

FOLLOWING THE WIRE

Phil Bianchi found the towering cliffs, vast beaches, boggy clay pans and overgrown tracks of Baxter Cliffs a 4WD heaven.

Words and images: Phil Bianchi



Views of the Southern Ocean are spectacular and majestic.

Imagine you're perched on top of a cliff looking down into the pristine Southern Ocean. It's clear and deep-blue. Whales can be seen offshore and sharks swimming along very near the cliff face. Because it's a little-travelled area you'll most likely have the whole place to yourself.

Welcome to the Baxter Cliffs on the remote southeast coast of WA.

NOT MUCH LEFT

I've done this trip a number of times and never tire of it, but one time things became a little hairy.

After topping up with fuel at Madura, WA, we headed westward following the old telegraph line. The telegraph line, a single wire linking WA to the eastern states and the world, was completed in 1877 and was considered an engineering marvel in its day.

Imagine surviving nowadays with just one phone line to the world?

On a very good but dusty track that skirted along the edge of the Hampton Tablelands, our first stop

was the Burnabbie ruins. An early settler set up house there, but little remains except for a wooden-post sheep yard, a deep-but-dry well and a wire-mesh fence. There are great camping areas there.

LUCKY

The Eyre Bird Observatory located at the restored telegraph station was the next stop.

The observatory is accessible from the Eyre Highway via a very steep jump up. The track from the bottom of the escarpment to the observatory has many dunes and these can be very sandy, especially if a bushfire has recently gone through. A 4WD vehicle is a must and you'll need to let your tyres down to around 20psi. It'll make the driving easier and protect the track.

Day visitors are welcome at the observatory and a walk around the building reveals much history and hardship as well as whale bones, turtle shells and shipping debris. Depending on how much time the host has, you may be fortunate to get Devonshire teas. ▶

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The Baxter Memorial is south from the main track, an impressive monument in the middle of nowhere.

LIMITED VISION

From the observatory it’s a short drive to the beach where you can drive westward some 13km to Twilight Cove and the buttresses of the Baxter Cliffs. The beach sand is so clean and white there it squeaks under foot and you could spend many hours swimming, beachcombing, fishing and just lazing around.

There is a track up the escarpment, but it can be overgrown or, if a fire has gone through, very scratchy. On my last trip the track was very overgrown in places. If you’re worried about paintwork this track isn’t for you. The kilometre after kilometre of extra pinstriping will drive you crazy.

It’s rocky terrain up top. You’ll be bouncing along the overgrown, rocky and winding track at a breakneck speed of 10kph to 12kph.

Occasionally you’ll see the remnants of old telegraph poles and long lengths of rusted wire running along the track in front.

Following the wire ever westward is mesmerising.

Some patches of terrain are so rocky the telegraph poles were stood up by stacking piles of rocks around the base. Occasionally there are open patches, although there isn’t any vegetation, and these tend to be covered in the finest, talc-like soil that billows up so you can’t see, and it gets in everywhere.

PEDAL POWER

The Baxter Memorial is south from the main track, an impressive monument in the middle of nowhere. John Baxter was a member of Edward J Eyre’s 1841 expedition party. He was murdered on April 29, 1841, by two native companions who then ran off with most of the provisions and firearms.

The Baxter Cliffs are some 80 metres above the ocean and the air is so clean and fresh you’ll almost cough at such purity. Views of the Southern Ocean from the edge of the cliffs are spectacular and majestic.

It’s just awesome!

After more bouncing and following the wire ever westward, Toolinna Cove is next.

This cove is the only break in the Baxter Cliffs, and there’s a small beach visible from the cliff top. Looking into the breaking waves you’ll often see schools of fish and sharks patrolling back and forth. It’s a fabulous spot to chill out and take it all in, but there’s no camping there. The almost 24-hours-a-day sea breeze will blow you away. ►



An underground tank roofed in corrugated iron in which there has always been water.

AD

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Some years ago intrepid fishermen fixed a steel ladder down the cliff face so they could get down to fish at this exclusive beach. They would deliver and retrieve their tackle, supplies and fish using a flying fox, which was driven by pedaling a bicycle that had been concreted into position on top of the cliff. Later on they used a vehicle and would drive away from the cliffs and pull the flying fox up. Because of cliff-collapse danger and potential litigation issues, the Department of Parks and Wildlife removed the ladder, flying fox and bicycle.

BE CAREFUL
When I first visited Toolinna in the 1990s, the ladder was in position, enabling me to climb down to the beach below. Yes, it was a little scary, but it was well worth the effort. I was younger then, and some would argue sillier. Be warned the cliff edge is dangerous and fractured. Any piece of rock you stand on could break away with ghastly consequences. Take care and be vigilant, especially if you have little ones with you. Also be warned that snakes such as death adders are often curled up in a crevice ►

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The country changes, with open patches becoming more frequent.

or hole in the rock, sunning themselves and waiting for lunch to pass by. Help is a long way away. Wear stout, enclosed shoes and be careful where you tread. A snake bite out there could be fatal.

FURTHER WEST

A few kilometres to the west at a junction there's an underground tank roofed in corrugated iron in which I have always found water. Don't, however, expect drinking quality. It's always looked pretty rugged, with tadpoles and slimy algae. Nearby in an open-grassed area are the stone ruins of a

telegraph linesman's hut, and it's another superb camping spot.

Following the wire ever west, the country changes with open patches becoming more frequent, although the driving is still slow and bouncy over the limestone rocks. It took us five hours to cover 70km. I could have sworn we were passed a number of times by land snails that frequent the area.

Leaving the rocky cliffs, but still up top, you're suddenly in sand-dune country, with many tree roots across the wheel ruts forming natural speed humps. Arriving at Wylie Scarp, there is a steep winding track



Day visitors are welcome at the Eyre Bird Observatory.

that takes you down to the beach.

We endeavor to time our arrival at the beach to coincide with low tide, enabling us to drive along the hard sand and below the vast banks of seaweed that can clog the beach and make it impassable. There is a slow, winding, often boggy inland track, but its best avoided.

BOGGED

The hard beach makes for spectacular driving. You can do speeds up to 70kph, but it's best to stay around 30kph to 50kph in case you hit a soft patch and to prevent tyre damage due to excessive heat build up.

On my last trip the tide had turned and was coming in rapidly. Israelite Bay was 95km, or about three hours, away. We made good progress along the beach, but when we arrived at Wattle Camp and were still 40km from Israelite Bay we thought it was safer to take the inland track. This was a disaster. What looked like a solid track across a clay pan turned to mush and down we went ►

AD



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The diesels blasted us out of trouble up and over the dune.



Israelite Bay Telegraph Station ruins.

on all four wheels. Fortunately, our fellow travellers had stayed on the hard ground and after numerous snatching attempts we were out of the bog.

We elected to head back down the beach again.

TIME AND TIDE

The tide was by then higher of course, and occasionally it washed in under the vehicles causing huge plumes of spray. Although not happy about the saltwater car wash, we had no option but to push on. Red dust that had turned to mud washed out from under the vehicles, leaving an unusual blood-like stain on the beach sand.

Some 5km from Israelite Bay it was full tide and the seaweed banks were starting to float. We rounded a point to find a group of large boulders blocked our path. To continue would have been treacherous, there wasn't any track off the beach and we were blocked by a large dune that had been paralleling us.

Nearer the boulders we found the dune

was lower, so we scrambled over rocks and between boulders, with much wheel spinning and black smoke, and the diesels blasted us out of trouble up and over the dune onto the track to Israelite Bay.

We made it, but only just.

ONCE WAS ENOUGH

There are many camping areas at Israelite Bay, and the ruins of the telegraph station are worthy of a visit, as are a number of graves of telegraph-station operators. If you want to visit a vast and pristine coastal environment the Baxter Cliffs and the Israelite Bay beaches are as good as you'll get.

I won't ever forget the exhilarating drive along the beach and hopefully I won't ever have to repeat it at high tide. **wtw**

TRIP-PLANNING INFORMATION

- This is not a trip for novices. You'll be travelling in remote terrain, crossing dunes, climbing sandy jump ups and driving over vast rocky patches and along sandy and boggy beaches
- As a minimum there should be two well-prepared and equipped high-clearance 4WDs
- Allow a minimum of four days travel time – six would be better
- Permits are not required
- The area can be visited all year round, however the months of December to February can be extremely hot. Check with the Parks and Wildlife office in Esperance – (08) 9083 2100 – before travelling the area. There may be bushfires or burning off
- Have a quality compressor for pumping up tyres
- Towing of camper trailers is not recommended
- Carry a HF radio, a satellite phone or a PLB for emergencies.

Heading to the Eyre Bird Observatory. Superb 4WD country.

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