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Photo: Sam Venn.

NOTES FROM THE NULLARBOR: THE FINAL FIGHT FOR THE BIGHT

Why we must protect The Great Australian Bight for years to come.

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By Sam Rankin

***'Conservative Dad and leftist daughter cross the Nullarbor'* sounds like the start of a peculiar joke. But in May 2023, it turned out to be one hell of a time with a shared outlook: this place is pure magic.**

On a May afternoon, on a mission to get to Northern WA, I packed my Toyota Hiace with the essentials: surfboards and a jaffle maker. I was ready to gun it on what I thought would be the most uninteresting leg of my trip: The Nullarbor.

It wasn't long into planning before my recently retired Dad pulled the good old *"can I come, too?"* card … something about the world's longest golf course. Really, I think he liked the idea of spending quality time with his 30-year-old daughter (and what better way to do that than a 1,365 km golf course?)

So, off we went. My right-wing Dad, looking for the world's longest 18 holes, and me, a left-leaning ocean lover looking for fun waves. The makings of a good road trip.

A classic dad and daughter selfie.

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We gunned it straight from Melbourne to the South Australian border, passing through Adelaide and Port Augusta, before heading south toward Tumby Bay in search of a Leafy Seadragon. We didn't spot one that day, but I took it as a good opportunity to show Dad my recent tattoo of a Weedy Seadragon. Turns out he would have preferred the real thing (sorry, Dad).

We continued along the Eyre Peninsula to Ceduna – *"wooooah"* becoming the catchphrase of the trip as we discovered stretches of wild, raw and precious ocean. Ceduna is a name derived from the Aboriginal word 'Tjutjuna' meaning sit down and rest (well, don't mind if we do). We knocked back some of Australia's best oysters from the Oyster Barn and cheers'd to the start of the Nullarbor.

The next day we found Cactus Beach—a world-class wave tucked far off the beaten track. A dusty road led us to a community of campers surrounded by dunes. If they weren't already staying for an extended period, I reckon they were figuring out how they could be. Just over the dunes, there were left-handers, right-handers, something for everyone if you pick the forecast right. Note to self: come back here.

A prime example of an Australia desert surf mission.

We continued along the Nullarbor, stopping to take in the breathtaking views, looking for waves, hitting a few golf balls, and having a yarn with locals and travellers at the campgrounds and roadhouses.

Nullarbor translates to a 'null arbor' – or no trees – in latin. Buuuut if we were to get them on a technicality, that wouldn't be entirely true (the amount of golf balls I sent into overhanging branches was a stark reminder that yes, there are in fact a few trees). Despite its inhospitable reputation, the place was brimming with life – bluebush, saltbush, mulga shrub for miles, plus sightings of birds, reptiles and kangaroos.

When we weren't listening to true crime podcasts, we were probably debating something. Political leaders, climate change, capitalism, renewables … the list goes on. And let me tell you, if there's ever a time to iron out your arguments, it's on Australia's longest road. Somewhere along the 1,256 km we came to the

conclusion that Dad: not sure about the viability of renewables. Me: all for expanding into renewables.

Differences aside, we were having a hell of a time. And when we pulled up at the raw, rugged and ocean-ravaged Bunda Cliffs, there's one thing we could agree on: this place is pure magic.

The thing about my Dad is, the last thing he'd want to be labelled as is a 'greeny'. *Those tree-hugging hippies, eh?* But at the same time, he's the first guy to look on in awe at a pristine coastline, marvel at natural wonders, and enthusiastically mark off another bird sighting the book that sits on my dash: '*Birds of Australia'*. Sure, he'll probably never be a 'greeny' – but even he agrees that some wild areas hold greater intrinsic value than whatever oil or resource they're sitting on.

Not a bad view from the lounge.

At the time I was familiar with the Fight for the Bight campaign (which saw tens of thousands of surfers around Australia paddle out to protest against oil drilling in the Great Australian Bight), but nothing makes activism more tangible than seeing it with your own eyes. As we ate dinner, we lost count of the number of whales we saw splash past. It became clear just how much this coastline needs protection.

The Nullarbor and Great Australian Bight is raw, wild and pristine – with 85% of the marine life not found anywhere else in the world. For the Yerkala Mirning people, the Bight has been sacred for thousands of years. You can really see why when you stand at '*Ngargangurie'* (the Bunda cliffs) where the vast open wilderness meets the fierce and wild ocean.

Something I learnt more recently: right now, there are no active oil and gas exploration leases in the Great Australian Bight. So now is a seriously big opportunity to protect it for good.

The Wilderness Society, Surfers for Climate, Sea Shepherd, First Nations custodians, and a bunch of Australian surfers are doing incredible work in this space – standing together to make the Great Australian Bight a UNESCO World Heritage Site and protect it for future generations. It's the final push for this special stretch of coastline, a chance to safeguard the waters that hold a place in the hearts and minds of so many people and communities.

The **Final Fight for the Bight** is going to need not just the Australian surfing community, but momentum from all angles. And if both me and my old man can get around it, I reckon you can, too.

Learn more about the Final Fight For The Bight and get involved here.

To read more of Sam's work, click here.