

Silverton where Max was Mad

Scenic sights, fascinating people and a surprise car rally make for a memorable visit to outback New South Wales.

Story and photography by TONY LUPTON

Silverton is a very small town. There's normally not much traffic and cattle often wander along the street. North west of Broken Hill, residents call it a village and it's so far west there's no local council. It's run by a village committee instead.

The haunting ochre and green landscape has been the backdrop for numerous movies and mini-series, including *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*; *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; *A Town Like Alice* and *Razorback*. The landscape brought the filmmakers and the artists to town and, largely due to *Mad Max*, cars are now part of the town's story. And for one day in September, cars all but took over the place when the Classic Outback Trial passed through.

I'd been staying in one of the cabin-style rooms behind the pub while in town to interview Adrian Bennett, owner of the *Mad Max 2* Museum, which opened in 2010. Bennett became a devotee of the film when he first saw it in his native Yorkshire in 1981. He and his wife Linda even-

tually moved from England and established their shrine to the cult film, complete with replica cars, original memorabilia and photographs.

Back in 2004 the Bennetts visited Silverton on a pilgrimage to see where *Mad Max 2* was filmed. He fell in love with the local landscape, with the view of the western plains from Mundi Mundi lookout, but was disappointed there was nothing in town devoted to the movie and its story. He decided to remedy that, moved his family to Australia and developed the museum.

Bennett has short, salt-and-pepper hair and a trim beard, giving him a slightly piratical glamour that sits well with the museum. His knowledge and store of anecdotes about the movie and its cars make the exhibits come alive.

"When we first came here and saw the sunset at Mundi Mundi lookout I felt like I'd come home," he says. "I asked Linda if she could live here."

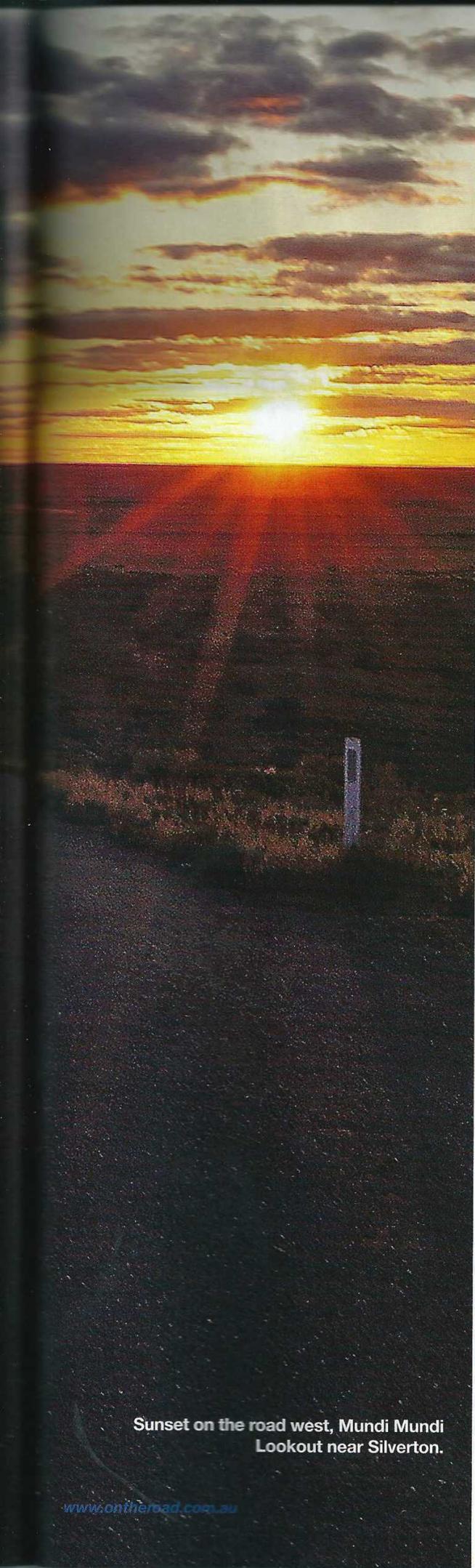
"I said yes, only because I never thought it would happen," Linda adds.

While we are talking, two guys from Melbourne pop in to the museum for a look round. Charlie and Anthony are on their way to the Birdsville races. "We had to have a beer in the pub and check out the *Mad Max* Museum."

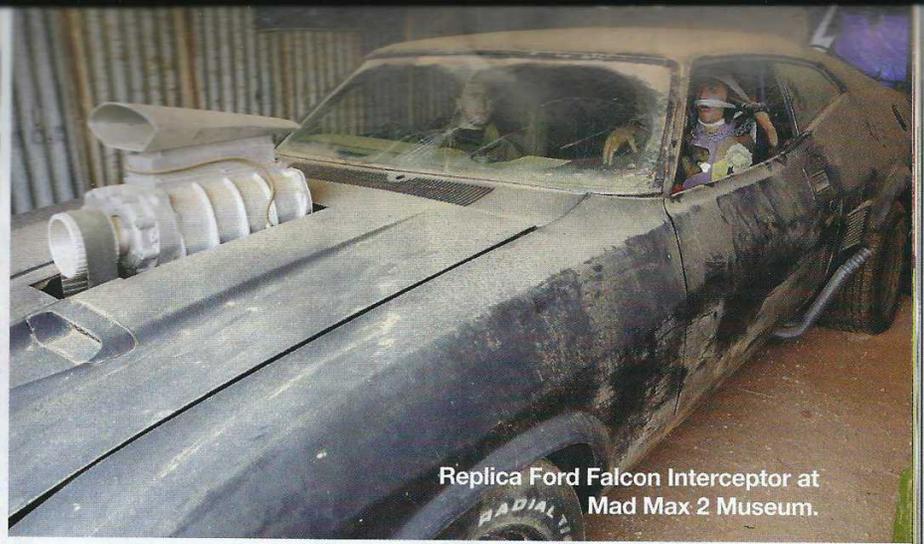
Establishing the museum wasn't simple, partly because land isn't put on the market very often in Silverton, but the Bennetts' opportunity to buy a property eventually came up during a conversation in the pub, the community hub and social centre of the town.

At the pub that night I was one of three diners. I sat at the bar, ordered sausages and mash and was asked to come and sit with a group by one of the locals. He turned out to be John Dynon, the acclaimed artist who owns a gallery just up the street.

Dynon is a living example of this town's regenerative capacity. A former miner whose father and grandfather also worked underground, his painting reflects the relationship between his working life around mines and sheep stations and the ever changing outback landscape. ▶



Sunset on the road west, Mundi Mundi Lookout near Silverton.



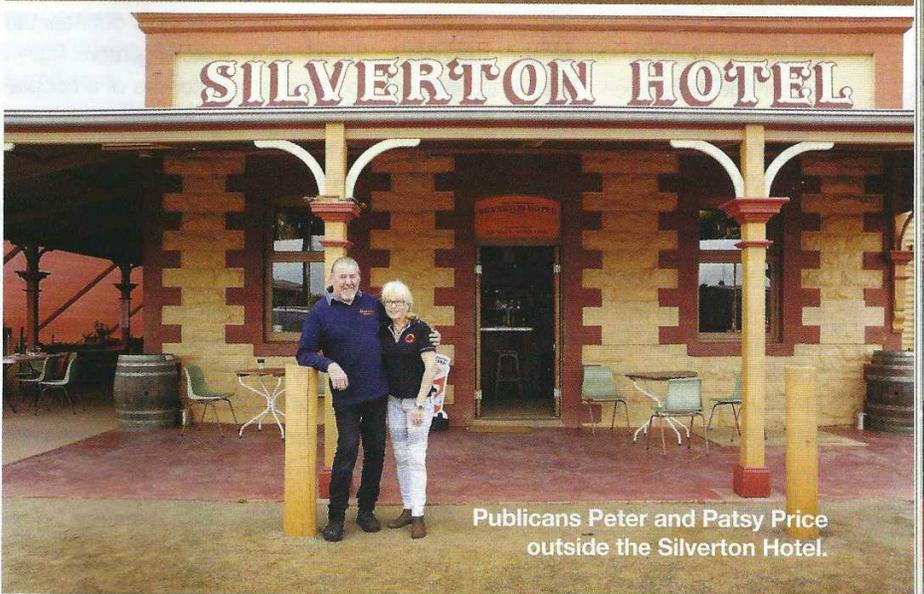
Replica Ford Falcon Interceptor at Mad Max 2 Museum.



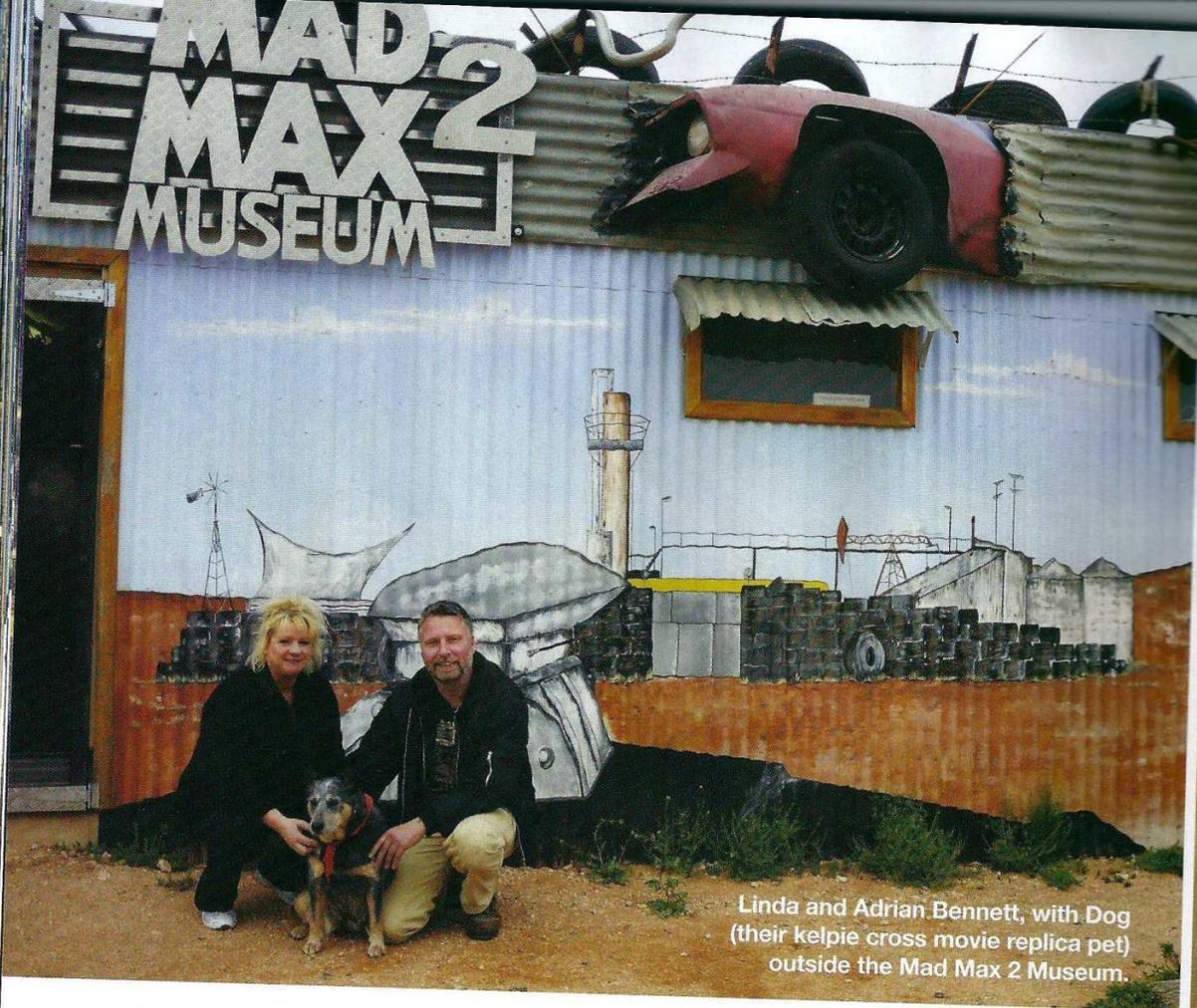
The bar, Silverton Hotel.



Rally cars outside Silverton Hotel.



Publicans Peter and Patsy Price outside the Silverton Hotel.



Linda and Adrian Bennett, with Dog (their kelpie cross movie replica pet) outside the Mad Max 2 Museum.



Other noted artists, such as Albert Woodroffe, who runs the Horizon gallery in the former general store and post office and Justin Cowley, also have galleries in town.

Someone inevitably asked if I'd seen the sunset from Mundi Mundi lookout. "We take oysters and drinks and sit in the back of the ute to watch the sunset there," said the barmaid. "Most visitors leave as soon as the sun sets, but out there the sky stays lit up with colour a long time after the sun goes down."

Peter Price and his wife Patsy have owned the pub for the last four years but have deep connections with the place. She is petite, energetic and down-to-earth and her husband is a genial, easy talker with a ponytail and a Harley-Davidson.

The Prices had a plumbing business in Adelaide before they bought the pub. Patsy is a Silverton native, went to school here in the days when there were plenty of children in the town and danced in the municipal hall. The school is now a museum.

"It's either flood or drought," Price says about the long days running the pub and the unpredictable arrival of visitors. "We want to give people reasons to come here so we do things like the music gigs." The coming attraction will be Kristy Cox and Travis List, Australian country music stars on tour back home from Nashville, playing on the flatbed truck in the beer garden.

As we talked, I couldn't help feeling that this town with so much past also seems to have a future.

It was while we chatted near the log fire that Price casually mentioned that a car rally - the Classic Outback Trial - was coming through town in the morning. Now I had to stick around for that.

Next day I tramped through the red soil and desert scrub outside town trying to locate a checkpoint. I passed an elaborate, circular brick structure built into the ground. It was once a well, long since filled in, its present contents are rusty beer cans.

A roar and a long plume of dust billowing over a rise pointed me in the right direction. Finally I see a small marquee. This was it and the first car was just reaching the end of a 7 km stage along narrow, rocky and rutted cattle tracks.

I spent over an hour out near the course of the rally, watching more than 30 cars come past at intervals of a couple of minutes. From beside the dirt track it was easy to feel the adrenalin rush and read the concentration on the drivers' faces. This is a very up-close-and-personal form of motor sport.

I hitched a ride back into town with one of the rally officials and reflected on this outpost that is part ghost town, part living history, the mines having given way to museums and art galleries, the wide streets, numerous ruins and few remaining build-

ings a testament to earlier prosperity.

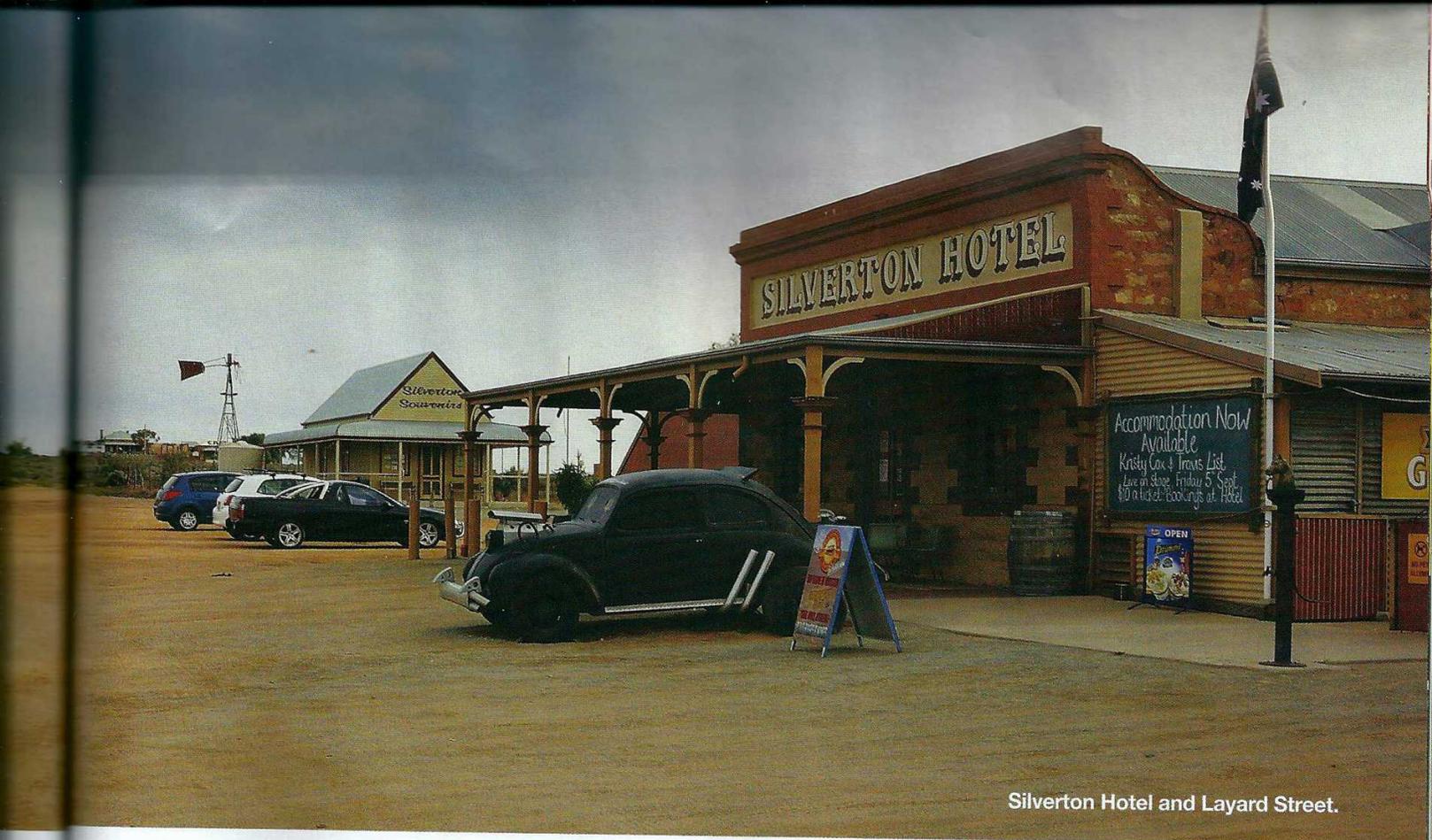
There was a festival atmosphere outside the pub, with the multicoloured rally cars all parked down the middle of the dirt road. I mingled among the crews, checking out the cars. The teams come from all walks of life. There are father and son crews, husband and wife crews, the varied entrants had also included a judge whose Porsche had expired early on and a past Australian rally champion.

The 2014 Classic Outback Trial ran from Parkes in New South Wales to Renmark in South Australia, covering 2,250 kilometres in a week. Day five was in Silverton.

Many of the timed sections of the rally, the racing sections if you like, are held on private roads on the cattle stations. I asked Warren Briggs, driving a 1965 Ford Mustang, what stood out for him. "183 kph on a dirt farm track down the fence line. That certainly focuses the mind."

As I walk among the cars I meet Pat Cole and his son Brad with their 1968 Mercedes-Benz 280SL Pagoda, a low-slung 2-door veteran of rallies across 57 different countries since its first run in the London to Sydney Marathon in 1993. Pat is a Mercedes-Benz dealer in Sydney. Like his car, Pat appears compact yet powerful and there's an obvious rapport between the father and son team members.

They immediately recount their rally so far. Two days ago they blew the gearbox in



Silvertown Hotel and Layard Street.

their Mercedes. In fact the gearbox casing blew apart. Brad gets out his iPhone and shows me a picture he took and I can look right into the inner workings of the gearbox. I imagine the force required to shatter metal like that.

"We were half way through a 75 kilometre stage when the gearbox blew," Brad Cole says. "Dad managed to find 4th gear so we limped on to complete the stage. Then we put a spare gearbox in on the side of the road between Cobar and Ivanhoe."

Pat and Brad are fortunate to have a large and skilled team at their disposal, but even so these are times that can try one's staying power. It isn't called a trial for nothing.

It wasn't long after their gearbox had been replaced that a problem emerged with a tailshaft. Perhaps some loose bolts caused the problem but it was major and this time the car had to be trucked way back to Cobar for repairs.

"We found a machine shop in Cobar," says Pat Cole. That meant a shop willing to be taken over for the night by a bunch of out of towners who would use the machining equipment to fabricate parts and cajole their car back to life.

"While Brad and I got some rest the crew started work and found that now all the gear selectors had been ripped out of the gearbox," continued Pat Cole. "These selectors are made of die cast metal so

they can't be welded. Our crew chief, Brian Westwood, and the team had to manufacture new ones on the spot. They worked through the night and by morning the car was ready to go."

So it's not just pull something out and put in a new part in this game. Genuine motor engineering lives. Father and son reminisce about it two days later without much drama, their faith in their team vindicated and enthusiasm high because the car's still running. They still hope for a decent finish despite the penalties they've incurred.

A few cars along I find Peugeot driver Graham Wallis, an electronics technician who has competed in a rally every year since his first in 1969, giving him the longest continuous record of any current Australian rally driver. "I love the multi-challenging nature of rallying, from building the car to driving the tight and twisting sections," he says.

His navigator Brian Ward adds "it's fantastic to experience the outback landscapes on the cattle stations and see how different the country is out there, with forests and unexpected beauty, compared to what people normally see from the highway." Being the navigator, he may have a little more time to soak in the scenery.

Wallis then takes me to meet some others inside the pub, where Peter and Patsy Price have been doing a modern loaves

and fishes performance with burgers and their 'famous' hot dogs. They are the brightest red hot dogs I've ever seen.

Charlie Gardiner and Barry Green call themselves the senior citizens at play, chuffed to be part of this event. In their late 60s, the Mazda RX7 pair is running near the tail of the field, which can be a rugged business, the outback farmers' tracks chewed up by the frontrunners ahead of them. Gardiner, who owns a 4-wheel drive franchise in Dubbo and his navigator, a retired wool buyer, are neighbours and old mates. "The outback driving is special," says Gardiner. "Day after day for a week brings a special friendship and companionship with the other rally people."

Once they'd refuelled themselves, the crews wander back to the cars outside the pub, still comparing notes while starting to think of tomorrow. One by one, the cars head out of town until the noise of the engines fades and Silvertown returns to its tranquility, the Classic Outback Trial now another page in its enduring story. The warriors of the dirt roads will spend the night in Broken Hill before resuming their trek to Renmark.

Late in the afternoon I take the short drive to the Mundi Mundi lookout, to the opening scene of Mad Max 2, the view that convinced Adrian Bennett to move halfway round the world. I don't have any oysters but the sunset is still glorious.

