

The Barbiemobile breaks down... again



Penny, right, and Heather chill out



The massive Wolfe Creek Crater

HALLS CREEK TO WOLFE CREEK CRATER, WA

BLOGGER Penny Jones, 30, NSW

The drive

About 300,000 years ago, a piece of universal bric-a-brac charged through our atmosphere and gave Earth an almighty thwack. It created the second largest meteorite crater in the world, Wolfe Creek Crater. My friend Heather and I are heading towards it, having stopped for fuel at Halls Creek – a small town in the heart of the Kimberley region – following a 2987km dusty drive west from Cairns.

At the service station we pick up a young hitchhiker called John but soon regret it. He answers in monosyllables and looks at us as if we're wacko. He's probably right; not many people drive into a desert in a dodgy 1979 Ford Econovan nicknamed "Barbiemobile" to satisfy a fascination for outer space.

And so we begin the bumpy 134km pilgrimage into what's affectionately called the "gafa" (the great Australian fuck all).

During the drive we discuss the terrifying movie *Wolf Creek*. Then, worryingly, the ignition cuts out. It's not lost on us that the murder spree in the film

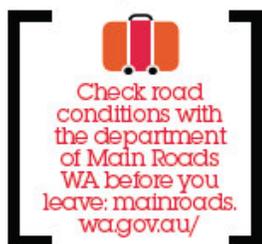
begins when a trio break down in a spot similar to ours. We get it started, but it cuts out several more times before we finally pull into the Wolfe Creek Crater campsite, seven long hours later.

The crater

None of us can sleep that night, so shivering in the pre-dawn chill, we leave the campsite and climb the 35m embankment to the crater's rim. The morning sun illuminates the crater like a giant red plug hole. On impact, the solid iron meteorite would have weighed more than

50,000 tonnes and been travelling at 15km per second – fast enough to cross Australia in five minutes. It would have vapourised and punched an 880m wide, 120m deep hole in the ground. It's scary, but much less so than *Wolf Creek's* crazed bushman with the creepy laugh.

"G'day!" a voice chirps. We're joined by a couple who've driven from Adelaide via Alice Springs and Uluru. The guy turns to John and says, "Yer van sounded ropey last night mate." Heather and I harness our feminist high horses and reply, "It's *our* van." The guy gives his wife a wink, "Girls, I reckon I know what ya problem is, and I said as much to the nag last night," he says, cocking his head towards his wife. "I told her, "They've popped a spark plug."



Check road conditions with the department of Main Roads WA before you leave: mainroads.wa.gov.au/

He winks at us and offers to take a look. Er, is that an under-the-breath chuckle I hear? Before my imagination goes to a nasty place, Heather announces she's going to check the spark plugs while I stare at the crater. Suddenly she revs the engine back to life. Never was there a more beautiful sound.

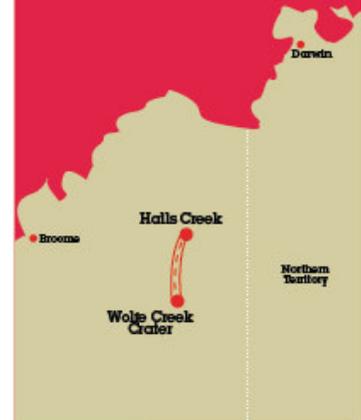
A lasting impression

After a round of high-fives, we pay the ancient, majestic crater a much happier visit. We eagerly scramble down the rocky incline but apart from a few darting lizards, it's as quiet as a cathedral. By 9.30am it's seriously hot and it's time to bid the crater adieu. I have a quiet word with the van whispering, "You've only got 134km to get back to the smooth bitumen, then I promise I'll never take you off-road again." I feel now isn't the time to mention the rest of the 13,500km journey back to Sydney.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE Wolfe Creek Crater is on the edge of the Tanami Desert in Western Australia. It's accessible via the Tanami Road which is signposted on the Great Northern Highway about 18km east of Halls Creek. Drive 112km south along the Tanami Road before turning onto the crater road. It's a further 22km from the Tanami Road to the crater.

THE COST The only costs are fuel and supplies. There is no cost for the campsite. The road is only accessible during the dry season, which runs from May to November. It may be closed during the wet season, which runs from December to April.



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PHOTOGRAPHY: PENNY JONES

Full blog version as seen at yahoo7.com.au/womenshealth



HALLS CREEK TO WOLFE CREEK CRATER, WA

WHO WENT: Penny Jones, 30, NSW

GAFA

I try the ignition for the fourth time, but it's completely dead. Our van has made a valiant effort on the decaying road out here but as we finally pull into the Wolfe Creek Crater campsite, seven hours after leaving the bitumen, it coughs, judders and cuts out. Things had started well. My university friend Heather and I could almost taste the sea air of Broome after a long dusty drive west across the 'top end' from Cairns. The crater is our last big outback adventure before we hit the west coast. After stopping for fuel and supplies at Halls Creek - a service town in the heart of the Kimberly in WA, we picked up a young hitchhiker called John but soon regret it. He answers in monosyllables, doesn't share his chocolate and looks at us as if we're wacko. He's probably right; not many people drive into a desert in a dodgy 1979 Ford Econovan nicknamed Barbiemobile to satisfy a whimsical fascination for outer space. The garage guys at Halls Creek had assured us the road was well graded and the van would breeze it, so we drove to the turn off and began the bumpy 134km pilgrimage into what the is affectionately called "GAFA" - the great Australian f**k all!



On the drive here we had discussed the terrifying movie Wolf Creek and, as I try the ignition one more time, it's not lost on us that the murder spree of the film begins when a trio of travellers break down in a spot similar to ours. We try to look on the bright side, we may be teetering on the on the cusp of a grizzly desert death but, at least we made it. About 300,000 years ago, a piece of universal bric-a-brac charged through the protective sheath of our atmosphere and gave the earth an almighty thwack. It created the second largest meteorite crater in the world, Wolfe Creek Crater, and right now I am sitting in its shadow. I curl into a ball to meditate before rolling onto my back. Opening my eyes I look up and the desert night sky fills my vision. As I sink into feelings of insignificance in the face of enormity, I sigh a great sigh, spy a small rock and move it about 15cm, just to prove I have some power to change the world. Later I walk back to camp and take my gnawing worries to bed.

Sunrise

I can't sleep so I lie there for hours pondering life until the denseness shirks off to the other side of the world. The others can't sleep either so shivering in the pre-dawn chill, we leave the campsite and climb the 35m embankment to the crater's rim. We huddle together for warmth until the first beams of sunlight peek over the lip, washing over us in a warm wave of positivity. It'll be fine, our van will get fixed and we will make it out of this beautiful place alive.

The morning sun illuminates the crater like a giant red plug hole. I feel tiny. On impact, the solid iron meteorite would have weighed more than 50,000 tonnes and been travelling at 15km per second - that's fast enough to cross Australia in five minutes. It would have instantly vapourised and punched an 880m wide, 120m deep hole in the ground. It's scary, but much less so than the crazed bushman in the film who laughs in all the wrong places.

"G'day!" We're joined by a couple who have driven the long dirt road from Adelaide via Alice Springs and Uluru. The guy turns to John and says, "Yer van sounded pretty ropey last night mate." Heather and I harness our feminist high horses and reply in unison, "it's our van". The guy gives his wife a wink, "Girls, I reckon I know what ya problem is, and I said as much to the nag last night," he cocks his head towards his wife. "I told her, 'they've popped a spark plug.'" He winks at us, hooks 'the nag' with an enormous hairy arm and offers to take a look. Er, is that an under-the-breath chuckle I hear? Before my imagination goes to bad places, Heather turns on her heels



announcing she's going to check the spark plugs. John mooches off too but I can't bear the suspense so I squat in the dirt to stare at the crater. I'm interrupted by a honk and look down to see Heather sticking double thumbs up out the van's window as the spark plugs fire and she revs the engine back into life. Never was a sound more beautiful.

A lasting impression

After a round of high-fives and a campsite breakfast we pay the ancient crater a much happier visit, I even see a smile escape from tight-lipped John. We scramble down the rocky incline but apart from a few lizards leaping from rock to rock it's as quiet as a cathedral. By 9.30am it's seriously hot and by 10am I'm medium to well-done. It's time to bid the crater adieu. I have a quiet word with the van; patting her and whispering, "you've only got 134km to get back to the smooth bitumen, then I promise I'll never take you off-road again," (I feel now isn't the time to mention the rest of the 13,500km journey back to Sydney). The bumps and dips in the road on the way back are as teeth-rattling as ever but we're in good company. The nag and her husband have appointed themselves our guardian angels and with plenty of smiles, they leap-frog us all the way back to the bitumen. I feel giddy with relief as we turn the final corner and watch as their van hoons off in the opposite direction.

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The cost

The only costs are fuel and supplies. There is no cost for the campsite.

The road is only accessible during the dry season which runs from May to November. It may be closed during the wet season which runs from December to April.

Before you go

It's essential to check the road conditions before you travel with Main Roads Western Australia (138 138) or the Shire of Halls Creek (08 9168 6007).