HEADING SOUTH

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HEADING SOUTH

FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA BY RAIL

TIM RICHARDS

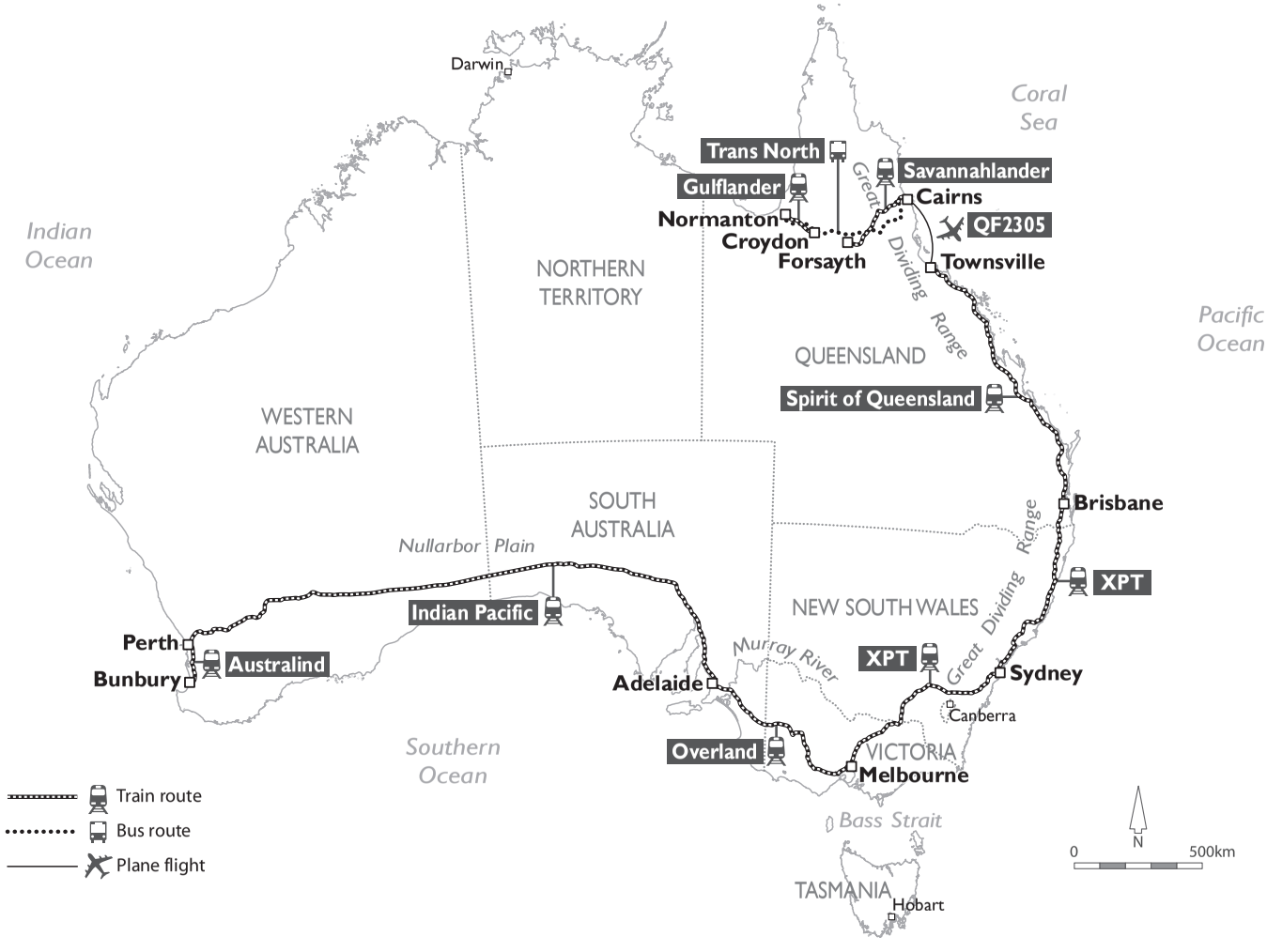
FREMANTLE PRESS

To Narrelle for standing by me

To George Stephenson for his marvellous invention

and

To the colonial engineers who provided Australia with a dizzying array of rail gauges and gave me something to talk about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Normanton
QF2305
Croydon
Forsayth
Townsville
Great Dividing Range
Indian Ocean
NORTHERN TERRITORY
Pacific Ocean
QUEENSLAND
Spirit of Queensland
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
Brisbane
Nullarbor Plain
XPT
Indian Pacific
NEW SOUTH WALES
Perth
Australind
Bunbury
Murray River
XPT
Great Dividing Range
Sydney
Adelaide
Canberra
Southern Ocean
Overland
VICTORIA
Melbourne
Bass Strait
Train route
Bus route
Plane flight
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Introduction

This journey came about because of a map, and a crisis.

Many countries have a national rail company that handles long-distance train journeys. For such countries, from such companies, there will be a full network map upon which one's mind can luxuriate: the eye darting here and there, up and down lines, across country, imagining possible rail treks and the destinations along the way. Such fantasies of planning, for trips that might never eventuate, are some of the greatest pleasures of travel, without all the fuss and bother of actually going anywhere. Although I am no armchair traveller, I've often shared Samuel Johnson's sentiment on beholding the Giant's Causeway in Ireland: 'Worth seeing, but not worth going to see.' I particularly enjoy long-distance rail travel, something I've indulged in on five continents. As I've written more than once, to me, trains are vastly superior to planes, cars and buses, especially over distance. In a train you're *in* the landscape, but not *of* the landscape – observing everything as you pass through, unimpeded, along the rails.

In Australia, passenger rail travel is largely the province of state governments, so the network maps are limited in scope. But one day I was gazing upon a non-official map created by Australian Rail Maps, on its website at railmaps.com.au. It laid out all the long-distance rail services across the continent, and was tantalising in its possibilities. There were the various inland trains of Queensland, peeling away from the Cairns–Brisbane spine. There were the spiders' legs of lines radiating out from Sydney and Melbourne, touching at Albury-Wodonga. There were the famous transcontinental trains that linked Adelaide, Perth and Darwin to the east-coast networks.

I puzzled over the routes, fancifully devising lengthy rail trips via the possible connections, and a thought came to me: 'What would be the longest rail journey you could take in Australia, without backtracking?' My eye was drawn to the north-east and south-west extremes of the map, from the privately run *Savannahlander* train in Far North Queensland to the state-run *Australind* train in south-west Western Australia. As the crow flies, their respective termini of Forsayth and Bunbury are over 3,200 kilometres apart. By rail, they would be seven trains and 7,725 kilometres apart, equivalent to about a fifth of the circumference of the planet … It would be the long way round, via a variety of terrains and climates: sparsely treed savannah, tropical rainforest, the sandy Pacific coast, sheep-farming plains, wine country, wheatfields and treeless desert. The route would also include all five mainland state capitals, as well as big regional cities such as Cairns and Bunbury, and tiny settlements between them. And while in Far North Queensland, one could tack on the separate *Gulflander* train, the oddest experience of the lot. I yearned to take this journey, to see Australia's diversity from a train window, to meet people along the way, and to break up my journey with excursions to overlooked places related to the railways or my pet interests.

As for the crisis, it was a slow-motion one. I'd been working as a freelance travel writer for almost fifteen years, and it felt as though my job was slowly collapsing. The internet was doing a number on the business models of print publications, which provided the bulk of my income, and in the past two years my income had started to decline. This situation had undermined my confidence and motivation. I needed to try something new, and researching this book was it. I sensed it was a journey I'd have to do alone; though I often travelled with my wife, Narrelle Harris, this trip was going to be introspective and filled with note-taking – not the ideal jaunt for a couple. I would, however, see her again when I reached Melbourne, at roughly the midpoint of the trek. For I had decided to do it: book the trains and travel from

the tropical north to the temperate south-west by rail. With a few days at Normanton, my starting point, plus breaks in the big cities and a stay with my family in Western Australia, the entire trek would take six weeks.

This is my account of that epic train trip, and of the places I went and the people I fleetingly met while undertaking it. It was the latter that most surprised me. I'd been focusing on the locations, but it was inevitably the men and women in them that lent meaning and joy to the journey, and solace when things went wrong. Writing the account of my journey cheered me up about the apparent decline of travel writing, and made me feel there was still a place for my kind of work. How could a popular online resource like Tripadvisor relate the experiences I'd had in my progress around the continent? Travel wasn't an atomised selection of individual attractions, as such sites would have you believe, but a continuity of thoughts, feelings and encounters. A narrative. And here it is.

It didn't turn out to be Australia's longest train journey, by the way. When I researched track distances, it turned out a route from Mount Isa to Darwin would have been marginally longer than the one I followed. But that would have meant skipping the Cairns-connected trains, and all of Western Australia. And there seemed a neat symmetry in travelling from the far north-east to the far south-west – the diagonal extremes of the continent. Even then, I didn't manage to travel the entire route as I'd intended.

I'd envisaged the journey as a kind of triumphant progress: gazing upon my conquered lands as they slid past, metaphorically waving at my subjects, the smooth motion of each train bearing me onward. This was hubris, plain and simple, and the experience of the nineteenth-century explorers Burke and Wills – whose path I would cross more than once on my expedition – should have prepared me for what happened next. It did not go entirely to plan.

But then, travel never does.

Normanton

If a crocodile the size of Krys attacked, I'd be doomed.

I was sitting in the shelter next to the Norman River boat ramp on a quiet Sunday afternoon, taking notes, when my eye was caught by a sign near the water featuring 'ACHTUNG' in black lettering. The German word was more noticeable than the red 'WARNING' in English above it. The rest of the sign stated casually that a saltwater crocodile had been sighted here recently and people should keep away from the water's edge. Well crikey, as Steve Irwin would have said. I relocated to the picnic area several metres further back, and scoped out a place to climb higher should a crocodile attack.

This line of thought was becoming a habit in Normanton, a remote town of 1,200 people near the Gulf of Carpentaria in Far North Queensland, ten hours drive west of Cairns. I was marking time there until the weekly run of the *Gulflander* train, and had been growled at by a lot of dogs as I walked around the township (eccentrically, as everyone else drove). Just the day before I'd been sitting in the empty Normanton railway station when I'd heard, rising in volume, the barking of many angry dogs. They were domesticated animals, I'd assumed, and maybe safely behind a fence somewhere nearby – but I didn't fancy taking my chances. I'd looked around casually for a place to escape from an enraged pack, and had sighted an old carriage once used to transport maintenance crews. I could be up the metal rungs of its ladder

before any dogs could reach me, then fend them off with my large black boots. Sorted.

Bouts of animal-based peril should seem surprising at the start of a series of journeys by train, a mode of transport not usually associated with danger. But it was clearly hard to fully tame the Australian outback, and that lingering wildness was appealing to a big-city boy like me.

Not that I wanted to meet the now-here, now-not crocodile. Next to the shire office in the centre of town was a life-sized model of Krys, at 8.63 metres in length the biggest recorded crocodile ever shot in the region. If anything like that showed up, that would be the end of my round-Australia rail journey before it had started. But if the croc was of smaller dimensions, I could possibly scramble to the top of the inclined exercise bench behind me. There was also an old crane set in concrete by the wharf. Though further away, it would be easy to climb.

Tension, though likely to be unfulfilled. Travel is like this, full of 'what might have been' moments that mean nothing in the end, but add grotesque savour.

'What if I'd been in New York City on 9/11?'

'I was in Christchurch a few months before the big earthquake.'

'We passed a burnt-out car that had been bombed in Cairo.'

'I once snorkelled in the same spot Steve Irwin died.'

'That woman was bitten by a snake exactly where I'd been walking the day before.'

Travellers probably used to spout self-dramatising hypotheticals about visiting Honolulu on 7 December 1941, or taking a stroll through Sarajevo on 28 June 1914.

The crocodile never turned up, as it happened, though small black flies crawled annoyingly over my face when they felt they could get away with it, and at one point a kite flew under the canopy of the picnic area, hunting for small mammals. Mostly I was alone, sitting near what had once had been a busy rail wharf transferring goods from boats onto waiting trains. It was a soothing experience, despite the heat and my little insect friends.

Jake, a barman at the Albion, the pub where I was staying, had given me a card for Gulf Getabout. It promised to be 'Like a taxi, but *better*!' I rang and asked them to pick me up from the river. It beat walking back into town, and there was another local creature I wanted to meet before I left: a fish on a stick. Mel the driver chauffeured me through the late wet-season heat to the Big Barra, Normanton's entry in Australia's fabled pantheon of Big Things (Krys didn't count, being life-sized). It was a huge replica of a barramundi, standing upright on its tail, outside a motel. Barramundi fishing was a popular pursuit around here.

On the way back into town, Mel swung onto the other side of the road to let me photograph the town's welcome sign:

> Welcome to Normanton
> Population small
> We love them all
> Drive carefully

What was I doing here, I wondered, in a moment of doubt. Because I'd decided to embark on this rail trek in the first week of March, I'd arrived in Normanton at the tail end of the tropical north's wet season. So far, the season had been a less-than-damp squib, but in the past few days the rains had kicked in and threatened the running of the *Gulflander* train from Normanton to Croydon. As the Gulf Savannah region was so flat, heavy rainfall to the south took its time to meander north to the Gulf of Carpentaria, making for unpredictable rises in the various rivers that intersected rails and roads. On the way out from Cairns to Normanton by bus, I'd almost been stranded on the wrong side of the rising Gilbert River. If the rains continued, the tracks could be covered to an extent that the train's weekly run would be cancelled. If the roads were also flooded, I could fly out of Normanton to Cairns – but that would mean skipping my first two trains (the *Gulflander* and the *Savannahlander*), thus falling at the first hurdle. Would I really be on that train out of

town on Wednesday? I hoped so. There was something curiously attractive about small, remote places such as Normanton, far from city life and the stresses of the twenty-four-hour media cycle. Every day I spent in the place, I could feel the horizons of my universe contracting. Leave it long enough and I'd get used to being here, buy a cheap old shack and spend my days propping up the bar of the Purple Pub in the middle of town, cursing the flies and the humidity and the barking dogs. And what's more, I'd probably like it. (Pushing Akubra hat up onto the back of my head, sipping beer, muttering under my breath about the heat.)

###

'Business is down a bit since the kitchen caught fire,' Frog had said ruefully on Friday when I'd arrived in Normanton, 'But we're cooking stuff on the barbecue and it's going all right.'

After dropping my backpack in my room I'd soon ended up at the bar with Frog, the publican of the Albion Hotel, and his part-kelpie, Toots. He had earlier shown me the blackened, unusable rear section of the old building.

I shook my head in sympathy, hoping its disordered state wasn't a metaphor for my onward itinerary, and ordered another beer.

The Albion was a hotel that had once been a blacksmith's shop. It was a classic country pub and Frog a big, genial bloke in a rugby shirt.

We were surrounded by men in battered Akubra hats and rugby tops. Some looked like they'd just come from work, others were older retired blokes. It all felt very familiar – part of the Aussie cultural canon from 'Waltzing Matilda' to *Crocodile Dundee* – but I also felt like an alien. I wasn't familiar with the Queensland beer brands or the state's glass sizes, and I hardly ever paid cash for anything in Melbourne, so I fumbled around trying to order. Beer in hand at last, I discovered Frog and I had both lived in Perth around the same time, when he had been a

member of the SAS. Its headquarters on the Indian Ocean coast was famously adjacent to a nudist beach beyond the adjoining dunes, on federal land rather than state. The Western Australian capital was on my route, as it happened, nearly 8,000 kilometres and several weeks away: a reminder of how big this country was, and yet Frog's story, and mine, illustrated how casually people relocated within it.

In my room, I reflected that the Albion wouldn't be an unbearable place to while away a few days until the *Gulflander*'s next scheduled run. Though it had an old-fashioned motel look of lurid coverlets and painted concrete walls, my room was well maintained and large, with a double bed and two singles. I'd be there five days in total, only because of my overdeveloped sense of caution. The bus I'd used to travel from Cairns ran roughly every second day, and I hadn't wanted to risk missing the train's weekly departure if a later bus had been cancelled. I also fancied the idea of hanging around somewhere quiet for a change; most of my travel-writing trips were a blur of appointments and note-taking, so quiet time in a nearly-off-the-grid place like Normanton had its appeal.

When I returned to the pub's outdoor deck a few hours later for dinner, it was transformed. The Friday-night Albion had become a community hub, with kids playing on the pub's lawn while their parents had a beer and a meal under madly whirring ceiling fans. The regulars still propped up the bar, but the big back deck was filled with younger people including neatly dressed families. Some of the girls were wearing fairy costumes. I ordered a pizza from a Spanish bartender (one of many working holiday visa holders filling service jobs in the outback) and chose a table near the edge of the deck. Then a nearby group of diners warned me that bees had been swarming around that corner a few minutes before. This random threat lifted my spirits. The caress of humidity by night, the energetic conversation all around, the daggy music on the sound system and random, swarming bees: the outback had not entirely been tamed, after all.

The only fly in the ointment was the rain. If only it would ease just enough for my journey to actually begin. When I asked one of the bar staff to write the pub's wi-fi password on the pizza box I was carrying, Frog came over and said he'd earlier asked Ken, the *Gulflander* driver, about Wednesday's service.

'He reckons the train will run,' he said.

When I finally met Ken a few days later, I asked him what he thought were the chances of the *Gulflander* running as scheduled on Wednesday.

'Fifty-fifty,' he replied.

On Tuesday, that long-hovering coin came down on the right side. Ken's crew checked the entire route that day, and gave it the all clear.

I was on my way.