were going places fast enough for the **Doonside** station sign to become an almost unreadable blur.

On the outskirts of **Penrith**, we were starting to come across patches of scrub, though there was still plenty of urban sprawl in evidence as well.

Crossing the **Nepean River** and passing **Emu Plains** a left-hand turn started us on the climb over the **Blue Mountains**.

While that reduced the speed, it took the train to heights providing broad backward vistas remarkably quickly.

As the ascent continued, the sun cut in and out each time the track twisted or turned through the hills.

Looking out, cliffs that blocked the westward progress of the early settlers were evident.

The railway cheats by using tunnels to get through rather than over, the escarpments.

Around 5:15 a sign indicated the presence of a **Grandview Hotel**, a reminder of home, but as we hit **Katoomba** darkness was upon us, and that was it as far as viewing the scenery was concerned.

Since that was the case, I wandered towards the **Club Car**, passing through the **Restaurant Car** where the **Red Service** were onto their entrees.

The **Club Car** was densely populated when we made our way there for the **6:30 Welcome Reception**.

We were greeted with a complimentary glass of bubbles.

If we'd arrived earlier and downed the first while the stragglers were making their way to the rendezvous, a second may well have been on offer.

The briefing covered most of the obvious bases. It contained a fair bit of promotion regarding **The Ghan** and associated trips operated by **Great Southern Rail**, but it was over just after seven.

With no further freebies on offer, we were on the edge of a group that had seemingly settled well in for the next hour.

So it was back to the cabin and an assault on the *Travelogue* backlog before they called us for dinner at eight.

Eight had passed, and we were about to check things out when the announcement arrived.

So while the vanguard beat us to the **Club Car**, we were among the first seated at the *Tucker Trough*.

Menus came with extreme rapidity as introduction were made across our table.

The elderly couple opposite was, we learned, from **Mittagong** and had a son based in **Toowoomba**, would take a drink if they hadn't already had their happy hour.

There were enough mutual interests to provide a flow of conversation through the rest of the evening's proceedings.

As far as the dinner menu goes, you're looking at three courses, with a couple of options for entree and dessert and four for the main (one of them vegetarian). Entree choices were a *prawn bruschetta* or a *curry-based soup*.

Non-vegetarian mains covered *beef*, *Atlantic salmon* and *chicken*. For dessert, you could have your cheese on a platter or in a cake.

Serving sizes were adequate but unlikely to satisfy a hearty eater. I guess it's a matter of looking after the majority rather than catering for quantity.

Fair enough, that was what I'd expected.

Fortunately, that doesn't extend to the wine list, which treads well clear of predictable offerings from the major chains.

I had a glass of *Adelaide Hills Sauvignon Blanc* with the entree and a *Mr Riggs The Rigger Shiraz* with the main, dragging it out long enough to cover the cheese platter as well.

Quality meals, wines a cut above the average at reasonable pub or restaurant prices and I returned to the cabin a happy camper.

In our absence, the beds had been made up.

Given the hour, lack of anything visible outside and tiredness it was a case of straight to bed, though both of us took a while to nod off.

Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Broken Hill to Perth

Sunday, 15 August

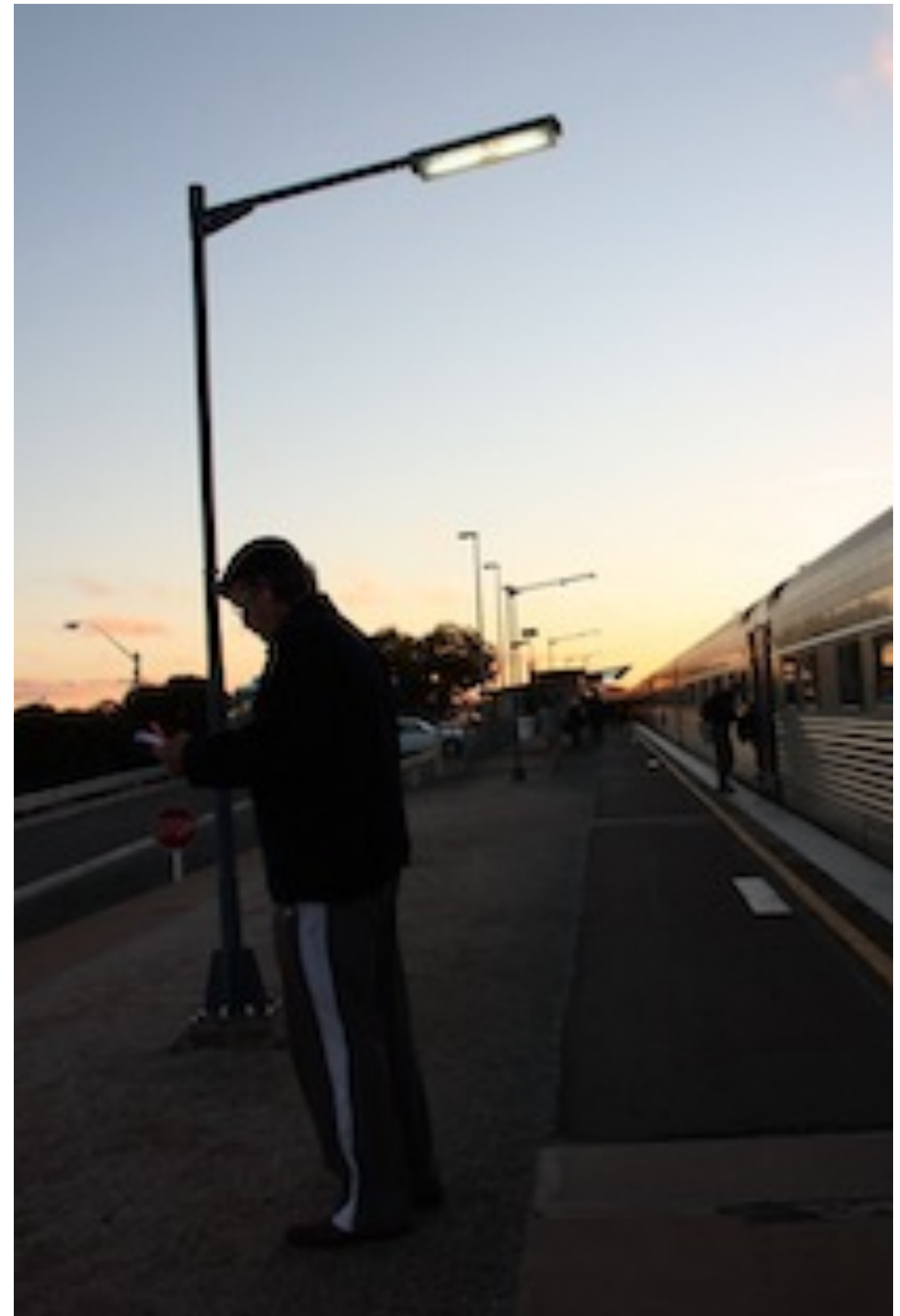
The body clock did its trick again and would have to be watched as we progressed westwards if I was going to avoid arising at some ungodly hour.

In that regard, I mused as the consciousness kicked in, the **Red Service** may have been a better option as far as meal times go.

Dinner after **Adelaide** was going to be late and if the diurnal rhythms were going to be maintained, I suspected something would end up having to give.

That's the sort of thing you ponder when you're wide awake, and the sun hasn't deigned to appear. Meanwhile, any attempt to sit up is going to cause a collision between your scone and the overhead bunk.

Still, as the time worked its way towards the sunrise, we had the prospect of an early morning tea.



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The train pulls into **Broken Hill** around six-forty CST. We'd been warned to adjust watches and other chronometric devices before we retired for the night.

I wasn't sure how to do this with the semi-flash new mobile, so I was still in EST when we arrived.

Since breakfast wasn't going to be served until after an 8:20 CST departure, there was a 6:00 morning tea to provide sustenance to those who needed it. Plenty did.

Quite a few were from the **Red Sitting**, which was understandable.

Quite a few familiar faces from last night may well have been sleeping in without the friendly reminder call over the P.A.

I got in two cups of coffee and *Madam* managed a cup of tea and a Danish.

Meanwhile, we learned the outside temperature was a somewhat crisp six degrees.

Given the temperature, assuming I was going outside at all, I would have been quite satisfied, with *a dingo's breakfast*.

After the regulation *nervous pee and a quick look around*, I would have been making a hasty retreat to the relative warmth.

After all, we were going to be there for two hours.

But *Madam* needed photographic records, some of which I would be able to use hereabouts, so off we went.

We ended up spending an hour roaming the streets, encountering fellow passengers and noting the locals were probably tucked up somewhere warm.

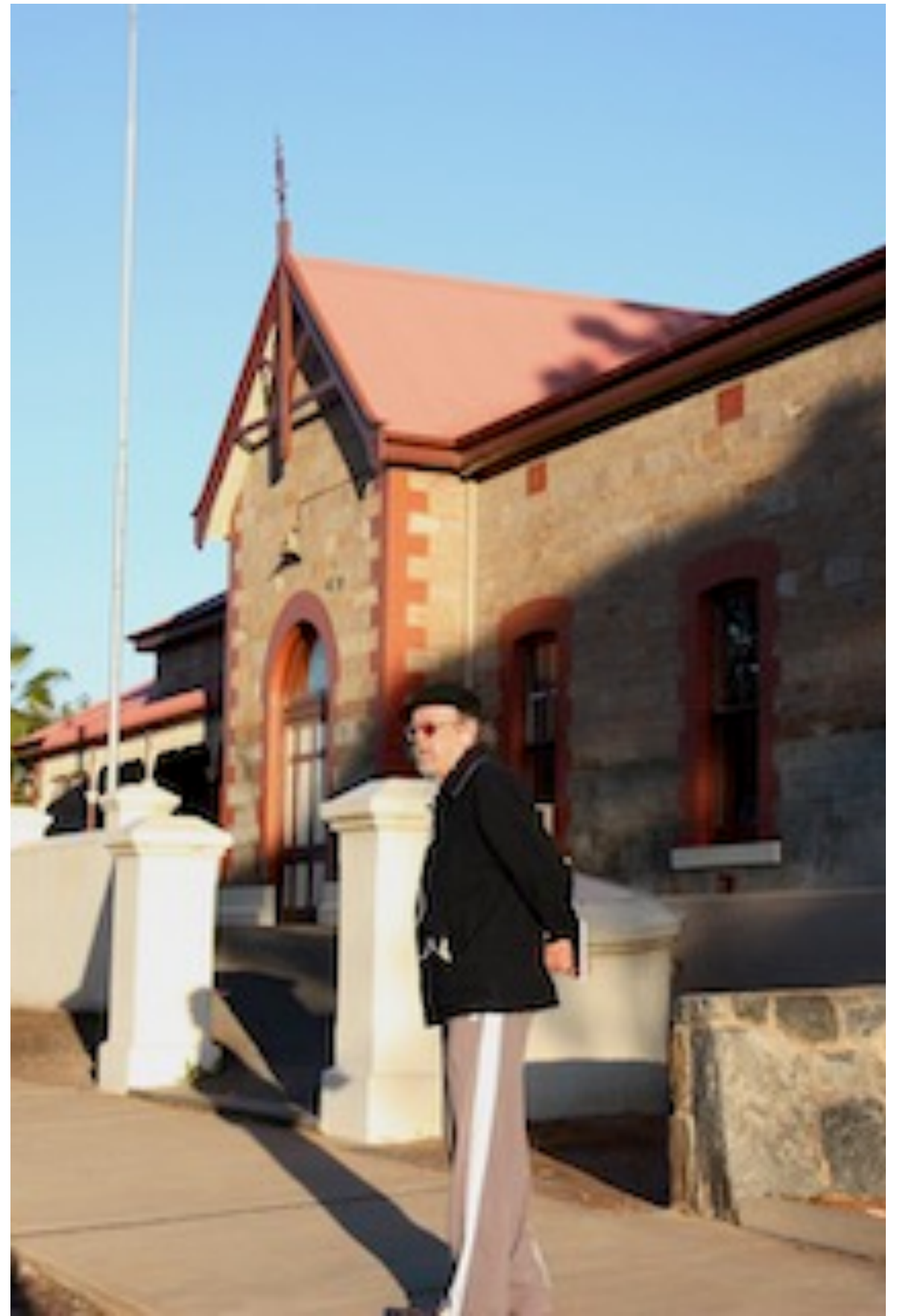
As far as *Madam* was concerned, the excursion could have been a bit longer.

Still, I managed to steer us back to the train comfortably before departure time.

While we'd been away, the train crew had been engaged in a bit of cleaning up, and we returned to find a line of plastic bin liners arrayed on the platform.











As we turned to board the train, something about one of them caught my eye. The bag closest to our door bore a message: *For Richard*, the kind of thing that puzzles the inquiring mind.

Who, I wondered, *is Richard*? What had he done to deserve this? What items of significance were contained therein?

There are, however, things that inquiring minds are better off not knowing. I guessed that this was one of them.

Back aboard, we had time for showers before we set off.

After an initial encounter with the shower facilities, this little black duck definitely wasn't looking forward to the next, which I expected would take place in a moving train.

Space was limited.

We'd been warned to ensure that the shower curtain covered everything if we wanted to keep the water in the designated area.

There weren't many obvious places where the train would stop for any length of time after Adelaide apart from **Cook**.

The primary purpose of the halt there is to replenish the water supply at the cost of up to \$2/litre!





Once we were moving again, the route took us across an ancient dry landscape covered with salt-bush.

It was populated by the odd pocket of sheep, the occasional emu and, more than likely the obligatory kangaroo, though I didn't manage to spot one over the entire crossing.

Still, it's hard to keep an eagle eye on the landscape and scribble notes at the same time.

After **Yunta**, a surprisingly large settlement two hours out of **Broken Hill** the country started to improve, as stunted trees took over from the salt-bush.

There were signs of recent rain in the odd patch of greenery though the countryside looked like it'd soak up any precipitation when it hit the ground.

In the unlikely event of summer rain (we're talking a Mediterranean climate in these parts) I suspected that rainfall would evaporate on impact.

It's hard to tell where you are as you cross a landscape without signs and landmarks so I can't say where I spotted what may well have been an approaching shower.

Our approach, however, differed, and we seemed to be skirting around any falling wetness.





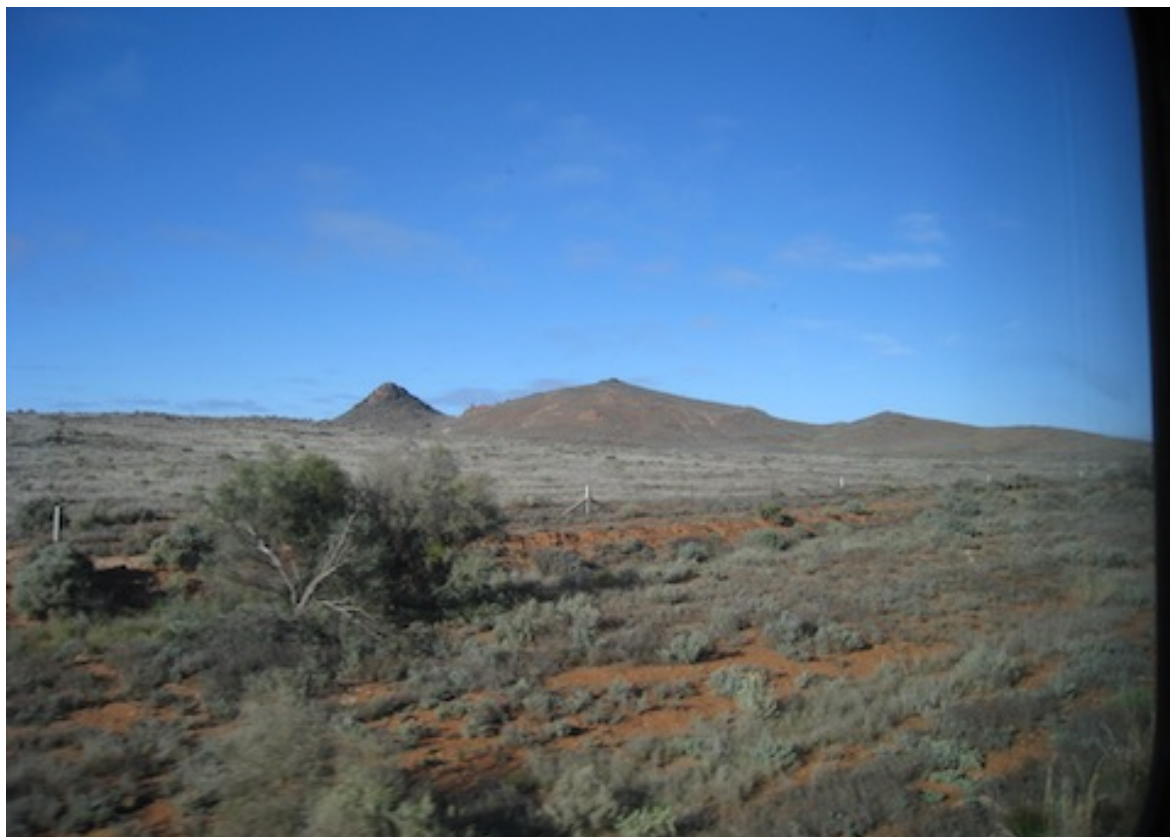
The scattered green pick on dry earth, however, suggested that we might have been a tad late.

Patches of significant erosion suggested when moisture did condescend to condense, it took its share of dirt with it.

I spotted dams, obviously man-made which, although dry, were there to capture runoff with raised walls and what looked like contour ploughing or a near relative thereof.

From that, it was apparent the land was being used.

Presumably, exploitation equated to grazing since I wasn't sure where we were in relation to **Goyder's Line**.



I noticed a homestead where the machinery included something that looked like a device used for cultivating the soil.

However, it was impossible to determine whether the item in question was a working device rather than a surviving relic of earlier endeavours.

As we crossed a bitumen road where the tarmac was still wet about ten minutes out of **Peterborough**, we were into country that had, at some point in the recent past, been cultivated.

In some places, the track-side reservoirs had already started filling with runoff.

Peterborough itself marks one of three points in the area where three separate rail gauges meet.

The first set of tracks to arrive was the railway from **Port Pirie** to **Broken Hill**.

They were followed by a line linking **Adelaide** to **Alice Springs** by way of **Quorn (the original Ghan)** both of which were **narrow gauge** (3 feet 6 inches) lines.

Before the launch of the **Indian-Pacific**, the line from **Broken Hill** was converted to **standard gauge** (4 feet 8 1/2 inch), and the line south of Peterborough to Terowie to **broad gauge** (5 feet 3 inches).

You get the same mix at **Gladstone** and **Port Pirie**.

Peterborough must have been a thriving community back in the day but presented a bleaker aspect through the contemporary mizzle.

While the weather reduced visibility to a couple of hundred metres, the landscape showed the benefits of recent rain.

The agricultural side of things became increasingly visible, with grain silos in substantial towns.

Not substantial, as in *populations running into the thousands*, but more than a dozen or two in a township that boasted a roadhouse, a pub and something else.

The rain lifted as we passed a town that may well have been **Yongala** (the town that gave its name to the **steamer wrecked off the North Queensland coast**).

From there, it's not far to **Jamestown**, the birthplace of **R. M. Williams**, **Sir Raphael Cilento** and actor **Paul Cronin**.

Those two locations were listed on the timetable, but I assume the stations were on the other side of the train.

There was no other way of telling, unless you managed to catch a glimpse of a place name on a pub, store or other business that chose to be place-specific in its nomenclature.

A glance in the ***Platform*** magazine suggested we weren't that far north of Clare.

An unexplained pause wasn't all that long.



In most cases, we got an announcement and a potted history over the P.A. if we were stopping to let somebody on or off.

Since we didn't, I guessed that within the necessary limits it operates under, the timetable is relatively flexible.

I'd started on the trip under the belief that the **Indian Pacific** was an express coast to coast service. Once you were on, you were on for the duration.

Still, it was becoming obvious there weren't many passenger services operating along the route.

So there was an element of the *milk run* coming into things.

Under those circumstances, a particular run might have no one to collect or deposit *en route*, while another might have a dozen.

With a certain amount of time lost at every pickup or set down, you're probably okay if the train's running late.

At least, that was my guess. I'm open to correction.

On the other hand, if the train's running early, someone might miss it, so from time to time if they're ahead of schedule, they stop to allow the schedule to catch up.



I guessed that happened when they knew there was a pickup somewhere shortly down the line.

At least that's the conclusion I came to as I sat pondering *why the heck we were stopping here*.

After **Gladstone**, the weather seemed to be lifting.

A vista of green rolling hills rolled across to the **Clare-**wards horizon and fields beside the track planted with peas or some green manure type crop but was more than likely something else entirely.

Crop identification from a moving train isn't *Hughesy's* strong point.

Shortly before we were called for lunch, we passed **Snowtown**. Mentioning the name brought a raised eyebrow from *'Er Busily Adding Photos To The Laptop*.

I was scribbling in the notebook.

A long, relaxed and leisurely lunch took us onto the **Adelaide Plains** with sightings of grapevines as the urban sprawl became increasingly apparent.

There are definite advantages in being in the second sitting.

Back in the cabin to prepare for three hours in **Adelaide**, we watched as the **CBD** high rise hove into view.

I scanned the horizon for familiar structures as the train rolled into what was obviously the terminal with an increasing sense of unease.

Madam had lined up appointments with a couple of *acquaintances from Adelaide days*.

The first rendezvous point was at the station close to the CBD, which meant I should have been sighting the light towers from the **Adelaide Oval** *over there*.

I should be glimpsing the banks of the **River Torrens** between them and the train.

Alighting, we discovered Adelaide's **Parklands Terminal** and **Central Station** are two different, discrete and completely unrelated kettles of fish.

A **\$12 taxi fare** took us to where we needed to be for the first rendezvous.

From there, we set out in search of somewhere to sit and talk.

That wasn't 100% easy unless you were willing to shell out for something to eat and/or drink.

That, in turn, is something you're not over-enthusiastic about shortly after a substantial lunch and a late breakfast.

Madam managed a fruit juice, and her friend had something more substantial. I was full up to the muzzle and sat deleting emails and passing an occasional comment about the train trip. There was no guarantee any of my remarks actually coincided with the contents of the Japanese conversation.

As we headed for the second appointment, *Madam's* friend seemed nonplussed when I revealed that my grasp of the language comprises the equivalents of *Hello, Good-bye, Thank You* and *Cheers*.

Outside it was obvious there'd been rain.

It had been raining steadily for a couple of days. The train's arrival had coincided with a brief break in the weather.

Remembering that, we were probably stretching our luck when the second rendezvous resulted in a decision to take a stroll along the banks of the Torrens.

Still, the weather held off while we completed a circuit that brought us back to the new panda-motivated entrance to **Adelaide Zoo**.

By that time it was about time for a taxi back to Parklands.

The sight of the terminal *sans* train would have had a drastic effect on the serenity of those prone to panic attacks.

The explanation for the absence was straightforward.

Up to **Adelaide**, the train had been configured one way.

While we were off doing our thing, the carriages had been rearranged.

To this point, we'd been looking off to our left and looking towards the direction of travel.

Now we were sitting with our backs to the engine. The outlook was still to the left, which was now the northern side. It's obviously all done with mirrors.

At least the change meant that previously mentioned issues with the setting sun would now be a thing of the past.

However, that *fat old Sol* had well and truly gone to bed when the **Indian Pacific** rolled out of **Adelaide**.

With new passengers on board, I wasn't sure whether existing dinner arrangements would stand, and wasn't keen

on being forced to switch to the early sitting. But no one came to discuss the matter.

When the **Red Sitting** was called, I set off for the **Club Car** to see whether there'd be a chance of a free glass at the **Blue Sitting Welcome Reception** as well as the odd pre-prandial snifter.

However, once the glasses had been distributed, an inquiry about the makeup of the crowd revealed that newbies were rather thin on the ground.

Maybe that explained why there weren't any refills.

Dinner for the **Blue Sitting** wasn't due till nine.

Still, I managed to kill time in conversation with the couple we'd met over lunch (*Madam* was catching up on things in the cabin, with sleep a significant agenda item).

When I set off to advise dinner was on the horizon, *Gavin* slipped a rather good bottle of *Peter Lehmann Shiraz* into the dinner mix.

While I wasn't quite walking on my knuckles when we toddled off to bed around eleven, I didn't take much rocking.

Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Across the Nullarbor

Monday 16 August

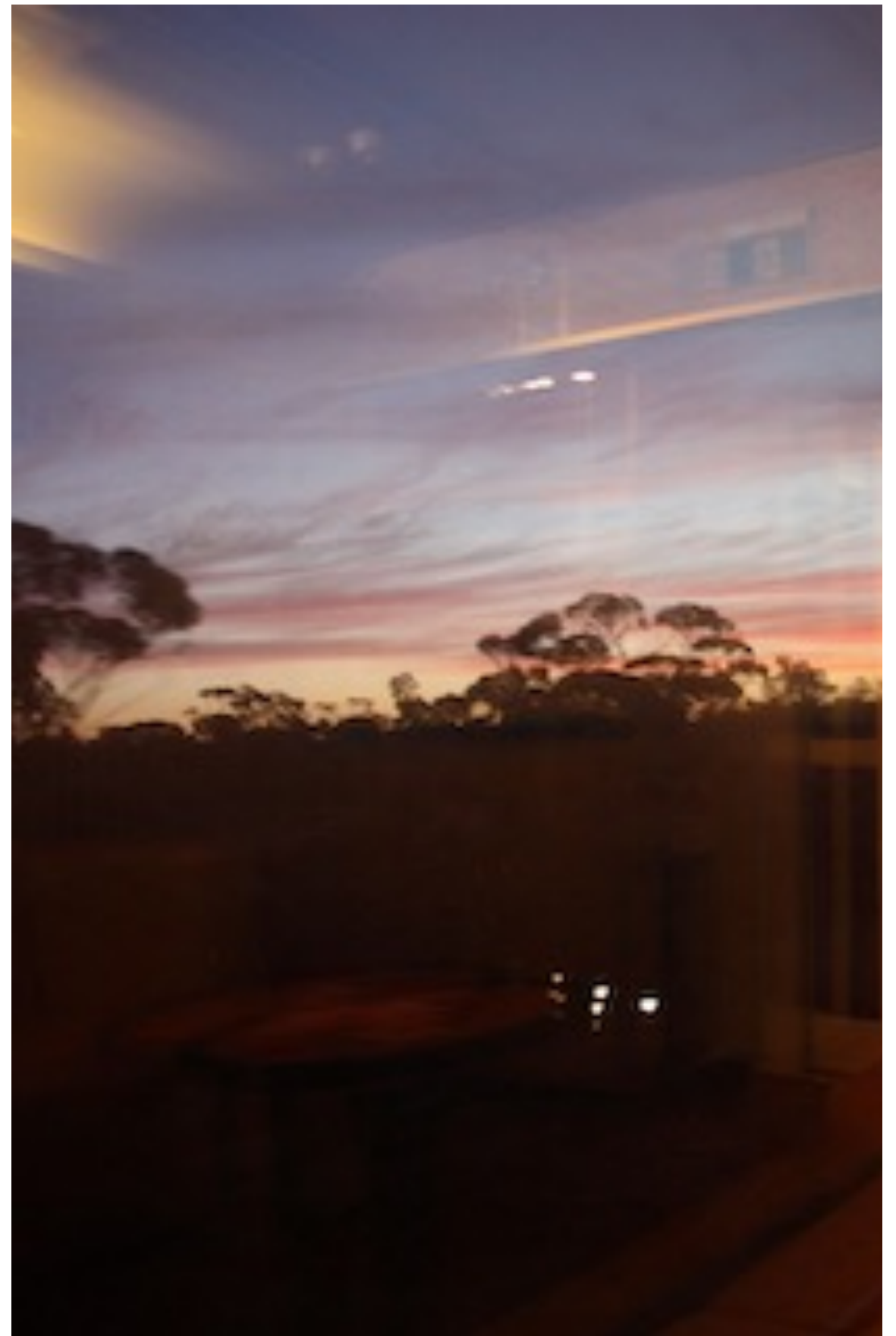
It might seem strange to learn one of the highlights of the **Indian Pacific** experience is several hundred kilometres of nothing.

Still, we'd been told that was the way things were before we hit the **Nullarbor**. Nothing I can think of would prepare you for a remarkable discovery.

Several hours of a 360-degree vista where the horizon is totally unencumbered and uncluttered by protrusions of any kind is an enjoyable experience.

At 6:00 when the wake-up call and cups of tea and coffee arrived, that was still all before us.

We had little real idea of what was in store apart from a very long stretch of unbending railway track.





Since the sun wasn't *quite* with us, and the cabin delivered a view to the left, the **Club Car**, with views to both sides seemed the way to go.

We arrived to find the place packed with people obviously there in anticipation of the **Red Service** call for breakfast.

The area emptied remarkably quickly when the call came.

The breaking dawn brought a misty sun over low scrub and red ochre sandhills, that rich red-orange, almost *terracotta on steroids*, with small trees scattered across them.

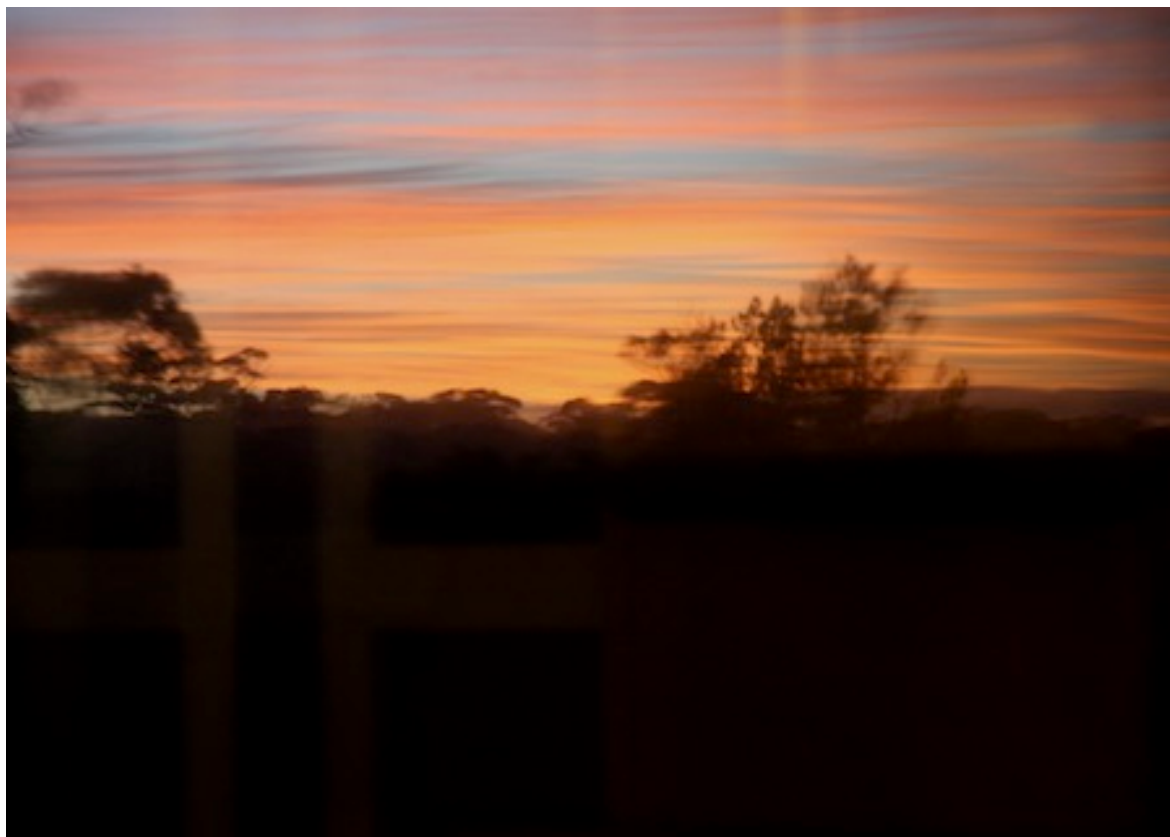
With sunrise shots taken and no one nearby to chat with, a move back to the cabin and a visit to the Rain Room seemed like a good idea.

There wasn't much to see, those things would have to be done eventually, and the future was an unknown quantity.

I'd emerged and dressed for breakfast.

I was in catch up mode on the field notes while *Madam* showered when my HBSP pen decided to give up the ghost.

Fortunately, I had a spare, but a brief grapple with the alternative wasn't entirely satisfactory.





So I headed off in search of a substitute, investing \$2 on an **Indian Pacific** *el cheapo* that wasn't much chop.

Any subsequent decline in reportage can be attributed to the change.

Poor workmen, their tools and all that...

Madam emerged, dressed, and expressed a desire for rest.

So I set off with pen and notebook thinking that there'd be space in the **Club Car** and I'd continue composing without seeming too unsociable.

There'd been no one in evidence fifteen minutes before.

It's remarkable how quickly things change. I arrived to find all seating occupied except for a stool near the bar.

It was apparent that solitary scribbling was setting the scrivener apart from the rest of the population.

I gave up and looked around to discover that the mist had closed in and turned into fog.

It was not quite your pea-souper, but enough to prompt the hospitality manager to remark that it was something she hadn't experienced on this leg of the journey before.





Up to this point, we'd been sitting in the cabin till the meal call came.

But it seemed gathering in the **Club Car** was the standard *modus operandi* so I wandered back to the cabin to suggest that *Madam* might care to join the crowd.

She did, but the joining lasted all of ninety seconds before the chime came and we were off to be seated for breakfast.

There isn't much room for variation in a cooked breakfast.

I went for the standard option, with *poached*, rather than *scrambled*, eggs to go with the *bacon*, *chipolata*, *mushroom* and *tomato*.

We were in the middle of ordering when the fog lifted, as if by magic.

We found ourselves gazing at the awesome extent of the **Nullarbor** in all its sparse and minimalist glory.

The other couple at the table was a farmer from the **Blue Mountains** and his *born to shop for shoes* missus.

He was a *Sandgroper* by birth and proved to be a mine of information.

He had made the crossing several times by both road and rail.

His better half wasn't at her best in the *morning person* role, but this was new ground to her.

So there were questions, remarks and banter across the table as we moved into a vast unchanging landscape.

When I spotted something that could have been mountains, I was told it was *probably cloud*.

There was nothing out there to the south between the railway track and the highway, a hundred kilometres away.

There's nothing beyond that to the **Great Australian Bight**.

Nothing. Not a hill, not a valley, nary a river or anything to deliver variation to a dead flat and totally even horizon.

There was no variation on the northward side either.

Then the PA announcement advised that we were on the 478-kilometre length between the 797 km post west of **Ooldea** and the 1275 km post west of **Loongana**.

It's **the world's longest stretch of straight railway line**.

As I looked out the window, on a full-circle vista, there was nothing to break the absolute flatness of the Nullarbor skyline.

That lack of variation gave plenty of time for catch-up scribbling.

There was absolutely nothing new that could be added in the way of further detail apart from a mercifully short half-hour stop at **Cook**.

And you wouldn't want to be spending more than thirty minutes at **Cook**, the township that **dates back to the construction of the line** during the **First World War**.

Named after the sixth Prime Minister of Australia, **Joseph Cook** rather than navigator James, these days **Cook** is effectively a ghost town since the railways were privatised in 1997.

The new owners didn't want to maintain a community that increased overheads without contributing to revenue.

As a result, the hospital and the school are closed. But there is evidence of an attempt to create an oasis in the desert.

The township boasts the only substantial clump of trees on the **Nullarbor**.

There are refuelling facilities and accommodation for train drivers.

But the purpose of the exercise is to replenish the water supply for the **Indian Pacific**.

At first, that was done with water from the **Artesian Basin**.

In the twenty-first century, in the age of bottom lines and profitability, the water is brought in by train.



As a result, the population has declined to three or four, not that we managed to sight obvious locals as passengers from the train wandered around deserted buildings.

Most residents were presumably engaged with the store, which opens while the train is in town.

We took a clockwise circuit around the outskirts of town, getting a good look at what remained.

Madam's photographic interest drew her away from the crowd.

As I watched and waited, I found my imagination moving into *Hercule Poirot* ***Murder on the Indian Pacific*** territory.

Over the next week and a bit, I managed to put together a workable plotline, but that'll have to wait its turn in *Hughesy's* queue of fiction projects.

We were back on the train soon after the blast on the fire siren signalled an impending departure.

Once we set off and signs of human occupation were gone, I found myself pondering matters metaphysical.















A line in a **Fred Dagg** monologue about **becoming a novelist** refers to *the stark hostility of the very land itself*.

It evokes an outback landscape far removed from anything close to the urban existence.

Alternatively, you might wax poetic along the **Dorothea Mackellar** *I love a sunburnt country* lines, but out here that doesn't really wash either.

Concepts like *beauty* go out the window if you equate beauty with a sense of being *attractive to look at*.

Fred Dagg's *stark hostility of the very land itself* might be just a little over the top.

But as the train made its way through a landscape that relentlessly refused to offer any variation, you might see where he was coming from.

On further reflection, I thought it wasn't so much *hostility* as an indifference to the existence of humans and other life forms.

That landscape's there.

It's always been there. For a long time, it's been just like this.



It will still be just like this long after the occupants of the train and all their descendants are long gone.

There's a sense of timeless indifference.

If I hadn't been in the middle of an all-Australian playlist on the *iPod*, I could have gone for repeated replays of **Warren Zevon**'s *The Vast Indifference of Heaven*.

However, here I wasn't contemplating heaven.

Instead, I was faced with the vast, empty and unchanging earth.



The straight stretch ended at **Nurina**, five hundred kilometres and almost seven hours after it had started at breakfast.

But the landscape continued to refuse to incorporate a vertical dimension.

Shortly afterwards we passed the site of an old prisoner of war camp.

A little further on at **Rawlinna** a couple of stockpiles from the nearby limestone mine provided a break from unrelieved flatness.



Six hours after we came into the **Nullarbor**, there was still no change as far as the skyline was concerned.

That's not to suggest nothing caught the eye at stops to pick up mailbags in the middle of nowhere.

At one of them, around lunchtime, there were colourful patches of red wildflowers.

A bit further along, she sighted a solitary cow moving towards the stationary train as if intent on a rendezvous.

That was the way it seemed from where we were sitting.

After some time, however, the vegetation began to gain height. Before long, we found ourselves in scrub high enough to cut off the view to the horizon.

I didn't note much in the way of intervening hills until the **Blue Service** was called for dinner, where I repaid the previous night's shout with a bottle of *Tempranillo*.

Dinner time took us into **Kalgoorlie**, and a three hour stop where there was nothing for it but to hoof it around town for a while.

That endeavour was encouraged by a significant diminution of on-board hospitality.







Throughout most of the journey, with the external doors secured, there was little need to lock cabin doors and so on.

A stationary train on the outskirts of a city meant a possibility of theft and other forms of mayhem.

Once the train was divested of its passengers, it went into lockdown with two doors and the same number of hospitality outlets open.

It doesn't take three hours to walk around Kalgoorlie.

The temptation to roll into a convenient waterhole, sink a couple of beers and return with replenishments probably accounted for a warning: Bringing grog onto the train was *verboten*.

That was something that hadn't been mentioned when I looked at bringing a couple of bottles of wine for in-cabin consumption.

Kalgoorlie presented as a town that had done very well for itself in its heyday, and the buildings were similar in style to those we sighted in **Broken Hill**.

There weren't many locals on the streets. That was probably a function of the hour and Monday. Ten o'clock on a Saturday may have been different.





I suspect a combination of *twelve hours on, twelve hours off*, and an *alcohol and substance testing* regime was a significant factor.

Commemorative pavers revealed **Kalgoorlie** as the birthplace of **Walter Lindrum**, *the Bradman of the billiard table*, and several sporting identities.

Almost all of them were totally unfamiliar names as far as the four of us were concerned.

Given *Madam's* background that was hardly surprising but many of them were footballers, *Gavin* and *Lynn* were from Victoria, and we were presumably talking AFL.

It seems football fame didn't always spread eastwards in the pre-*Eagles* and *Dockers* era.

I was also quite taken by the wording on this storefront.

Presumably, in the owner's mind, *gourmet* precludes the culinary traditions of **Italy** and **South Africa**.

There may, possibly, be a case for the latter, but *Italian*?

Having negotiated our way back to the train, the ladies made their way to the cabins.



Gavin and I headed for our **Club Car** in the vain hope of finding it open.

We were about to call it a night when we were joined by a young bloke I'd sighted with a camera and tripod over the preceding few days.

He'd been carrying a copy of *Uncut* before dinner. In the brief conversation that followed, he turned out to be a regular reader of *Mojo*.

After *Gavin* called it a night, we sat discussing music for a good hour.

Eventually, I decided an uncertainty about what lay over the horizon in Perth meant that it wasn't a good idea to continue sitting up.

Still, it was one of the most enjoyable conversations I've had for many a year.

Talking **Derek Trucks**, **Little Feat**, **Captain Beefheart** and **Forever Changes** with a young bloke in his twenties or early thirties on the **Indian Pacific**.

Who'd have thought?



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Perth

Tuesday, 17 August

A glance out the window the next morning presented an aspect, predictably, substantially different from what had been on offer as dusk rolled in the previous evening.

While the mist and mizzle didn't allow a great range of vision, the scenery was relatively lush. It offered the promise of rather spectacular views to the right-hand side of the train.

Unfortunately, as previously indicated, we were looking to the left, where we had a view of hillsides rather than the depths of the **Avon Valley**.

I could recall the **Avon Descent** whitewater race from the days when I watched things other than the cricket and rugby league on **Channel Nine**.

I'm sure that, had we been looking out the right-hand side under conditions offering better visibility I'm sure I would have been impressed.

There were more pressing issues that needed our attention.

Experience suggested the gap between finishing breakfast and the arrival at **East Perth Terminal** would be too small to allow for much packing and preparation.

So it would need to be taken care of before breakfast. Before that could be done, there were two showers required.

With the preliminaries out of the way, we were on our way to the **Club Car**.

Then the call for the **Red Sitting** came. We found ourselves with new mealtime companions.

As the introductions were made, there was something said that prompted me to suspect the gentleman opposite, who volunteered **Townsville** as his home base, knew me.

The word that I was from **Bowen** threw him for a bit, but a question about pubs, specifically about where I drank at in **Bowen** got the bells ringing again.

Well, I answered, I started at the Grand View.

The remark produced an observation that he'd *seen Donna and Ted in Thredbo recently*. That was followed a question about where I'd gone once I'd left the **GV**.

The news that we'd shifted to the **QB** and the explanation that followed produced references to *Brownny*, and left me convinced I should have been able to put a surname to the face.

Introductions on the **Indian Pacific** are confined mainly to a first name basis.

We were well inside suburban **Perth** when we rose from the breaky table. Before long, we were pulling into the terminal, and the train part of the journey was over.

There were final details like collecting checked luggage still to be negotiated.

More importantly, we had to find *Madam's* new friend, who'd generously taken time off work.

She had volunteered to pick us up from the station and convey us to the **Travelodge**, where we were booked on for the next two nights.

Then she'd take *Madam* to **Kings Park** for a session photographing wildflowers.

While that was taking place, I expected a couple of *iPod* hours.

That might be followed by lunch in town, a wander through the CBD and even a possible visit to a CD shop (**78 Records**) that seemed like a place worth exploring.

As has been often remarked, the old internet is a wonderful thing, though it can have its pitfalls.

I'm only too aware of the propensity of online communities to degenerate into flame wars, slanging matches and general nastiness.

I've been quite amazed by the apparent civility and generosity of the little blogging community that *Madam* contributes to.

We've met three of its members now, and they've all proved to be quite wonderfully warmhearted and interesting people.

Once the introductions had been made, it was apparent we were going to be a party of four rather than three.

Yuko's partner *Mark* appeared after he'd parked the vehicle.

There was that uncomfortable pause as new acquaintances try to figure out what the hell to talk about.

Crowded railway platforms aren't the most suitable *get to know you* places.

Still, once the luggage had been claimed and we were *en route* to the city, things seemed to be flowing reasonably smoothly.

I'd heard something to the effect that *Yuko* lived next door to the **Travelodge**, and the reports turned out to be accurate.

After dropping us off with the luggage, we arranged a rendezvous in about ten minutes while cameras and other paraphernalia were organised.

We set off expecting to be unable to check-in but hoping we'd be able to deposit the luggage for a while.

As it turned out, our room was ready, and with check-in complete, we hurried upstairs, stashed the bags, collected our wits and headed off on the **Kings Park** excursion.

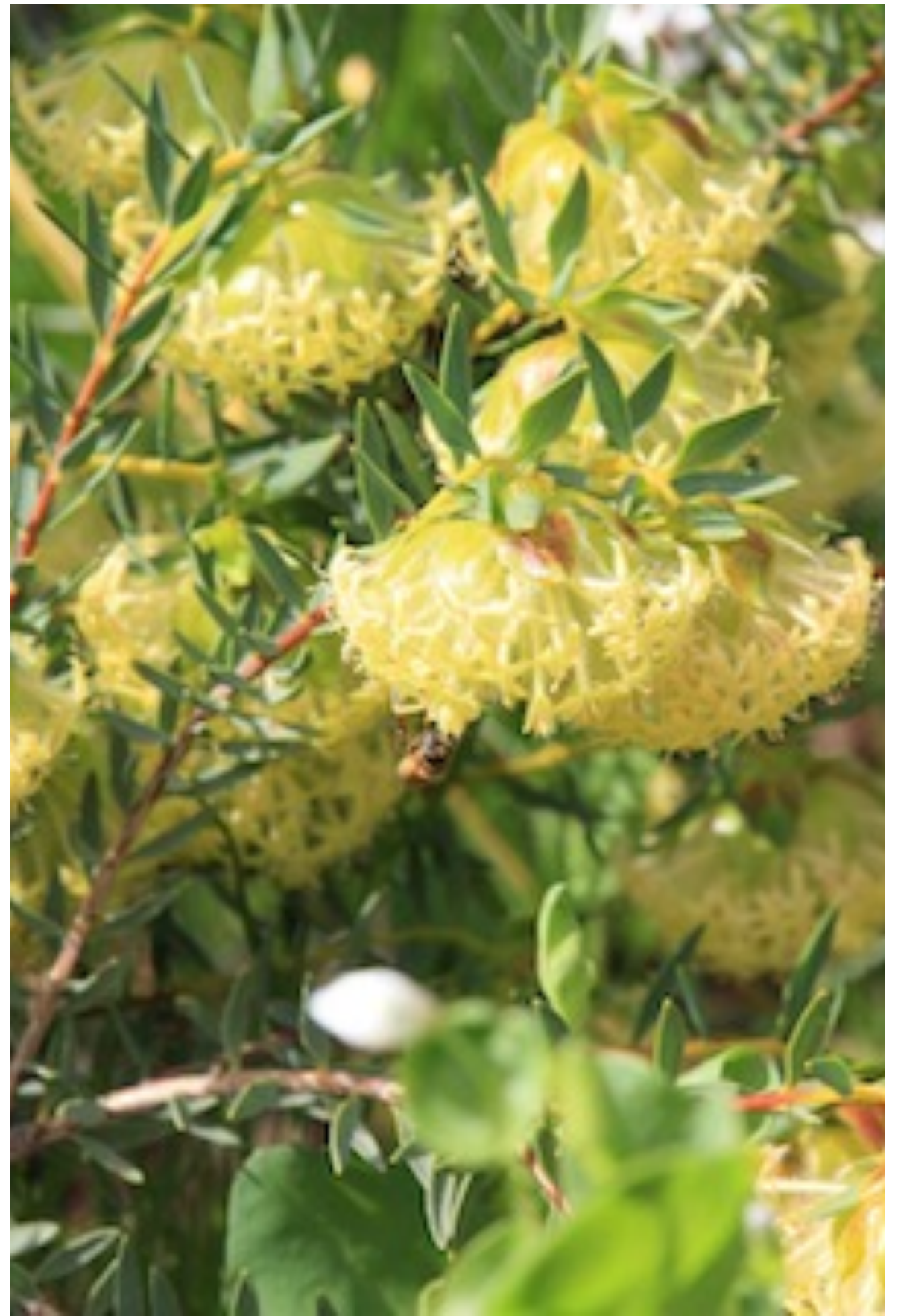
Fine, I thought. A few hours in the park, bloke to talk to while the photos are being taken, music on the iPod. Looks good. Bit of lunch and take it easy for the arvo.

How little I knew.

Mark, apart from his interests in photography, wildflowers and birdlife shared some of mine.







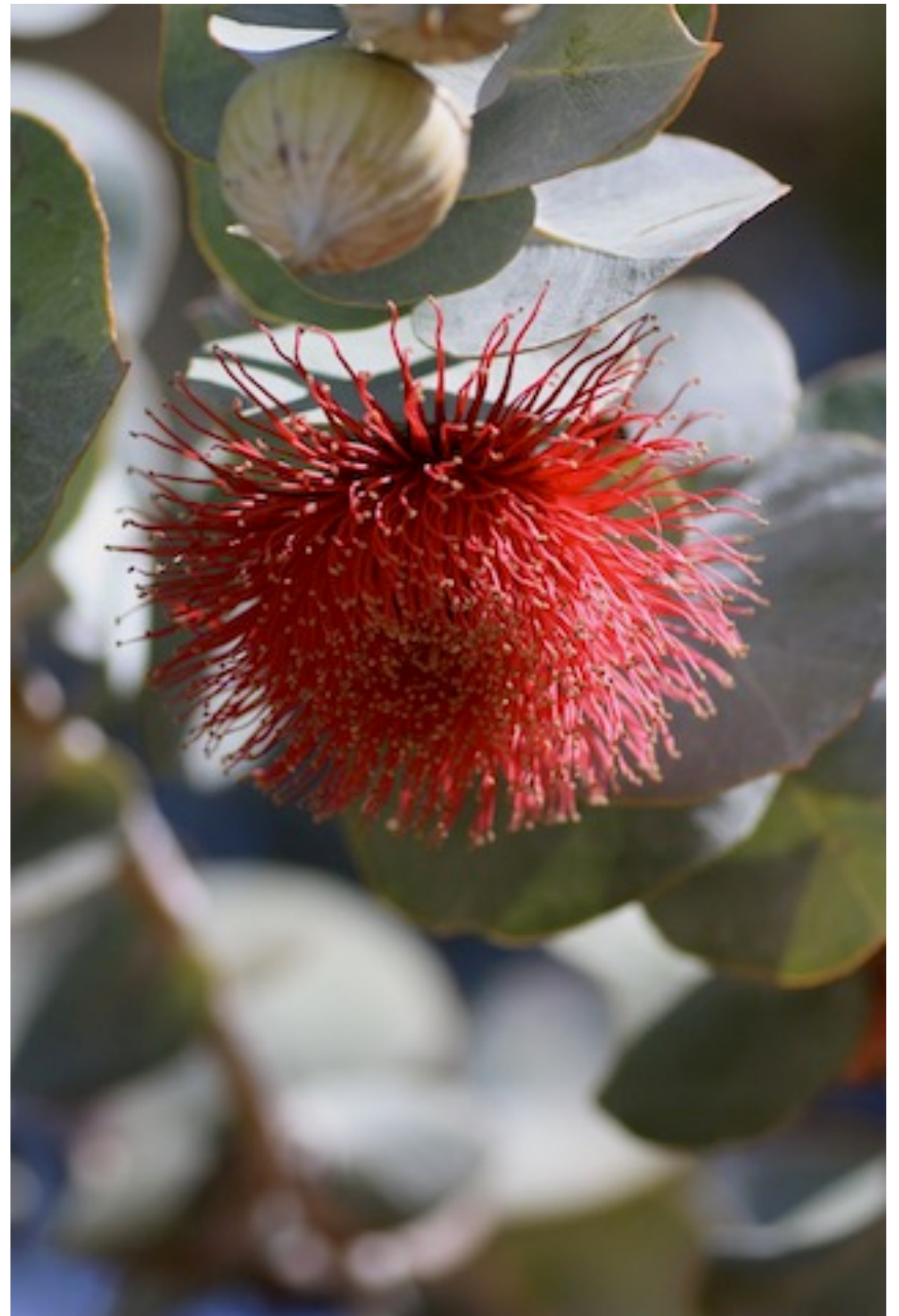
















As we strolled through the park, the blokey conversation was interrupted by indications of wildflowers worth photographic attention, along with the odd technical tip.

After the lap around the park, we adjourned for coffee.

Out of the blue, an observation that the light *looked promising* if we were inclined to head off to the escarpment meant we found ourselves *en route* to **Gooseberry Hill** for more wildflower photography.

While I must admit it didn't do a lot for me, I should point out, as I did, that the train trip had been my indulgence, and the wildflowers were *Madam's* thing, so I was happy to tag along.

But I'd done something right.

As we made our way along the downhill zigzag, since we happened to be in the right area, was I interested in visiting a winery?

I obviously don't do *please don't put yourselves out* well enough.

I suggested that I'd be quite happy with lunch and maybe a tasting if time permitted.









However, I was decanted at **Sandalford**, ushered into the tasting area and told to take my time.

With three people waiting nearby while you're the only one tasting, taking your time isn't easy.

And when they're discussing dinner options, and you want to contribute to the discussion, it's difficult to devote the attention that good wines deserve to a very attractive range.

In any case, much of what I'd tried came from **Margaret River** so I could remove **Sandalford** from the list of places I needed to visit.

Then it was on to **Houghton**, where, as you'd expect going from one winery to another, the experience was substantially different.

Sandalford had been friendly, but the girls in the tasting room, while happy to pour samples and give a comment went about their other tasks and left you to it.

The young bloke in the tasting room at **Houghton**, on the other hand, was a salesman, and a classy operator at that.

Inquiries about varieties, regions and styles developed into an ongoing conversation that ended up with *Hughesy* ordering half a dozen and placing himself on the email list.

In the meantime, my companions strolled around the grounds and through the gallery. They ended up in the **Tasting Room** just as I was finishing up.

By that time it was getting on for four, and the fact that we'd missed lunch was starting to tell on all concerned.

Back in the car, we made our way back to the city. We were back just before five.

The party split up to put cars to bed, deposit cameras and freshen up before joining back up to head off to dinner at **Caffe Italia**.

It does the *BYO wine only* bit, which gave me an excuse to knock over one of the two bottles that had made the transcontinental odyssey with us.

Brook Eden Pinot Noir mightn't have been the perfect match for the entree of *Arancini di carne al sugo* (rice balls stuffed with cheese & peas).

Still, it went down quickly enough for me to order a bottle of *Waterwheel Cabernet Merlot* to go with the main course.

Having sighted *Maccheroni all' osso buco* (pasta with *osso buco* in tomato and basil sauce), a hearty red seemed like the way to go.

The *Waterwheel* appeared to go down well with the other mains ordered around the table.

We'd arrived shortly after opening time, and when we left just after seven, the place was filling up.

That was a factor that should have entered my consciousness at the time but had a significant effect on Thursday's evening meal arrangements.

Still, we'd eaten well and were feeling no pain.

The stroll back to the corner that marked the divergence of the two parties' paths was enough to remind us that tomorrow was another day.

It would need a gathering of strength to negotiate.

After five days on the road, there was a load of laundry to be attended to once we'd passed on a *thank-you* bottle of *Rockford Alicante Bouchet*.

After that, it was a matter of gathering strength for the morrow and ensuring that the new day would be greeted with freshly laundered clothing.

Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Rottnest Island

Wednesday, 18 August

We'd wangled a considerable saving on the train journey because of the 40th-anniversary celebrations.

However, the reduced fare came with a couple of riders.

One was the need to book two nights' accommodation, which accounted for the booking at the **Travelodge** (at a rate we would've avoided under other circumstances).

The second was the need to book one of three tours on offer.

One was a wine tasting tour to **Margaret River**, but our plans included a couple of days there rather than a one-day bus trip.

The second was an excursion to **Wave Rock**, which *Madam* had visited previously and been underwhelmed by, so the third option was always going to start a short-priced favourite.



A visit to **Rottnest Island** is probably one of the must-dos if you're in Perth on holiday.

Still, given the time frame we were working in, we'd probably have given it a miss if it hadn't been the third tour option.

But the others were non-goers, so we'd gone to bed the previous evening with the knowledge the courtesy bus would be waiting at the front door at 8:20.

We went very close to missing it, having slept in.

Put that down to the combination of a king-size bed that proved a remarkably good sleeping surface and general weariness after the train trip, where we'd slept adequately rather than well.

Effective curtains on the windows with a large sun-blocker to our eastward side, overcast weather and the previous evening's over-indulgences completed the equation.

Under other circumstances, I would have been up early, tapping away on the laptop.

While I managed a start, that happened much later than expected. I'd mentally prepared myself to stop when *Madam* emerged from the shower, but that happened slightly later than expected.

The result was a wild flurry of activity that had us downstairs in the foyer right on 8:20 to spot the **Rottnest Explorer** bus waiting on the other side of **Hay Street**.

As we boarded and found seats about midway along the bus, I was mildly surprised to note a strangely familiar face.

I couldn't imagine what noted Australian culinary personality **Stephanie Alexander** would be doing on a tour to Rottnest Island.

Still, stranger coincidences have, no doubt occurred.

Now, it's not as if *Hughesy* has spent his entire life filing away celebrity images in the memory bank.

As noted elsewhere, when they were filming *the movie* in Bowen (in Bowen ***Australia*** is always *the movie*), I wasn't sure I'd recognise **Nicole Kidman**.

I also failed to spot **John Jarratt** strolling past wearing a pink dressing gown.

So why, inquiring minds would ask would *Hughesy* be spotting a grey-haired lady of a certain age and making an identification as **Stephanie Alexander**?

Simple, really.

I've had around thirty years reading articles about food with that face somewhere in the byline.

There have also been newspaper articles with accompanying photos. So **Ms Alexander** is one of three or four culinary figures I'd possibly recognise in real life.

Since the others are **The Cook and The Chef** and **Neil Perry**, there's probably an answer to your question of *Who is Stephanie Alexander?*

Given the relative dearth of watchable T.V. over recent months, I seem to recall **Ms Alexander** as the subject of one of those *tributes to and examination of their influence-type programs* on the ABC.

The husband/partner was featured from time to time.

There was something familiar about the bloke who was sitting alongside the possible influential culinary figure.

There was another woman in the party of three, so it was possibly a case of three old friends or relatives on a day trip together.

Since that was presumably the case, I butted right out.

Still, you can't help wondering.

Checking in for the cruise was the predictable well-oiled process.

Hand over the tour voucher and receive, in return, your ticket for the boat and morning and afternoon tea.

You receive another for the bus tour around the island and a third that would get you into the buffet lunch.

You also receive a timetable and a briefing as the attendant draws helpful circles around the times and places where we'd need to be to catch the bus, get lunch and catch the return ferry to the mainland.

All this was done with a vocal tone that suggested extensive experience explaining such matters to befuddled elderly day-trippers.

Since we don't fit that demographic, I concluded that this was the result of a lengthy and comprehensive training process.

Down at the ferry, we presented our credentials to *tour guide Adine*.

We opted for seats upstairs on the outside deck, coincidentally landing the row in front of the *suspected Alexander party*.



At that juncture, I thought of turning around and asking whether a certain party was who I thought she was.

But I concluded that if one of the doyens of modern Australian cooking was travelling *incognito*, I shouldn't blow her cover.

The cruise along the Swan towards **Fremantle** was accompanied by a descriptive narrative from *Adine*. However, it wasn't exactly audible on the upper deck.

We'd decided downstairs was the better option, shortly after the Alexander party had done likewise. I had visions of *I know that man's going to turn around and ask if I am who he thinks I am, and I won't have it!*

After we found seats in a snug position on the starboard side, *Madam* moved from time to time for photographic purposes.

I stayed put looking through the window and listening to *Adine's* commentary on the lifestyles of the *rich but not necessarily East Coast famous* occupants of **Millionaire's Row**.

The cruise, despite the weather outside, reinforced the view that the **Swan** helps define **Perth** in the same way **the Harbour** defines **Sydney**.





While we weren't experiencing the best conditions, it was still thoroughly enjoyable.

The morning tea, on the other hand, was on the very ordinary side of ordinary (tea or coffee, packaged biscuits and/or fruit cake).

After two stops in **Fremantle**, it was onto the open waves for the crossing to **Rotto**. We managed that without any distress for those who don't find the motion of ocean-going vessels comfortable.

Disembarking, we joined up with *Adine* and the rest of the tour party and made our way to the bus stop.

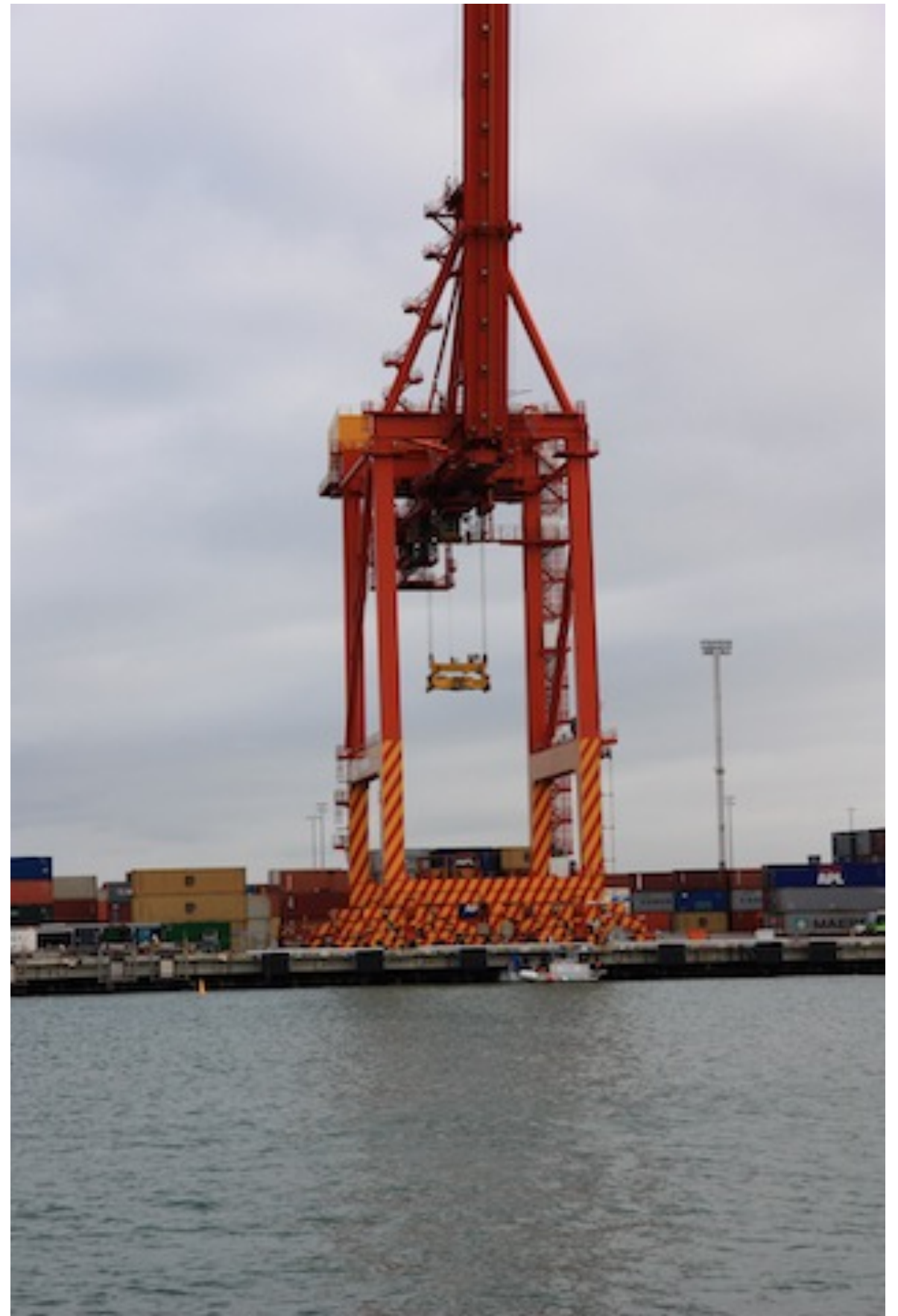
Commentary along the way delivered warnings that the first two buses that hove into view were not our bus.

As previously noted, one suspects a thorough training program to develop the skills required to deal with ageing and rebellious geriatrics.

Not that we fit that demographic, of course.

Aboard the third bus that arrived on the scene, we set off for a clockwise circuit of the island, with comprehensive commentary from the *English-accented bus driver*.













I won't be reproducing much of it here.

Suffice it to say it was exhaustive and comprehensive, so if readers require details, they'll have to do the trip themselves.

As we continued towards the island's western extremity, it was apparent there were plenty of summer leisure options on hand.

However, the season and the prevailing conditions meant most people we saw were engaged in a cycling circuit of the island.

They had presumably pre-booked (and more significantly prepaid) their bicycles.

The weather outside the bus wasn't the most clement of cycling conditions.

The weather came into consideration when the bus stopped at **West End**.

We were informed we were at liberty to spend a quarter of an hour strolling around the boardwalk and taking in the view and the photo opportunities.





Given the conditions, I would have been happy if they cancelled the walk and continued on the circuit.

But that would have delivered the bus back to the main settlement before Adine was ready for us, so with a little prompting the bus was emptied, and off we went.

From the start it was apparent outside was hardly the place to be unless you'd invested in, and decided to wear, well-insulated clothing.

Thermal underwear would deliver certain very definite added advantages.

Remaining on the bus would label you a *sook*, so it was a matter of how long you could stand the cold.

I managed a complete circuit of the boardwalk, though I must admit that the final leg saw me gathering pace as I went, and it wasn't just the effect of the tailwind.

The views from the vantage points were spectacular, or rather they would be under the right circumstances.

A passing comment when we were back in the main settlement suggested that the right circumstances were a relatively rare occurrence.











Having made my way back on board, I waited while the hardier, better-insulated souls went about proving their innate superiority.

Predictably *Madam*, ever eager to catch that extra photo, was the last to re-board the bus. Meanwhile, in a seat beside the open mid-bus door that caught the prevailing gale, *Hughesy* lightly froze.

On the return journey, our attention was drawn to the mooring buoys placed at regular intervals around the bays and inlets.

The commentary suggested that these were available for lease at around two thousand dollars a year each.

By *Hughesy's* calculations, that would produce a revenue stream of several million per annum for virtually no expenditure or effort.

Nice work if you can get it.

We returned to find *Adine* patiently waiting.

There was a *Follow me* as we set out in search of lunch that didn't seem to go down too well with some members of the party.





Still, as we made our way into Rottnest Lodge, it was fairly evident that they'd hidden the buffet deep inside the complex, and the guide was definitely advantageous.

Lunch, when we arrived, proved to be a reasonable, quite substantial take on the *all you can eat* buffet arrangement.

It started with *sliced turkey, pasta with a Bolognese-style sauce, a curry and rice* option and moved from there through the usual suspects.

What one of the doyens of Australian cooking made of it I didn't know and was polite enough not to ask.

Plates full, we opted to sit outside in the courtyard under an increasingly sunny blue sky.

The arrival of tourists bearing plates brought several seagulls, obviously well-versed in the opportunities for a free feed. One dared to snaffle a chip off *Madam's* plate.

With another loitering with evident intent, I caught it with a baleful beady eye.

In a stern voice, I indicated the carved turkey breast which had formed the base of the food mountain and remarked, *This is your cousin!*





A chastened and startled squawk suggested that the message had hit home

A postprandial stroll through the settlement provided an avenue for *up close and personal quokka spotting*. It brought us back to the jetty at the appointed time.

After we surrendered the boat ticket, retaining the stub that we'd need for afternoon tea, we made our way upstairs to enjoy better weather on the return journey.

No one, however, had pointed out the change in conditions on the water.

Once we were underway, it took about two minutes to realise if we stayed where we were, we'd be drenched by the time we reached the safety of the estuary.

The vessel's pitching and rolling, on the other hand, meant there was the danger of ending up in the drink when we moved.

I might have managed to do just that if a helpful hand hadn't grabbed my wrist as we made a run for shelter below.

Once we'd done that, things improved remarkably.







Watching the spray cascade towards our former position, knowing we were well out of it was reassuring, to say the least.

The crossing was surprisingly rapid, and before we knew it, we were inside the outer mole of **Fremantle harbour**, making our way to the first stop.

With the second stop out of the way, as we passed under the bridges that link the eastern portion of **Freo** to the **CBD**, *Adine* announced that afternoon tea was available for those who might choose to indulge.

The news met with complete disinterest until the following remark that there was a wine tasting for anyone so inclined.

Needless to say, a brace of afternoon tea-sceptics were making their way towards the rear of the vessel without further ado.

The tasting, as it turned out, represented the downmarket end of the **Sandalford** range. Still, *the mouths of gift horses and all that* meant *Hughesy* had a sample of everything on offer.

I could probably have gone around again since *Adine* seemed bored and listless with nothing to do on the final portion of the cruise.

Tour guide, marshal of geriatric sheep, cruise commentator and dispenser of wine samples, the girl certainly wore a variety of hats.

After the courtesy bus dropped us back at the **Travelodge**, there was the matter of dinner to consider. However, neither of us were up for a substantial repast.

I think it was ***The Week*** that advised me of the existence of **Tom's Kitchen**. Still, I'd mentioned it to *Madam*, and she'd been interested at the time.

So we found ourselves sitting on a **Red Cat** and heading towards the other side of the **Hay Street Mall**.



Tom's Kitchen lies tucked away in a laneway off **Hay Street** and does a good line in French-influenced bistro-style food, with an eclectic wine list.

Madam's seafood chowder was described as *fishy*, but not in a pejorative sense. My *coq au vin* was excellent, with deliciously tender meat falling off the bone and a sauce that needed some of *Madam's* bread for mopping up purposes. It was one of the very best things I've eaten in a long time.

The glass of *Spanish Tempranillo* (with most of the palate notes I've been noting in the Australian versions of the variety, so someone down this way's doing it right) went down rather well.

I'd definitely be back, and could well be tempted to make repeated visits to try to work my way through most of the menu. *Highly recommended.*

With dinner out of the way, we took a stroll back along Hay Street, dropping into the **Apple Store** to have a gander at an **iPad**. In a remarkable display of restraint, *Hughesy* managed to escape without shelling out the thousand dollars required to collect a **64Gb Wi-Fi + 3G** model.

After we'd finished the **Hay Street** stroll, we retired comfortably early with a day trip to **Freo** on tomorrow's agenda.



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Fremantle

Thursday, 19 August

I've remarked elsewhere on *Madam's* skills when it comes to finding accommodation that's convenient to our next day's plans.

The rate we'd paid at the **Travelodge** was more than we'd be looking at under normal circumstances. Admittedly it was probably a *better room* than we'd get for what we usually pay.

So it probably comes as no surprise to learn that Thursday morning saw us, once we'd showered and packed, checking out and setting off for that night's accommodation.

The game plan, as far as I was concerned, involved relocation, a look around the **CBD** on at least one of the **Cat services**, and a wander through the far end of **Hay Street**.



Down there, I expected to get the chance to stumble across what was, by all accounts, a rather good CD store (**78 Records**).

Around eleven-thirty, we could make our way to the station, catch a train to **Fremantle**, and then spend the afternoon wandering around the **Maritime Museum** and various historic buildings.

That plan lasted about fifty metres once we'd made our way through the front door of the **Travelodge** and were heading east along **Hay Street**.

I heard a cry of anguish and turned to find the sole and upper of *Madam's* left shoe had parted company and any attempt to raise the foot produced a *duck's bill* wagging under it.

It was a fair step down to the **Perth Comfort Hotel**, where we found, wonders will never cease, our room was ready for immediate occupancy.

That made two out of two, and I couldn't help suspecting that this was no coincidence.

The hospitality trade in **Perth** was heavily dependent on the *fly in fly out* mining trade.

I suspect cashed-up miners in transit to or from their place of employment don't want to mess around waiting for a 2 p.m. check-in time.

I may be wrong, but I don't recall many previous 9 a.m. instances of *your room is ready*. As stated, this made two out of two.

Fortunately, when it came to the *Shoe Replacement Stakes* *Madam* was already aware of a **Harbour Town** towards the other end of downtown Perth.

So it was a case of onto the **Red Cat** in search of replacement footwear.

That task wasn't all that difficult but involved a loss of time.

My visit to **78 Records** had to be something other than an alleged accidental discovery.

78 Records is one of those places where *Hughesy* could spend hours and an awful number of ducats,. But the circumstances only permitted a brief glance.

I wandered out ten minutes later with the Rhino **Where The Action Is** 4CD box and a stubby cooler.







From there it was off to **Freo**.

One suburban train trip in a major city is much like another.

However, I can't think of too many that match the section of track that gives a spectacular view of the **Indian Ocean** before dog-legging through **East Fremantle** and crossing the river to reach its destination.

On the ground, we set off in search of fish and chips.

The journey took us through **Fremantle's West End** with its late Georgian and Victorian architecture at the southern end of the port.

The area had presumably declined after former glories, along much the same lines that you'd expect to see in an old warehouse and commercial precinct in a port city.

Over recent years there's been the regulation inner-urban renewal. In this case, the process received some additional assistance.

The **University of Notre Dame Australia** has taken over many buildings in the West End.





Our progress towards the fishing harbour was interrupted by frequent time outs for heavy-duty snapping of historic buildings.

As *Madam's* shutter finger received a solid workout, I found myself distracted by the *minutiae* of the area.

For a start, unlike most **University campuses**, the academic agencies are scattered through the neighbourhood, so there's a mix of nameplates as you walk around the streets.

I noticed the **Portuguese Consulate** cheek by jowl with private homes and various academic departments and student-related affiliates. Interesting...

Lunch took the form of a serve of *fish and chips* (*Hughesy*) and a *seafood basket* (*Madam*), both of which were substantial feeds.

The seafood basket rendered *Madam* incapable of finishing her *Stella Artois*.

So once I'd downed a *Fat Yak* I had to drain the dregs of the *Fosters-brewed faux-Belgian ale*.

It also ruled out dinner as far as she was concerned, a minor factor that had some significant consequences later that evening.









We always intended to visit the **Maritime Museum**, and the **Shipwreck Galleries** annexe, so when we found ourselves outside the **Shipwreck Galleries**, we had to go in.

We'd been advised that the *Batavia* display was worth a visit, and the gold coin donation was money well spent.

For anyone unfamiliar with the story, the *Batavia*, flagship of the **Dutch East India Company**, struck a reef in the **Abrolhos Islands** after midnight on 4 June 1629 during its maiden voyage to **Java**.

The mutiny and massacre among the survivors make for a chillingly bloodthirsty tale.

During the voyage, ship's captain **Ariaen Jacobsz** and junior merchant **Jeronimus Cornelisz**, a heretical bankrupt pharmacist fleeing the Netherlands, developed a plan to take the vessel.

They would then use the gold and silver on board to start a new life somewhere.

After leaving **Cape Town**, **Jacobsz** steered away from the rest of the fleet, and while the plot failed to come to fruition, the shipwreck provided the plotters with a second chance.





Although forty lives were lost in the wreck, most of the passengers found their way onto barren islands with no freshwater and limited food supplies.

Expedition commander **Pelsaert**, after an unsuccessful search for water, left the other survivors and headed to **Batavia (Jakarta)**.

The journey, in open boats, took thirty-three days.

In **Batavia**, **Governor-General Jan Coen**, gave **Pelsaert** command of the rescue mission, which arrived at the islands two months after leaving Batavia.

They found the survivors greatly diminished by mutiny, murder and general mayhem.

This strange and terrible saga has provided material for several historical accounts.

Cornelisz, left in charge of the survivors, planned to hijack the rescue vessel to seek another safe haven but needed to eliminate possible opponents.

He started by sending a group of soldiers to nearby islands to search for water.



With one group of rivals gone, **Cornelisz** and his allies set about killing anyone who threatened their ambitions.

They wanted to reduce the population to around 45 so that their supplies would last as long as possible.

In the process, at least 110 men, women, and children were murdered.

Pelsaert's return produced a brief struggle before the mutineers were captured, tried and executed.

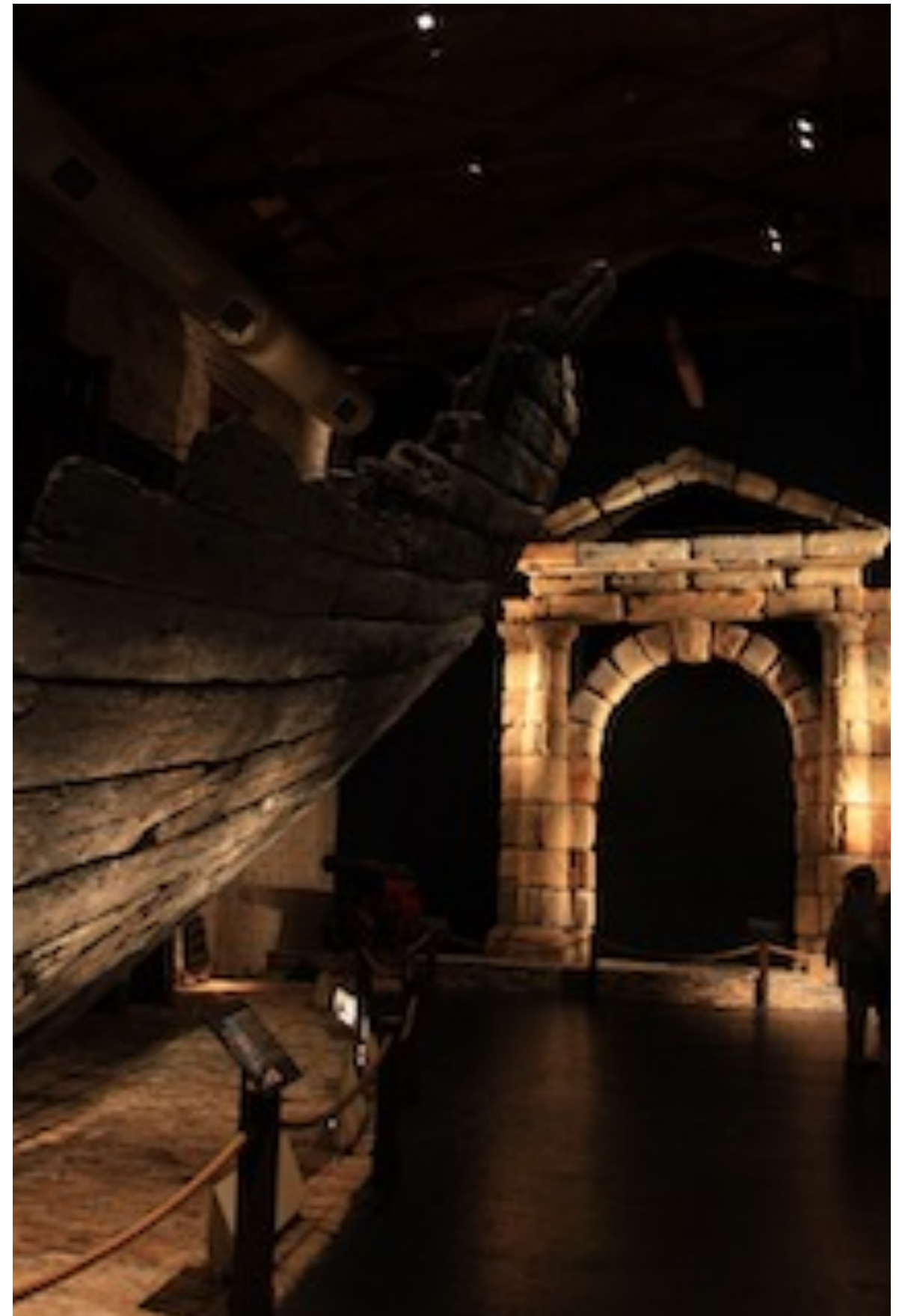
Of the 341 people aboard *Batavia*, only 68 made it to **Java**.

Containing material that has salvaged from the wreck, the **Shipwreck Gallery** is the sort of place you could comfortably lose a couple of hours exploring.

However, *Madam* wanted to catch **The Roundhouse**, the original jail for the **Swan River Colony**'s port.

Hughesy also had ambitions of checking out the **Maritime Museum**.

But that's not quite the way things worked out.





The visit to **The Roundhouse** provided the odd interesting photo opportunity, and time was getting on.

Doing the **Museum** thing takes a bit out of you, and by the time we'd reached the actual **Maritime Museum**, there wasn't much time left to check out the displays.

Madam wasn't over-keen, and I was tired.

The \$10 admission fee didn't seem to be a justifiable expenditure when there wasn't anything among the exhibits the guy in the ticket booth rattled off that jumped out and demanded my immediate attention.

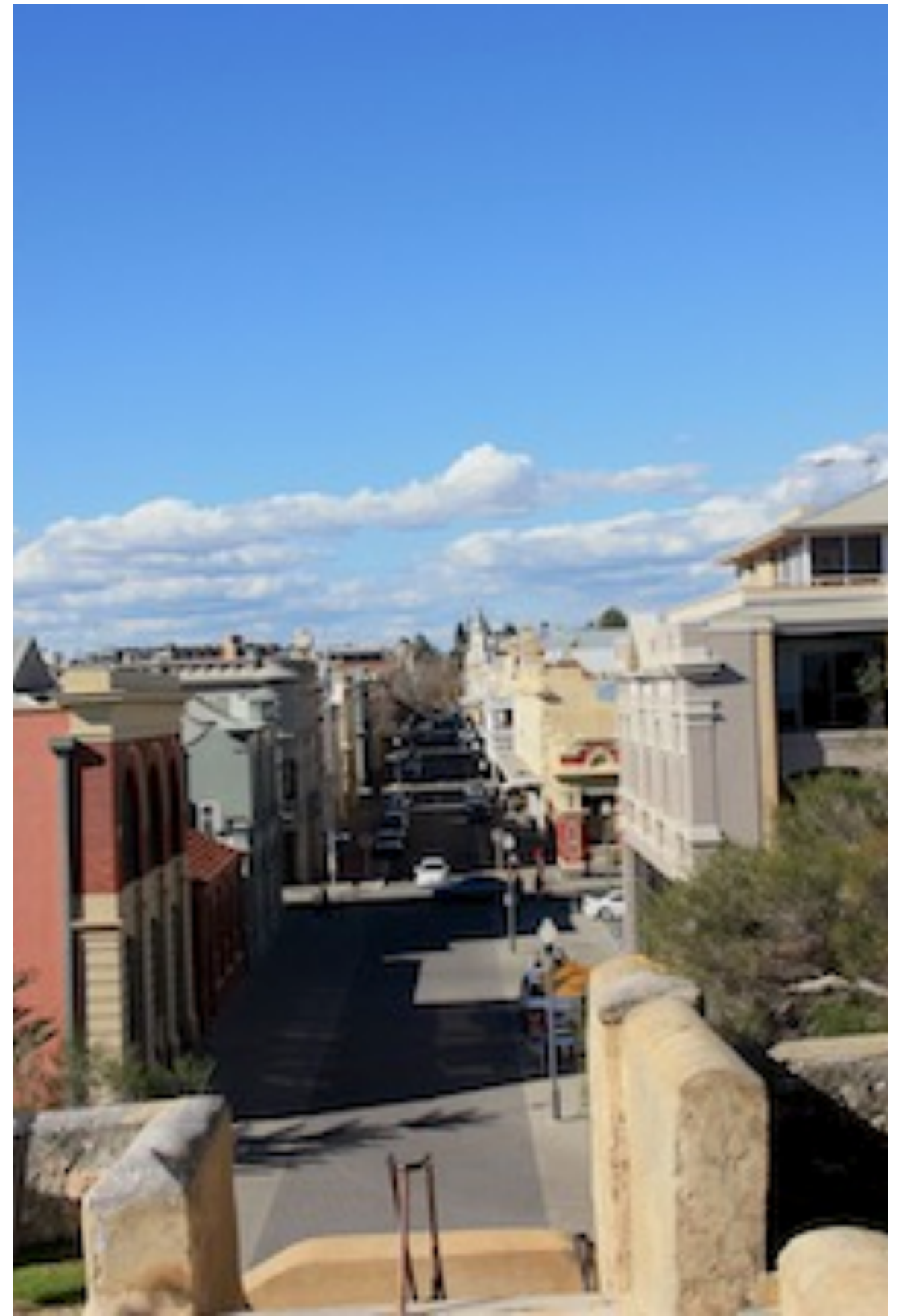
Having decided that was a non-goer, we were on our way to the nearest bus stop when the **Fremantle Cat** whizzed past.

Although we were too tired to make the seventy-metre sprint to catch it when it pulled up, there'd be another one in ten or fifteen minutes.

When that arrived, we did a complete circuit, disembarking downtown where *Madam* had spotted a couple of candidates for camera action.

Then we were off back to the station for the train to **Perth**, landing in the downtown area in the middle of the five o'clock rush.









For a start, I seemed to recall sighting one of those new-breed supermarkets catering to the downtown unit-dweller somewhere close to both the **Travelodge** and the **Comfort**.

I also thought these matters could be taken care of in the morning.

Madam, on the other hand, wanted to sort things out tonight.

But for some reason decided I looked tired and needed to be taken back to base, after which she'd venture downtown to do the shopping.

Some more jumbled thinking saw us walking all the way back to the **Comfort**.

When we checked at **Reception**, the nearest supermarket was in the **Hay Street Mall**.

So, after a brief rest, we were back on the inbound **Red Cat**.

There were significant road works just outside **Perth Station**. So once we'd bought a six-pack of bottled water, some biscuits and the odd bit of fruit we set off to find the **Red Cat** stop, only to find ourselves cut off from where it should have been by the construction site.

We had two tasks to take care of before I turned my thoughts to dinner.

The first (locating a place where we could leave the luggage on the final day) was fairly straight forward and took no more than two minutes.

From there, we needed bottled water and emergency supplies for the car leg of the trip.

This is where tiredness and muddled thinking nearly brought us unstuck.

A mad scramble back to the nearest place we knew boasted a **Red Cat** stop saw us safely on board what may well have been the final service of the night.

Shortly after seven with the emergency supplies safely in the room, *Madam* could put her feet up, and I turned my thoughts to dinner.

Two substantial lunches in two days meant that I wasn't over-keen on a big evening meal.

While the restaurant at the **Comfort** included a *prawn and pea risotto* that looked just the ticket.

However, a glance at the other side of the menu revealed a wine list boasting the usual corporate suspects.

That had me turning my thoughts elsewhere.

*No, I thought, **Caffe Italia**'s only a block away. They've got a much better wine list. I can probably sneak in two glasses with an entree or maybe a small pizza.*

So off I went.

While we'd been there on **Monday** just after five and found the place empty, this was a **Thursday night** around seven-fifteen.

The place was packed, and there was a queue of intending diners that looked like three or four tables' worth.

There were no apparent signs of a table close to finishing. So I was faced with a lengthy wait.

There was every chance that a single diner in for an entree and a glass or two might find himself being pressured door-wards.

Under those circumstances, waiting for a table for one was not a viable option.

So, with a heavy heart, it was back to the **Comfort** for the *risotto*. Admittedly, it did go down well.

A glass of *Makers Table Cabernet*, which mightn't have been the perfect match for the meal, but I needed red wine. It was the best of the by-the-glass options.

All things considered, I wasn't the happiest of campers as I headed upstairs to rest up for the Wildflower leg of the odyssey.

Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

The Wildflower Leg

Friday, 20 August

After missing dinner, *Madam* was ready for a solid starter.

There was also a fair void in the *Hughesy* digestive tract as we made our way downstairs to check whether our tariff included a continental breakfast.

I had vague recollections of one being mentioned the day before.

A continental breakfast, as far as I can make out, is something light that might do you till morning tea but doesn't fill a gaping void.

If it wasn't included, it wouldn't be too difficult to find somewhere nearby where they turn out a hearty breakfast at a reasonable cost.



Yes, we were assured, *a continental breakfast is included in the tariff, so if you'd care to step through into our restaurant...*

So we did, and, as a result, added a new dimension to the definition of the continental breakfast.

I was expecting something like juice, tea or coffee, toast and a *croissant* or some other pastry.

What we found was a substantial buffet offering *fruit juice, cereal, toast, pastries, ham, salami, boiled eggs, yoghurt* and an array of *fruit*.

Not a bad spread. *Tea* and *coffee* thrown in for good measure.

That, I suspect, is yet another example of the impact of *fly in fly out* miners on the Perth hospitality scene.

If you're heading off to the back blocks for a fortnight, you'll be wanting a substantial breakfast, and you're going to want it at the right price. I could be wrong about that.

Still, I'm not holding my breath in anticipation of a similar spread being classified as a *continental breakfast* anywhere in the eastern states anytime soon.

So, refreshed and fuelled, we checked out and set out on the stroll to **Bayswater Car Hire**, where our chariot and *Karen the Helpful Sat-Nav Voice* waited.

We disposed of with the paperwork quickly in an environment that could have been friendlier.

But when you're paying the rate that we were paying smiling courtesy and detailed explanations are an extra that would cost a bit more.

Once the paperwork was done, we claimed the chariot and prepared to negotiate our way out of **Perth**.

It may come as a surprise to learn *Hughesy's* array of techno-skills comes to a screaming halt when you're talking **GPS technology**.

But I had no idea how to get *Karen* to start doing her thing.

A visit to the office for orientation while *Madam* sat in the car park with the engine running produced a rather abrupt entry of the **Brand Highway** as our preferred destination.

Beating a hasty retreat, I failed to register the existence of the step leading up out of the office.



The result?

A sprawling *Hughesy*, *iPod* and mobile phone relocated from the breast pocket to the right-hand sleeve, a skinned little finger and a hasty undignified exit.

And once she'd been installed, *Karen* spat out a series of directions that didn't compute with our (very basic) knowledge of the local geography.

A handy street map and a few hurried directions had us across **The Causeway** heading for **Wildflower Country**.

Once we were on the road, *Karen's* directions became increasingly accurate. By the time we were into the familiar territory of the **Swan Valley**, she was delivering them like a little champion.

The plan was to get onto the **Brand Highway** and arrive at the **Western Flora Caravan Park**, just north of **Eneabba** in time for the **4:30 Wildflower Walk**, with a stop at **The Pinnacles** on the way.

The Everlastings Trail in the **Wildflower Holiday Guide** listed three areas for wildflower viewing, *en route*. But *Madam* was adamant **The Pinnacles** was a must-visit, and so it turned out to be.



The first part of the drive-through urban traffic had been a stop-start affair, and it was lunchtime when we passed through **Cervantes**, heading towards **The Pinnacles**.

Arriving, we found there was an admission charge. Once we'd made our way onto the drive around the circuit, it was money well spent.

I've never seen anything quite like these formations, and don't expect to see their like again.

The drive around route allows plenty of places to pull over and take in the scenery, and you're quite welcome to walk around, provided you don't touch or try to climb the structures.

Madam took advantage of the chance to exercise the photographic skills, and we took our time around the circuit, parking at the **Desert Lookout** and setting out for a stroll around the walking track.

I was amused to overhear a Chinese tourist (or perhaps a tour guide) remark this was too quiet for him and that he'd be happier on **Swanston Street**!

The walk was enjoyable but time-consuming.











Once we made our way back to the car, navigated our way out, and set off for the **Brand Highway**, a four-thirty deadline meant there wouldn't be many wildflower stops.

The ones in the book were away from the route *Karen* chose for us.

Delays at roadworks we'd sailed through unhindered on the way down didn't help matters.

As the clock headed towards four-thirty, we were increasingly unsure of arriving in time.

That side of things was complicated by uncertainty about where the place was.

We'd booked by email, but I'd neglected to print out the reply that contained the directions.

I knew we had to go through **Encabba** and look for the right hand turn off at a distance that ended with a '2' north of the town. I thought it was 12,

Madam failed to note the odometer count as we passed the township.

So we rolled relentlessly north as *Mickey's big hand* moved relentlessly south.



We were just about to push the panic button when, on a curve 22 km out of **Eneabba**, a sign indicated a right-hand turn.

An eight hundred metre drive over a good dirt road got us to our destination.

Madam had been unsure, but I was confident there'd be a sign to indicate somewhere that depends on the arrival of paying customers for its existence.

However, *Karen* was completely unaware (at least as far as I could tell) of the Park's existence.

As we travelled along the dirt road, there was no sign of our destination until we were right on the doorstep.

We arrived as the **Wildflower Walk** party was assembling. Once we'd checked in, paid, and transferred the luggage to the mud-brick chalet we were off for our introduction to **Western Australian wildflowers**.

The walk lasted an hour and took us on a circuit, with stops to allow noted amateur botanist **Alan Tinker** to talk about some significant feature.

It was more of a nature ramble than a guided tour with specific stops at designated locations.

If we had been staying more than the one night, we'd probably have ventured out for a second walk.

While many of the stops might have been the same I suspect there would have been a few different stops thrown in for variety.

There's enough diversity (the park covers 160 acres, and has something like two thousand different species on-site) to allow for any number of variations on the hour-long walk.

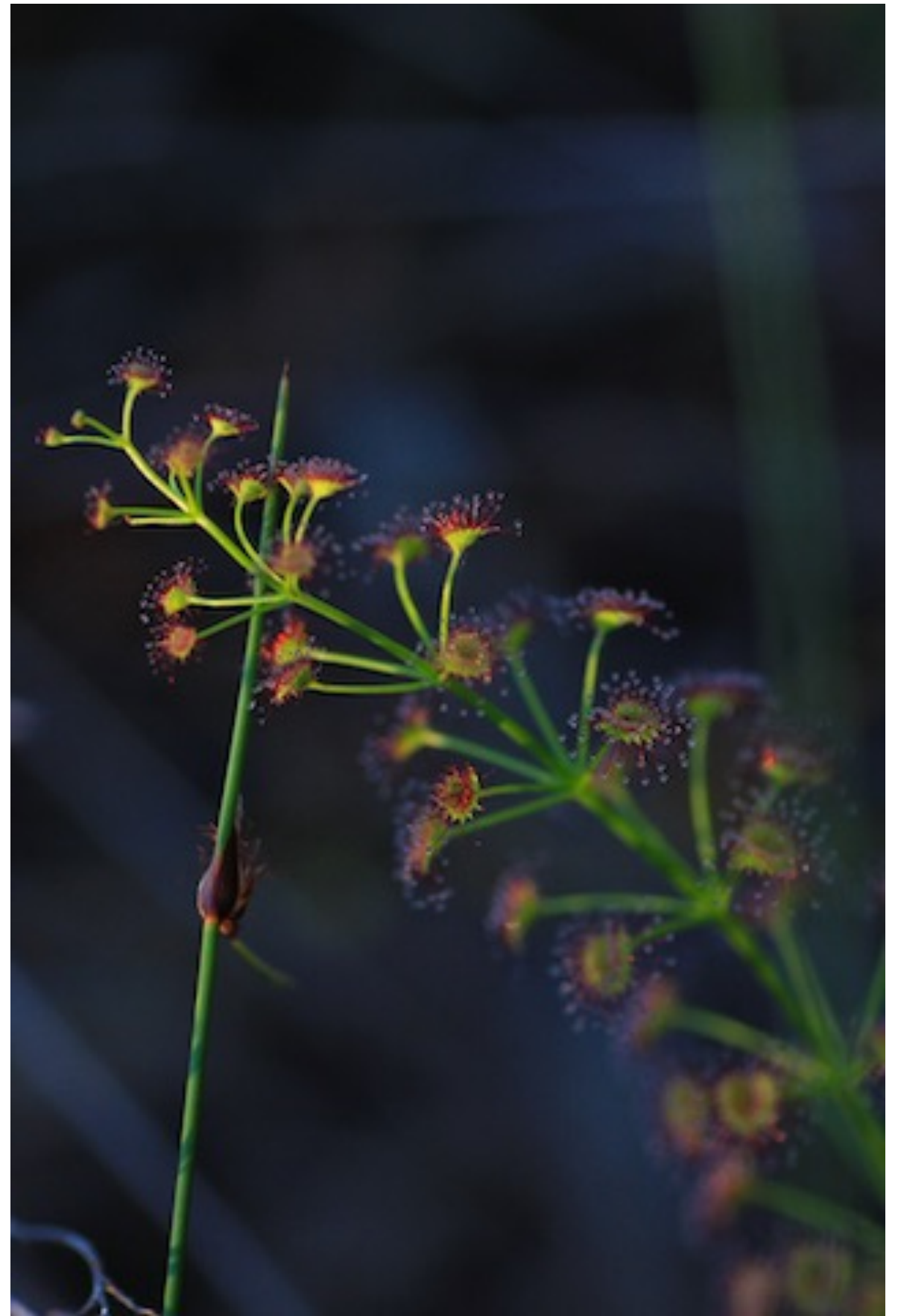
At each stop, there were descriptions, pointers and explanations of what we saw.

However, the amount of information on offer was mostly lost on this botanical novice.

If I'd had a background in botany, the experience would have been enhanced, but I still learned a lot.

It was apparent from comments around us there were people there with much more knowledge who were finding the walk equally enjoyable.

As a novice, much of the detail went over my head, but I picked up enough to make the next couple of days an absolute delight.





The walk concluded at the **Theatre**, where a microscope hooked up to a data projector gave us a look at the finer points of botanical specimens *Alan* had collected along the way around the walk.

Very interesting, entertainingly presented, conveying a wealth of information and an experience not to be missed if you're in the area.

So, all in all, the **Wildflower Walk** was one of the highlights of the whole trip.

The opening five minutes or so delivered the most significant benefit as far as we were concerned.

The **2010 Wildflower season** is a poor one, and lack of winter rain before mid-to-late June meant the carpets of **Everlastings** they tend to show in tourist brochures aren't there.

That's not to say there are *no* wildflowers.

You have to go out and look for them.

I'd had visions of spending days in the wildflower belt sitting back and listening to the *iPod*.

I would probably have been tapping my foot waiting for this bit to finish so that we could get on and get through the day's journey around the backblocks.

Karen needed to plug into the cigarette lighter, so that *put the kibosh* on that idea.

The **Wildflower Walk** demonstrated what was out there.

It made you appreciate just how attractive these things could be to the photographers among us.

Realising that there was no choice but to get out and walk meant you couldn't complain when you had to do it.

There's no option.

Still, you won't find *Hughesy* out doing much of that kind of thing.

As I've frequently noted, I don't need any more obsessions, particularly those that carry a hefty price tag for travel, photographic equipment and reference material.

With the walk over, we were booked in for the evening meal.

Given the haste with which we'd arrived at the assembly point, I hadn't dressed appropriately for the deepening chill.

I had to make my way back to the chalet with *Alan* and the non-diners (the dining room is next door to the theatre) to grab the fleece and walk back to the dinner venue.

I hadn't paid much attention to the relative numbers of diners and non-diners. I was surprised to find the dinner party numbered precisely four.

The other couple included the bloke who'd probably been the most botanical-savvy member of the group on the walk.

If he wasn't, he was the one who asked the most questions and made the most comments.

That's not a bad thing I picked up quite a bit from the dialogue.

The other diners run a gallery west of the **Clare Valley** in a town called **Blyth**.

That set us off on a five-way conversation that ran for the next three hours over *pea and ham soup*, and a *roast chicken* dinner that went down fabulously.

It's been a long time since I've sat down anywhere for a three-hour dinner conversation without a glass or three.

But the conversation was so entertaining that the thought of ducking back to the chalet to collect the bottle of *Pinot Noir* in the luggage didn't cross my mind.

Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Eneabba > Geraldton

Saturday, 21 August

Many people will remember **21 August 2010**, and it's a day *Hughesy* won't be forgetting in a hurry.

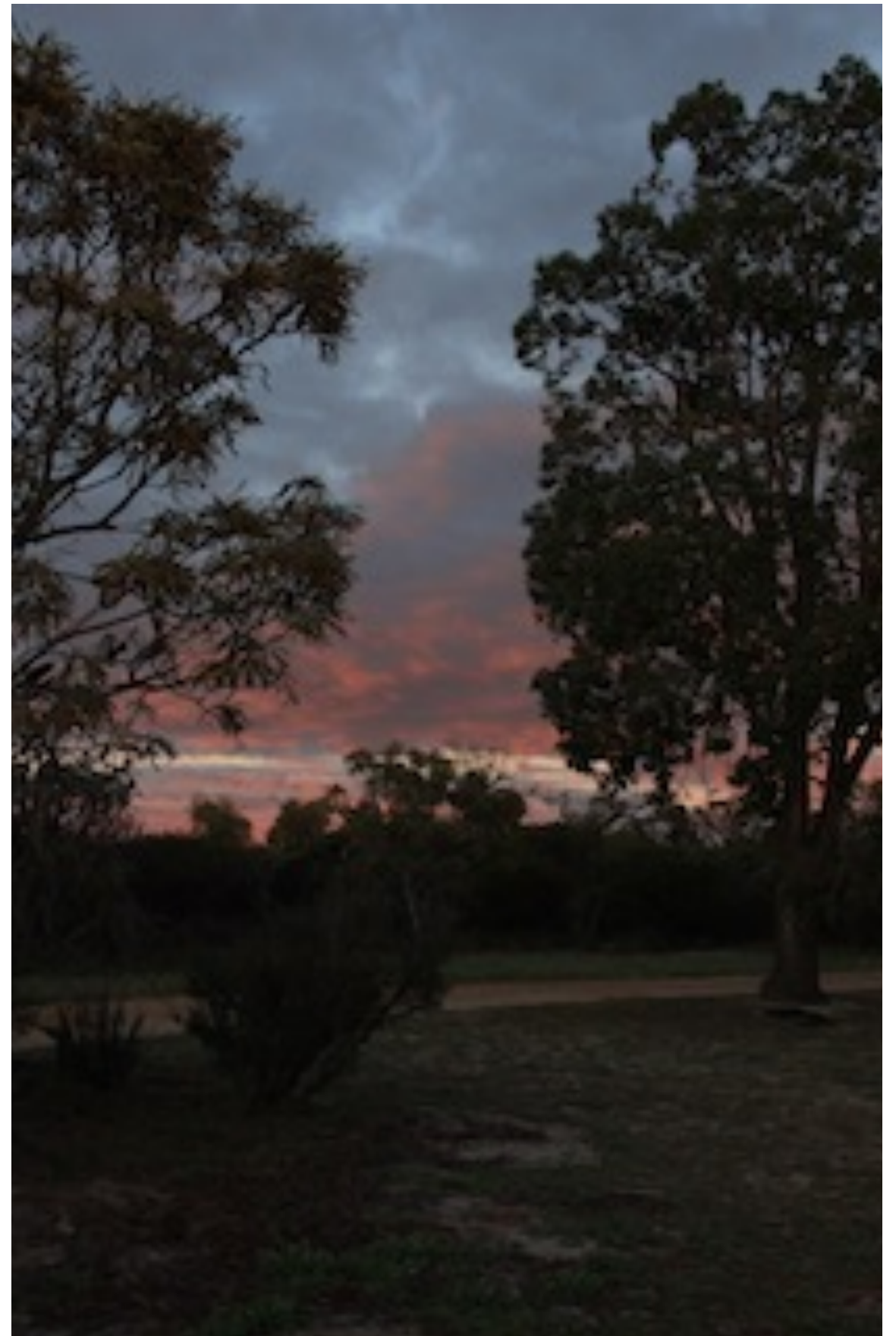
Still, the reasons that have it etched indelibly on my memory will differ from most people's.

We didn't get off to the best of starts around dawn because our intentions regarding early mornings didn't exactly coincide.

Madam, with her developing interest in photography, was going to find plenty of subjects to keep her busy.

I, on the other hand, lacking the wherewithal to keep a record of what I came across, wasn't so keen to go exploring.

Madam's attempt to catch the sunrise wasn't successful, given an overcast morning.





Still, she set out for a lengthy spell in the bushland while I opted to find a warm sunny patch to stand and meditate.

The hour I spent looking and listening as the wildlife around me went about their business with the roar of traffic on the **Brand Highway** behind them wasn't *exactly* a life-changing experience.

However, coupled with musings on the **Nullarbor**, it reinforced some long-held beliefs and added weight to some lurking suspicions.

Having mused for about an hour, I returned to the chalet, brewed the regulation cup of coffee and waited.

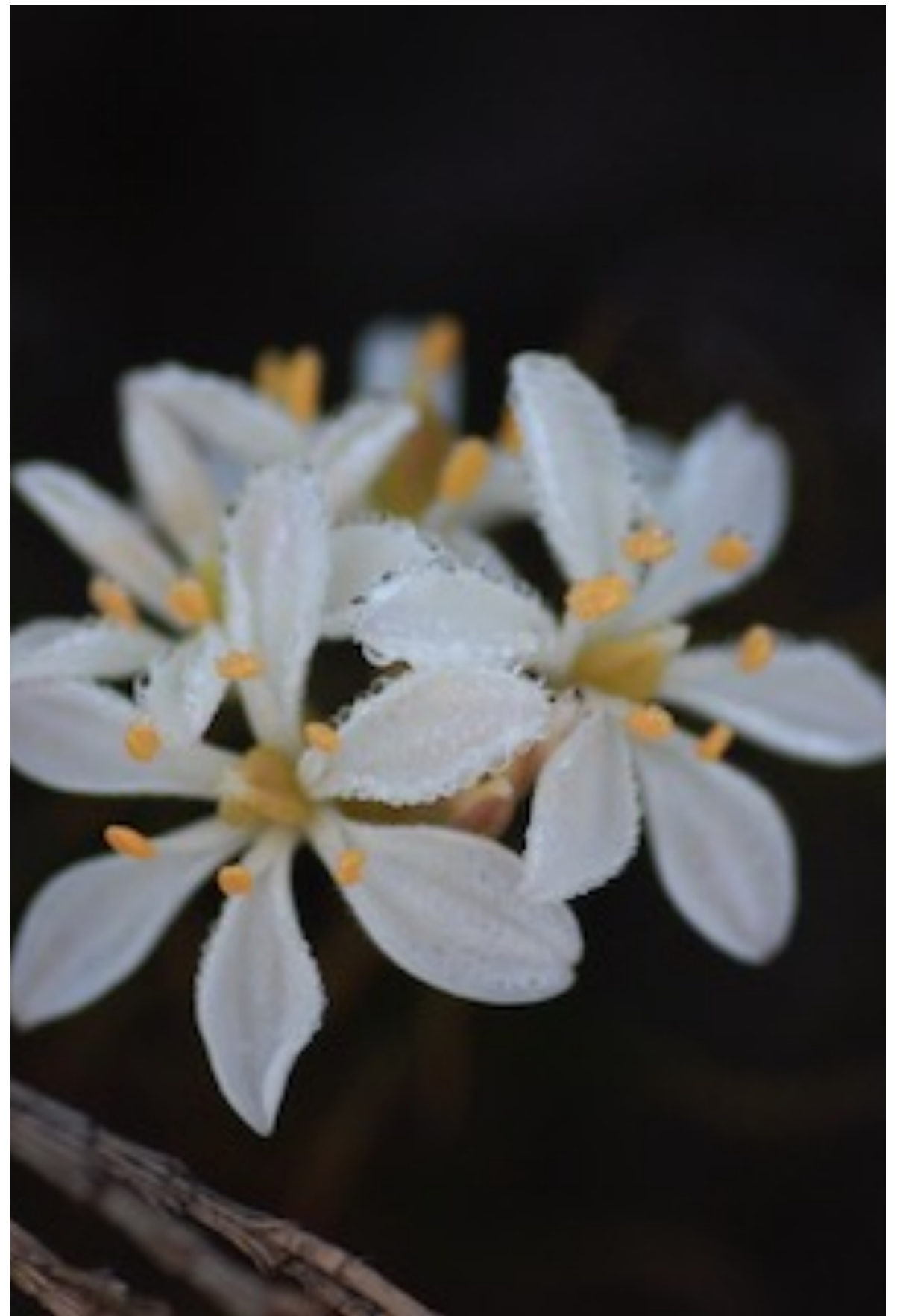
Madam returned, full of excitement having found all manner of small wonders.

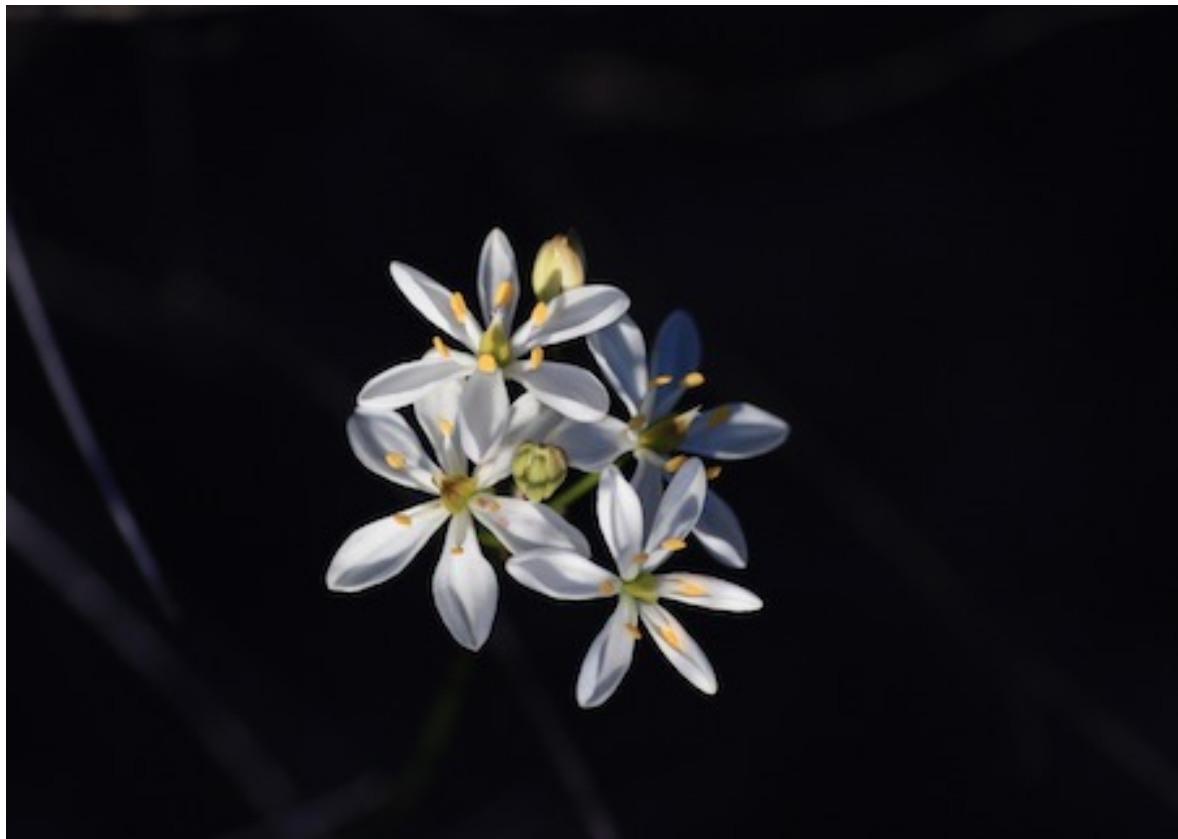
After showers, with bags packed and stowed in the car, it was checkout time.

From there, the general plan was to wander in the grounds, then continue to **Dongara** for lunch, then move on to the night's accommodation at **Geraldton**.

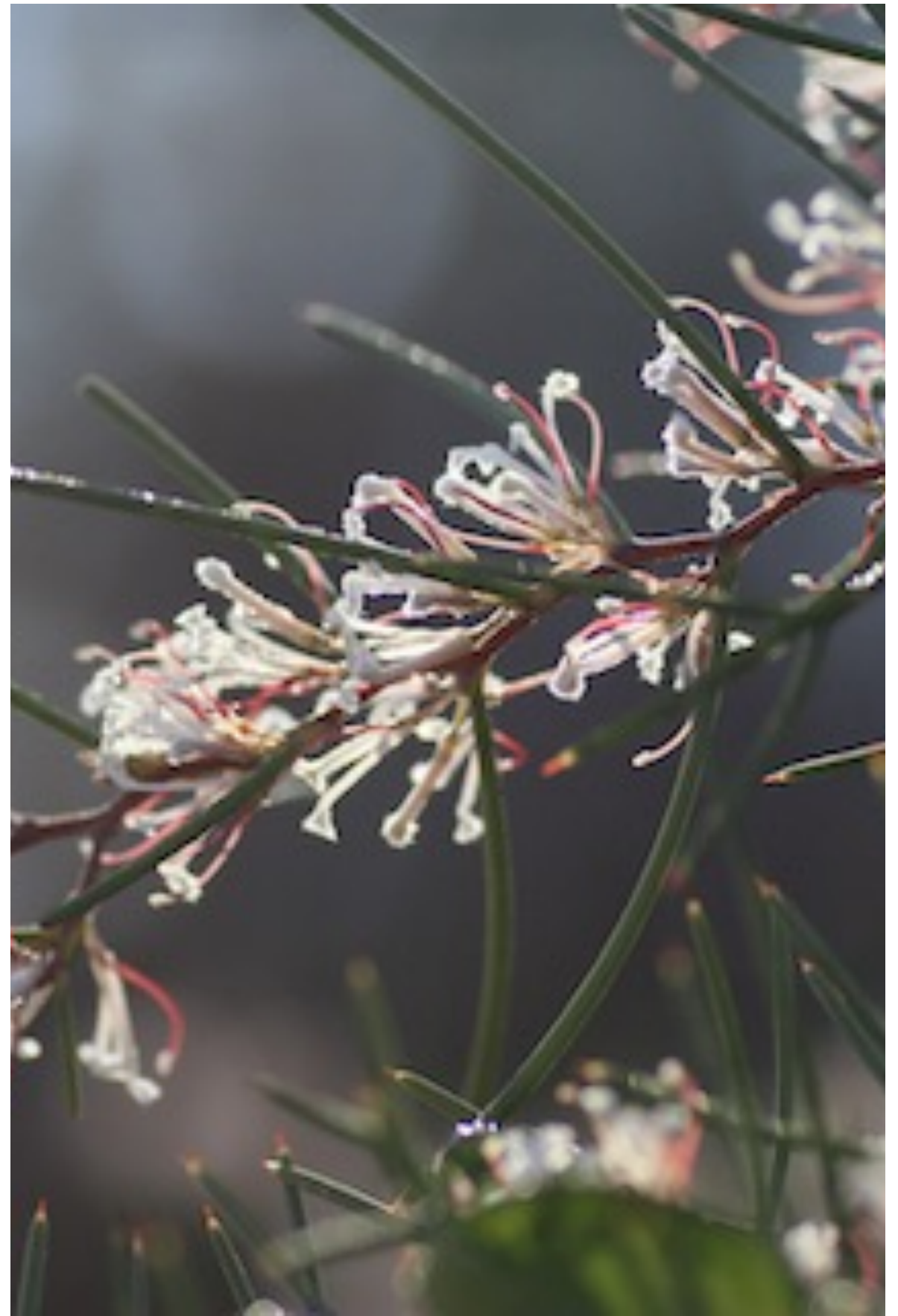
There were, however, a couple of little extras and one big plus in store before we departed.

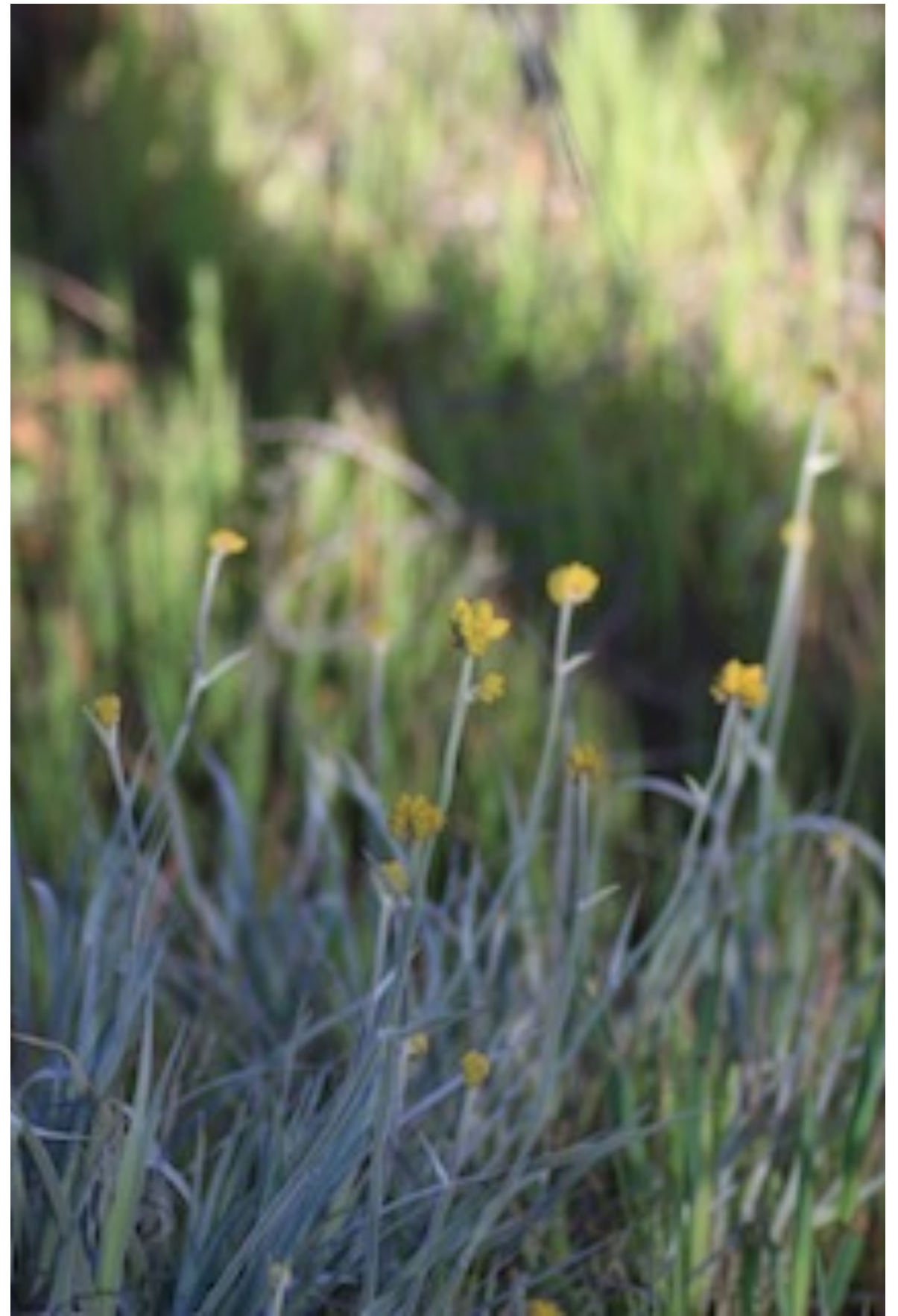
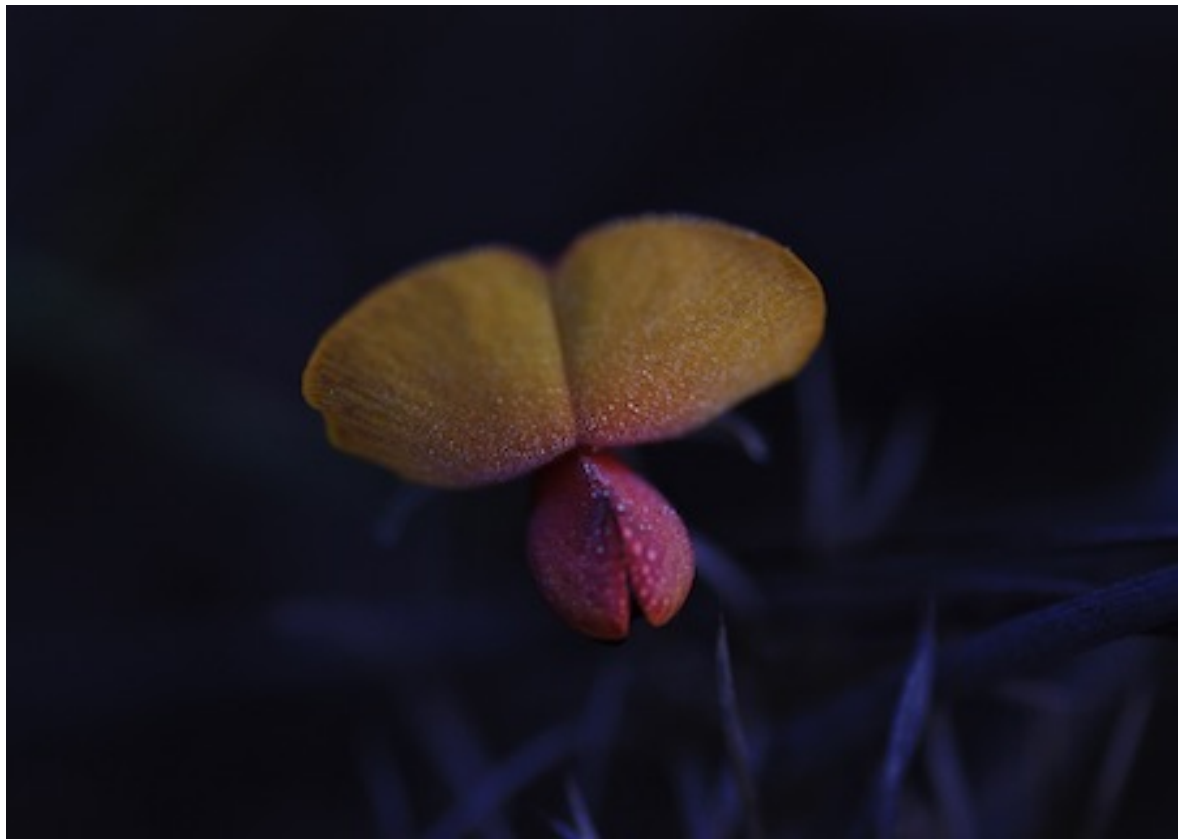




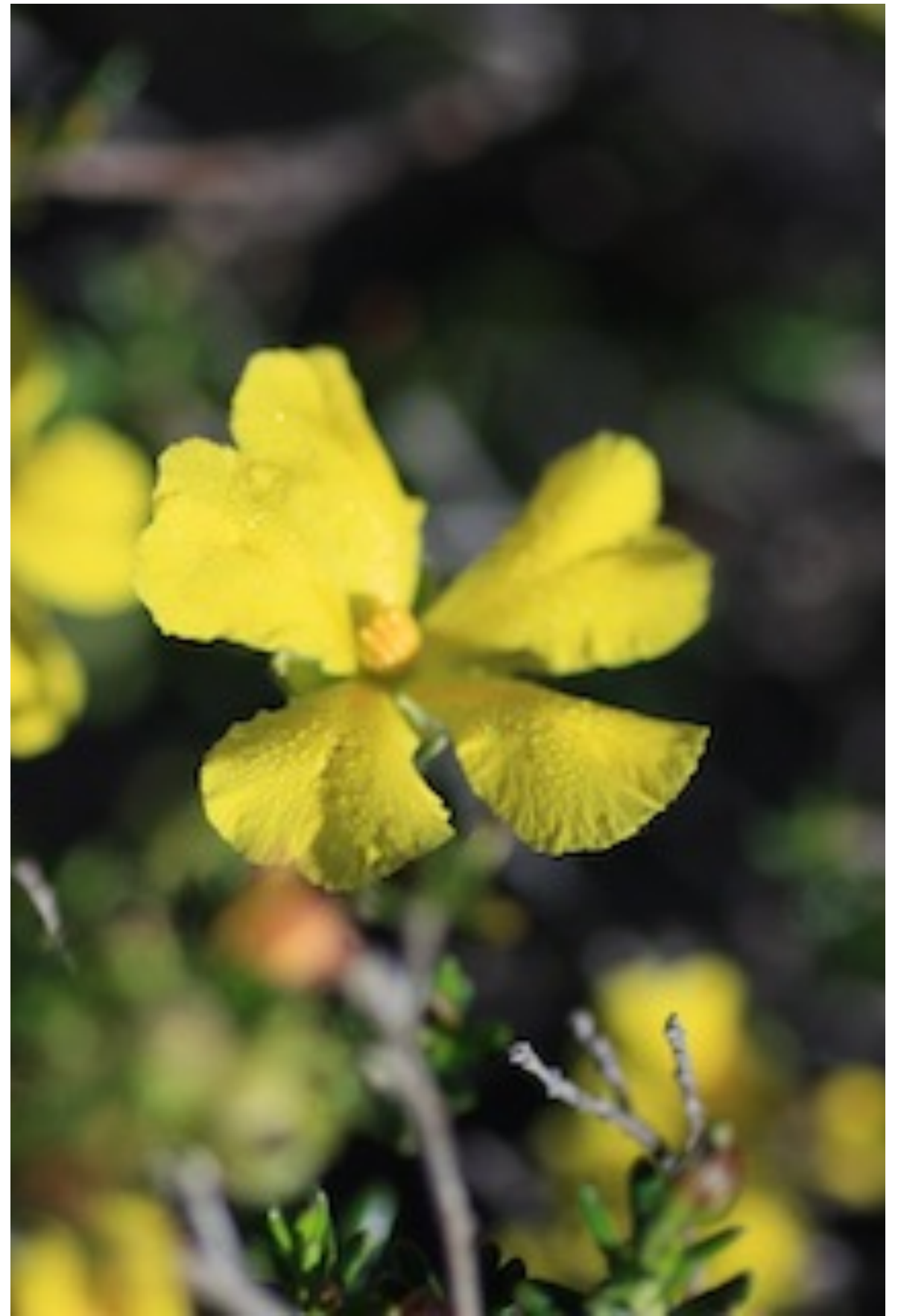


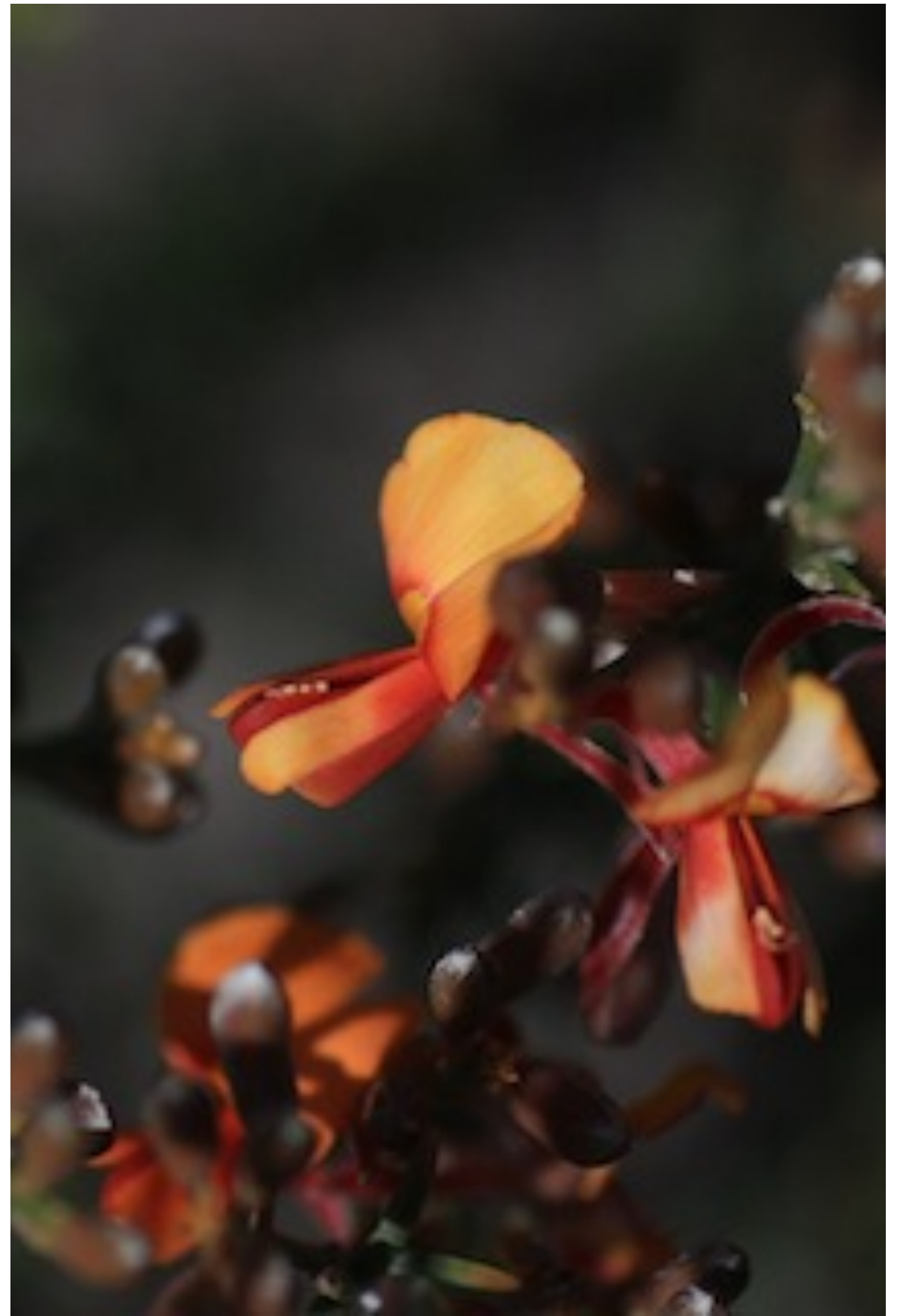




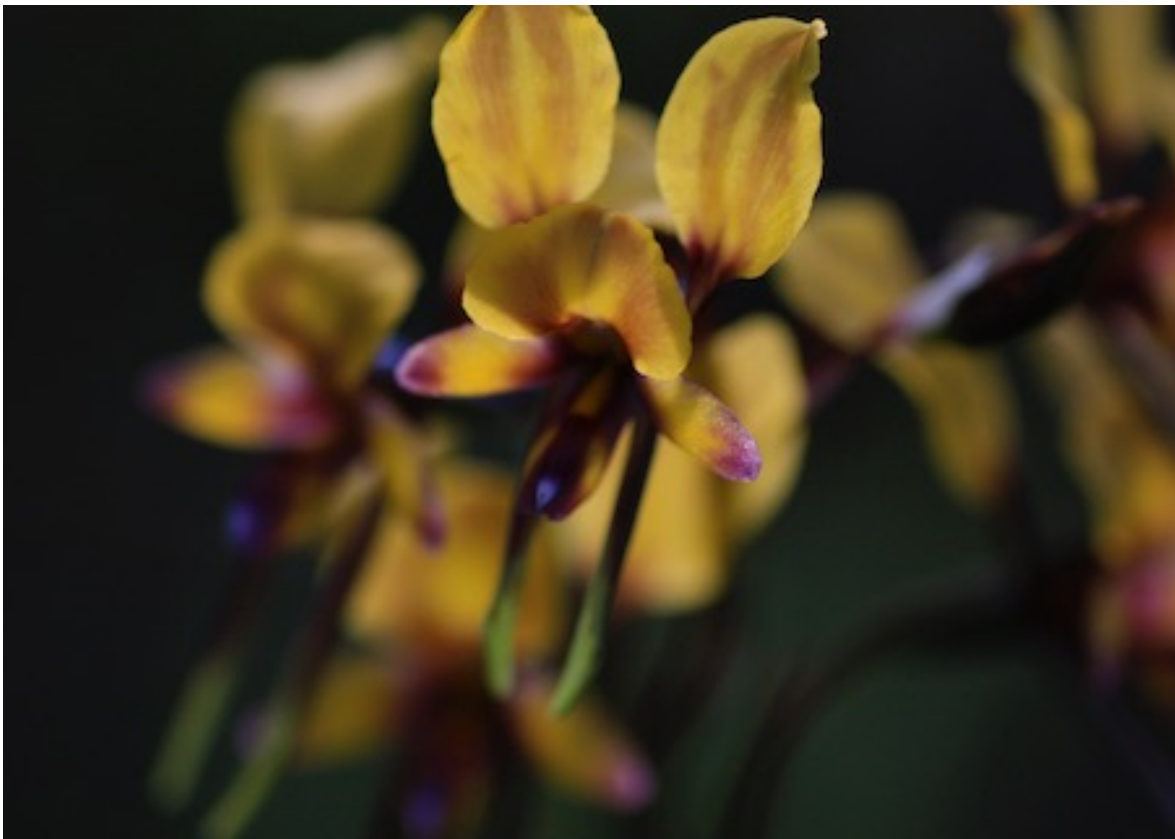
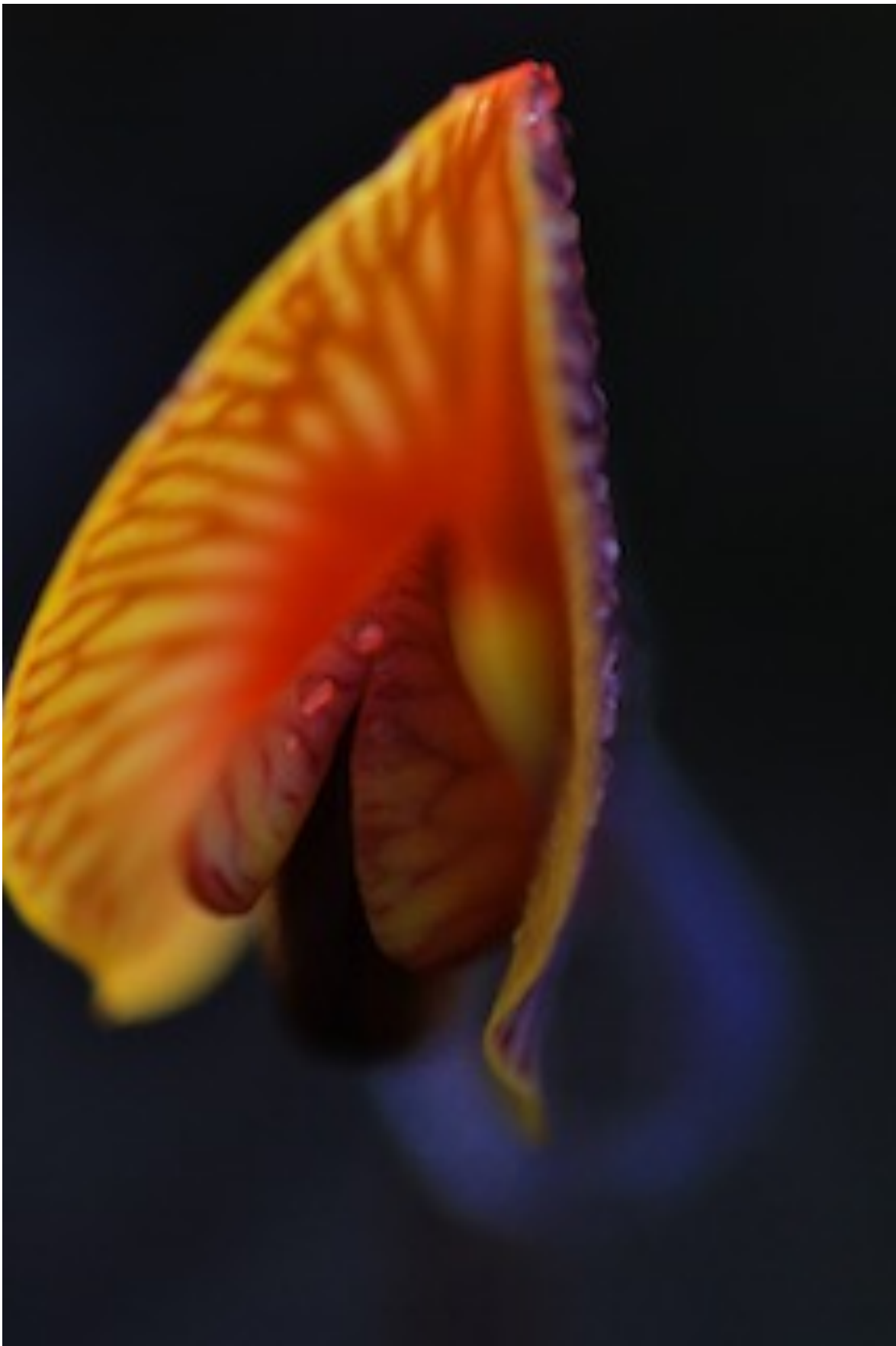
















The first started simply enough.

Pulling up at the shop, we spotted a small member of the kangaroo family sniffing around outside the **Tinkers' quarters** while we watched and snapped away at a distance that wouldn't alarm the subject.

Alan emerged and invited us closer. *Madam* was able to pat the euro, which, though effectively wild, was used to humans.

Like subjects of earlier meditations, she went about her business unconcerned by their activities.

That led into a discussion about matters relating to *the Park*, *wildlife conservation* and *wildflowers*.

That, in turn, delivered precise directions to somewhere we'd find an abundance of orchids.

Five kilometres north of the park turn left onto a dirt road.

That's the way you find these things — word of mouth, and the odd distinguishing landmark.

A couple of days later, we heard about a display of orchids in the back-blocks that could be identified by the presence of a *blue sock*.







With that conversation over, we checked out, emerging from the store to find *Lorraine* had arrived.

Thanks to expert guidance we were able to spot the *tawny frogmouth* that had been one of the subjects of conversation the night before.

This was the (almost perfectly camouflaged) female. It seemed the male was sitting on a nest somewhere within a hundred metres of where we stood.

However, the best efforts of *the Tinkers and assorted wildlife rangers* had failed to locate the nest.

Looking at the female, hidden away in the branches, I must say I wasn't surprised.

Once we were back in the car, the short drive to the *Don't Drive Tired* sign delivered us to a landscape that looked, on the surface, totally unpromising.

The signs of bushfire activity were all too obvious.

As we parked about a hundred metres off the bitumen, it wasn't hard to imagine motorists zooming past and ruefully shaking their heads at the sight of such devastation.





On the ground, as you looked, there was more and more to discover.

Nothing very big, mind you.

As you hurtled along the highway, it'd be easy to miss them, but scattered across the burnt landscape patches of orchids and wildflowers were quite beautiful.

Fortunately, *Madam* didn't stray far from the track.

A move into the country would have revealed more and more items that demanded attention.









We could have spent hours wandering further and further afield.

But with the prospect of lunchtime looming on the horizon, we returned to the blacktop and resumed the northward trajectory.

That venture set the tone for the next couple of days.

As we hit what looked like a promising patch of roadside terrain, we'd slow down and scan the verges as we moved along much more slowly than would have been the case in other circumstances.

Where there was space to pull over, *Madam* would get her five or ten photographic minutes.

Hughesy sat patiently, as expected but *sans* soundtrack since Karen was plugged into the car's cigarette lighter

Dongara might not be far up the road, but with the late start and delays along the way it was close to lunchtime when we arrived.

Without alternatives before **Geraldton**, we decided this was the place for a meal.





We'd had nothing more than a nibble at breakfast and weren't sure about dinner.

So we found a park and made the obligatory visit to the local **Information Centre** to gather the *Wildflower Intelligence*, then lunched at a pleasant little Asian coffee shop.

Green chicken curry and rice and a pad thai (Madam's almost invariable selection in such circumstances) kept us going in the afternoon.

We could have ventured further afield in search of wildflowers, but the morning had satisfied *Madam's* photographic urges.

So we were in **Geraldton** in time to book into the accommodation and make it over to the **Visitor Centre** before it shut at four.

We didn't need to head that way.

Checking in at the accommodation revealed that the manager had been in the job for a week, and he'd previously managed the **Visitor Centre**.

He provided us with a printout of the **Visitor Centre's latest bulletin**.







The girls at the Centre didn't give us much new information, apart from another copy of the newsletter.

We did, however, need to be in the area to pick up **dinner supplies for Sunday night** and scope out the **dinner possibilities for Saturday night**.

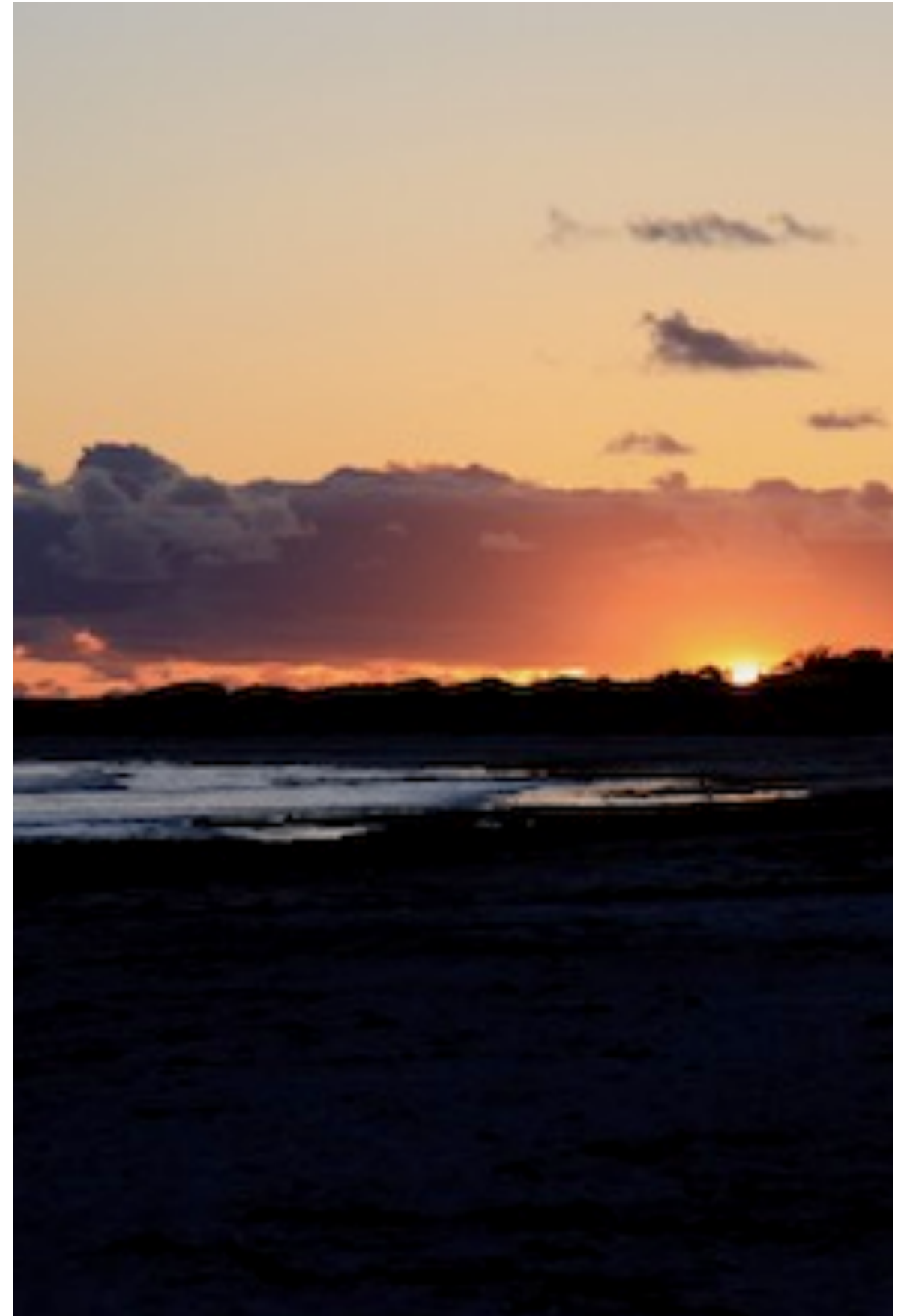
There wasn't anything that reached out and grabbed us by the throat as we strolled around the **Front Beach** and we retreated to the unit resigned to the inevitability of fish and chips for dinner.

We'd also need something to go with the deep-fried staple. The fact that it was already after five and the **Woolworths Liquor** outlet I'd spotted *en route* was closed threw a spanner in the works.

However, once the wonders of **Google** had revealed a conveniently located and highly rated fish and chippery (**Chis and Fips**) and pointed out a **Thirsty Camel**, we had what we needed.

I spent the evening writing and watching the election results for as long as I could stand it.

Then it was time for a lengthy spell of deep slumber before we set out on the **Wildflower Trail** again in the morning.



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Geraldton > Morawa

Sunday, 22 August

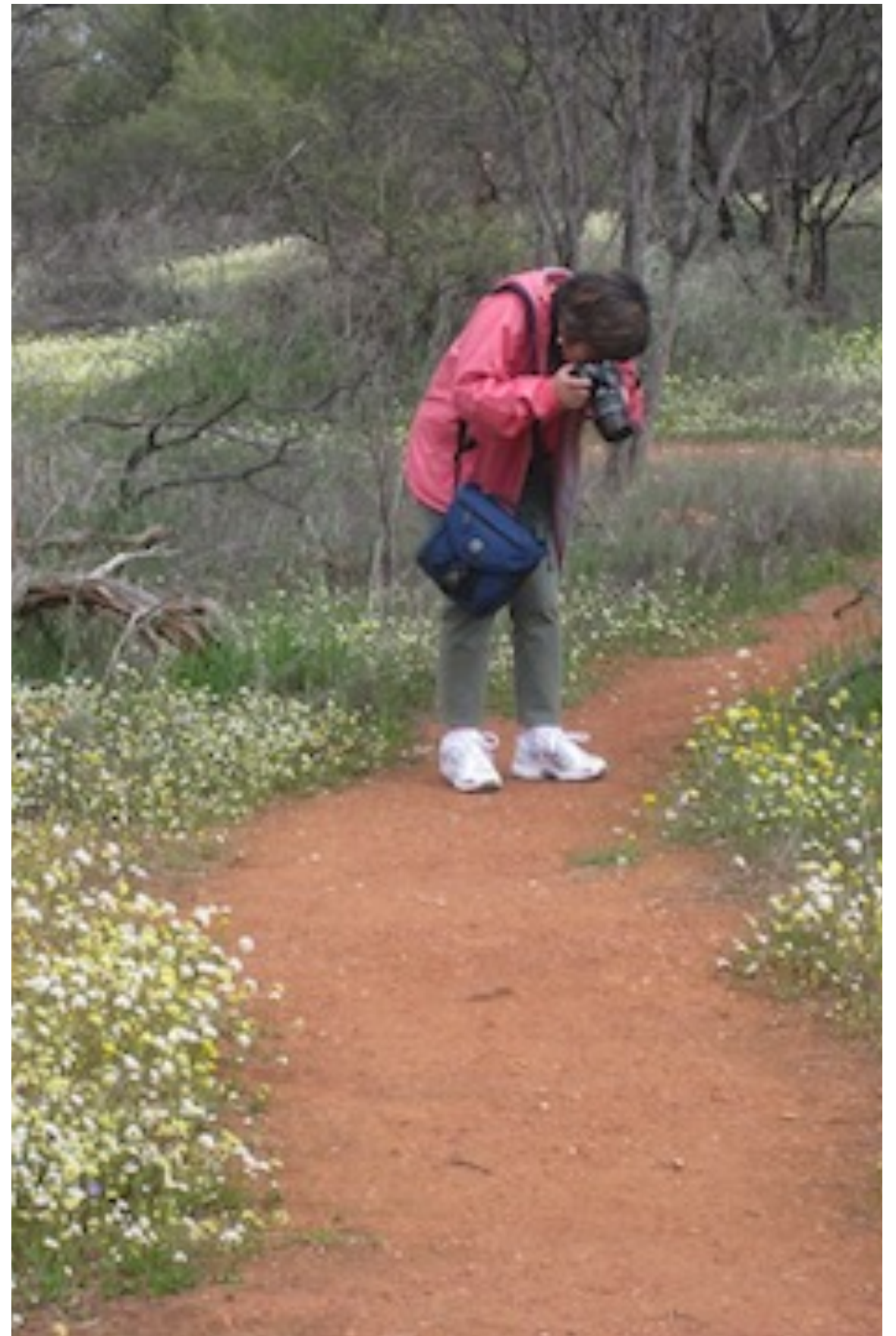
While the road distance pencilled in for Sunday wasn't that far, the day's ramblings would, according to theory, take us through the heart of the W.A. wildflower country.

There were likely to be several diversions, extrapolations and other opportunities to look at and photograph the feral flora.

That's feral in a friendly sense, folks. What we'd learned over the previous two days might discourage anyone less than a dedicated follower of flora.

We didn't quite fit that category ourselves.

At least, I didn't, and *Madam* sits on the cusp between dabbling dilettante and dedicated follower).



But we had the time and the inclination to take our time looking. Whether we had the energy to pursue that interest remained to be seen.

However, we needed to reach our evening destination by around five, so we could pick up the key to the chalet at the Council-operated caravan park from the local roadhouse.

I wasn't sure where the deadline came from, or if it actually existed.

But the prospect of being locked out of accommodation in close to freezing conditions didn't appeal at all.

Still, the first stop on the itinerary was obvious.

It was the first day of the **Mullewa Wildflower Festival** in the heart of wildflower country, about halfway between **Geraldton** and **Morawa**.

Not that we were necessarily going straight to **Mullewa** without *passing Go or taking 200 pictures of wildflowers*, you understand.

From the time we were on the road, it was a case of cruise below the speed limit, keep your eyes peeled and stop where necessary.

It was just after ten when we arrived in **Mullewa**, located the **Festival**, paid our \$5 each and gathered the latest intelligence about locations worth visiting.

The **Festival** was located in a local hall. It wasn't, if you looked at it with the steely eye of a *big-city Expo-goer*, all that impressive.

You paid at the door, and the centre of the hall was filled with two impressive displays of wildflower specimens.

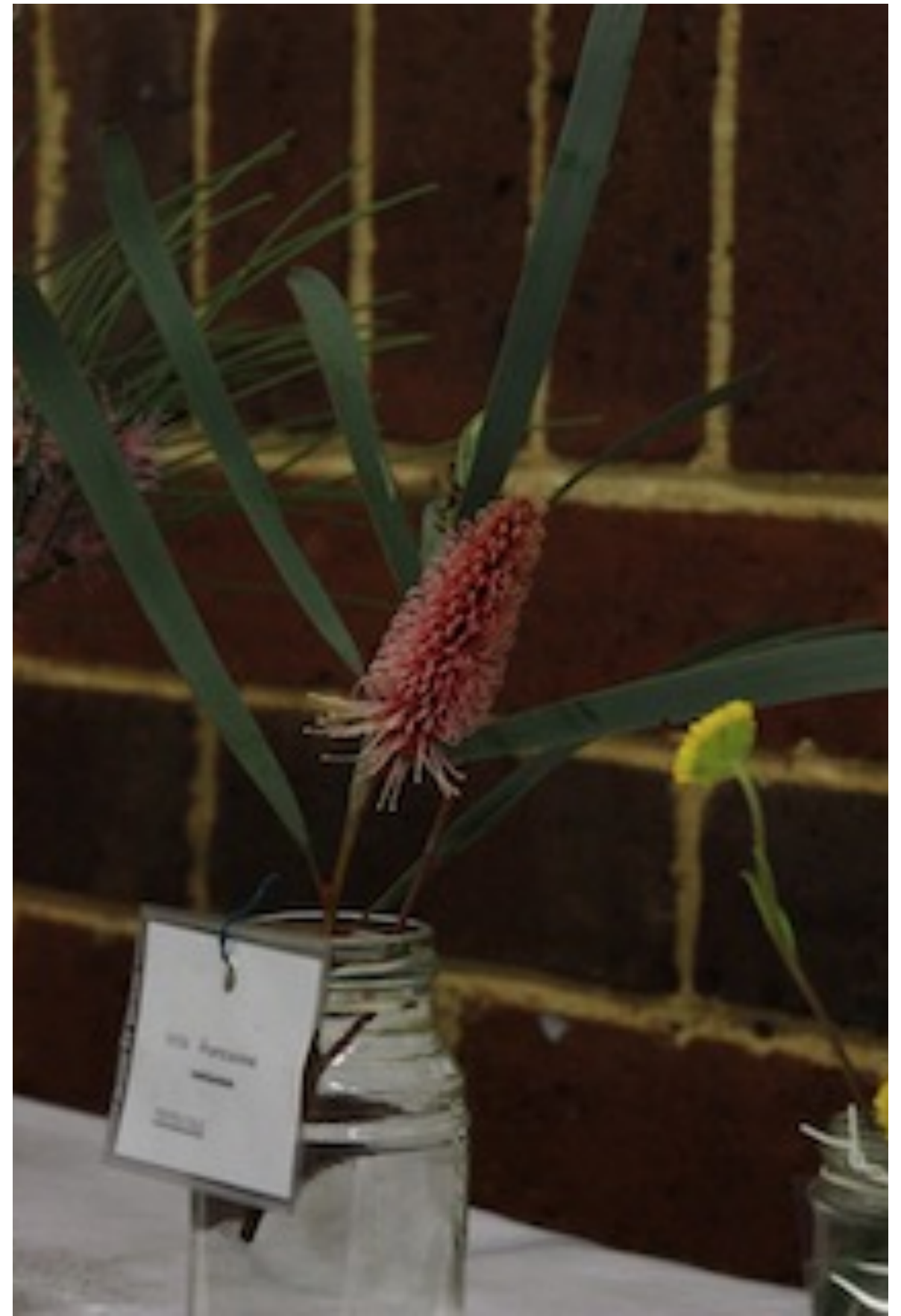
They were built up into what you could regard as roadside banks in a cutting or such. It was an opportunity to see the variety that was out there in the wild in one place.

As a result, it's a perfect spot for those who wanted a look and didn't want to spend much time doing so.

The hardened viewer would have been out searching the backblocks.

We were somewhere between the two extremes.

Having gathered requisite intelligence decided that the best prospect was the **Wildflower Trail** in town that runs in a 2.8 km loop around the local water supply.







After we'd spent a good hour and a half making our way around the trail we didn't need to go anywhere else.

In a way, I was glad this year's wildflower season wasn't going to reach the heights previous years, and particularly the reputedly outstanding 2009, had reached.

About forty-five minutes in, my eyes were getting tired. It was something like the way that your palate starts to tire after six wineries in a day, or your taste buds do after a four-course meal of highly flavoured dishes.

After an hour and a quarter, I was looking for a way to give my eyes a rest.

Still, what I'd seen was hardly a match for the vistas they tend to put on the covers of the tourist brochures.

Back in town, we snaffled lunch at the roadhouse. The stop underlined the wisdom of obtaining dinner supplies in **Geraldton.**

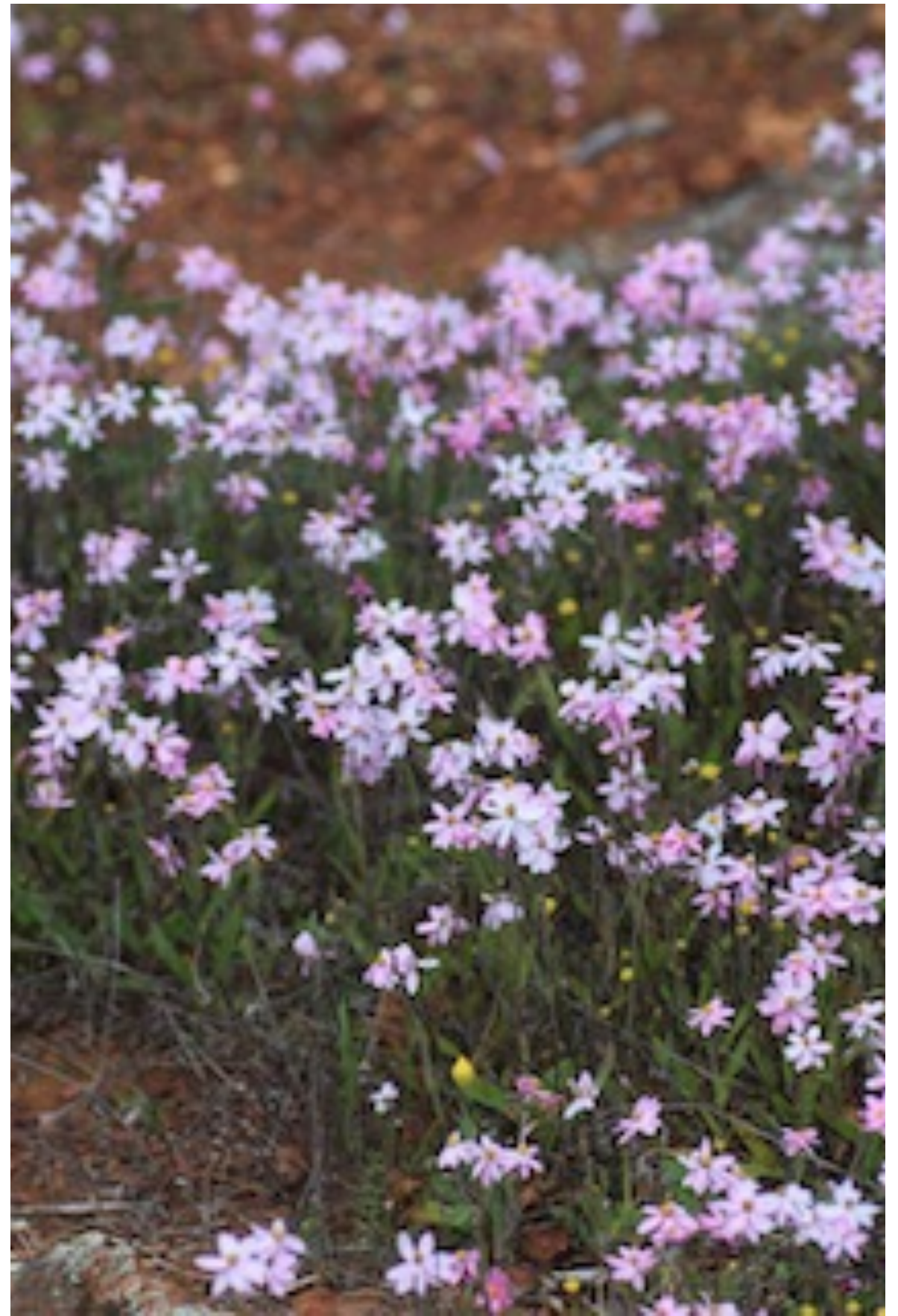
Then we set off for **Coalseam National Park** where the wildflowers weren't, from all accounts, all that flash.

Still, there was an unusual geological formation that was worth a look.

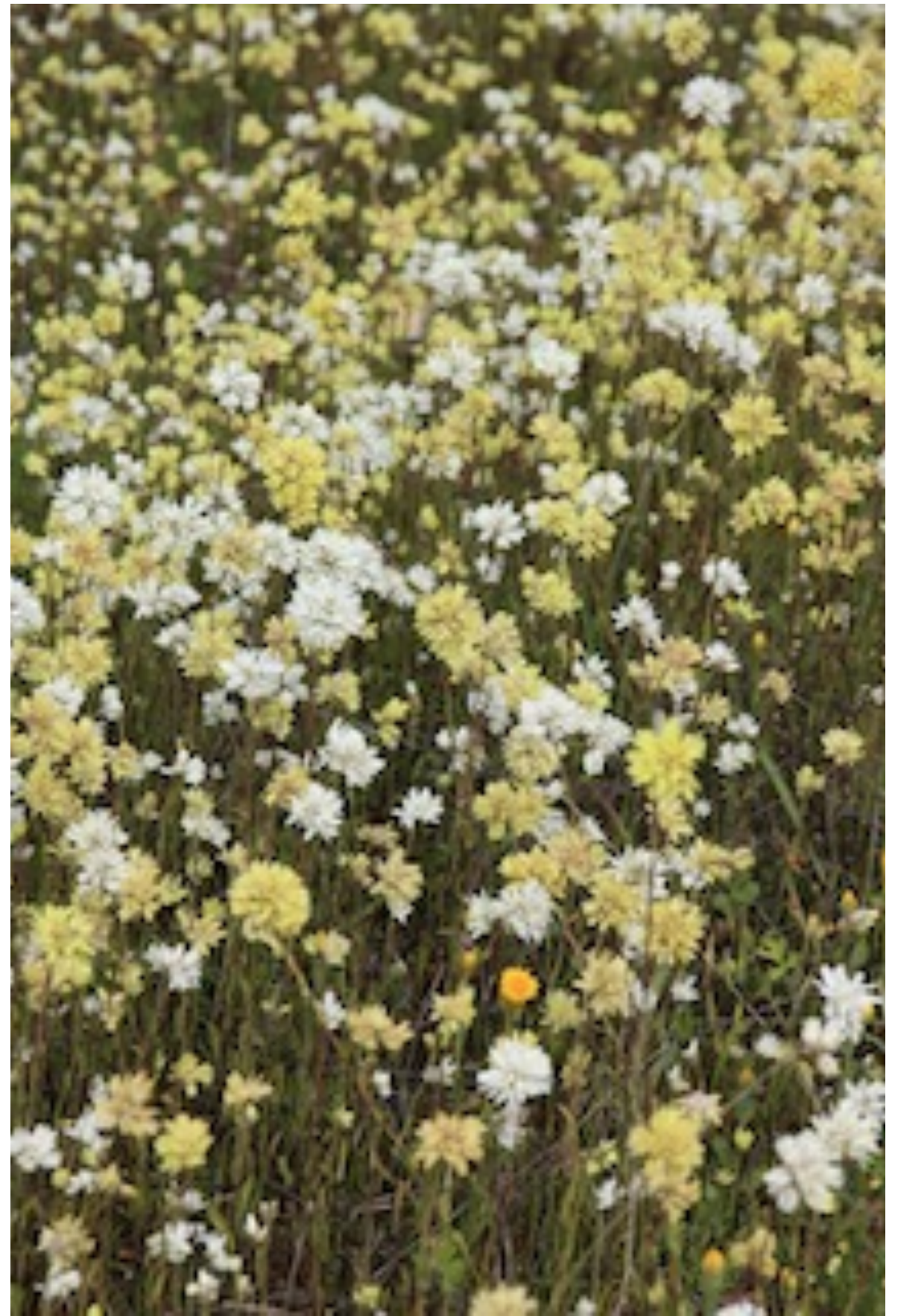






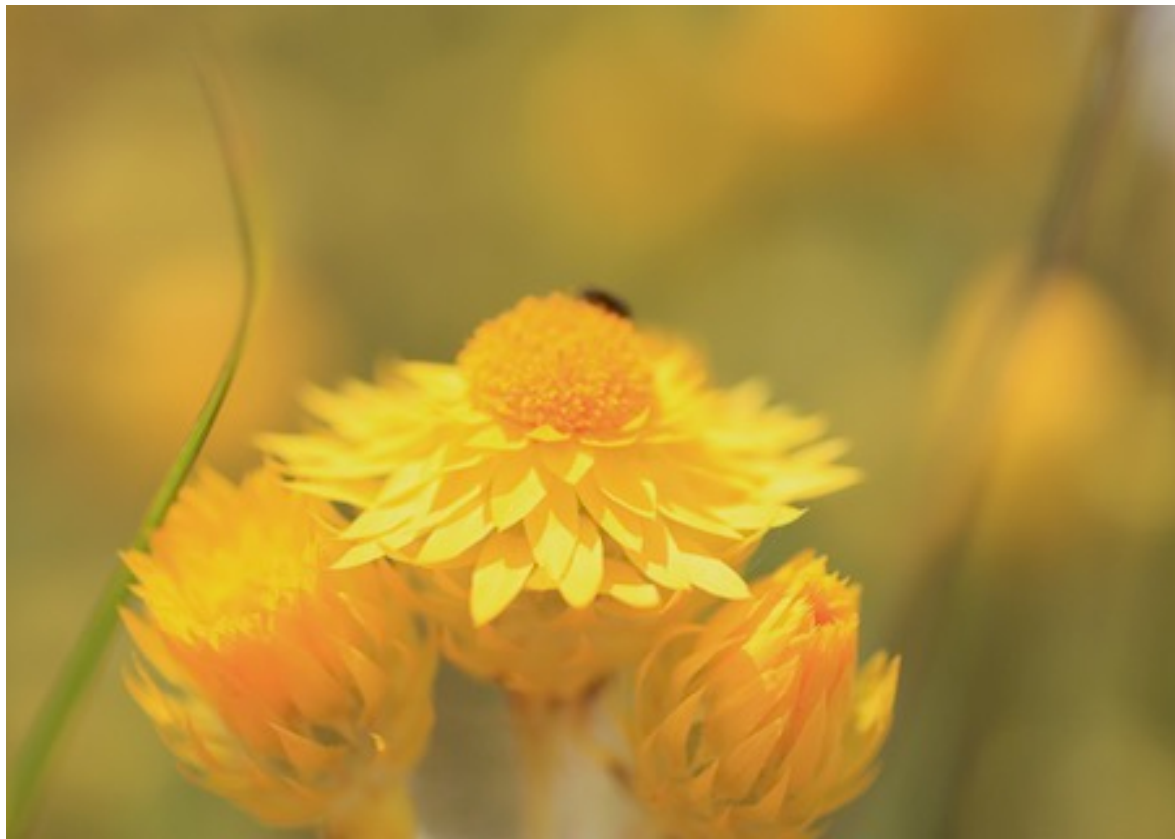
















We arrived to find the wildflowers were beginning to emerge.

If we'd been there a week later there might have been more out.

Still there were enough there to provide *Madam* with an excuse for a ramble while *Hughesy* sat in the car scribbling away in an attempt to get details down while they were fresh in the mind.

Subsequent checks revealed that we'd reached the site of Western Australia's first mined coal deposit. Those exposed bands of coal, siltstones, claystones and sandstones cover some 250 million years of geological history.







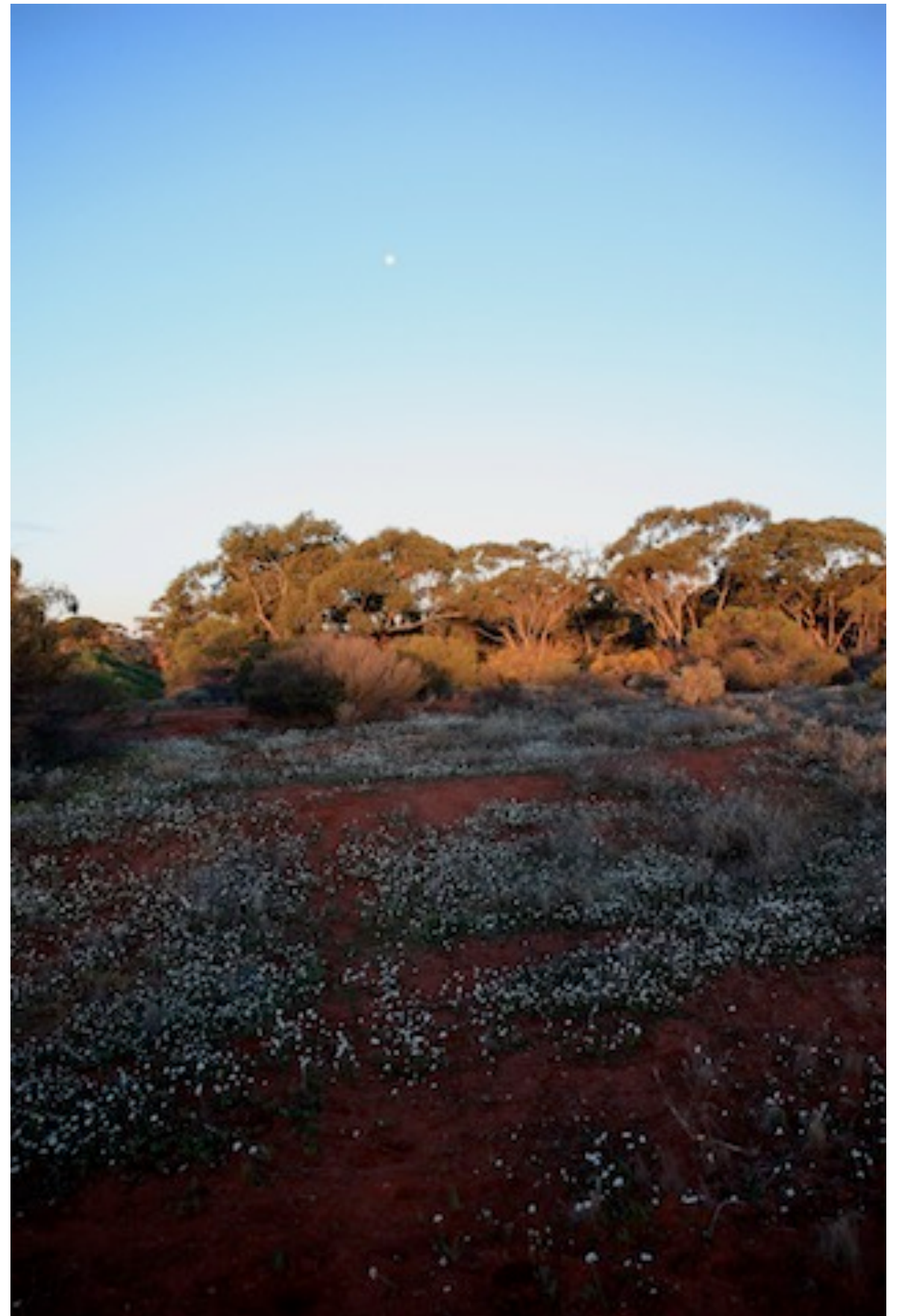


When she was finished, we headed off to **Morawa**, arriving in time to collect the key to a comfortable chalet.

The surrounding bush offered, so we were told, exciting photo opportunities.

However, *Madam* wasn't over-impressed with the results.

Home-cooked pasta with tuna and olives made a change from a week's diet of restaurant and takeaway tucker.



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Morawa > New Norcia

Monday, 23 August

Heading out of **Morawa** things were straightforward.

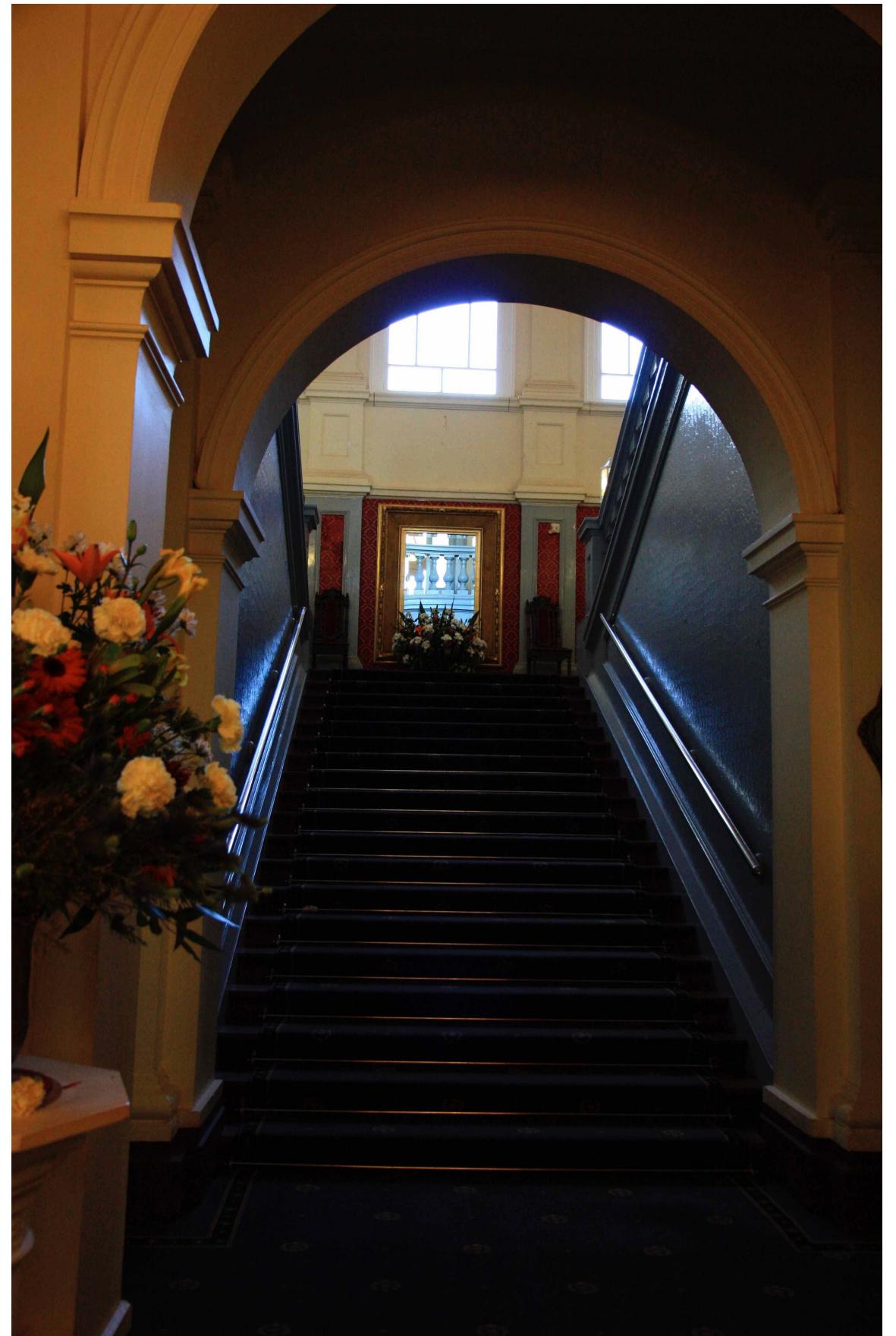
We had a day's leisurely drive towards an evening stop at **New Norcia**, with pauses to look at whatever wildflowers were out along the way, and that's how it panned out.

Stops along the way to check out wildflower intelligence weren't as successful as they might have been.

While I don't mean to cast aspersions on people who look after tourist info, they don't always pay much attention to where you've been or consider the vehicle you're driving.

A case in point.

We stopped in **Perenjori**, having come from **Morawa** and answered the inquiry about where we'd been.





We went on to describe our destination and pointed out that the hire car people didn't like their vehicles travelling off the bitumen, then asked about the possibilities.

The response was a complicated briefing that would've taken us along a confusing array of dirt roads in search of an array of orchids in a location identified by the presence of *a blue sock*.

And we'd have been *heading back towards Morawa, rather than south towards New Norcia*.

While we listened patiently, nodding sagely, and thanked the lady for her advice.

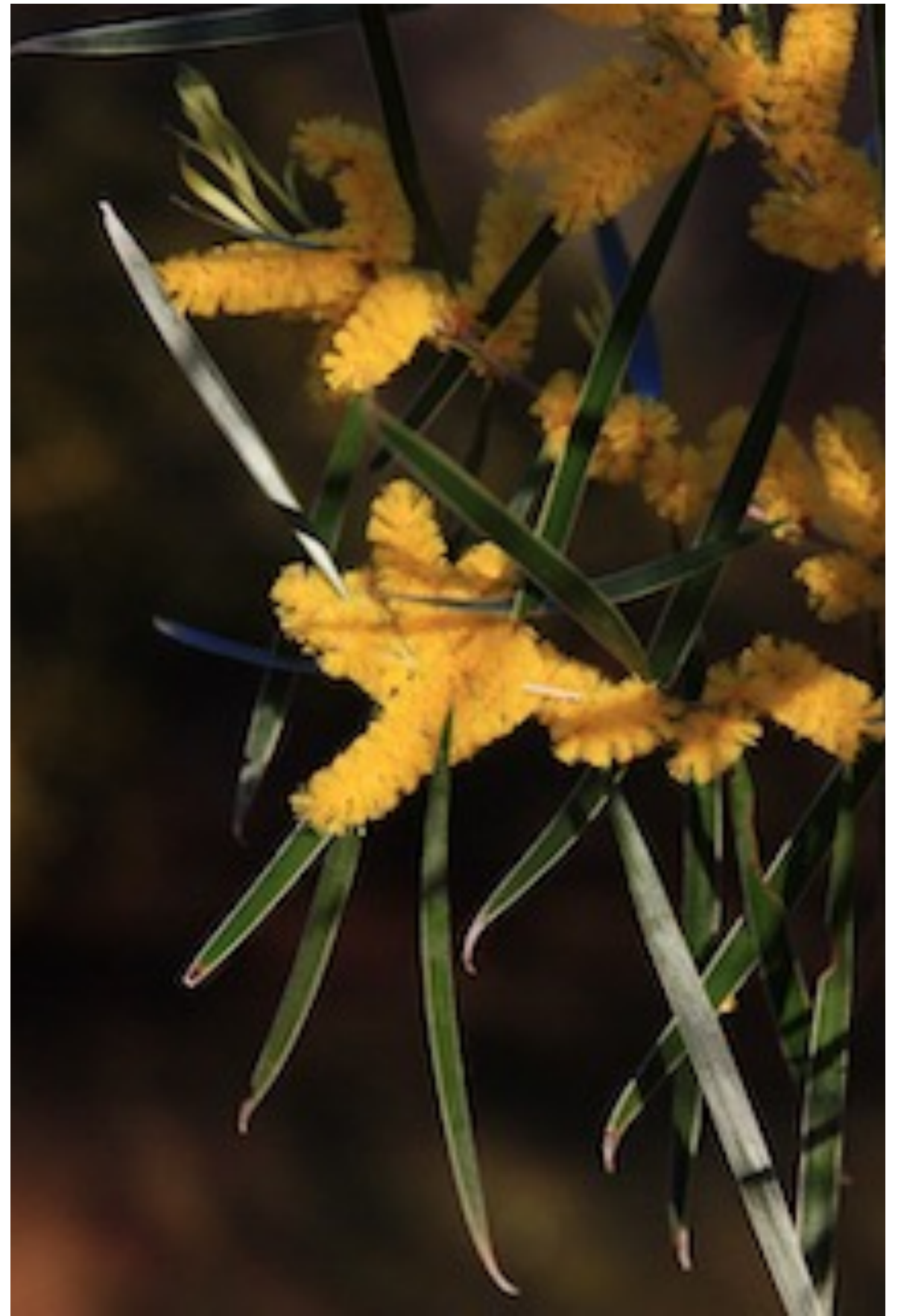
Once we were back in the car, we headed off towards **Carnamah** and **Coorow** with the possibility of lunch in the back of our minds.

Neither township seemed to have much on offer in the eating department.

So we continued towards **Moora**, where the information brochure suggested the **Wildflower Farm** to the north of town might be a possibility.

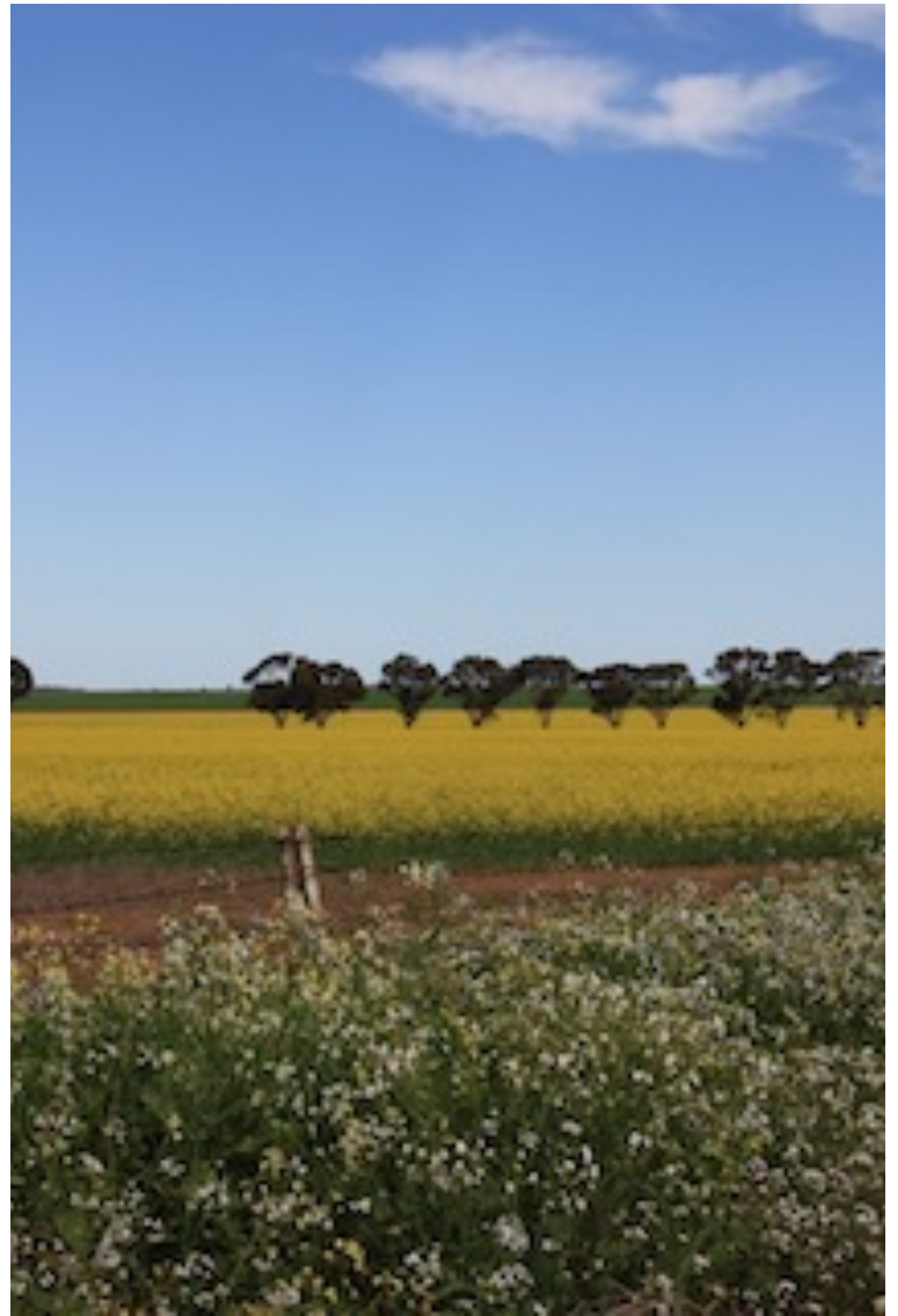
The **Wildflower Farm**, once we'd found our way inside, proved an interesting operation in several ways.















The entrance wasn't identified (or maybe we were in the wrong part of the car park).

We found our way in through the entrance that provided access from the proprietors' living quarters and were greeted by the owner, who showed us around the processing operation.

It was rather impressive. They have an extensive export market.

She offered us a cup of tea or coffee in what looked like the eating section and left us to go about her routine out the back.

The woman who looks after the front of house arrangements cheerily delivered the refreshments.

Payment didn't seem to be required, so we sat undisturbed while a Leyland Brothers documentary about Western Australian wildlife played out in the background at a relatively high volume level.

Inquiries about lunch brought an *I'll see what I can do*.

The end of the Leyland Brothers DVD produced welcome silence, interrupted by the return of *Madam Proprietor*.





She volunteered to put it back to the start so we could watch the rest of it and advised the catering only operates for coaches.

Oh well, **Moora** was just down the road, and we'd be sure to find lunch there.

Madam ended up with an impressive bouquet of preserved banksia and wildflowers, which I thought was a dubious prospect in the *Will It Get Back Safely To Bowen Stakes*.

So *we* set off for **Moora** around a quarter to two, not at all confident of finding something still open with lunch available.

A check at the tourist information pointed us towards the pie shop, which boasted a restaurant as a side operation.

We arrived to find that side of things about to close.

The pie warmer was depleted towards the end of what had presumably been a busy day's trading.

Still, there was a meat pie and a vegetable pasty.

They sufficed to get us along the rest of the route to the evening stop in Australia's only monastic town, **New Norcia**.





There aren't many settlements scattered across this part of the Westralian countryside.

Finding somewhere between **Morawa** and **Perth** where we could spend the night before continuing to **Busselton** was something of a problem.

Initially, *Madam* came up with a farmstead B&B property. We should have known something was up when all attempts to make an actual booking seemed to draw a blank.

Eventually, I phoned at the right time (the place is a working farm, so the proprietors are usually out and about somewhere away from the phone). I was advised *we don't do that stuff any more, sorry*.

There seemed nothing else available except for the hotel at **New Norcia**, so that was where we headed.

Madam also had ambitions regarding **New Norcia bread**, but complications set in.

For a start, you don't buy the bread from the bakery, which is part of the monastery and off-limits to the general public. You can buy it at the roadhouse or an outlet at **Scarborough Beach**.

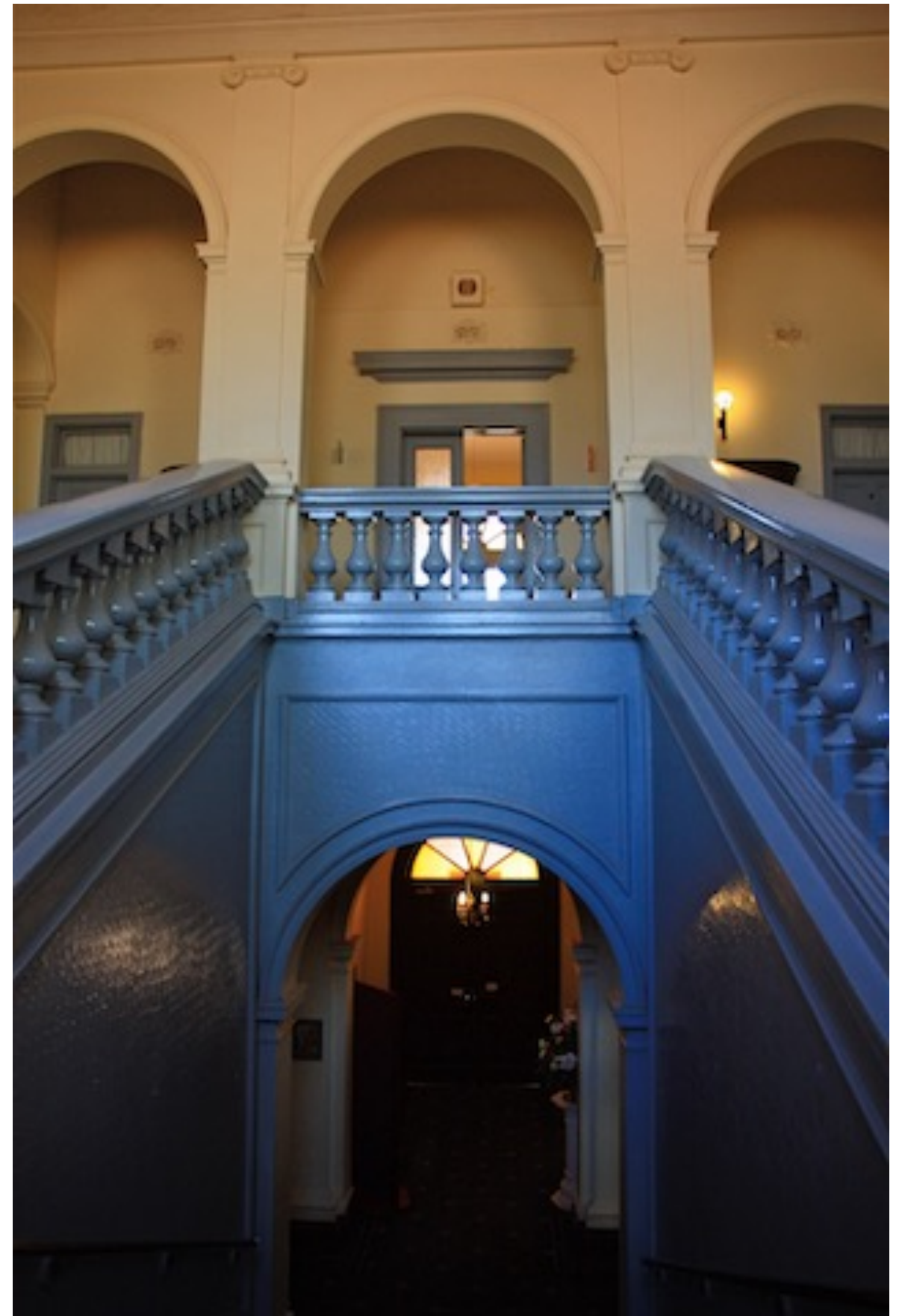
Predictably the roadhouse had sold out.













Enquiries revealed that Tuesday was the baker's day off, so no joy for the morrow either.

We also went looking for it in the shop that operates beside the museum.

The search brought spooky memories of a very much younger *Hughesy*'s visits to reclaim a football that had found its way onto the wrong side of the ten-foot-high fence behind the house where my family lived in **Auchenflower**.

There was a **Carmelite nunnery** on the other side of the fence, and football-reclaiming took place in a spooky atmosphere of total silence.

The flashbacks continued after we'd checked into the hotel and found a room that existed in a sort of late-fifties time-warp.

Or maybe early sixties.

It bore a remarkable resemblance to the rooms we found upstairs at the old **Queens Hotel** on **The Strand** when my family moved to **Townsville** in 1963.

Fortunately, the time warp included electric blankets.



We were downstairs for dinner reasonably early in proceedings since breakfast and lunch had been thin on the ground.

Still, dinner made up for that, with glasses of *monastic wine* and samples of the *Abbey Ale* to wash down *beef and Guinness stew* and a remarkably good *pizza*.

With that out of the way, there wasn't much to delay the retreat to the cot.

And, of course, the electric blanket.



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

New Norcia > Busselton

Tuesday, 24 August

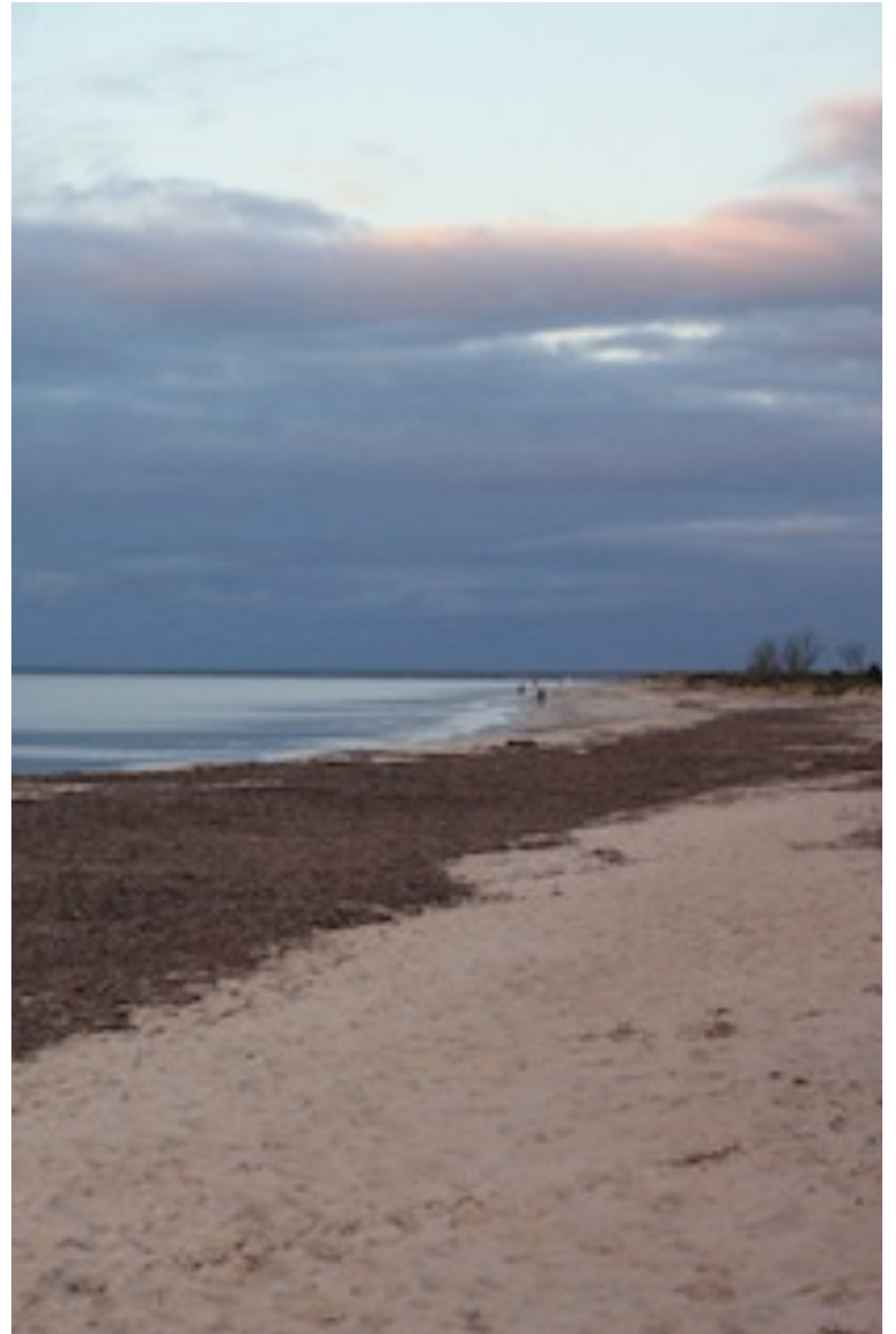
There's nothing like a good night's sleep, and nothing was going to tip *Hughesy* out of bed early on a rather chilly morning.

The prospect of walking through chilly corridors to the bathroom didn't exactly give me the *ooh-ahs*.

I deftly avoided the necessity through judicious under-indulgence the night before.

Once showering and packing were complete, we took a circuit through the dining room for the continental breakfast.

It was a return to the regularly defined article rather than the excesses on offer in downtown **Perth**.







Once we'd hit the bitumen, it wasn't long before we were heading back into the familiar territory from previous visits to the **Swan Valley**.

That turned into a slight problem since familiarity with the ground suggested that we wanted to go one way, avoiding the city and the **CBD** if possible.

At the same time, *Karen's* directions seemed destined to take us through the heart of the downtown freeway.

Madam wasn't sure about all this.

She had spotted what looked like a suitable route via the airport onto a feeder that would take visitors almost directly to **Margaret River**, but we missed the turn.

That, in turn, provoked the odd moment of panic until I spotted a turnoff that would deliver us onto the **Kwinana Freeway**, which was, according to my calculations, where we needed to be.

The map we had with us (the hire car company, having given us *Karen*, decided we didn't need a street guide) cut out south of **Perth** and wasn't that detailed.

Karen's recent pronouncements didn't exactly fill you with confidence.

Madam was more than a tad spooked.

Hughesy, with the calm insouciance of someone who knows **Kwinana** is south of Fremantle and **Mandurah** is south of **Kwinana**, reasoned that since we were on the way to **Mandurah** things were under control.

Madam wasn't convinced, but eventually the inevitable logic of the signage won. **Bunbury** started turning up in the *you are heading towards* column.

Madam was inclined to stop there for lunch and concluded we must be on the right road after all.

Karen, on the other hand, refused to believe we were travelling on the road at all and issued frequent requests to *perform a U-turn when possible*, resulting in banishment to the glovebox.

\$5/day to hire the thing and the maps weren't up to date.
Sheesh!

Once we'd found our way into *Bunbury*, a check at **Tourist Info** yielded the location of the cafe quarter.

We ended up eating at the first establishment we sighted.

That might suggest a degree of desperation, but we'd taken a glance at the menu, decided it looked OK.

Still, we thought we might look further, walked a hundred metres without sighting another option, so that was it.

A grilled chicken wrap and an almost identical chicken caesar salad tortilla hit the spot nicely.

We were back in the car before two, counting our way through six roundabouts before the turnoff to **Capel Vale**, the only **Halliday 5-star winery** in the **Geographe region**.

It's a right hand turn off the highway, followed by an immediate right again.

From the car park, a walk to the back of the building takes you to a ramp leading upstairs to the restaurant and cellar door.

It's not the largest tasting area, and with any more than two or three small parties you'd start getting in each other's way.

A reasonably boisterous lunch party was finishing up when we arrived.



With vineyards at Capel, Mount Barker, Pemberton and Margaret River growing eighteen different grape varieties it's an interesting range. I tried:

2009 Mount Barker Riesling (4.5/5 \$26.95). Definite Riesling nose without the South Australian citrus and slate. I thought it was a subtle variation on a favourite wine style. Classy. Possible order.

2009 Pemberton Semillon Sauvignon Blanc (4/5 \$24.95). Tropical fruit notes you expect from this style. An example of what's possible—an excellent alternative to the Savalanche. Could order, but...

2009 Debut Verdelho (3.5/5 \$17.95). Typical varietal character on the nose and flavour profile. I've gone off Verdelho lately, and this one wasn't going to bring me back into the fold. Probably a 4 for fans of the variety). Not for mine, but Halliday liked it more than I did, rating it a 92!

2009 Pemberton Chardonnay (4.5/5 \$24.95). Very taken with another new-style Oz Chard, and it's one worth watching for. Would be in the order if one goes in.

2009 Geographe Viognier (3.5/5 \$26.95). Perfumed varietal nose and standard flavour profile. Slowly going off the variety, though fans would probably enjoy. Not for mine



2008 Debut Shiraz Rose (4/5 \$17.95). Slightly sweet at first, but with a long dry finish. Very pleasant summer chilled style. One to bear in mind, and could go half a dozen.

2005 West Australian Shiraz (3.5/5 \$24.95). Peppery varietal nose. Easy drinking rounded style that I didn't mind but wouldn't be likely to order.

2007 Margaret River Cabernet Merlot (3/5 \$24.95). Attractive nose but neither of us liked it on the palate.

2007 Geographe Sangiovese (4/5 \$26.95). Interesting style with varietal character. I liked it and would possibly throw a bottle or two into an order.

2008 Geographe Petit Verdot (4.5/5 \$26.95). Varietal nose and very impressive style. It seemed like an ideal fireside red. Could easily go for more.

We escaped with a bottle of the *Petit Verdot*, which seemed to be the ticket with the promise of a wood fire in the caravan park chalet.

Less than an hour later we'd made our way to **Sandy Bay Holiday Park** on the southern outskirts of **Busselton**.

The accommodation looked snug and could have been parlayed into a three-nighter at a reasonable rate had we been so inclined.

That, however, would have involved a half-hour commute to and from **Margaret River** each day.

So we were happy to maintain the original plan, thank you very much, however attractive the rates on offer might have been.

The most important information we picked up was, however, news of the presence of a food court in the shopping centre about a hundred metres further along the highway.

After we'd taken our time settling in, it was reasonably apparent that a walk along the beach would give us a chance to check it out on the way back.

We'd stopped in **Busselton** *en route* to Sandy Bay and had noted that the waters seemed remarkably calm, what with the presence of the **Indian Ocean** just out there.

A walk along the beach gave time to reflect that the waters in the lee of **Cape Naturaliste**, certainly did bear a remarkable resemblance to a millpond.

With the **Cape** west-north-west of **Busselton**, anything coming from **Madagascar** will run into land before it gets to where we were standing.



Around the corner, between **Capes Naturaliste** and **Leeuwin**, you have **Margaret River's surf breaks**, but around where we were standing the waters presented the millpond to end all millponds.

From the beach, we made our way back to the highway, past large unit and resort developments.

We landed in the shopping centre's food court a little too early to be ordering dinner, and at the wrong time of the week if we were looking at the pizza or steakhouse options.

Both are closed on Tuesdays.

That left us with a choice of *Asian (Chinese, Thai or Vietnamese)*, *fish and chips* or a place that labelled itself as *halal* and included *Cajun squid* among the offerings.

With that initial research carried out, we returned to the chalet to consider the options and relax a bit before *Madam* headed beach-wards to catch the sunset shutter action.

At the same time, *Hughesy* relentlessly continued the attempt to catch up on the *Travelogue* backlog.

Once night had fallen, it was off to the Asian for a *pad thai* and a *green beef curry*.



Neither was a match for the *Petit Verdot*, but the wine wasn't meant to go with dinner in the first place.

With dinner demolished, it was time to set the fire.

That was a straightforward task thanks to a generous supply of kindling in the metal bin on the verandah.

By the time the wine had a good breathe I was throwing slabs of hardwood on the fire, luxuriating in the radiant warmth, sipping a hearty red and reflecting that there are worse ways to spend a chilly Tuesday night.



Indian Pacific / Western Australia 2010

Margaret River

Wednesday, 24 August

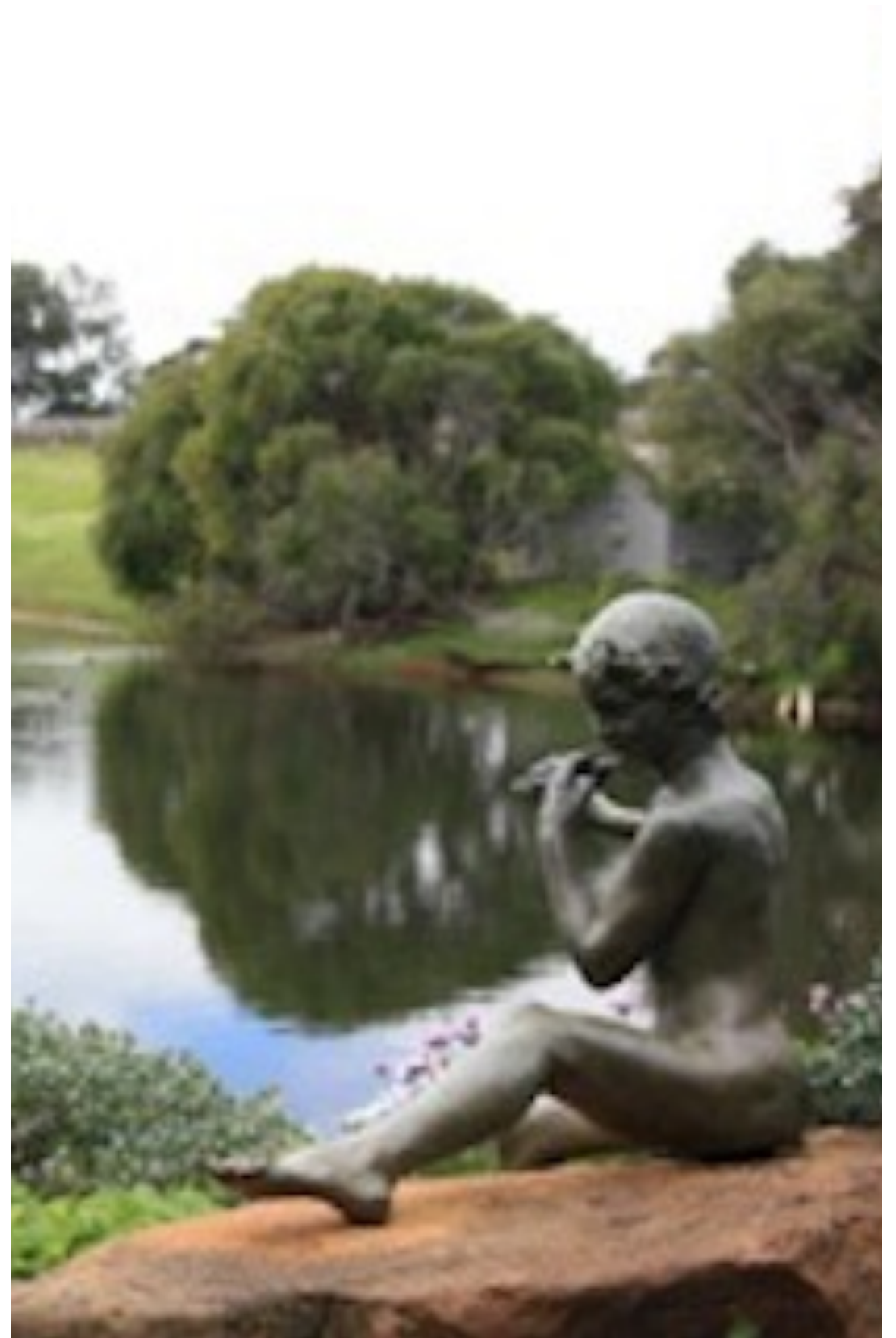
Regardless of how many times you're told *this is your bit of the trip*, for some reason you can bank on a *can I just do this little bit first?*

Fortunately, my plans allowed a degree of flexibility.

So we headed to **Cape Naturaliste** for a photographic exercise that would have needed most of the morning if it was going to be done properly.

It was after ten when we found our way onto **Caves Road**.

We passed what an uninformed observer might have regarded as an unconscionable number of wineries before we turned left at **Lenton Brae**.



Nowadays, when we head for wine country, the first thing I do is to check **Mr Halliday's ubiquitous reference tome**.

That allows me to come up with a list of the establishments *James* has rated with five stars.

Earlier in the year, our visit to the **Granite Belt**, where the single five star wasn't open at the time I had to look further afield.

With **Capel Vale** as the only one in the **Geographe** region, the day before that also left things cut and dried.

Margaret River, on the other hand, is a different kettle of fish with the count running into the forties.

You would need more than two and a half days to do that lot properly.

Some aren't open to the public.

Even with those eliminated from the list, we were left with a week to ten days' solid tasting.

That's if we tried to visit them all.

Experience suggested a couple of options when it came to sorting things out.

For a start, it made sense to head for those concerns that offer freight-free delivery to the east coast.

A surprising number do, provided you're buying a dozen bottles, so that didn't help a great deal.

A better principle involved separating iconic establishments you felt obliged to visit from the rest.

Then I could cast an eye around for the odd establishment that looked like it had something to offer in the way of *quirky independent producer* status.

The icons weren't too hard to figure: **Cullen**, **Leeuwin Estate**, **Vasse Felix**, **Brookland Valley** and **Cape Mentelle** were obvious must-visits.

I could've added **Howard Park/Madfish** and **Xanadu** but I suspected they'd attract numbers of coach-borne visitors.

Hughesy sees the presence of tour coaches as a definite minus when it comes to serious sampling.

Round the list off with half a dozen interesting establishments, and we'd have a doable list.

Being fresh on **Day One**, I figured, we could probably get around half of the dozen or so places I'd listed.

Travelling along **Caves Road** would take us to **Lenton Brae** and **Brookland Valley** before we diverted to **Hay Shed Hill** for lunch.

Then **Ashbrook**, **Vasse Felix** and maybe one more before we headed for the accommodation in downtown Margaret River.

Madam wanted to visit **Lake Cave** on **Day Two**.

If we could get into the first tour party that would leave a smooth run through **Leeuwin Estate**, **Voyager Estate**, **Stella Bella** and maybe a fourth.

Friday would be abbreviated by the need to travel north.

We'd save **Cullen** till last. We could add further strings to the bow if time permitted before a 2 p.m. departure for **Singleton Beach** on the southern outskirts of Perth's metropolitan sprawl.

We must've passed at least a dozen wineries before we reached **Lenton Brae**, which turned out to be a perfect starting point.

That was partly because of the quality of the wines, but we were expecting that, weren't we?

It wasn't as if we were visiting places where the wines were likely to be substandard).

That *perfect starting point* was mainly due to a single factor: cellar door attendant *Chris Stott*.

After extensive experience, I have definite opinions about wineries and their cellar door operations.

For a start, unless there's a very good reason to go there, you can forget most cellar door operations that welcome tour buses. **Leeuwin Estate** proved a golden exception to the rule.

If you sight a couple of tour buses in the car park, it's safe to assume that if you want to talk to someone about the wines you're sampling you'll probably be better off somewhere else.

Second, I like to see a tasting area with room for more than two or three groups.

If the place is handkerchief-sized and there's a tour bus on the premises, it's going to be a waste of time.

Even where the tour buses don't run, it's nice to have room to taste without rubbing elbows with total strangers.

It helps to be able to avoid overhearing what they're being told as they sample something a bit further down the range.

You're going to hear that eventually, but these things are best happening in their own good time.

Third, and most importantly, if you're a winery that's serious about your cellar door operation, you need cellar door staff who know their stuff.

Hopefully, they'll go about the business of quietly selling both your own product and your region as a whole.

We'd seen both extremes in the **Swan Valley**.

At **Sandalford**, the girls in the room dispensed the tasting samples with alacrity. Then they left you to it.

In contrast, the dude at **Houghtons** engaged in a dialogue and ended up selling *Hughesy* half a dozen \$50 reds .

Admittedly, they were substantially discounted, but the sale was still at a price point where I'd usually be looking elsewhere.

Lenton Brae Dude was another out of the same mould.

A delightful forty minutes culminated in a recommendation we visit **Woodlands** (just across the road) because the reds are excellent.

You'll like them.

We didn't get anything from **Lenton Brae** straight away, but the website will be getting repeated visits over the next couple of years.

I started with the *2010 Semillon Sauvignon Blanc* (4.5/5 \$22), the blend that is to Margaret River what Riesling is to Clare. Everybody makes one, and they're rarely less than excellent. This one was firmly wedged into the upper end of the echelon, and the varietal character integrated very nicely indeed. Definitely one to throw into an order.

The *2010 Sauvignon Blanc* (4/5 \$22) wasn't quite up there. Still, I rated it relatively high, along with the 2009 *Southside Chardonnay* (4/5 \$25) the early release style. This tangy minimal-oak number worked very well. It'll be seven or eight months before the regular Chardonnay hits the shelves.

Still, these three definitely look like classy summer drinking as far as *Hughesy's* concerned.

There were also a couple of *Late Harvest* styles (\$18) that were interesting with the *2010 Special Late Harvest*, a blend of Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc working very nicely indeed. Definitely one to go with the curries.



The reds were, on the other hand, light on numerically, but the two I tried impressed greatly.

The 2010 *No Way Rose* (4.5/5 \$18), a bone dry style that works stunningly well, could be described as *summer in a glass* and is one to throw into the Little House of Concrete summer mix.

I was also reasonably taken by the 2009 *Cabernet Merlot* (4/5 \$25), a softer, drink now style and definitely one to look at for summer.

The strength of the recommendation and geographic proximity meant we didn't have much choice about visiting **Woodlands**.

Subsequent checking revealed the place was a **Halliday five-star operation**.

So while it wasn't on my list of places to visit it could well have been had there been something on the website to spark interest.

As it was, a flying visit, a chat to a knowledgeable attendant and a sampling of the range had me signing up for the mailing list and heading off with a bottle of the *2008 Emily Special Reserve* (5/5 \$39.50) in tow.

It's a small range, but highly impressive, from the entry-level 2009 *Cabernet Franc Merlot* (4.5/5 \$20 or \$16.50 in a case). It was a luxurious, dense style that comes through very late on the palate.

That assessment continued through the very similar, but slightly more rounded 2008 *Cabernet Merlot* (4.5/5 \$23 or \$19 in a case) through to the Reserves, which punch up comfortably into the mid-nineties on the old points range.

It looked like an operation that will be featuring in the wine rack for the next few years.

Stop #3 at **Brookland Valley** might be bordering on *usual suspects* territory. But *Madam* is partial to the *Verse 1* range, I wanted to try the *Estate* range, and it was **Halliday's 2009 Winery of the Year**.



There was also the possibility we might use the restaurant as a fallback if we didn't manage to get into **Cullen** on **Friday**. So I guess **Brookland Valley** was always going to be rated as a *must-visit*.

The restaurant menu didn't seem to be available on the web, so if we were going to be checking that side of things out, we might as well do the tasting bit.

Like many operations, the cellar door setting is spectacular.

But the restaurant isn't open on a **Wednesday**. That may have accounted for the fact that when we arrived there wasn't anybody there but us chickens.

As I worked through the *Verse 1* lines (\$18/bottle), everything was a solid 4/5, with the *Rose* as a definite summer possibility (\$14.40 a bottle with the discount for bulk buying).

The *Estate* range involved a jump in price, kicking in at \$30 with the 2007 *Sauvignon Blanc* (4/5), which didn't grab me, but the 2006 *Semillon* (4.4/5), very impressive at \$38 and 2009 *Chardonnay* (4.5/5 \$40, 97 points from Mr Halliday) outstanding. I didn't mind the 2008 *Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot* (4.5/5 \$45), either.

The 2003 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (5/5 \$70) was an impressive long finishing style I'd be happy to wrap the tonsils around on a more regular basis if I could afford to do so.

A glance at the Restaurant menu revealed *arm and a leg* territory as far as lunch was concerned, but gave us a backup if we needed one on Friday.

Since I expect to find *Verse 1* on wine lists on a reasonably regular basis, the visit was worth making.

The *Estate* was range impressive, but I doubt that I'll be going out of my way to order. At \$172.80 for a dozen *Rose*, I could be tempted in the summer drinking department.

The cellar door lady, while she mightn't have been as communicative as the previous two was still streets ahead of the *pour and leave you to it* brigade.

She made a very interesting observation: I should ring and talk to place an order rather than shopping online.

By this time the sun was well and truly over the yardarm and lunch beckoned, so the next stop was **Hay Shed Hill**, which rated a visit for a couple of reasons.

For a start, their cafe looked like the best option for lunch, and we had a non-Halliday recommendation from a reliable source (thanks, Helen!).

The **Cellar Door**, supervised by a gentleman of northern European extraction and an accent that may have been German, was an impressive operation.

Samples were administered with almost Teutonic efficiency.

We broke halfway through for lunch, and when we returned, we were seamlessly reintegrated into the tasting cycle. As indicated, highly impressive.

The wines, on the other hand, were a more mixed bag. For a start, despite the efficiency behind the counter, I found myself zipping around the order form as I worked my way through the four separate ranges on offer.

Entry-level wines in the *Pitchfork* range (\$17, case price \$15) were solid without demanding attention, except for *2009 Pitchfork Pink*, a *Rose* on special at \$10 by the case, ideal summer drinking. There's a dozen sitting in the wine rack as I type.

The *Hay Shed Hill Vineyard* Series was consistently around 4/5.

The exception was the *2008 Cabernet Merlot*, an easy-drinking style that was pleasant enough but a touch on the light side (3.5/5 \$20, case price \$18).

The pick of them were the *2008 Cabernet Sauvignon* (5/5 \$25/\$22) was a classy line that comes out of the glass right into the nose and came through very rounded on the palate and the *2009 Botrytis Riesling* (5/5 \$22/\$29).



In between, the *2009 Sauvignon Blanc Semillon, 2009 Chardonnay* and *2008 Shiraz Tempranillo* all rated a solid 4/5 at \$20/\$18.

Next up the pecking order, the *World Series* (\$30/\$25), a *Tempranillo* and a *Sangiovese* from 2008 were exciting explorations of newer varietals. I preferred the *Sangiovese*, a pleasant savoury style.

The top of the range *Block Series* was a definite step up. The *2009 Block 6 Chardonnay* (4.5/5 \$35/\$30) was a highly perfumed style.

The *2008 Block 8 Cabernet Franc* (4/5 \$35/\$30) had varietal character to burn in a medium-bodied style.

The dry with depth *2005 Block 10 Petit Verdot* (4.5/5 \$35/\$30) also rates pretty highly.

To finish, the *2008 Block 2 Cabernet Sauvignon* (4.5/5 \$50/\$45) was quite outstanding (95 from Halliday).

I escaped with credit card dockets for dozens of the Pitchfork Pink and a cleanskin 2008 Merlot that was quite acceptable drinking @ \$8. Still, I don't know if there'll be a great deal of ordering action headed towards Hay Shed Hill.

The curse of lost tasting notes kicked in at **Ashbrook Estate**, where we met another friendly and informative cellar door attendant. But the only evidence to hand was a single sheet bereft of scribbled comments.





So I've got little option but to move on to a **Margaret River** icons that I was looking forward to.

You never quite know what's in store when you pull into the visitors' car park at any time, but the last stop of the day can be problematic.

Looking back on two days in **Margaret River** I've got to admit both last visits were not quite *underwhelming* but weren't as impressive as they could have been.

Everything I tried at **Vasse Felix** was in the 3.5 to 4 range on my scale.

The two *Heytesburys* (the *Chardonnay* and the *Cabernet/Malbec/Petit Verdot*) lived right up to their reputations, price points and 96-point Halliday ratings.

The *2009 Chardonnay* (4/5) was another classy new breed Oz Chard. However, I'm not sure I'd be shelling out \$27 (Cellar Club \$21.60).

The *2009 Semillon* (4/5 \$25/\$20) was a lovely expression of the variety, with a bit of oak lurking in the background. A fragrant bouquet and quite delicious.

You could say much the same about the *Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (\$25/\$20), balanced with the obligatory tropical fruits on the nose and across the palate.





The *2010 Classic Dry White* (\$20/\$16) had an awfully familiar nose. I rated it as another 4/5 while the *2009 Viognier* (\$25/\$20) was better than most I've tried though I'm still not totally convinced.

The reds, from the *2007 Cabernet Sauvignon* (4/5 \$38/\$30.40) with its pronounced varietal character through the *2007 Shiraz* (4/5 \$35/\$28) and *2008 Cabernet Merlot* (4/5 \$25/\$20) were impressive styles, while I was less convinced by the *2008 Classic Dry Red* (3.5/5 \$20/\$16).

Tempranillo fans should be impressed by the *2009 Tempranillo* (4/5 \$25/\$20), though varietal sceptics might disagree.

Overall, as much as the wines impressed, I found myself scratching my head and wondering if I was missing something.

A bridge too far on the tasting trail, perhaps, but maybe it's a case of too-high expectations and severe burnout in the taste buds.

Too much of a good thing, and all that.

Given those factors, I wasn't keen on more tasting.

So we headed downtown, stopping at **Tourist Information** for details we needed to plan the next morning's **Lake Cave** excursion and other information.

From there, we headed off to base camp for the next two nights at **Margaret River Tourist Park**.

Once we'd settled in, thoughts turned to dinner.

Since we hadn't formed any definite plans, we walked back into town, partly to work up an appetite and partly to avoid driving over darkened unfamiliar roads at night.

The walk up and down the main street failed to produce anything that grabbed *Madam's* imagination, so we found our way into the **Settlers' Tavern**, where the food turned out to be excellent.

The drinks options were more than merely *interesting*.

Hardly surprising, really, given the fact that the establishment had picked up the *Best Pub Restaurant List* gong at the **Gourmet Traveller Wine** *Wine List of the Year Awards*.

Madam's catch of the day went down well. So did *Hughesy's* 300 g *Scotch fillet* with accompanying mashed potato that operated on a whole different playing field to the old-style mash I'm used to.

After a cleansing ale, I couldn't resist a glass of *Forester Estate Alicante Bouchet*, a full-bodied red as opposed to the Rockford tannin-free take on the *teinturier* variety.

We weren't, however, inclined to hang about inside as the external temperature plummeted (any delay would only mean that it'd be even chillier when we finally ventured outside).

We made our way home at a brisk walk that threatened to develop into a trot as we entered the home straight.

Inside it was a case of on with the old reverse cycle and an early night with a good ten hours' sleep to prepare for a second day on the tasting trail

Thursday, 26 August

According to the signage outside *Margaret River* does breakfast at **The Urban Bean**.

But the decision to head there in the morning was based on location and the fact I'd spotted it the night before rather than publicity material.

The prospect of a big breakfast will have almost always have *Hughesy* licking his chops in anticipation.

Lack of an obvious lunch stop on the tasting trail meant I was inclined towards a fair-sized breakfast and a big evening meal and hopefully survive on a light lunch.

In any case, fuel was needed since *Madam* was keen on visiting a limestone cave, had selected **Lake Cave** and *Hughesy* wouldn't be given a chance to chicken out.

I'd seen a limestone cave some fifty years ago.

While I was sure this one would be spectacular, I wasn't over keen on indulging in a significant photo opportunity given my non-photographer status.



Once we'd paid our money and started on the tour, things weren't improved when I found myself at the front of the party.

I was leading the way down a set of stairs that may well have induced vertigo in a mountain goat.

Hughesy doesn't like heights, prefers not to look down when faced with them, and wasn't keen on being there in the first place.

Retreating wasn't an option, so on I went.

Despite all the reservations, I must admit the cave was spectacular.

Reducing the sense of time reduced to the *drip, drip, drip* of calcite was mildly mind-blowing: a calcite straw with soot from a candle from fifty years before had grown about an inch.

Had I been a photographer I'd probably have been in seventh heaven.

Still, having now seen two limestone caves I won't be queueing up to look at any more, thank you very much.



Back on the surface, I had to wait a while longer before hitting the tasting trail.

Things didn't look promising when we arrived at **Leeuwin Estate** and sighted a tour bus.

Fortunately, as I discovered when I made my way into the **Cellar Door**, the occupants were on a tour of the winery.

But the tasting area had a lengthy bar that could handle a tour group plus unassociated tasters and the woman running the operation could maintain separate ongoing conversations.



One such conversation apprised me of a *Museum Release of Art Series Riesling*, a favourite non-Clare/Eden Valley style at the very reasonable freight free price of \$242.

Remembering the current vintage (2008) was going for that price, a dozen with couples of the 2008 and the previous five vintages was close to a foregone conclusion.

It was an ideal way to build up stocks of *bottle-aged Riesling*.

The tasting started with a sparkling *Brut Pinot Noir Chardonnay* (4/5, \$33 or \$181.50/6), a quite acceptable nicely yeasty drop in a style that doesn't turn up too often in Margaret River.

Then we moved to *Art Series* territory with the *Riesling* (4.5/5 \$22 \$242/dozen) lighter on the citrus and minerality than the South Australian equivalents, but quite excellent.

The *2009 Siblings Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (4/5, \$23 \$252/dozen) was one of the best expressions of the blend I tried in the region.

Meanwhile, the unbelievably good *2009 Art Series Sauvignon Blanc* (5/5 \$30 \$330/dozen) had me shaking my head at the continuing cut-price Kiwi Savalanche.

Halliday gave it 96 points and described it as *an exceptionally fine and elegant rendition of Sauvignon blanc*.

It was a step or two backwards with the *2009 Classic Dry White* (4/5 \$17.95 \$197.50/case) that was great value for the price. The Cellar Door attendant described it as fruit salad in a glass and wasn't far wide of the mark.

I was also quite taken by the *2007 Prelude Vineyards Chardonnay* (4.5/5 \$31.50 \$346.50/case), an excellent example of where *Australian Chardonnay* is headed, with pronounced grapefruit and pear notes on the nose.

But it paled alongside its big brother, the *2007 Art Series Chardonnay* (5/5 \$89 \$979/case) which was absolutely sublime. My tasting note reads Wish I could afford it by the case.

Given the stellar quality of the whites, the reds were always going to be a tricky proposition.



Still, I liked the *2007 Siblings Shiraz* as a value for money lighter everyday drinking style (4/5 \$23 \$253/case).

The *2007 Art Series Shiraz* (4.5/5 \$36.50 \$401.50/case) and the *2005 Art Series Cabernet Sauvignon* (4.5/5 \$59 \$654.50/case) were both right up there with the rest of the *Art Series* range, the nose on the *Cabernet* being particularly delightful.

I wasn't quite as taken by the *2004 Prelude Vineyards Cabernet Merlot* (4/5 \$28.50 \$313.50/case).

But that's as much about my reaction to the blend as the embarrassment of riches that preceded it.

Madam had spent much of the time I was in the **Cellar Door** prowling the spectacularly landscaped grounds for photographic purposes.

Once we were back in the car on the way out, I would have been happy to take it easy for the rest of the day, given what I'd just tasted and the visual riches that surrounded us.

It would have been easy to find the next stop anticlimactic.

Still, we headed down the road and turned into our next stop, where there was an equally spectacular landscape at **Voyager Estate**.



An initial glance had me thinking **French Château**.

Once I'd left Madam to the shutter action and found my way indoors I learned we were talking **Cape Dutch**, but that, in turn, has roots in **Huguenot France**.

The grounds need a full-time staff of seven gardeners, and there was the same attention to detail evident in the wines.

The *2009 Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (4.5/5 \$24) was one of the best I'd tried, with the regular elements in the nose more pronounced and pleasant acidity balanced in with the fruit on the palate.

The *2005 Tom Price Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (5/5 \$55) was an oaked style, and the difference the bottle age and 50% barrel fermentation made was quite pronounced. Mileages would vary according to how much wood you like in your whites, but I was extremely taken by the style.

The *2007 Chardonnay* (\$42 4.5/5 \$42) was another refined new style Oz Chard, with an excellent mouthfeel and textured fruits on the palate. The nose wasn't bad either.

It had been a while since I'd had a *Chenin Blanc*. The *2009 Voyager Estate* is overshadowed by the other whites but 4/5 and \$20 for an exciting take on an overlooked variety.

They'd had reason to open a bottle of the *2003 Chardonnay* (5/5 \$60), which isn't usually available for tasting. The extra bottle age produced a balanced style, oakier than recent examples I'd tried. Very much a style I like.



The reds wines were equally impressive.

The *2008 Girt By Sea Cabernet Merlot* (4/5 \$24) was a style that would handle a spell in the fridge.

From there we moved through the *2007 V.O.C. Collection Merlot* (5/5 \$55) a beautiful expression of varietal Merlot that I thought *wasn't to be taken Sideways* to the *2008 Shiraz* (5/5 \$34).

The latter was a darkly fruity style that made an excellent alternative to the big Barossa versions.

After **Leeuwin Estate**, it would've been easy to be let down, but what I tried here was as impressive as what I'd tried at the previous stop.



After two stops like that, you'd possibly be tempted to give things a spell. Still, advance publicity about **Stella Bella Wines** suggested an operation firmly on the way up, and there was no way I was going to give it a miss.

The **Cellar Door** operation is new, but the girl who looks after it was another one of those enthusiastic types who'll have visitors lining up for more.

Knowledgeable, easy to talk to with a genuine interest in other regions and styles, resulting in another highly enjoyable tasting session.

In the end, of course, it's all about the wines, but here again what was on offer was amazingly good, consistent across the range and represented excellent value for money.

That wasn't quite apparent with the *2009 Skuttlebutt Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (4/5 \$18), a pleasant enough drop. However, I preferred ones I'd tried elsewhere.

The *2009 Stella Bella Semillon Sauvignon Blanc* (4.5/5 \$21 and a very classy little number indeed) and the *2010 Stella Bella Sauvignon Blanc* (4.5/5 \$24) offered fantastic value for money.

You're going a bit up-market with the *2006 Suckfizzle Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (5/5 \$45) a fantastic wine with great length on the palate. Halliday's a fan, rating it a 96.

Dropping back in price the *2007 Stella Bella Viognier* (4/5 \$28) had varietal style with plenty of apricot notes.

The deliciously creamy *2008 Stella Bella Chardonnay* (4.5/5 \$30) was an excellent expression of the oaked style.

The reds started with the *2008 Skuttlebutt Rose Shiraz Merlot* (4/5 \$18), a sign that *Hughesy's* going to have some very tricky decisions to make regarding summer fridge-friendly reds.

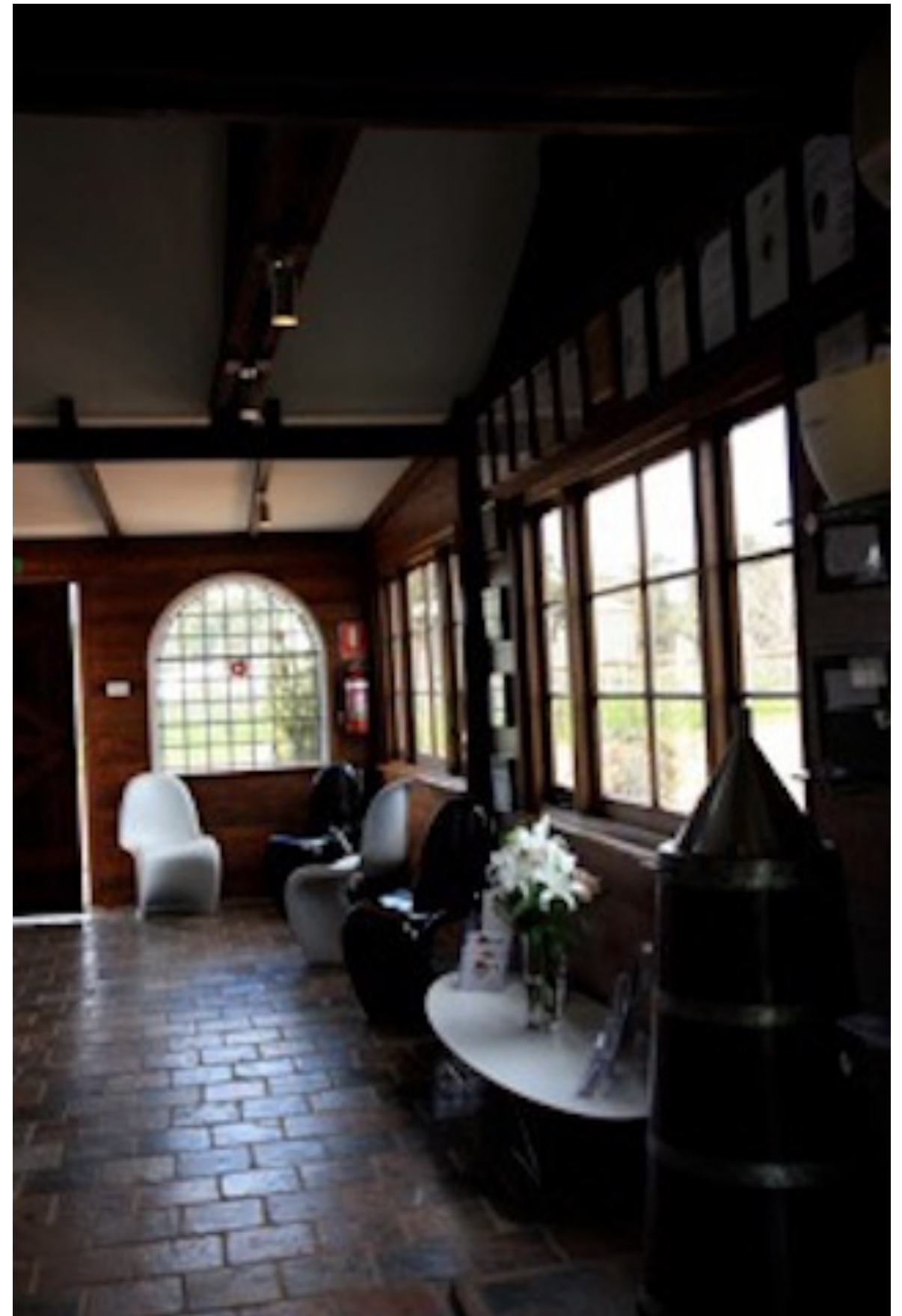
Unfortunately, the similarly priced *2007 Skuttlebutt Otro Vino Tempranillo Blend* was all gone.

I thought *2007 Skuttlebutt Shiraz Cabernet* (4/5 \$18) would make a pleasant lunch style, though I doubt I'll be able to fit it into the order book. On the other hand, the *2007 Stella Bella Sangiovese Cabernet* (4.5/5 \$30) was a great style to go with Italian food.

The *2007 Stella Bella Tempranillo* (4.5/5 \$30) was a muscular style that would go down a treat with chargrilled beef.

The *2007 Stella Bella Shiraz* (4.5/5 \$27) was another beauty, while the *2007 Stella Bella Cabernet Merlot* (5/5 \$32) produced tasting notes that read *W.O.W.! Great nose. The Benchmark for the blend. One I'll be looking to order.*

Along the way, I also tried the *2009 Skuttlebutt Savvy Sauvignon Blanc* (4/5 \$18). It's a low alcohol easy-drinking style that'll attract its share of fans, though it didn't convince me.





That made three out of three for the day. When we made our way outside, I wasn't too optimistic about future prospects.

Lunch beckoned, and given the fact that I needed a break from the tasting bit, we decided to try **The Berry Farm**, which turned out to be just the ticket on the tucker front. At the same time, *Madam* caught plenty of shutter action with the abundant birdlife.

After lunch, we diverted to **Chalice Bridge**, which I'd neglected to note was open *by appointment*.

Our arrival was greeted by a large and extremely aggressive dog which ruled out investigation of the area just in case.

That meant we made our way back to **Rockfield**, which was pleasant without hitting the stellar heights I'd experienced earlier in the day.

Lack of scribbled notes makes further comment impossible.

From there, we took a drive out to the surf before making our way back to **Cape Mentelle**, where the palate tiredness kicked in big time.

That's not to belittle the wines, which I thought rated very highly, particularly on the white side of the ledger. I probably need to go back to at the start of the day.





The *2010 Georgiana Sauvignon Blanc* (4/5 \$16) had a varietal nose, one to hit in the near future. So was the *2009 Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (4.5/5 \$25.50) a version of the region's prime white blend that was very easy drinking.

The *2008 Chardonnay* (5/5 \$44), on the other hand, was a wonderfully complex barrel-fermented style with abundant oak on the nose that didn't muscle its way into things when the wine hit the palate. Nicely structured, and I could be a big fan.

The *2006 Marsanne Roussanne* (4/5 \$28) on the other hand, while pleasant, paled in comparison to the Tahbilk take on the two Rhone varieties. Not for mine, and the apricot-heavy *2008 Viognier* (3.5/5 \$28) rated similarly.

Of the reds, the *2008 Marmaduke* (4/5 \$16) was a light soft spicy style, very much an immediate future or medium-term prospect. I liked the *2008 Sangiovese* (4/5 \$25) without looking at a purchase.

As noted elsewhere, I'd been underwhelmed by the Cabernet Merlot blends. While the *Trinders 2007 Cabernet Merlot* (4/5 \$29) had its strong points, particularly on the palate in the tannin department, there wasn't enough to overcome increasing scepticism about the blend.

We'd both been looking forward to trying the *2007 Zinfandel* (4/5 \$49). It turned out to be a muscular style with substantial layers of mixed notes on the nose, the sort of thing that demands attention and isn't for the faint-hearted. Interesting to sample, but....





Finally, the *2006 Cabernet Sauvignon* (4/5 \$84) with a long finish and structured tannins rounded things off nicely and had me wandering outside convinced that I wasn't in the market to sample anything else for the day.

On reflection, **Cape Mentelle** was a repeat of what happened at **Vasse Felix** the day before. I desperately wanted to be amazed and impressed but ended up underwhelmed.

If we're back in the area, I'll be revisiting both.

But I'll be doing so at the start, rather than towards the end, of the day.



It was still daylight, so we ventured out to the beach at the mouth of the **Margaret River**, where *Madam* snapped away.

While she did, I sat back to take in the views, impressed by the lack of visible human structures.

Most of the coast between **Cape Naturaliste** and **Cape Leeuwin** is **National Park**.

The authorities deserve credit for the care and consideration they have exercised when excising sections of the park for commercial and residential development.

There's a rugged and unspoilt beauty along the shores with their multitude of surf breaks that I don't recall seeing in similar circumstances on the east coast.

It's not as if I'm some sort of *I've been everywhere* expert. Still, the human aspect (as in high rise residential and such) in these parts was conspicuous by a conspicuous absence.

We made our way into town for a spell, and a while scribbling *Travelogue* notes.

Then we headed back out to the coast around dusk for the sunset across the **Indian Ocean**.

It wasn't as spectacular as it could have been with better cloud conditions, but you can't have everything.

Madam wasn't in the market for a substantial dinner, so back in town, I picked up a curry, and that was it for the night.

No way were we going to be walking anywhere.

After attempts to fill in the backlog of banked up reminiscences, I was in bed reasonably early with substantially reduced plans for tasting on the last day in **Margaret River**.

Friday, 27 August

Most people probably wouldn't choose leftover *Beef Vindaloo* for breakfast. Still, most people probably wouldn't have selected it for dinner the night before.

Most people would also probably suspect *Hughesy* would have been pencilling in a frantic rush around as many wineries as possible.

After all, this was our last day in **Margaret River**, and we planned to be on the road to **Singleton Beach** by two at the very latest,

That's not, however, the way I was thinking.

For a start, we needed to pick up thank you gifts for friends back east, and I'd already decided that we were going to be lunching, if possible, at **Cullen Wines**.

We hadn't booked, but I figured if we were there early enough (say, around a quarter to twelve), we should be able to snag a table for two.

We also had to fuel the chariot, so I figured we could take our time, lob at **Cullen** just after eleven, do the tasting bit and be right at the head of the queue for lunch.

After that, we could possibly visit somewhere, and there was a possible spot on the highway towards **Busselton**, so it was more or less a matter of filling in time till **Cullen** time.

The shopping bit took about as long as you'd expect, fuelling the car wasn't a hassle. Just after ten, we were on the road.

There was, of course, a contingency plan.

As we turned onto **Metricup Road**, I was navigating towards **Fermoy Estate**.

The winery is described by **Mr Halliday** as *happy to keep a relatively low profile, however difficult that may be given the quality of the wines*.

Sounded like my kind of place.

There was a possible fall back in **Pierro**, but I figured **Fermoy** would do in the pre-Cullen department.

There are times when you pick up a vibe about a place, and **Fermoy** was one such occasion.

Madam dropped me at the **Cellar Door** and turned the chariot back along **Metricup Road**, where she'd noted the presence of a **chocolate factory**.

Inside, I found a friendly, but new to the establishment attendant who I hope they have the sense to hold on to.

As indicated, she hadn't been there long, readily admitted to things she wasn't sure of, and still did an excellent job of guiding the interested taster through the range.

Professionally, I'd put her on a par with the **Cellar Door** people at **Houghton**, **Lenton Brae** and **Stella Bella**.

I started with the *2008 Estate Semillon* (4.5/5 \$22) a nicely lemony number with an excellent mouthfeel.

While I wasn't as quite taken with the *2009 Semillon Sauvignon Blanc* (4/5 \$20) picking up the regulation regional nose, it was still an impressive style with a long finish.

The *2009 Sauvignon Blanc* (4/5 \$22) was impressive as well, and prompted the usual remarks and shaking of the head over the Kiwi Savalanche. Yes, I know they do it well over there. Still, several Australian operations produce something right in the same ballpark.

The Chardonnays were equally impressive.

The *2007 Estate Chardonnay* (4.5/5 \$22) was an understated, refined style I really liked and the *2009 Geographe Chardonnay* (4/5 \$16) was an impressive summery unwooded quaffer that could well be a reorder candidate. We shall see.



At \$72/case there was no delay ordering a box of *2008 Naturaliste Shiraz* (4/5 but outstanding value for money in a lighter style).

Thank heaven for cancelled export orders.

The *2009 Geographe Shiraz* (4/5 \$16) was another one in a lighter mode. I thought it was value for money, and the third Shiraz, the *2008 Fermoy* (4.5/5 \$22) was a rounded, fresh style that ran over the palate very nicely indeed. Another one to remember, as was the *2007 Nebbiolo* (4.5/5 \$30) a classy balancing act in the lighter style with varietal style and savoury tannins.

The *2008 Merlot* (5/5 \$30) was very much the way *Merlot* should be but often isn't, while the *2008 Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot* (4/5 \$20) was, I thought, a bit young but had things in place to improve with age.

The *2008 Cabernet Sauvignon* (4/5 \$30) was also on the young side, and I note Mr Halliday rated it 94 with a *drink to 2023*. One to give some time if I can generate some space in the wine fridge.

I also tried the *2010 Verdelho* and a *Rose*. Both were too sweet for mine and were conspicuously absent from the website and the printed price list.

While it'd be going too far to suggest *Hughesy* was determined to like what he found at **Cullen Wines**, I'd been careful to eliminate any risk factors.

I'd taken my time at **Fermoy**, and was at peace with the world when we rolled into the car park.





As one of the pioneers of **Margaret River** winemaking the winery has plenty of historical significance.

But that's not going to count for much if the wine isn't up to scratch.

I was particularly keen on the fact that they moved from conventional viticulture to organics.

The winery subsequently gained *biodynamic certification*. They're also the first winery in Australia certified as *carbon neutral*.

After sighting bikes displaying a variety of flags in the courtyard, I spotted a French couple inside.

On the other side of the tasting room, there seemed to be disagreement on the subject of cork versus the screw cap.

While you try not to tune into neighbouring conversations, there are times when the temptation becomes too great.

Given the care that has obviously gone into the winemaking side of things, I would have thought the decision to go for the screw cap spoke for itself.

Still, some people apparently can't be convinced.





I was expecting to be impressed.

From the starting *2010 Margaret River White* (4.5/5 \$19) a variation on the traditional *Bordeaux* blend of *Sauvignon Blanc* and *Semillon* with a splash of *Chardonnay*, I wasn't disappointed. It's a blend for the short term with remarkable depth on the palate in a wine that registers 12% alc/vol.

The *2008 Mangan Vineyard Semillon* (4.5/5 \$19), a slightly oaked style came across powerfully on the nose, and the depth of flavour on the palate matched the bouquet.

My notes for the next two, the *2009 Mangan Vineyard Semillon Sauvignon Blanc* and *2009 Cullen Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc Semillon* (both 5/5 \$35) read, respectively *Forget the rest. \$35 and worth every cent* and *Hard to say which to prefer. Solution? Buy both. Minerality, citrus notes, and absolutely fantastic.*

Then there was the *2008 Kevin John Chardonnay* (5/5 \$75) which started off somewhat restrained on the nose and subsequently opened out magnificently. Iconic, with a significant *Wow* factor.

It came as no surprise to learn that it picked up the *World's Best Chardonnay* gong at the recent ***Decanter*** awards.

Somehow I suspect the order will be going in too late to pick one up, but at least I've tried it.

Moving on to the reds the *2008 Margaret River Red* (4.5/5 \$24) was a lovely softer style, eminently drinkable at just 12%.





The *2008 Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot* (4.5/5 \$39) was another more delicate rounded style, the perfect antidote to *Cab Merlot* satiety. I'd been going off the blend, but the soft tannins and depth of flavour here brought me back into the fold. There's a smidgen of *Petit Verdot* and *Cabernet Franc* in there as well

Then there's the *2008 Mangan*, a *Merlot, Petit Verdot Malbec* blend (5/5 \$45) which left me speechless and the *2008 Diana Madeline* (5/5 \$105), the flagship red. If the *Mangan* left me speechless, how on earth would I try to describe this one apart from a single word. *Wonderful*. And that's in the absolute sense of *full of wonder*.

From the **Cellar Door**, we made our way into the restaurant for lunch. The selections from the daily specials rather than the regular spring menu were outstanding.

A potato and leek soup that wasn't quite to die for, but wasn't far off was followed by a roast venison dish that was simply divine.

Once we'd paid the bill, as we made our way to the vehicle *Madam* asked if I felt like going anywhere else.

As indicated above, there were a couple of places I'd filed away as possibilities, but after one of the most excellent experiences of my tasting life, what was the point?

Predictably, I spent the first part of the three-and-a-bit hour drive sedately sated.





There was a diversion for more beach photos before we left Margaret River and another leg-stretching pause at the **Busselton Jetty**.

After Bunbury, we parted company with our previous route, heading along the **Old Coast Road** and enjoying scenery which was a marked improvement on what was on offer on the freeway.

The older road was indelibly etched in *Karen's* memory banks as well, and we navigated our way into **Singleton Beach** without incident.

Arriving on the doorstep, we found the place deserted, though the front door was unlocked.

A check revealed I'd neglected to turn on the mobile before we left **Margaret River**. When that oversight was remedied, I found a text asking for an *E.T.A.*

It took a while to get a response.

So I indulged the imagination in worst-case scenarios while *Madam* made a photographic excursion to the beach.

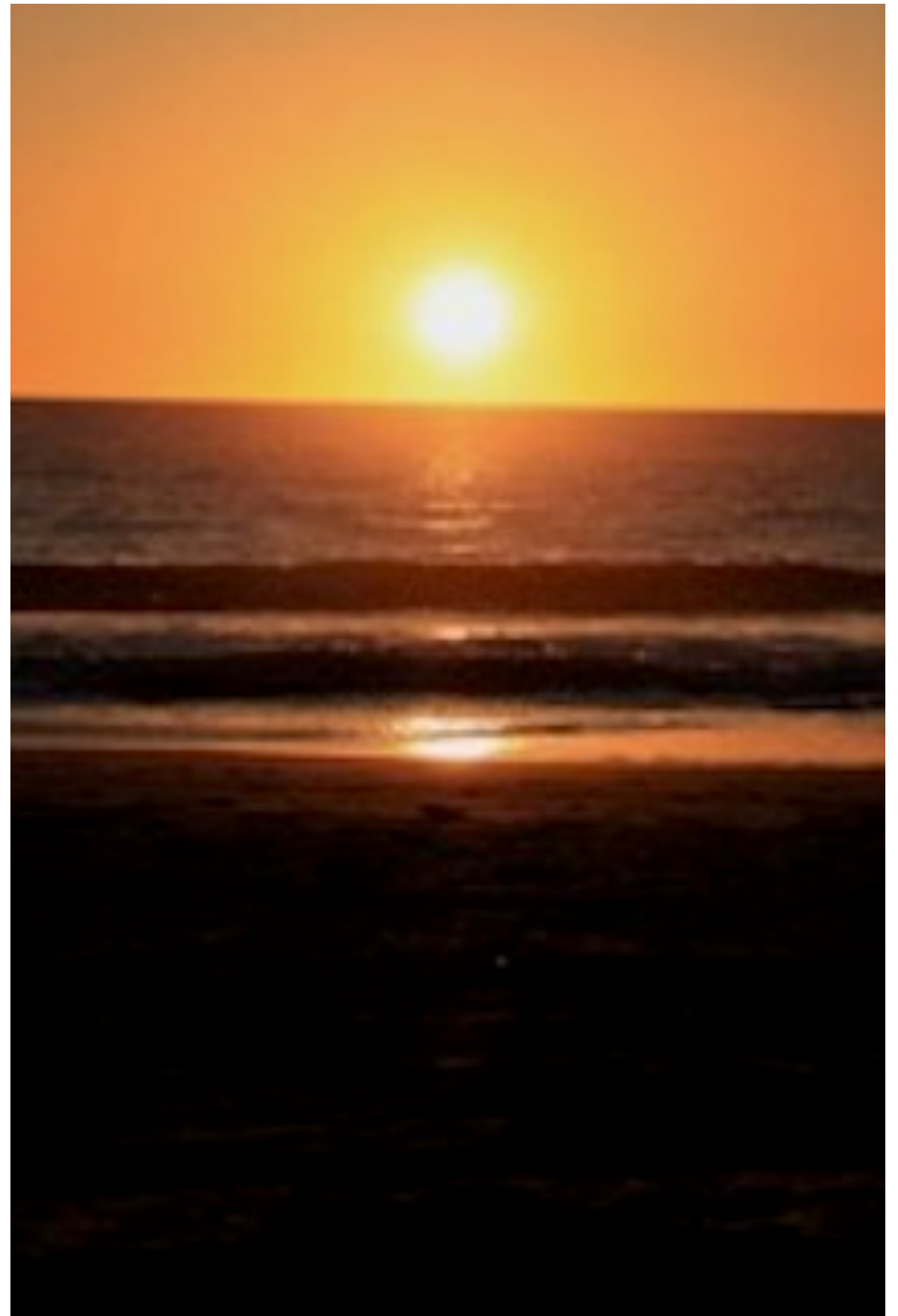
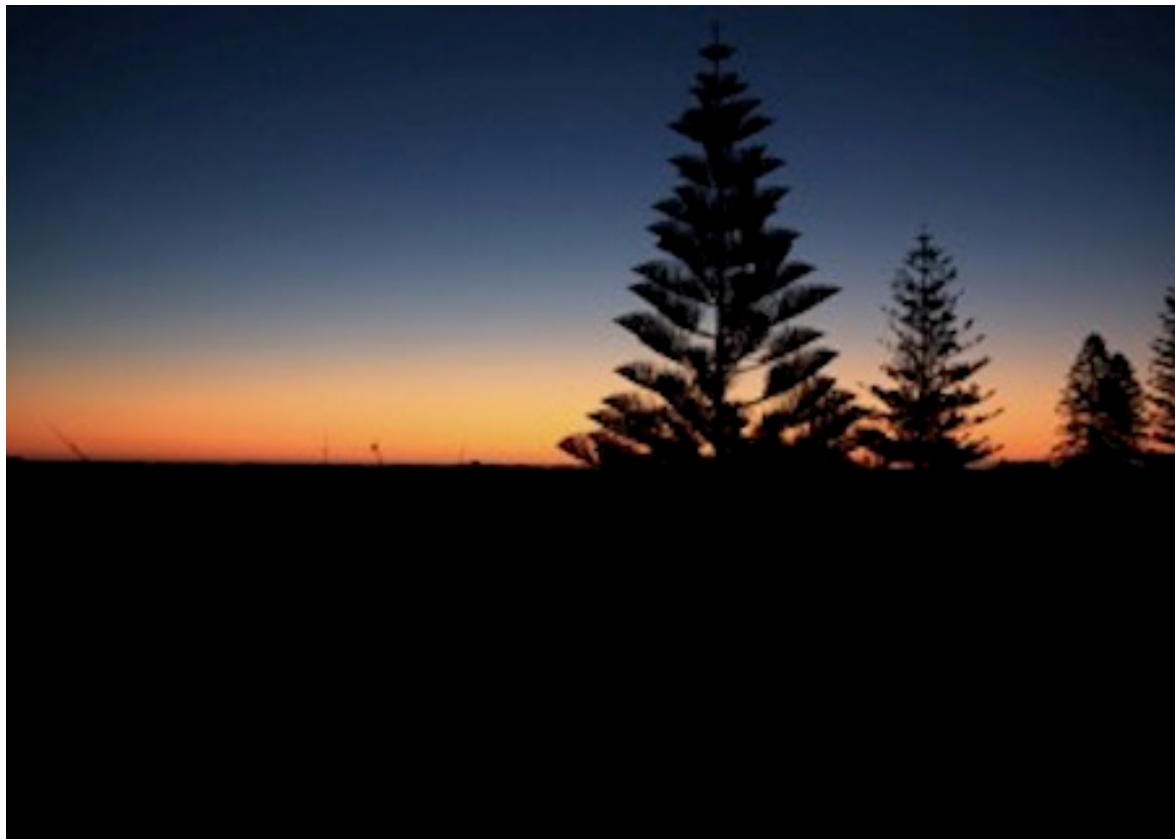
The explanation, when it arrived, was predictably prosaic. Given an errand that needed to be done by five, *Elaine* waited for a response to her inquiry.

It failed to come by four, so she left a note on the front door, and headed off on the errand.

A complicating factor was the presence of two front doors.

I'd gone to the wrong one, so I hadn't sighted the note. In any case, it was a minor hiccup.

We spent a relaxed evening after a visit to the local fish and chippery, heading off to the cot at a reasonably early hour before our last full day away.



Homeward Bound

Saturday, 28 August

Part of the logic behind spending Friday night just south of **Perth** was an easy run in to deliver the vehicle back to **Bayswater** by midday.

As it turned out, it's just as well.

If I'd made the same navigational mistake when we were really pushed for time, the results could have been, not disastrous *as such*, but certainly less than optimal.

Much of the confusion related to the need to navigate around one-way streets and *no right turns* into a service station.





As it turned out, *just leave the car in the car park on Saturday arvo* looked more secure than it sounded over the phone.

In any case, we were back in time, the paperwork was concluded, and we had twelve hours to kill before the **Red Eye Express** left **Perth**.

I would've been happy to find somewhere to sit and scribble.

Since I'm tapping out this section of *Travelogue* close to a month later that point of view seems justified.

Various illness and incidental instances have been part of the delay. Still, I was more than aware of the backlog facing me after a fortnight away.

Madam, on the other hand, wanted to be out and about and unearthed the existence of the **Citiplace Rest Centre**.

For \$10, we could hire a locker to stow the luggage and set out for places that weren't totally specified, but would undoubtedly include **Kings Park**.

Other cities may have similar facilities, but if they have, I've yet to identify them.

I would have been quite happy to sit in the facilities at **Citiplace** and scribble away.

Still, off we went, in search of lunch and nature photography.

We kicked around a couple of options, and could well, had *Hughesy* been more manipulative, have ended up lunching at **Tom's Kitchen**.

Instead, we found our way to the **cafe at Kings Park**, where lunch was late enough to push later mealtimes back.

As a result, the evening meal, which might or might not materialise depending on the airport's catering arrangements) became less of an issue.

While *Madam* took herself around the landscape for the next two hours, I sat down and made as much progress on scrawling the backlog as time permitted.

As the sunset loomed on the horizon, it was time to head back into the city, where we reclaimed the luggage and spent some time taking it easy in **Citiplace**.

Faced with three options to get us out to **Perth Airport**, we ended up going for the slowest.

Yes, a taxi might have got us out there quicker, but there would be time to kill to fill in the void before the check-in process was scheduled to start.

Yes, we could have gone somewhere for dinner, but that late lunch then became a factor.

After close to a fortnight of not quite gastronomic excess but certainly dietary intake far more than at home, I wasn't interested in pushing the envelope any further.

Alternatively, we could have rendezvoused with the airport shuttle. That was probably probably cheaper but raised the same dietary issues and added the question of where to meet the shuttle.

It's not like we could specify the front door of the hotel.

The best option, as it turned out, was regular public transport, and a meandering ride through some of Perth's lesser socioeconomic zones.

That's not a put-down.

People who can afford not to live under airport flight paths usually prefer not to.

Those factors would be exacerbated by late-night departures, but you would presumably learn to sleep through it.

It's a couple of blocks between **Citiplace** and the bus stops.

We set off through the gathering dark, arriving just after one bus had departed. It seemed like a good half-hour before the next one came.

The trip itself was unremarkable, though had we been travelling another day at another time things may have been different.

Seven-thirty on a Saturday night is not, as you may suspect, prime *people moving time*.

That still put us into **Departures** with two hours till check-in time.

So the scribbling resumed, broken by an investigation into the coffee shop possibilities.

That check revealed that the cooked items on the menu weren't available after six.

As a result, after that short break, it was back to the scribble.

But, eventually, the appropriate times roll around.

With the luggage out of the way, we made our way through Security with the inevitable questionable object identified in the carryon placed there by *Madam*.

On the way out of **Townsville**, it was a pair of scissors, in Perth two umbrellas.

Equally predictably, she was selected for the random wand-wave for traces of explosive.

Upstairs in the **Departure Lounge**, there was a chance to sneak in an ale, but at airport prices, you're not going to kill time at the bar.

In hindsight, I probably should've gone two or three more as a sleeping draught, but there you go.

Postscript

While the overnight **Red Eye Express** from **Perth** to **Brisbane** wasn't anywhere near as painful as it could have been it's still not something I'm looking to repeat any time soon.

The previous day's meal arrangements had *Hughesy* moderately famished on arrival.

They were enough to move the *big cooked breakfast* from *Regulation* to *Mandatory* status.

Once that had been demolished, we headed off to the relevant **Departure Lounge**.

An encounter with a former colleague did an excellent job of killing the remaining time before the final leg of the trip.

We got updates on the gossip when *Miss Behaviour* collected us from the airport.

Once we'd collected the car, a refuelling stop at **Home Hill** had us lobbing on the doorstep of the **Little House of Concrete** around three.

From there, once we'd opened the place up and the computer had finished updating, backing up, downloading and all the other things it does automatically, it was time to settle down and start tapping out the details I'd scribbled down *en route*.

That ended up taking far longer than it could have done, thanks to a bout of flu, and the predictable interruptions and distractions.

Once I've finished adding this addendum to the *Travelogue* the next task is to add the **R.I.P.** I started in Sydney about six and a half weeks ago to the **Music pages**.

In hindsight, a couple of things stand out.

First up, the **Indian Pacific** is one of those things you really should do at some stage.

And it's the sort of thing you could do again in a few years, travelling in the opposite direction or at a different time of year.

If you're interested in wildflowers, the **Western Flora Caravan & Tourist Park** is a must-do.

Wine aficionados should add **Margaret River**, and specifically **Cullen Wines**, to the list of things to do.