

WEST WEEKEND

JULY 22-23 2017

WHISKY TOWN

Going for gold in the
Great Southern

rob broadfield

MARGARET RIVER'S
NEW LUCKY 13

KIM SCOTT

The novelist spins
some ripping yarns

Robin's NEST

Meet the
girl from
Texas who
fell in love
with the
Pilbara.

plus »

TINY TREES, SCHOOL
SORES, FELINE FASHION
AND EGG-CELLENT WINE

The Weekend West

WEST WEEKEND
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The West Australian

Published for West Australian Newspapers Limited, ABN 98 008 667 632, 50 Hasler Road, Osborne Park, WA 6017, by Phil O'Toole and printed off set by Colourpress Pty Ltd, ABN 17 009 172 276, 54 Hasler Road, Osborne Park, WA, 6017. Registered by Australia Post Publication No. WBF 0906. Recommended and maximum price only ISSN 0705-7792. West Weekend Magazine is a supplement to The Weekend West and must not be sold separately. There is a cross-media relationship between West Australian Newspapers Limited and Channel Seven Perth Pty Limited.

COVER ROBIN PENSINI
 PICTURE DAN AVILA/
 AUSTRALIA'S NORTH WEST
 TOURISM



WEST WEEKEND

July 22, 2017

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Featured
 You need to learn all kinds of skills living on the land but Robin Pensini never thought one would be teaching.



From the editor

As I boarded the plane from Perth to Paraburdoo I worked out it had been 27 years since I had last made the journey. I've headed north a few times since my parents left Tom Price in the early 90s but I'd never had reason to go back to the Pilbara. Driving out from the tiny airport, surrounded by the Hamersley Ranges, I realised how little I appreciated the beauty of the place when we lived there. As a teenager I was eager to get out, relieved to escape to uni, though I was quite happy to come home in the winter holidays (the summer, not so much). My parents faced many of the same concerns as Robin and Evan Pensini; while we lived in town, not out on a station, education was still a huge issue. Lucky for us (and them) though, Mum and Dad didn't have to teach us themselves. With the tyranny of distance, Robin found herself thrust into the position of teacher, guiding all four of her boys through primary school. As her youngest prepares to follow in his brothers' footsteps and head to boarding school for secondary education, I can only imagine how hard it must be to let him go. We all know of droughts and flooding rains but there are so many other ways the outback can break your heart. Lucky it is so beautiful.



QUIZ ANSWERS (FROM PAGE 22) 1. Vitamin C 2. Yukon 3. Sydney FC 4. The Wiggles 5. Gemini 6. Tahiti 7. Tim Allen 8. Michelangelo 9. High-Definition Multimedia Interface 10. Going in Style 11. Oahu 12. U2 13. Cannes Film Festival 14. Green, yellow, red 15. 30 Rock 16. England (United Kingdom) 17. Tennis 18. 2003 19. France 20. Grapes

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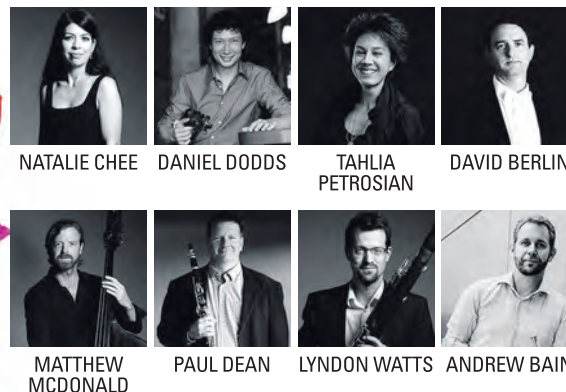
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feature





The great outdoors
Robin, Evan and
Preston Pensini at
Cheela Plains Station.
PICTURE DAN AVILA/
AUSTRALIA'S NORTH
WEST TOURISM

Lessons in *Love*

It's a spectacular place to visit but living in the outback presents a unique set of challenges. **Julie Hosking** meets a Pilbara family who could teach us a thing or two.

It's 7.35am and Preston Pensini is already at his desk, ready for morning muster. He's surrounded by the paraphernalia of school – work sheets, colourful posters and textbooks – but it's a long way from your regular classroom. There's only him and tutor Jenny in situ, there's not another class within cooee and there's no school oval to run around on at lunchtime, though there's always the prospect of a late-afternoon ride on Tsar.

Travis' hit Sing starts blaring from the laptop. "We always have a song," the 12-year-old says. "See this," he adds, pointing to the left-hand window of the screen, "the ones in grey and black are the teachers and the ones below are all the students." Images of Canberra landmarks and children in the snow are coming up on the screen as we speak. "That's our principal. I did a power point yesterday and he's putting up more pictures."

Faces of varying ages appear in the window, greetings beaming across the Pilbara. Port Hedland School of the Air has begun. There's plenty to talk about, with the older students having just returned from a camp in the nation's capital. As the only Year 7, Preston is given a lead role in discussions, his voice carrying down the line at the push of a button.

This is Preston's last year of homeschooling and his mother Robin is a ball of mixed emotions at the prospect of her fourth and youngest son leaving the nest. "I'm going to miss him like crazy," she says, "but he'll be ready. He's really keen to play sports and do the kind of things you can't do out here."

Out here is Cheela Plains Station, a 188,000ha pastoral lease Robin runs with husband Evan as part cattle station, part contracting business, part tourism venture. About 130km out of Paraburdoo, they're nicely placed for tourists travelling between Ningaloo and Karijini National Park.

In winter, there is a rare beauty about this part of the world that is hard to put into words. The colours of the rock, the vast plains, the undulating ranges in the distance, and that unbelievable sky, unveiling majestic palettes at dawn and dusk, before a startling canopy of stars drapes over all and sundry.

Sitting on the terrace at the Pensini homestead, a warm, inviting home that defies its genesis as three banged-up sea containers, sharing a delicious lunch of meat, salad and homemade bread, it's easy to romanticise the outback.

And there is plenty of romance about the Pensini story, even if a young Robin Richards wasn't instantly enamoured on her first encounter 26 years ago. The Texan animal science student had come to WA on exchange with Muresk agricultural college and was sent to spend four weeks at Wyloo Station, which Evan's parents, Geraldine and Fred, had owned since

the mid-70s. In a letter home, dated June 12, 1991, she tried to paint a picture for her family:

I can't even explain the wide-open spaces I have seen in Western Australia. You can drive all day and never see a dwelling. I am truly in the outback ... The weather is getting hotter as we head north. Don't know if I brought the right attire. I am having difficulty understanding the accent. The bush flies are unbelievable and the Aussie salute is real. The area here is very dry and in bad need of rain ... I am a little overwhelmed by the whole situation. Don't know what I've let myself in for.

She could, of course, have no idea exactly what she would let herself in for. A few days later, rain started to fall, mustering was called off and, in the lull, she fell for the charming young boss, the Pensinis' second eldest son. The pair managed to maintain a long-distance connection over snail mail and the phone for three years before Evan finally jumped on a plane to Texas; within a few weeks they were engaged.

Evan was under no illusions of the challenges that his fiancée would face in moving to the other side of the world, let alone living in the outback – though Robin grew up on a ranch, the rolling, green hills of east Texas were a million miles from the Pilbara's stark landscape. The couple decided if she could endure a summer on Wyloo, they would then get married. They wed in Kings Park in October 1994, before that first summer even began.

The 45C-plus summers have just been one of the challenges Robin has faced in the ensuing 23 years, first on Wyloo and then on Cheela Plains, the station the couple started on Wyloo's eastern end. Don't even get her started on the trials and tribulations of generator power, though that has lessened since they installed solar panels. Then there was the fact a gal who could barely boil water had to learn how to cook for up to 20 people. And, as a couple living in harsh country, there has been the constant struggle of trying to make a living off the land they love, a struggle that at one stage saw them destock Cheela and leave to manage a station in the Northern Territory.

But the toughest gig of all – one that terrified her – was homeschooling her four boys. Ask both Robin and Evan the biggest challenge of living in remote WA and the answer is resounding: education, education, education.

"When I was growing up Mom and Dad were like 'Be a teacher, then you get school holidays and as a mom that's a perfect occupation', and I was like 'No way, I'm never going to be a teacher'," Robin says with a laugh. "I didn't like school, I had to work pretty hard to do everything. My sister was a teacher, Mom was a teacher. I did animal science." »



Family life The boys as youngsters with Robin; mustering cattle; hard at work in the classroom.

« But teach she would, starting with twin boys Fraser and Gavin in Year 1, though she initially tried to get someone else to do the job. “I thought ‘I’m not going to do this, we’ll hire a teacher’. She lasted about six weeks and that was it for me, I wasn’t having another one,” she recalls. “Because it’s your responsibility – whoever you employ, the education department’s not checking up on them, it’s me who’s responsible for what they teach the kids.”

So Robin guided her boys through School of the Air, with the aid of a radio – computer conferencing didn’t come in until the twins were in Year 2 – whose reception was so dodgy that it would occasionally pick up the voices of Indonesian fishermen at sea. “Getting over the ranges was just impossible. We nearly pulled out altogether and just did Distance Ed because the lessons were so disruptive,” she says.

But Robin, now 48, could see the benefit of the School of the Air community and persevered. The most stressful thing was not knowing how to measure their progress. “Oh, you just worry about it all the time. I wanted a teacher to come out and do a special visit in Year 1 because I wasn’t sure we were doing enough,” she says. “Over time you build a bit of confidence, I guess, and you sort of get into the lingo. And every year Port Hedland School of Air has a home tutor seminar and they’ll bring in different professional learning people and you develop those skills along the way – and sort of work out what you’re supposed to be doing.”

She must have done something right. The twins won high-school scholarships to Guildford Grammar, where both excelled. Now 20, they are studying sciences at UWA and Murdoch University. Fraser wants to be a GP, though the accomplished rower is also trying to make the Australian team. Gavin wants to be a vet and was heading off to stay with his uncle in Texas to get some experience as a vet specialising in large animals. Lawson, 17, is sitting his ATAR this year and elected to spend the first week of the last holidays at the school studying.

Robin has clearly instilled a strong work ethic in

‘It draws you in and gets into your blood.’



her boys. “I just made sure they followed through with what they had to do, they can’t really get away with not doing something because you’re always there.” Besides, growing up on a station showed them the value of hard yakka. “We came here in 2001, built the homestead, put in lots of paddocks and all the infrastructure and they’ve been here all the way along, so I think just being part of the growing businesses has instilled in them the drive to achieve something.”

A past president of the Pilbara branch of the Isolated Children’s Parents Association, which lobbies government for equal access to education for remote students and financial assistance with school camps and the like, Robin doesn’t think she would have coped without the support and friendship of parents facing similar pressures.

She also tapped into the ICPA’s committee of retired teachers, Retired Educators Volunteers for Isolated Students Education (REVISE). “You can apply and they come and give you a break for up to four weeks; I learnt a lot from those teachers. We were fortunate to have the same REVISE come and teach the kids for a four-week period for 12 years. It brought me to tears when I rang her early in the year to say we won’t need you to come this year.”

As they did with their first three boys, the Pensinis had employed a tutor for Preston for Year 7. Robin had to apply for an exemption to keep him enrolled at Port Hedland School of the Air now that high school starts a year earlier because she felt her youngest, who has dyslexia, just wasn’t ready to fly the coop yet.

“It’s almost a relief when they go off to school because it’s not your responsibility any more as far as education goes but then you really worry; are they ready, are they going to cope,” she says.

Preston is swinging off a rope he wrapped around the beautiful African mahogany tree in the front lawn when Jenny calls him back to class. Lunchbreak is over. It’s our cue to hit the road, too. Or, more accurately, the scrub. I’ve come up to Cheela with the Pew Charitable Trusts, a not-for-profit organisation which works with people such as the Pensinis to preserve and promote sustainable outback communities and landscapes, and Evan wants to show us exactly what he’s been doing to ensure the

viability of his corner of the Pilbara. We climb up into the four-wheel-drive, grateful for the extra padding as Evan navigates his bumpy backyard. It’s an enormous yet deceptively fragile landscape. Aside from the sting of those long hot summers, rain is rare and falls are meagre, an average of 290mm a year. In fact, Robin says while education has been the biggest challenge for them as parents “the climate overrides everything in some ways”.

It was the climate – several years of below-average rain – that forced them to take the painful decision to destock completely in 2010. When they gradually reintroduced cattle under agistment a few years later, Evan returned to the rest-based grazing system he’d adopted years before. Cattle are given short, sharp spells in paddocks, which are then left alone for a good six months or longer, depending on the season, to regenerate. As we drive along, even the untrained eye can see the difference where nature is being allowed to take its course, the grasses flourishing in a way the 52-year-old pastoralist had not seen in his 40 years on the station.

Evan’s passion for the land is obvious, as is his frustration at the short-term nature of policies and decisions made in city offices far from the people and properties they affect so profoundly. Like the mining exploration up the road that resulted in unwelcome four-legged visitors. “They’re dewatering the mine and just tipping the water into a creek that runs through our property,” Evan says. “So we’ve got a system now that’s been forced on to us where there’s permanent flowing water where there never used to be and hundreds of feral donkeys have moved in.”

He fears for the future of the stunning gorges on Cheela, too, because they sit in a pocket of undeniable riches. “When you get to the gorge you will see how beautiful it is and it is surrounded by four billion tonnes of high-grade iron ore, so it’s got no hope,” he says. “The gorge itself is in a reserve, a 5000ha reserve but the rest of it ... And that’s the thing from our perspective, people who’ve lived here for so long. We’ve got to look beyond mining. Mining’s a fantastic thing, it’s good for the economy and all the rest of it, but you also transform the environment.”

Caravan and 4WD holidaymakers can do the same, unfortunately. As we pull up outside the gate to



the gorge, Evan says they've had to act as the "fun police" because people were camping wherever they liked without care for the fragile environment. They set up numbered bays as guides for campers, trying to keep them away from the edge of the inviting waterhole known as Mussel Pool, and now ask for a bond for a key to this piece of paradise. They still find rubbish or people camped where they shouldn't but the destruction is not as rampant.

While the Pensinis are doing their best to protect the environment they call home, they know better than most how difficult it is to live off the land, especially one as arid and unforgiving as the Pilbara. In recent years, they have diversified into contracting and tourism. Cheela Plains offers station-stay accommodation or you can pitch your tent or pull up the caravan on their camp site. The dongas are basic but very comfortable, with all the facilities road-weary travellers welcome. When they first

Cool change
There are sweet spots to chill out at Cheela.
PICTURE DAN AVILA/AUSTRALIA'S NORTH WEST TOURISM

started serving meals, Robin would cook up at the homestead on the other side of the highway and ferry meals across. Now there's a charmingly rustic dining room, where camp cook Pauline dishes up platters of food as hearty and welcoming as her smile. She and her husband Ross, who takes care of the road-grading contract Evan has secured from Main Roads, are from Kangaroo Island but now spend most of their year working at Cheela.

Perhaps by necessity, everyone's a multi-tasker up here. The footy's on in the corner on the night we join a hodge-podge of workers, both from Cheela and mining contractors who travel 90 minutes to and from site each day, for dinner. Roxy, who usually works with the cattle, has made a divine Nutella cheesecake for dessert. Chances are if you have a hidden talent it won't remain a secret for long.

It's pitch black as I duck back to the donga to grab my coat, intent on a little stargazing. Captivated by the night sky, I can see many reasons why the Pensinis love this place despite the difficulties the distance brings. What the boys missed out on growing up on the land was made up for in many intangible ways, not the least of which is the respect for what their parents have built. I wonder if it makes Robin and Evan sad to think that once Preston goes, perhaps none of them will come back here to live permanently. That all the work they are putting into

the land, while certainly not for nothing, may not pass on to the next generation.

Robin is philosophical. "With all the boys we've said go off and get a trade or go to uni and experience a bit of life before you come back and we'll see what's around," she says. "We might not be here, it might not be viable, we don't know what's going to happen in a few years. Whenever the older boys were asked what they wanted to do when they leave school, they'd say they want to come back here. But when they get down there and they see the opportunities ... and that's what we wanted for them, to go and experience those opportunities."

As for the girl from Texas, she's become such a part of the Pilbara she stars in Australia's North West Tourism's new campaign, Epic Pilbara, encouraging others to experience the outback.

Does this chief cook and bottler, cattle wrangler, tourism operator and teacher wonder what life would have been like if she hadn't fallen for Evan all those years ago? "Not really. I think Evan and I just thrive on challenge. Every day is a new day. And the landscape, it sort of draws you in and gets in your blood I suppose. I can't imagine living anywhere else." **WW**

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