TRAVELOGUE · WESTERN AUSTRALIA · JULY – AUGUST 2023

Ransacked, Cut Short, Yet Unforgettable

Our second Australian adventure with Sixfoot: From chilly winter rain and brazen port thieves to a snapped driveshaft in the deep sands of Shark Bay and the glowing red gorges of the Pilbara.

Written by Rudi · On the road with Heike and Sixfoot (6x6 Sprinter)

CHAPTER 1 · PREPARATION & 2–11 JULY 2023

A Rocky Start and the Great Harbour Shock

2022 to May 2023: Dry Ice, Shipping Bans, and a Last-Minute Lifesaver

It was supposed to be a relaxed, triumphant return to a continent we had already fallen in love with back in 2019 and 2020. Yet even the preparations made it abundantly clear, with typical Australian stubbornness, that real adventures rarely stick to a tidy schedule. We rolled up our sleeves back in 2022 to get Sixfoot shipshape for his second major ocean crossing.

Anyone who has ever shipped a vehicle to Australia knows the legendary strictness of its biosecurity inspectors—a single forgotten speck of European dust can trigger a very expensive cleaning bill at the port. So Sixfoot was scrubbed spotless inside, down to the very last corner, and every piece of equipment was carefully checked. In December, the undercarriage received the full spa treatment: dry-ice blasted, primed, and freshly painted. Sixfoot practically gleamed brighter underneath than on top.

When we enthusiastically tried to book freight space in January 2023, our first bubble burst. We needed a spot on a RoRo vessel—Roll-on/Roll-off, where the vehicle is driven aboard on its own wheels. Every single European freight forwarder and shipping line turned us down flat. The blunt verdict: a complete freeze on motorhomes bound for Australia. The ships were simply bursting at the seams.

For months, our dream hung in the balance. Just as we were beginning to resign ourselves to staying closer to home, the tide turned in May: an Australian freight agent somehow conjured up a passage at very short notice. Barely had the ink dried when Sixfoot rolled aboard in Zeebrugge in early May and set sail. Mission Australia II was back on!

3–9 July 2023: A 24-Hour Flight, Winter Rain, and Waiting in Fremantle

According to the schedule, the ship carrying our home on wheels was due into Fremantle on 2 July. After a 24-hour flight, we touched down slightly crumpled but safe and sound in Perth, picked up a rental car at the airport, and drove straight to our first base in Fremantle. At Fremantle Village campground, you can rent little cabins with a parking space right outside the door—an ideal temporary setup while waiting for our rig.

Only the weather seemed blissfully unaware that we had just flown in from a European summer. Down Under was in the grip of proper winter: a brisk 10 to 16°C and plenty of rain meant our rain jackets saw far more action than our sunglasses. To top it off, the freighter took its sweet time. Running several days late, the ship finally docked in Fremantle on the evening of 6 July. Sixfoot was unloaded on 7 July, but before we could get our hands on the keys, he had to clear quarantine inspection—which didn't happen until Monday, 10 July.

We made the most of our enforced waiting week and worked systematically through our shopping list: an Australian SIM card for internet access, a local gas bottle, groceries, and new camp chairs—since used chairs aren't allowed into the country under quarantine rules. In between errands, we explored Perth, braved the drizzle, and counted down the hours until handover.



Night-time sparkle in the Australian winter: A view across the Swan River toward Perth's glowing skyline during our week of waiting.

10 July 2023: Pick-Up Day at the Port—and a Nasty Surprise

Monday finally arrived. Buzzing with anticipation, we drove down to the port to collect Sixfoot. The moment we walked up to him, however, I stopped short: Sixfoot was completely unlocked—not a single door or locker was secured. At first I tried to stay calm, assuming the quarantine officers had simply left everything open after their inspection. Then I stepped inside and noticed a few familiar things missing. All right, a bit of shrinkage, I told myself optimistically—these things happen on long voyages.

The full, bitter truth only hit us once we had driven Sixfoot back to our cabin at the campground and took proper stock. This wasn't minor "shrinkage"—it was a brazen, methodical raid. Gone were our tools, gone was the cutlery, gone were entire boxes of cables, gone was the power station. The thieves hadn't even spared our collection of fridge magnets. And the cruellest blow of all: our large computer, tucked away in what we thought was a clever secret hiding place, had vanished without a trace.

Whoever did this hadn't been in a hurry; they had plenty of quiet time to strip the vehicle with surgical precision. Whether it happened in Zeebrugge before loading, during the stopover in Durban, or over that final weekend sitting at the port in Fremantle, we will never know. The paperwork delivered the next cold shower: our insurance wouldn't cover it, as we had a €5,000 deductible and any claim above that would have required reporting the full extent of the loss on the spot at pick-up. And the shipping line? They accept zero liability for items inside vehicles. In short: rotten luck.

11 July 2023: Replacement Marathon and Solace in a Sea of Lights

What do you do after a start like that? Sulking gets you nowhere, so on 11 July we switched into pure pragmatism mode. In a whirlwind shopping sprint across Fremantle, we replaced everything essential for the Outback: vital tools, walkie-talkies for tricky off-road manoeuvres, fresh cutlery, and all the little odds and ends. Then we drew a firm line under the whole mess. *Shit happens*—from here on out, we refused to waste another thought on port thieves and resolved to enjoy our Australian journey.

That evening in Perth gave us the perfect reset. We had tickets for the Lightscape event at Kings Park. For the very first time, the sprawling botanic garden had been elaborately illuminated after dark. Strolling through glowing avenues and light installations alongside countless Australian families, we left rain, theft, and frustration behind for a few magical hours. At last, the real adventure could begin.



A sea of lights instead of harbour gloom: Flaming torches line the path at the Kings Park Lightscape event, with Perth's skyline shimmering across the water behind.

CHAPTER 2 · 12–16 JULY 2023

Back on the Road – Coastlines, Bushland, and Old Friends

12 July 2023: Out of the City, Into the Open

On the morning of 12 July, I turned the ignition key—and finally the open road stretched ahead. First, though, we had to swallow one last dose of city traffic, rolling north out of Perth along a six-lane freeway in each direction. We made a quick stop to stock up on fresh fruit and vegetables, then turned onto the Indian Ocean Drive. Instantly, the world transformed. The traffic thinned to a trickle, the road narrowed, and the sky opened wide.

We pulled in at Lancelin for lunch right on the beach—a nostalgic milestone, as this was the very spot where our first trip had ended in 2020 before shipping home. By afternoon we rolled into Sandy Cape and snagged a dream campsite right by the ocean. With the surf rumbling in our ears and salt air drifting through the windows, that unmistakable feeling washed over us: it felt wonderfully, deeply good to be back on the move.

13 July 2023: Early Birds and Quiet Solitude Inland

We slipped effortlessly back into the natural rhythm of Australian travel: up with the sunrise around 7:00 a.m., a quick coffee, and straight onto the road. Since Western Australia's Mid West is famous for its carpets of wildflowers in spring, we decided to try our luck and turned east for roughly 150 kilometres into the interior.

The moment we left the coastal highway, we had the road almost entirely to ourselves. Live kangaroos stayed out of sight during the day, though several roadkill casualties lined the verge. One had clearly been hit that very morning and still lay right across the tarmac, so I pulled over and dragged it onto the shoulder before the next vehicle could run over it. Passing through the tiny towns of Coorow and Mingenew, we eventually reached Coalseam Conservation Park.



A first taste of the Outback: Rolling down the glowing red gravel track into Coalseam Conservation Park beneath a crisp blue sky.

As it turned out, we were still four to six weeks too early for the big wildflower bloom. Even so, the detour was worth every kilometre. A splendid lookout perched high above the winding river valley—though the river itself held very little water—offered sweeping views across the rolling hills. That evening, we had the red-earth campground completely to ourselves. Internet reception vanished for good, leaving us to savour an evening of total, undisturbed silence.



All alone in the bush: Our first solitary camp in Coalseam Conservation Park, surrounded by gum trees and endless rolling scrubland.

14 July 2023: Back to the Coast and a Warm Reunion at Lucky Bay

Up early once again, we covered the 150 kilometres back to the coast and rolled into Geraldton. The port city had everything a travelling rig needs after a few days off-grid: dump point, fuel stations, and well-stocked supermarkets. Along the waterfront promenade, we spotted a large water-filled sphere designed to create striking inverted reflections of the setting sun.

We didn't linger long, heading north and turning off toward Kalbarri National Park. Just before the park boundary lies Lucky Bay, a spacious campground nestled right in the coastal dunes. Barely had we come to a halt when a hearty greeting rang out: Dave, working at the camp, had recognised us immediately! Back in 2019, he had been a camp ranger in the south of Western Australia, and our unmistakable Sixfoot had left a lasting impression. After a joyful catch-up, we found a cracking spot in the dunes and watched the sun dip into the Indian Ocean.

15 July 2023: Sea Cliffs, Fish 'n' Chips, and a Test of Nerve

After a long farewell to Dave, we drove straight into Kalbarri National Park. Right from the start, dramatic coastal lookouts delivered dizzying views down sheer cliffs into the churning ocean below. Around midday we reached the laid-back seaside town of Kalbarri, where we treated ourselves to a proper serving of fish 'n' chips—the unofficial staple of the Western Australian coast.

Refuelled, we headed inland to the park's most iconic landmark: Nature's Window along the Murchison River. Over millions of years, the river has carved a magnificent gorge through layered red sandstone, and the natural rock arch frames the valley like a painting. Right nearby stood the airy Skywalk, cantilevered boldly out over the yawning chasm. I stepped onto it with immense respect—genuine vertigo is not something you can simply talk yourself out of.



Framed in ancient layered sandstone: Heike and I at Nature's Window, with the dramatic Murchison River Gorge stretching out behind us.

We took in several more spectacular lookouts along the Loop Walk until the afternoon sun began sinking fast. Overnight camping isn't permitted inside the national park, so we hurried back toward the exit before dusk. Just beyond the boundary we found the Alanya Roadside Stop, where several other campers facing the same curfew had already settled in. With hardly a vehicle passing after dark, it made for a perfectly peaceful night.

16 July 2023: A 150-Kilometre Dead End of Ancient Life, Shells, and Emus

Just after sunrise we pulled out of the Alanya Roadside Stop and joined the North West Coastal Highway—a pleasantly quiet road with a single lane in each direction. After topping up with diesel at Billabong Roadhouse, we turned off at Overlander Roadhouse toward Shark Bay, embarking on a dead-end peninsula stretching at least 150 kilometres.

Our first stop after roughly 50 kilometres was Hamelin Pool, home to a colony of stromatolites—living rock-like structures ranked among the oldest life forms on Earth. Sadly, a fierce storm had destroyed the boardwalk over the colony, so we could only admire them from the shore. Our next stop was far more hands-on: Shell Beach, an astonishing 40-kilometre stretch of coastline made not of sand, but of billions of tiny white cockle shells piled up to ten metres deep.

At Eagle Bluff Lookout, a boardwalk perched some 50 metres above the bay, we briefly met two Germans travelling in a rental camper before losing sight of them again. The view below was spellbinding: through crystal-clear shallow water, we watched dolphins herding a dense school of fish. Finally, we rolled into Monkey Mia, the famous dolphin station. The resort was busy and camping is restricted to the official park, yet we were more than compensated by curious emus strolling casually right past our doorstep and dinner at the local restaurant accompanied by a sunset glowing in that unforgettable, electric Western Australian orange.



Distinguished visitor at Monkey Mia: Emus wander right past Sixfoot's open door as though they own the campground.



Pure Western Australian orange: When the sun drops behind Shark Bay, sky and sea melt into liquid fire.

CHAPTER 3 · 17–18 JULY 2023

Bang in the Deep Sand! Drama in François Peron National Park

17 July 2023: Morning Dolphins and Into the Sand Track

Our morning at Monkey Mia started serenely: just after sunrise, two dolphins glided peacefully right along the water's edge. A magical sight! We lingered briefly for the official 8:00 a.m. dolphin feeding, but within minutes 50 to 100 guests from the campground surged onto the beach. It quickly felt far too commercial and crowded for our taste, so we packed up and left Monkey Mia briskly.

Now it was time for real off-road territory. Heading 35 kilometres back toward Denham, we turned onto the sandy track leading into François Peron National Park. At the entrance we paid our camping fee, planning to spend the night out by the tip of the peninsula. Ahead lay roughly 42 kilometres of track to the lighthouse. The first two kilometres to an old sheep station rolled smoothly enough—then came the mandatory sign: air down your tyres!

We dropped tyre pressure to around 70% and pressed on, though "fun" soon became a generous description. Deep soft sand alternated relentlessly with bone-rattling corrugations. The track was narrow, single-lane, and punctuated by oncoming traffic—fearless Aussies in beefed-up LandCruisers, some even towing serious off-road camper trailers that bear very little resemblance to European caravans.



The calm before the crunch: Sixfoot cruises across the firm, open track of the dry lakebed in François Peron National Park—mere hundreds of metres before the deep sand trap.

Two Loud "Bangs"—and the Silence After the Snap

After about 30 kilometres, the terrain opened out onto a broad, dry lakebed. Here the track turned firm and wide—riddled with deep potholes, yes, but easy enough to navigate. At the far edge, however, stood the crucial warning sign: *No trailers beyond this point—deflate tyres further!* We obeyed, dropped pressure to 50%, engaged low range and our diff locks, and plunged into the soft, undulating sand.

The track morphed into a bottomless, rutted sand trap. Sixfoot pitched and rolled heavily as he fought for traction. Roughly 500 metres into the deepest stretch, it happened: a sharp, shockingly loud *Bang!* jolted through the cab. I tentatively tried easing forward again—and immediately, a second *Bang!* A cold dread crept into my stomach. We climbed out, knelt in the hot sand, and one glance beneath the front axle confirmed our worst fears: under the heavy load, our front-left driveshaft had snapped clean through.

There we sat—buried in the deepest sand pit, 40 kilometres from the nearest sealed road, in a place where nobody could easily help us, let alone tow us out.

Rescuing the Rescuer—and Four Hours on the Sand Tracks

Before long, a LandCruiser rumbled up behind us. A kind-hearted Aussie slowed down to lend a hand—and promptly bogged himself to the axles. A second Aussie in another LandCruiser showed wiser judgement and stopped well back. In a sand pit like this, one golden rule applies: stopping is fatal; momentum is everything.

So before we could even think about extracting ourselves, we had to rescue our rescuer! We unbolted our sand tracks, grabbed the shovel, and dug the LandCruiser clear. Using our recovery boards, the Aussie eased slowly backwards onto firmer ground, built up a proper run-up, and blasted past us at full tilt. At least one of us was free.

Now it was our turn. We aired down to a drastic 30%, shovelled Sixfoot partway clear, and wedged the sand tracks behind the tyres. With only two driven axles left, our heavy 6x6 actually crept backwards! It worked—albeit at an agonising crawl. Dig, lay tracks, reverse a few metres, dig tracks back out, haul them behind, lay them again. That exhausting cycle lasted nearly four sweat-soaked hours before we finally clawed those 500 metres back onto the firm, flat expanse of the dry lakebed.

Once on the lake, we faced the next delicate puzzle: turning around. With the diff locks disengaged, Sixfoot wouldn't budge an inch because of the broken front shaft; yet with the locks engaged, turning the steering wheel too sharply risked snapping another axle on the spot. So we edged Sixfoot around in microscopic arcs, inching back and forth until we finally faced the way we had come. Crawling at a cautious 10 to 12 km/h across the lakebed, we still faced 30 kilometres of narrow, corrugated deep sand ahead—impossible to tackle before dark. Exhausted, we pulled off beside the track for the night. At least nature offered a peace offering: a breathtaking sunset followed by a blazing canopy of stars.



Unplanned bush camp in François Peron National Park: After four hours of shovelling and a snapped driveshaft, the glowing twilight sky brings welcome peace.

18 July 2023: Morning Sand to Denham—and the Mechanic Carousel

We were back behind the wheel right after sunrise. Cooled overnight, the sand was noticeably firmer, and we managed to nurse Sixfoot across the final 30 kilometres in two focused hours. Around 10:00 a.m. we rolled gratefully into Denham—only to run straight into the harsh reality of Outback workshop schedules.

Denham has exactly two mechanics. Workshop number one shook his head: nothing before next Monday—six days away. Workshop number two easily topped that: fully booked for the next two weeks. He did offer to put us on a tow truck to Geraldton, 435 kilometres south, where Mercedes dealerships exist. A call to Mercedes Australia brought the next cold splash of reality: they only assist if you hold an Australian Mercedes Roadside Assist plan. So we rang two workshops in Geraldton ourselves—one no longer serviced Mercedes vehicles, and the other couldn't fit us in for at least two weeks.

Only one sensible choice remained: we locked in Monday's slot with the first mechanic in Denham. Thank goodness we carried a spare driveshaft on board! Crawling along with barely a twitch of the steering wheel, we rolled into the nearest campground, explained our predicament, and snagged the very last site—unpowered and without water, yes, but positioned so we could drive almost dead straight in. For now, we were safe.

CHAPTER 4 · 19–25 JULY 2023

Six Days Stranded in Denham—and Back on All Six Wheels

19–21 July 2023: 600 Residents, Eye-Watering Prices, and Camp Ingenuity

Spend six involuntary days in Denham and you'll know every street corner by heart. The little Shark Bay town is refreshingly compact: around 600 residents, four restaurants, two small supermarkets, one café, a handful of hotels, and three campgrounds. At least our park offered a bit of internet reception and hot showers—we'd certainly weathered worse.

Not wanting to drive on without a backup shaft once ours was fitted, I tried sourcing a replacement in Australia. The quoted price nearly knocked me off my chair: a staggering AUD 3,000—roughly €2,000! A quick call home solved the problem far more sensibly: our daughter ordered the exact same part in Germany for €600, ready to be couriered by DHL or UPS in three to four days if needed.

The days drifted gently by. I used the enforced downtime to sort photos and catch up on the travel blog. On 21 July, we also got wonderfully resourceful on our unpowered site: with the neighbouring pitch empty, I discreetly topped up our fresh water tank. At the tiny local hardware store I picked up a ten-metre greywater hose so we could drain our tank properly, and to cap it off I plugged Sixfoot into mains power for four or five hours to recharge our batteries. Now we could easily sit out the remaining days—cooking dinner inside Sixfoot, watching the mandatory beach sunset, and winding down with Netflix.



Eight-legged neighbours at Denham campground: Stay put for six days and you get well acquainted with Australia's smaller—and remarkably patient—locals.

23 July 2023: Café Rituals and the Shell-Block Restaurant

After six days, we practically qualified as locals. We had eaten twice at both of the town's main restaurants: while the Shark Bay Hotel served up Australia's ever-present standard of fish 'n' chips, *The Old Pearler*—a wonderfully quirky restaurant built entirely from quarried blocks of compressed shells—won the culinary contest hands down. Heike faithfully completed her daily stroll through town, always anchored by a stop at the local café. Even the nightly light show of blazing sunsets over the bay was starting to feel almost routine. Every hope now rested on Monday morning.

24 July 2023: The Big Monday—Too Tall for the Shed, Fixed Anyway!

Promptly at 8:30 a.m. we pulled up outside the workshop. This was the very first time the boss and mechanic had actually laid eyes on Sixfoot—the previous week he hadn't bothered stepping outside and had simply booked us in sight unseen. When I explained that we could only creep along with diff locks engaged, couldn't steer sharply, and were far too tall to fit inside his workshop, you could almost read his mind: had he known what was coming, he would have turned the job down flat!

To his credit, he showed true Aussie grit and agreed to give it a crack. Slowly, I reversed Sixfoot into the yard so the broken left side sat as close to his shed as possible. He told us to come back in five hours. We took one final stroll through Denham, I finished my book in peace at the Shark Bay Café, and at 1:45 p.m. the phone rang: our vehicle was ready!

When we walked back into the yard, Sixfoot was already parked outside, ready to roll. The mechanic wore a grin from ear to ear and declared everything sorted. You could tell he was every bit as relieved as we were. We paid a remarkably fair bill, happily left a tip for a carton of beer, and drove out over the moon. Sixfoot was alive again!



All six wheels turning again! Freed after six days of workshop limbo, we soak up the sunshine on the beach just outside Denham.

Nothing could hold us in Denham a minute longer. Thirty kilometres down the highway, we turned off toward the beach at Fowler Bay for the night. Almost every campground in Australia now requires advance payment in town or by phone; since the Shark Bay office had already closed, we dutifully sent an email. Above all, we were mobile again—and buoyed by the repair, we decided to push on with our Australian journey after all.

25 July 2023: Woken by a Welshman—and Wartime History in Carnarvon

At 7:00 a.m. sharp, a brisk knock rattled our door. Outside stood the ranger, noting we didn't have a permit. Still half-asleep, I explained that nobody had answered the previous afternoon. His response was pure Australia: *"No worries"*—just book it online today, no fine! With the ice broken, the ranger—a proud Welshman with an unmistakable accent—launched into a stream of gripping stories that could easily fill a book of their own, before we finally tore ourselves away at 9:00 a.m.

Ahead lay 140 kilometres back to the North West Coastal Highway and another 200 kilometres north. Around midday we reached Carnarvon, filled the tanks, picked up groceries, and under gathering clouds checked into one of the town's five or six caravan parks—far too crowded and hardly scenic, yet practical once the evening rain set in. What gave us pause in Carnarvon was a memorial stone for fallen German sailors: during the Second World War, a German auxiliary cruiser had sunk the Australian cruiser *HMAS Sydney* just off Shark Bay before sinking herself. While most of the German crew were rescued and taken prisoner, not a single man from the *Sydney* survived. It was sobering to realise fierce battles had been fought even off this remote coast—history is everywhere here.

CHAPTER 5 · 26–28 JULY 2023

Caravan Boom at Ningaloo Reef and a Rollercoaster Day

26 July 2023: 240 Litres of Diesel, Cactus Gardens, and Escape to the Dunes

Having stayed up a little too late watching Netflix in the rain the night before, we got a slower start on 26 July. First came the essentials: filling the fresh water tank and emptying greywater. Next, we prepared for the big Outback distances ahead by topping up every tank and jerrycan with diesel: 100 litres in the main tank, 110 litres in the auxiliary tank, and 30 litres in reserve cans—240 litres in total, enough for well over 1,000 kilometres.

On the outskirts of Carnarvon we paused to admire a quirky whale skeleton displayed inside a cactus garden, then cruised 150 kilometres north on the highway before turning left for another 100 kilometres into Coral Bay. The village itself is tiny—permanent residents likely number in the double digits—which made the contrast with its two massive, overflowing caravan parks all the starker.

The bay and beach are undeniably gorgeous: protected by the offshore Ningaloo Reef, the water stays calm and invitingly warm, with plenty of people swimming. We strolled through the tiny settlement, enjoyed—naturally—another lunch of fish 'n' chips, and walked along the shore. Yet despite it being outside school holidays and peak season, the crowds were simply too much. We drove 25 kilometres further to Bruboodjoo, an off-road campground tucked among the dunes. We weren't alone here either, but the sites spread generously across a huge expanse, and at the far end we claimed a wonderfully peaceful spot. At dusk, kangaroos hopped quietly behind Sixfoot through the scrub.



Room to breathe at last: Seen from above, Sixfoot looks tiny on the sweeping red-sand plains of Camp Bruboodjoo.

27 July 2023: 800,000 Caravans and a Touch of European Charm

Up with the sunrise and ready to roll by 8:00 a.m.: Heike piloted Sixfoot back along the nine-kilometre sandy track to the sealed road while I sent the drone aloft to film. Another 150 kilometres brought us into Exmouth, where we hoped to book a campsite inside Cape Range National Park. One look at town told us we were in for a surprise: Exmouth was packed to the rafters with SUVs and LandCruisers of every conceivable build, towing off-road caravans, topped with rooftop tents, and frequently hauling boats as well. Both major caravan parks were completely full.

At the Visitor Centre, our casual enquiry drew bemused looks: campsites can only be booked online—ideally months in advance! A quick check confirmed the unbelievable: the 100-kilometre-long Cape Range National Park boasts 15 to 20 campgrounds with 20 to 30 sites each, and every single one had been booked solid for weeks. Australia is in the grip of an unprecedented camping boom—roughly 800,000 caravans and motorhomes now roam the country, joined by legions of rooftop-tent 4WDs, seemingly every retiree in Australia, and a handful of Europeans in rental campers. So much for spontaneous travel. Even park day passes were sold out—thank goodness we already held our annual Western Australia National Parks pass!

The information desk suggested ringing Yardie Homestead Caravan Park just outside the national park. Instead of calling, we simply drove straight up. The initial answer came as no surprise: full. Yet we gestured toward Sixfoot, explained we only needed a plain parking spot for the night, and confessed that as visitors from Europe we had no idea everything had to be booked months ahead even out of season. A little friendly small talk worked wonders: we landed a site for the night—and maybe even a second!



Postcard Western Australia in Cape Range National Park: Beyond the pale coastal dunes, turquoise waters stretch out to the white surf line of Ningaloo Reef.

Relieved, we drove into Cape Range National Park. Because the park sits 60 kilometres from Exmouth and stretches another 100 kilometres down the coast, not everyone makes the long daily round trip—so once inside, the crowds thinned pleasantly. Overnight parking is strictly forbidden everywhere, but with our site secured we explored at leisure. Along the roadside we spotted two dingoes and grazing kangaroos, and Heike beamed with delight when she finally found the striking scarlet Sturt's Desert Pea growing wild. Back at Yardie Homestead that evening, the vibe was unbeatable: live music under the stars, everyone pulling up their own camp chairs with a cold beer or glass of wine, and fresh prawn pizza from the kiosk.



Heike's botanical triumph: The vivid scarlet Sturt's Desert Pea blooming wild in Cape Range National Park.

28 July 2023: Rock-Wallabies, a Fresh Driveshaft, an Ominous Sound, and Whales

28 July turned out to be the entire journey distilled into a single day—a true emotional rollercoaster. Setting off at 8:00 a.m., we drove 100 kilometres to the very southern end of the park for the Yardie Creek Trail. The roughly six-kilometre hike each way starts gently beside the creek before climbing into rocky scramble sections. In the crisp 18°C morning air it was pure joy—in summer, when temperatures hit 50°C, it must be a formidable test. Our reward was unforgettable: perched among the cliffs we spotted rare, endangered, and utterly adorable black-footed rock-wallabies! On the return leg, clusters of flying foxes hung fast asleep in the mangroves.



Rare star of the Yardie Creek Trail: An endangered rock-wallaby soaking up the morning sun on a sheer sandstone ledge.

Back at Sixfoot after two and a half hours, we drove to Sandy Bay—a dreamy, shallow, white-sand lagoon sheltered behind Ningaloo Reef. Although snorkelling revealed only a modest number of fish, swimming in that crystal-clear water was bliss. Next we headed back into Exmouth, where our replacement driveshaft from Germany was due to arrive. Sure enough, at 3:10 p.m. sharp we collected our parcel at the post office. Once again we had a spare shaft on board. *Be prepared!*

Yet our streak of good fortune didn't last an hour. After a quick supermarket run, as we headed back toward camp, the front-left wheel began making a deeply unsettling noise—sounding suspiciously like a severe imbalance. I pulled over and inspected everything closely, finding nothing loose or visibly wrong. The mystery remained, but our mood plummeted instantly. Determined not to let the day end on a sour note, we drove up to the lighthouse for sunset—and right on cue, the pendulum swung back to pure magic: suddenly Heike called out in excitement as pod after pod of massive whales cruised past offshore! A grand finale to a thrilling day.

CHAPTER 6 · 29 JULY – 2 AUGUST 2023

Into the Red Heart of the Pilbara—and the Bitter End

29 July 2023: Turning Down the Lonely W136 Into the Real Outback

In the morning we bade farewell to Cape Range and Ningaloo Reef, stopped in Exmouth to refuel and dump tanks, and drove 160 kilometres back to the North West Coastal Highway. Traffic was refreshingly sparse—a few mighty trucks, far fewer caravans, and virtually no ordinary passenger cars at all. At Nanutarra Roadhouse we topped up once more, sticking to the Outback rule of always running with full tanks.

Then we turned onto the W136—straight into the Pilbara, one of the oldest and most dramatic landscapes on Earth. The country grew vast, rugged, and fiery red. Both phone signal and internet vanished completely. That evening we pulled off onto a spotless wild camp beside the road. All night long, just two colossal road trains rumbled past in the distance; otherwise, absolute stillness reigned beneath a dazzling canopy of stars.



Outback scale: The highway cuts like a ruler through the red expanse of the Pilbara, with Sixfoot tucked away to the left as a tiny white speck.



Quiet twilight somewhere in the Pilbara: The horizon still glows burnt orange as the first evening star appears above Sixfoot.

30–31 July 2023: Dust Clouds, a Mining Town, and a Proud Mechanic

Up with the sun again, we set off early for Tom Price. The final 50 kilometres ran along dusty gravel where every oncoming vehicle swallowed the world in a blinding cloud of red dust. By afternoon we rolled into Tom Price, a neat, quiet mining town deep in the Outback, stocked up at the local Coles, and checked into the town's caravan park.

On 31 July we had one important technical errand: topping up the gear oil in our front axle. We drove over to the local mechanic and heard the now-familiar refrain—no time, fully booked. A little gentle persuasion won us an afternoon slot. In a mining town, workshops normally wrestle with giant mine trucks, so the atmosphere is noticeably rougher around the edges. When I tried to helpfully point out the exact filler plug, the mechanic treated it almost as a personal insult and sent me straight outside to wait. Credit where it's due, though: he found the right bolt immediately and topped our front axle right up. We stayed another night in Tom Price to catch our breath—especially as nearby Karijini National Park was also heavily booked out, despite being deep in the Outback outside school holidays.

2 August 2023: The Verdict—Our 2023 Adventure Ends in Tom Price

Fresh oil or not, one ominous sound refused to go away: for roughly 1,200 kilometres now, a persistent clunking had been echoing from the front-left axle area. After a thorough consultation with our 6x6 Sprinter specialist back home, there was no point sugar-coating it. Every symptom pointed to a failing front axle gearbox or differential. Sixfoot could still roll, yes, but every single kilometre carried the very real risk of a complete breakdown in the middle of nowhere.

That was a gamble we simply weren't willing to take. Repairing it locally in Tom Price was out of the question. So I got online and booked a freight truck to haul Sixfoot from Tom Price back to Perth—which worked smoothly and cost a fraction of what our insurer quoted for towing. Yet what awaited us in Perth? Weeks waiting for a workshop slot, weeks more waiting for parts to arrive, and even then no guarantee everything would run reliably afterwards.

We had reached our limit. We were done driving through thousands of kilometres of Outback with the nagging fear of breaking down again. With heavy hearts, yet completely sure it was the right call, we made our decision: we were cutting Australia 2023 short. Next week we would fly home, and thanks to Ryan we quickly secured a shipping slot for Sixfoot—scheduled to board by Friday of the following week at the latest. This trip simply wasn't meant to be; too much had gone wrong. It had been wonderful, yet exhausting. Before heading home, however, we were determined to savour our final days in the Pilbara.

CHAPTER 7 · 3–6 AUGUST 2023

Rental Car Trek, Gorge Scrambles, and the Mining Airport

3 August 2023: Hiking My Way to a Rental Car

Finding a rental car in Tom Price takes a bit of ingenuity—and sturdy walking shoes. There isn't a single rental desk in town; the nearest one sits at Paraburdoo Airport, a full 110 kilometres away. So I laced up my boots that morning and walked the four kilometres from the campground into Tom Price to catch the 1:00 p.m. airport bus. In fact, two buses departed at 1:00 p.m.: a plush full-size coach packed with mine workers, and a tiny minibus for tourists—carrying just one other woman and me.

At the airport I picked up a modest 2WD Mitsubishi, accompanied by the stern warning: *Strictly no off-road!* After weeks behind the wheel of a 6x6, the little tarmac SUV felt practically like a toy. Driving back to the campground, I picked up Heike and we cruised effortlessly into town for groceries.

4 August 2023: Into Karijini National Park in a 2WD

Up early as ever, we pointed our rental car 130 kilometres toward the southern end of Karijini National Park. The scenery was jaw-dropping: sweeping ochre plains crowned by ancient flat-topped ranges, sliced cleanly by a narrow ribbon of tarmac. It felt liberating to drive without listening anxiously for clunking axles. We hiked down to the idyllic Fern Pool and soaked up every bit of the park's grandeur.



Widescreen Outback in Karijini National Park: A lone ribbon of tarmac winds across the red plains toward the towering peaks of the Pilbara.

5 August 2023: Loading Sixfoot, Class-5 Gorges, and a Brush with the Brown Snake

Morning brought the poignant moment of seeing our faithful companion loaded up. Prompt to the minute, trucker Allen pulled into the road-train parking area—having just driven nearly 2,000 kilometres straight down from Broome. Everything ran like clockwork: Sixfoot climbed safely onto the low-loader, was strapped down tight, and set off piggyback on the long haul south to Perth.



Piggyback across the Outback: Riding high on trucker Allen's mighty low-loader, Sixfoot begins his return trip to Perth beneath the red mesas of the Pilbara.

With Sixfoot in safe hands, we headed straight back into Karijini National Park—another 110 kilometres each way. First up was the spectacular Knox Gorge. The trail runs around four kilometres each way, rated *Class 5*—the highest grade in Australia, reserved for experienced bushwalkers. Well, we figured with a grin, at sixty we're still pretty fit, so let's give it a go! Within a kilometre we understood exactly why it carried a Class 5 badge: a steep, loose scree descent turning into a proper rock scramble. We conquered it—and the towering red canyon below left us speechless. The climb back out under blazing sun at nearly 30°C, however, took every ounce of stamina we had.



Worth every drop of sweat in Karijini National Park: Between sheer, ancient red rock walls, a tranquil emerald pool glimmers in the sunlight.

Anyone thinking we called it a day there underestimates us: next we tackled Joffre Gorge—3.2 kilometres each way and “only” Class 4, easily within reach! At the bottom, steep metal ladders drop onto the canyon floor, where you either press flat against the rock ledges or wade straight through the cool water. Another truly magnificent gorge.

By evening we were thoroughly cooked. After enduring a memorably awful burger in Tom Price, we retreated to our little green cabin at the campground—a simple corrugated-iron hut that was completely comfortable for a night or two. Only that evening, while reading up on the area, did a fresh chill run down our spines: just recently in that very Knox Gorge, a hiker scrambling over the rocks had been bitten by a deadly brown snake, surviving only because a doctor happened to be right there on the trail. Thank goodness we only read that story once we were safely tucked inside our tin cabin!



Our final Outback quarters: The trusty 2WD Mitsubishi parked outside our little green tin cabin at the Tom Price campground.

6 August 2023: Sunday Stillness in Paraburdoo and Flying with 80 Miners

Our final day in the Outback dawned bright and calm. Up early as always, we lingered over breakfast on the cabin's little veranda and lazed away the morning with podcasts and books. At 2:00 p.m. we packed the Mitsubishi for the 90-kilometre drive to Paraburdoo, hoping to check out the town and a local lookout.

Paraburdoo turned out to be another textbook mining town: roughly 1,000 inhabitants, one petrol station, a small supermarket, a café, and a burger joint—and on a Sunday, completely deserted apart from a couple of kids on the playground. So we drove straight to the airport. Owned by mining giant Rio Tinto, Paraburdoo Airport is a world unto itself: one gate, one single Sunday flight, and roughly 95% of the 80 passengers were fly-in/fly-out mine workers heading home. The vast red-dirt car park overflowed with white mine vehicles flying high-vis safety flags, and passengers waited relaxed outdoors in the breeze. Sadly, our flight back over the Outback to Perth took place in the dark; on arrival we checked into a hotel for the night.



Classic Pilbara at Paraburdoo Airport: Row upon row of white mine 4WDs with safety flags line the red-dirt car park outside Rio Tinto's terminal.

CHAPTER 8 · 7–11 AUGUST 2023

Rain in Fremantle, One Last Crawl to the Port, and Home

7–8 August 2023: Reunited with Sixfoot and a Sensible Decision

On the morning of 7 August, our truck rolled into the meeting point right on schedule—Sixfoot had arrived back in Perth without a scratch! We returned to our familiar Fremantle Village campground and began packing Sixfoot up for his sea voyage home.

Ryan had managed to arrange a return shipping slot at wonderfully short notice. Running through every option one last time only confirmed our choice: repairing Sixfoot in Perth made no sense at all. Two to three weeks waiting for a first appointment, another one to two weeks for parts, then two to three weeks more for the actual work—we would easily have spent one or two dreary winter months stuck in Perth, likely unable to live inside Sixfoot, with no certainty of a clean fix at the end. Bringing him home for a proper repair in Germany was the only logical move. And we made one firm promise for the future: we are taking a long break from shipping our own vehicle. If Australia calls us back in a few years for a month or two, we'll simply rent one of the capable off-road campers now widely available locally.

9 August 2023: 12°C, Pouring Rain—and a Warm Farewell Dinner

On 9 August we hung around Fremantle in a miserable 12°C and steady rain. Honestly, by this point we had had our fill of Australia for a while. So much had grown surprisingly complicated: national parks requiring reservations months ahead even out of season because seemingly every Australian retiree now tours in a LandCruiser with an off-road caravan, alongside strict *"No Overnight Parking"* signs seemingly on every corner. Thankfully, the evening delivered one last golden dose of Western Australian charm: over delicious seafood, a cold beer, and a glowing sunset over the Indian Ocean, we raised a glass to a wild, unforgettable ride.



A fitting final toast in Fremantle: Good food, a cold beer, and one last golden sunset over the Indian Ocean.

10–11 August 2023: Final Drive at 30 km/h, Customs Stamps, and "Bienvenue"

On 10 August we met Ryan at the port. First, though, Sixfoot needed a thorough blast through the car wash—far too much red Outback dust still clung to his chassis and tyres. Then we gingerly nursed him toward the loading terminal at a cautious 30 km/h. The grinding noises from the front gearbox practically hurt to listen to, yet our loyal rig held together and rolled into the port under his own power by midday. Together with Ryan we cleared customs and got our Carnet duly stamped. At 10:00 p.m., our flight lifted off for Dubai.

After a brisk three-hour layover in Dubai, we caught our connecting flight to Nice and walked back through our front door on 11 August at 2:00 p.m. CET. *Bienvenue!* Phew—after that rollercoaster, what we need now is a proper holiday! While we unpack, Sixfoot embarks on his own maritime odyssey: due in Japan by the end of September, followed by another ten to twelve weeks at sea to Bremerhaven. By year's end he will be back in Germany, heading straight into the workshop—and with a little luck, ready to roll again by late January.

TAKING STOCK OF A WILD RIDE

Ransacked at the port, a snapped driveshaft in deep sand, six stranded days in Denham, booked-out national parks, and a failing front gearbox deep in the Pilbara—yet alongside it all: reuniting with Ranger Dave, silent star-filled Outback nights, rare rock-wallabies, migrating whales, and the awe-inspiring gorges of Karijini made this an adventure we will never forget.

APPENDIX

Journey Chronology at a Glance

Dates	Location / Region	Key Events & Highlights
2022 – May 2023	Preparation & Zeebrugge	Deep interior clean, dry-ice blasting & underbody coating; after RoRo shipping freeze, last-minute passage secured from Zeebrugge.
3 – 11 Jul 2023	Perth & Fremantle	Arrival in winter rain (10–16°C); delayed ship; port theft discovered on pick-up; replacement shopping & Kings Park Lightscape.
12 – 14 Jul 2023	Indian Ocean Drive to Lucky Bay	Departure via Lancelin & Sandy Cape; solitary night in Coalseam Conservation Park; warm reunion with Ranger Dave at Lucky Bay.
15 – 16 Jul 2023	Kalbarri NP & Shark Bay	Nature's Window & Skywalk; Hamelin Pool stromatolites, Shell Beach, Eagle Bluff Lookout & emus roaming Monkey Mia campground.
17 – 18 Jul 2023	François Peron NP & Denham	Front-left driveshaft snaps in deep sand; 4-hour recovery using sand tracks; careful drive out to Denham on firmer morning sand.
19 – 24 Jul 2023	Denham (Shark Bay)	6 days awaiting workshop slot; spare shaft ordered from Germany (€600); successful Monday repair & onward drive to Fowler Bay.
25 – 26 Jul 2023	Carnarvon, Coral Bay & Bruboodjoo	Early wake-up by Welsh ranger; 240 L diesel loaded; packed Coral Bay; quiet dune camp with kangaroos at Bruboodjoo.
27 – 28 Jul 2023	Exmouth & Cape Range NP	Booked-out parks; spot secured at Yardie Homestead; Sturt's Desert Pea, rock-wallabies, Sandy Bay, spare shaft collected, new front-axle noise & migrating whales.
29 Jul – 2 Aug 2023	Pilbara & Tom Price	Lonely W136 & starry night; axle oil service in Tom Price; front gearbox/differential diagnosed faulty—trip cut short.
3 – 6 Aug 2023	Karijini NP & Paraburdoo	2WD rental from Paraburdoo; Sixfoot trucked to Perth; Fern Pool, Knox Gorge (Class 5) & Joffre Gorge (Class 4); flight from Rio Tinto's airport.
7 – 11 Aug 2023	Perth, Fremantle & Flight Home	Sixfoot safely reunited; return shipping arranged with Ryan; final 30 km/h crawl to port; flight home via Dubai to Nice.

Until Sixfoot is back on his feet, things will stay quiet here for a while. Thanks for following along, and see you soon! — Rudi