

AS FAR WEST AS IT GETS

We head to Steep Point the most westerly location on the Australian mainland

Story and Photography by
GLENYS GELZINIS

For once the alarm beeping on my phone wasn't an annoyance but a reminder that it was time to get up, pack the Land Cruiser and tackle our highly-anticipated trek to the most westerly spot on mainland Australia, Steep Point.

Setting off at 5.30am meant we had actually beaten the flies which had been hounding us in the hot and humid previous days. The sun was still just a glow on the horizon when we arrived at the information boards advising us that we were about to head 148 kilometres into the Shark Bay World Heritage area to our destination. Despite us being told a number of variations on how long it would take to get there, we relied on the National Parks version which advised to allow three hours one way, and believe it when they say this is definitely only to be undertaken with a high clearance 4-wheel drive vehicle.

As the sun began to rise in the east we were rewarded with a stunning display of pink streaked clouds above the silhouetted scrub but ahead of us were ominous darker skies and occasional flashes of lightning. We had to keep our eyes peeled for wandering stock as we drove along and had to slow a couple of times for goats crossing the road. There are two stations located in this area, Tamala Station and Carrarang Station both of which offer basic camping options for self-sufficient campers.

The road for the first hour of the trip had been a pretty good dirt road so we were beginning to think that the time needed to do the 148 kilometres might have been slightly exaggerated, but soon the road became a lot rougher and corrugated. As you skirt around Henri Freycinet Harbour there is another short stretch of bitumen giving you a short respite from the bone jarring and teeth rattling rough sandy tracks.

Around two hours into our trip we ar-

A roadside stop to admire the sunrise.



Sunrise on the dirt road ahead.



Reinflating tyres at the registration station.



The Clough family property.



Pristine waters for fishing.



Mission accomplished, at Steep Point.



Cloughs bar.

rived at the registration station where you pay your \$12 daily entry fee, unless you have an annual or holiday pass, and let your tyre pressure down. We let our tyres down to 16 psi a little lower than the 20 psi recommended, to try to get a smoother ride over the corrugations. Soon we came to a signpost to turn off to False Entrance where a seven kilometre track will take you to a fishing beach and blowholes, however, we were on a mission so continued in the direction of Steep Point.

From here on it was very rough terrain on hard corrugations past salt ponds until we got to the turn marked on the map at Cloughs Bar. From that turning point the terrain changed again and we encountered deep and soft sand and found ourselves bouncing over sand dunes and being tossed from side to side in the car. It was about now in our trek that we thought sand flags would have been a good idea, especially when we encountered a couple of other vehicles coming in the opposite direction. With blind bends, car height scrub and small dunes it would definitely pay to

invest in these safety flags to let other drivers know you're there. Once through the smaller dunes the vista opened up to huge pristine dunes with very little vegetation on them and then to the next challenge, one very steep downhill dune which we had been told about. This dune is a downhill only, on the way in to Steep Point so you have to take a short detour around it on the way back before joining up to the single track again.

Onwards we drove and now finally, three hours into our journey the jewel blue sea opened up before us and we could see Dirk Hartog Island and the barge that crosses between it and the mainland. The road then took us down onto a sandy beach for a short stretch of the drive. Coming off the beach we drove past the Clough family property and finally to the rangers station. We stopped in briefly to talk to the ranger and were advised that it would be best not to attempt the drive to the Zuytdorp cliffs at the moment, the turnoff for which was a further four kilometres on, as the road there was 'pretty crappy'. Having experienced

the rough and rugged roads to get this far we took the advice and continued on to Steep Point, only a tantalisingly close eight kilometres to go.

The last leg of this epic drive was past some of the most spectacular beaches and pristine water, dazzling in all shades of blue, green, aqua and turquoise. As you drive past Shelter Bay there are a number of sign-posted camp sites well-spaced out from each other and nicely tucked in amongst the low scrub off the track, with only sand and clear water in front of them. The campsites have to be booked in advance with the Department of Parks and Wildlife WA. Some of these sites have drop toilets nearby, which were exceptionally clean, but apart from that you have to bring in all of your camping needs including plenty of drinking water.

Finally the end of our quest was in sight, we had made it to the westerly most point of the mainland and with only one minor casualty. We noticed when we got out of the car that one of the headlights had worked its way loose and was hanging out of its

fixture like a grotesque dislodged eyeball, but it was easily put back in place. The time it took for us to make the distance was a shade under four hours with only a couple of brief stops to take in the views. Having made it through some fairly rugged landscape to make it to such an iconic spot we made sure to stay a while and take in all the spectacular scenery. One unexpected surprise on reaching Steep Point was finding there was a Fotopol there. This is essentially a fixed monopod for you to attach your camera to and then using the timer function on your camera, race into shot and get a photo to celebrate the completion of the journey. Much easier than a selfie to take and it enables you to capture more of the surrounding scenery.

Looking towards Dirk Hartog Island we spotted a group of people fishing on the cliff edge at a place called The Oven. What was unusual about it was the sight of helium balloons floating above the cliffs. The Point is renowned for balloon fishing from the massive cliffs. Balloons are drifted out with bait attached which then skips in and out of the

water with the wind, trying to entice and catch big fish species such as mackerel, sailfish, cobia, mullet and more.

For us though, after soaking in the experience of the location, we started to slowly make our way back the way we'd come but this time stopping to do a little bit of conventional fishing on the way. Feeling a lot more confident now that we knew what to expect, we stopped at a few of the eye-catching beaches we'd passed on the way in. With the sun now high in the sky the colours of the landscape and sea were even more vivid and dazzling and while beach-combing we found the sand covered in shells and sea stars with a few ghost crabs scurrying backwards and forwards to their burrows.

Reluctantly we left the secluded beaches behind, without troubling any of the big fish we could see cruising by in schools, to travel the bumpy track back. At least now we knew the conditions we were facing and were happy in the knowledge that we had just experienced an unforgettable journey with a few 'Steep' learning curves.

FACT FILE

Where:

Steep Point is in the Shark Bay World Heritage Area. The turnoff from the North West Coastal Highway is at the Overlander Roadhouse, approximately 300 kilometres north of Geraldton, Western Australia.

Where to Stay:

Basic caravanning and camping sites can be found at the stations on the way to Steep Point but be sure to call and book before heading out. Carrarang Station: Phone (08) 9948 3997 or email carrarang.station@bigpond.com Tamala Station: www.tamalastation.com.au There is also the Hamelin Pool caravan park just off the Shark Bay Road. www.hamelinpoolcaravanpark.com Campsites are available within the National Park which also must be booked in advance. Steep Point Ranger Station: Phone (08) 9948 3993 or email ranger@steepoint.com.au

Essential Information:

There is no drinking water available so even if visiting for a day trip remember to take plenty with you, also take food and snacks and make sure you have full fuel tanks as there is none available either – be prepared! Remember to throw in your fishing gear, camera, tyre deflators, air compressor to reinflate, put a sand flag on your car and enjoy the ride.

When to Visit:

We visited in early March when the weather was quite hot and humid. The best times for visiting, fishing and camping is anywhere between November and May. Campsites get booked out early so it probably pays to go when there are no school holidays or long weekends involved.