

Take the Long Way Home

Road-tripping along the longest national highway in the world, Matthew Abbott captured his country's great contradictions – the mundane, the marvellous, and the fascinating people along the way.

by **Lilian Bernhardt**

✕ @LBernhardt_

Lilian Bernhardt is a freelance writer and journalist based in Naarm/Melbourne. She is passionate about exploring social and environmental issues through her work.



SOME SINGIN' BUT NO RAIN AT THE PODDY DODGERS FESTIVAL IN CROYDON, QLD

Matthew Abbott returned to Australia in 2015 after a year of photographing the civil war in South Sudan. Realising he may never grasp the full scope of such a complex conflict abroad, he came home keen to gain a deeper understanding of his own country.

With his car, rooftop tent and hundreds of rolls of film, he set off on a 12-month road trip along Highway 1, documenting the 14,500 kilometres tracing Australia's coast.

"I thought it was a great way to tell a larger story about Australia, and how this road links all these different people and places," Abbott says over the phone, recounting days spent driving, exploring local areas, camping by roadsides and "hunting" for photographs.

The project was named *When They Sing of Australia, They Never Mention the Flies*, challenging the rosy way in which Australia is seen as "the lucky country". His approach was grounded in the belief that what is often most fascinating about our lives is overlooked at the time.

"For me, I'm trying to not romanticise life in regional areas. It's about trying to find these little things about life there that's fascinating in a more mundane or ordinary kind of way," Abbott says.

Through his ongoing work, Abbott hopes to portray a realistic view of Australia, reflecting its nuances and challenges. "Of course, there's incredible beauty here, and we are so lucky to have the incredible culture that First Nations bring," he says. "But there's also this underlying tension and difficulty. Racism and other complex issues that aren't maybe seen, but if you scratch the surface, become visible."

His favourite image was taken in Croydon, Queensland, during the Poddy Dodgers Festival. Amid a difficult drought, he watched as children sporting raincoats and umbrellas marched along the dry streets, in an event ironically coined Don't Rain on My Parade. "It was just this deeply humorous and human response to what is clearly a very serious issue for the town," Abbott says. "I thought that really encompassed this larrikin sort of way of dealing with serious issues."

While capturing portraits along the highway, Abbott noticed a reluctance among many Australians to be photographed. He theorises this could be due to our culture's tall poppy syndrome, or the British influence of "not making a fuss".

Either way, it stood in stark contrast to his subjects while he was working in places like the US. "Over there, people are so willing to share their story and they really own it," he says. "Here, they often go, 'Why me? My story is not interesting.' But in actual fact, they are very interesting. And so sometimes it's about convincing people."

Abbott's impression of Highway 1 is of a "quirky and odd place", defined not just by its vastness and lack of population in many areas, but also by its contradictions. The title of the series speaks to this complexity, Abbott explains: "Yeah, you can be looking at this incredible, stunning scene in the outback, but at the same time you can be like, absolutely inundated, swatting flies."

FOR MORE, VISIT MATTHEWABBOTT.COM.AU.



COUSINS TYRONE AND TRISTAN AT A FOOTY FINAL IN BORROLOOLA, NT



FIVE-YEAR-OLD HEATH VISITS KATHERINE HOT SPRINGS, NT



BERYL AT A BBQ IN KATHERINE, NT



MUSTERING CATTLE IN NGUKURR, NT



KALGOORLIE, WA, AFTER A BUSHFIRE



EMUS IN EXMOUTH, WA