



# THE Words and Pics RENÉE McLENNAN

# ELECTREK BEGINS

## *New Caravan World columnist Renée McLennan and her family head off on their all-electric Big Lap of Australia and explore WA's Coral Coast from Perth to Exmouth.*

**W**ith the final packing box taped up, the last work email sent and out-of-office activated we were finally ready to roll and embark on our all electric adventure. The nine months ahead is dedicated to exploring this great southern land in our EV and solar camper trailer on the iconic Big Lap.

As we hit the road, we are conscious of the need to be prepared for the unexpected. Our travel schedule is intentionally fluid, allowing us the freedom to embrace the challenges that will come our way in a country that's only just opening up to electric travel beyond the limits of the cities.

### CHARGED UP FOR ADVENTURE

Between Perth and Exmouth, a myriad of destinations beckoned. From sandboarding escapades in Lancelin, to nights under the stars in Francois Peron National Park,

encounters with dolphins in Shark Bay, swimming with Whale Sharks in Coral Bay and marvelling at the wonders of the Ningaloo Reef in Cape Range National Park – the journey promised many unforgettable experiences and did not disappoint.

### NAVIGATING RANGE REALITIES

While modern EVs now achieve impressive ranges exceeding 500km when commuting around the city, our journey is a different reality. Venturing beyond city limits meant confronting the challenge of scarce charging stations.

With our EV9 still relatively new and our setup undergoing final tweaks right up until departure, there was a degree of uncertainty about our travel distances. Initial test runs had indicated a towing range in excess of 300km (33kWh/100km) and this was reinforced on

the first leg of our journey to Gin Gin. However, subsequent legs, with variation in cruising speeds, road surfaces tyre pressures, elevation changes and head winds, have seen the range drop to as low as 260km for a full charge.

### POWERED BY ADAPTABILITY

Utilising the newly installed (but yet to be completed) WA EV Network made the initial stages of the journey simple. Charging stations are strategically placed, offering more than just power, but interesting places to explore, playgrounds for the kids to run off some energy, lunch options or shops to stock up on supplies for the next leg of the journey while our vehicle recharged.

The car is usually ready to go before we are, and either myself or Tim has usually returned to the vehicle to move it out of the charging bay to avoid the idle fees.



Most charging stations have not factored in drive through for vehicles that are towing, which necessitates unhitching the camper when charging. This is a minor inconvenience that could easily be addressed in the design of future charging stations along popular travel routes.

The network is not yet fully complete, so we have encountered some stretches where the planned chargers are not yet operational. The charger at Minilya (between Carnarvon and Coral Bay) is one that has not yet been commissioned, leaving a gap in the fast-charging infrastructure for heading up the Coral Coast. When travelling this 240km section, we left Carnarvon with 92 per cent charge and arrived in Coral Bay with seven per cent battery remaining (efficiency averaging 35kWh/100km). The fast charger at Coral Bay is currently out of action while the RAC resort undergoes renovation, but we were more than happy to 'have to' stay and enjoy the Ningaloo Reef for a few days and allow the car to trickle charge back up to 100 per cent before heading on to Exmouth.

The journey into the Shark Bay region is facilitated by the WA EV Network charger hosted at the Overlander Roadhouse. Being quite remote, and off-grid, this charger is a little slower, with max output of 50kW. At this rate, a full charge of our vehicle would require 2.5 hours. However, we didn't need a full charge, but just a top up to get us to our campsite. In theory, this should only have taken 15 minutes charge time. However, the charger was ramping up to only approximately 18 kW and was regularly dropping its connection, so the planned 15 minutes stretched out to over an hour. We decided to use this time to have our meal stop and play a board game together



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** Charging station at Overlander Roadhouse; EV fast charger at Denham; Ellie at Coral Bay; Tim, Renee and Xavier ready to head off on their adventure

in the air-conditioned roadhouse until the car had enough charge to get us to Nanga Bay for the night. The site was powered, but the campsite operators were reluctant for us to top up charge from their power so we just charged from our solar and internal camper batteries before travelling to Denham for a fast charge on the way to Monkey Mia the next morning.

A highlight has been four stunning days off-grid at Osprey Bay along the peninsula in Cape Range National Park. We scored an isolated site close to beautiful beaches and great snorkelling. Thanks to our solar panels and batteries we left with 10 per cent more battery charge than what we arrived with, despite having the fridges running and using the camper's fans, aircon, induction cooktops, hot water system and lights during our stay.

We have generally used the paid EV fast chargers to top up to 80 per cent (since this is the fastest portion of a charge), unless the next leg required the full buffer of 100 per cent

charge. The remaining 20 per cent has been topped up via slow charger overnight if we are at a powered site and from the camper's internal battery ready with 100 per cent the next morning to explore the local area or head off to the next town.

### CHARGING CHARGES

We've clocked up 2300km on the journey between Perth and Exmouth. In addition to paying for some powered campsites, the direct 'energy' costs from paid charging stations has totalled \$188. The WA EV Network chargers are priced at 60c/kWh for fast DC charging with back up slower AC charging also available at 35c/kWh.

From Exmouth we are heading inland to visit Karijini National Park and to enjoy some station stays inland. The WA EV Network does not extend into these regions, so there are likely to be some new adventures and challenges ahead. **E**