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LEFT: Charlie Kidd lives on a remote cattle station near Windorah, in Queensland's Channel Country. Charlie's mum Helen, a talented photographer, took this pic of her son having his bath in a water trough.

INTRODUCTION

A weather beaten sheep farmer, who'd gained fame for stumbling across dinosaur bones on his property some years back, said it first.

As David Elliot surveyed the dusty drought stricken paddocks around him near Winton in outback Queensland, I queried why anyone would want to live in such seemingly desolate parts.

He replied without hesitation, 'I belong here, I feel connected and everyone needs to belong somewhere. I belong in Winton, and that's it.'

It was one of our very first Back Roads shoots. We weren't to know that his heartfelt sentiment would be echoed again and again by the many characters we'd meet in the years ahead, as Back Roads travelled the breadth and depth of this vast country.

They said it in different ways, some more eloquently than others, but there was never any doubting their sincerity.

On the edge of Victoria's high country near Yackandandah, young Moira Dale explained from the comfort of her couch on a cold winter afternoon that the only thing she'd change about her life would be to move closer to the fireplace.

In Ceduna in South Australia, Bev Bedson rejoiced in not having to put on a front for anybody. She could be what she wanted to be. Indeed, she'd progressed from her first job as cleaner at a satellite station to pretty much running the joint on her own.

At the rough and ready Glengarry 'Hilton' pub in New South Wales, opal miner Daniel McDermott told us over a beer how he felt so accepted there. He knew everyone, no one judged him and that helped him to accept himself. Daniel called himself a second generation victim of war because his father had suffered radiation poisoning in Japan. Daniel had no fingers on one hand and just a few on the other. →





PREVIOUS PAGE: A colourful new tradition has become part of life in the New South Wales town of Hay, and it's just as action-packed as the long-running rodeo. The Rainbow on the Plains – the Hay Mardi Gras – has been life-changing for many locals, such as Chadd Hancock (left) and Domenic Scarfone (right) as well as bringing in tourists to recharge the local economy.

BELOW: When singer and songwriter Asta Binnie was growing up in Tasmania, she busked on the streets of Cygnet, her hometown. The seaside hamlet, in southern Tasmania's Huon Valley, has undergone some big changes with runaways from the city flooding into the town. Asta is inspiring other young Tassie talent to pursue their dreams.

LEFT: What a spread! Most of the residents of Harrow in western Victoria, were invited to celebrate the 90th birthday of Margaret Grigg. Margaret is the number one fan and scorekeeper for the Harrow Balmoral netball team, travelling hundreds of kilometres every winter to support the local players.





HOW'S THE SERENITY



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PREVIOUS PAGE:

Beauty is everywhere. Biloela in Queensland might be a working town, known for its mining and meatworks, but there are plenty of serene spaces and that famous big Queensland sky.

LEFT: Our crew came across this old miners' cottage in the abandoned gold mining town of Kiandra, on the Snowy Mountains Highway, New South Wales. It is known to be the birthplace of skiing in Australia, when Norwegian miners made their own skis during the winter of 1861. Sadly, this area was badly damaged during the 2020 Australian bushfire season.

When I was a young teenager at boarding school in Geelong, homesick for my family and the farm, it was the familiar and comforting sounds I missed just as much as the landscape.

The bleating of sheep at dusk in the dry flat paddocks, cicadas in the gumtrees at the height of a long summer, the chirping of magpies at sunrise as the kettle whistled on the old AGA stove in the kitchen, dogs scratching at the backdoor, ready to be fed, the crackling of the fire on a winter evening and the chatter and chuckles of parents, siblings and friends sitting around the fireplace or the dining room table.

You don't need silence to find serenity. But you do need the feeling of certainty that you're in the right place – whether it's home, or countryside you don't live in but get to visit whenever you can. Maybe you've just stumbled across it fleetingly on your travels and would love to return one day.

Listen and watch closely, and you'll find many of the sounds and images of my childhood on Back Roads episodes, captured perfectly by our sound recordists and cameramen.

We frequently come across sights and sounds that are typical of so many farming communities right around Australia and take me back in a flash to where I grew up. It might be something as simple as a tumbledown shed, an old windmill, a deserted railway track, or driving along a dirt back road similar to the one that led to our place. It could be the historic main street of Clunes in Victoria – built around the same time as my hometown of Murchison – or a bonfire gathering of friends and neighbours at Dalkeith Station near Longreach in outback Queensland, aimed at taking the edge off years of debilitating drought. →



**THIS FACE
TELLS A
STORY**



ABOVE: Traditional owner, May Nango, took Back Roads to catch a fish at a secluded billabong. May grew up in the bush and is a respected elder in the Mirrar Aboriginal clan. Her country stretches from Jabiru, in the Northern Territory, all the way to Arnhem Land.

TOP RIGHT: Radkia Barunga from the Mowanjum community in Derby, in Western Australia's north, is painted in readiness for the Boab Mardi Gras parade.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Duncan McHarg is a bespoke boot and shoemaker in Clunes, Victoria.

BOTTOM FAR RIGHT: Roland Harvey is a clever children's book writer and illustrator. He's recently moved to Fish Creek, Victoria, and set up his studio and shop in the main street.



In the highly multicultural Victorian town of Robinvale by the Murray river, the effervescent Akesa Kei from the local Tongan community quit being the trouble maker at school and instead became a role model heading game development for Sunraysia rugby league and teaching local kids the value of sport. Her broad grin told us she was very happy with her decision.

Then there are the smiling faces trying to move on and not give away disappointment or family tragedy. Abalone diver Brett Menke and his three siblings from the Victorian coastal town of Mallacoota, lost their much loved, energetic and fun loving parents, Gerry and Mary, in the Malaysian Airlines flight 17 shot down over the Ukraine in 2014. Gerry had one of the original abalone diving licences in Mallacoota and his kids are determined to keep the legacy going.

The twilight years tell another story. Eddy Ah Toy, former grocery store owner at Pine Creek in the Northern Territory, has never lost his smile either, even though he's the last Chinese man standing in a town once booming with thousands of Chinese gold seekers back in the 1860s. Now in his eighties, he still cuts a fine figure on the dance floor at the local watering hole on a Saturday night. It was an honour to be his dancing partner when we dropped in back in 2017.

I couldn't say that's an activity that would have remotely interested the grumpy old Kevin 'Tarpot' Oates in the outback Queensland town of Windorah. How could I possibly ignore Tarpot as we were filming around town? He was always sitting on the front of his veranda at the old courthouse on the main corner of Windorah, watching the world go by, frowning at the tourists and our TV camera as well. So I thought I may as well say g'day. 'Don't like visitors, you all ask stupid questions,' he replied.

But the longer I stayed with Tarpot, the more he warmed up. I got to sit on the veranda with him and he even gave me a personal inspection of his free lodgings gifted to him by a mate after he finally retired from being a ringer and stockman at cattle stations in the region. There was just one room, with his single bed serving as a couch as well. In winter he'd throw on an extra swag for warmth as the wind whistled through the timber slats. 'Beggars can't be choosers' he said. 'And you can't miss my place. No one forgets about me.'

So true. Some tourists thought his historic abode was the local museum and bashed on the door to get in. I shudder to think what he told them. But Windorah loved him enough to make sure he was always delivered a pub counter tea every night, no charge. They even ignored his complaints that the food sometimes wasn't hot enough. When he died in 2018, there was a big farewell and many a beer and a rum shared. Because Tarpot was a character no town would want to lose.

RIGHT: Brett Menke comes from a family of abalone divers in Mallacoota, in Victoria's East Gippsland, near the New South Wales border.

NEXT PAGE: Friends Harry Jakamarra and Albert Wiggan share a love of music and the Dampier Peninsula in Western Australia. Albert is from Beagle Bay and is passionate about the conservation of this very special part of Australia.



STATION LIFE





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PREVIOUS PAGE:
A pastel-painted sky as the sun goes down in Mundulla, South Australia.

LEFT: Windorah, Queensland, has long battled drought. Water is precious. Just ask local boy Charlie Kidd, who loves the stuff.

It's billed as the most remote cattle station in Australia and you need to set aside plenty of time to get there.

In fact it's close to a nine hour drive from Alice Springs to Suplejack Downs on the edge of the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory, and that's not allowing for stops or breakdowns on the rough corrugated dirt track shared by road trains heading north, and only the keenest of tourists and travellers.

Suplejack Downs was home to three generations of the Cook family when we stayed there in September 2018 and all of them had to chip in to run the one million acre cattle station – even the youngest of the kids.

As the number of family run stations in Australia dwindles – many of them swallowed up by large corporations – every pair of hands matters.

At Suplejack, empty accommodation for jackaroos and ringers spoke of more prosperous days.

We were there for almost a week and this hot, dusty and unforgiving land settled as a cattle station by Tiani's grandfather in 1964, was clearly a much loved way of life for the Cooks.

The leader of the pack was the highly capable Tiani Cook, a superb horsewoman. Three of her kids were on the station with her, as were her parents, her brother Cam, his wife Leza and their five young children.

They all seemed to thrive on the isolation. Even the long distance education didn't cause too many grumbles in the little schoolroom by the main homestead. Every weekday, the School of the Air based in Alice Springs would crackle to life and only at mustering or other busy times on the station, were any of the school age kids allowed to skip class.

That's the way most children on remote stations have to learn. And they're usually experts at helping their parents when called upon. By the age of seven, all the Cook children knew how to start a bore and change a tyre, and they could all ride horses from the moment they could walk. →