

# Thirst quencher

*The Iron Clad Hotel is a welcome watering hole in Australia's hottest town.*

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

Music spills from the open doors of Marble Bar's Iron Clad Hotel and two jillaroos collect a cover charge from a bunch of grinning ringers milling on the footpath outside. Inside, the only pub in Australia's hottest town is starting to hum as the tunes of a reggae outfit from Broome flow across the beer garden, providing the soundtrack to the annual Start of Muster party.

Perched on stools at the wooden bar, a line of locals and station workers mix with travelling tradies sipping cold beers as a pedestal fan rattles in the corner. Nailed to the walls are road signs from across the Pilbara: Coongan River, Doolena Gorge, Mount Divide and Nullagine. Australian and Aboriginal flags hang from the ceiling and a set of framed local footy jumpers lines the back wall – Irrungadji Dockers, Parnngurr Tigers and Kiwirrkurra Lions. On another wall, a poster signed by Lee Kernaghan nods to the pub's 120th birthday bash in 2013.

Behind the bar, publican Thomas 'Foxy' Fox chats with one of his regulars and keeps an eye on the growing Friday evening crowd. A former driller, Thomas explains how he became imbued with Marble Bar's remote charm while working in the region more than two decades ago. "Back in 1992, we were heading out to drill in the Central Desert and we broke down, so I spent a few days here at the pub and I thought, 'What a bloody great town'."

Although the drilling job saw him travel the world, including long stints in China and Brazil, when the Australian mining boom ramped up Thomas found himself returning regularly to the Pilbara, with off-swings spent at the Iron Clad. "I thought I might buy a little house in Marble Bar, but it turned out there weren't really any for sale, and then out of the blue someone told me the pub was for sale," Thomas says. In 2005, he bought the place, although not before some serious financial negotiations. "The banks wouldn't lend me a cent to buy a pub in Marble Bar, so I had to get vendor finance and then had five years to refinance," he says. "I told a few of my mates to sell their crap share-market stocks and give me the money and that's how I came to be here."

Located 200 kilometres south-east of Port Hedland, Marble Bar was settled during the gold rush of the 1890s. The place earned its reputation in the 1920s after a spell of 160 days of more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius). Today, the town's entry sign declares 'Warmest welcome from Australia's hottest town'. The

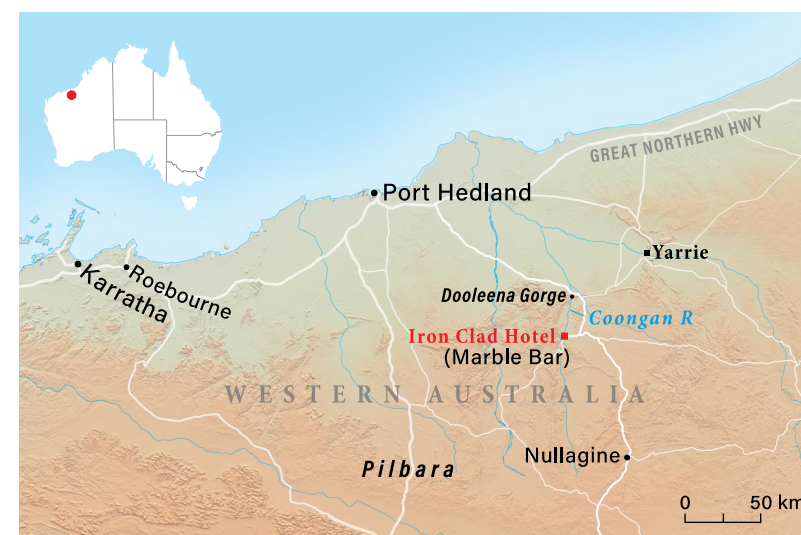
pub's been here since 1892. Although better roads and technology have somewhat subdued its once wild reputation, locals still share tales of people being shot in the bar and others dying of heat exhaustion.

Contrary to popular perception, Thomas says summers are not busy at the bar. "In summer, Marble Bar goes into a coma," he laughs. "You get journos calling up from Sydney saying, 'It's 50 degrees there today, the pub must be packed', and I say, 'Mate, at this time of year there's about five people in town'."

When the clientele do start to roll in, sometime around May, Thomas says there's a mix of locals, station hands, tradies and government workers, and then a big influx of tourists June to September. "I suppose because the town's famous, or infamous, depending on which way you look at it, there's a lot of people who have Marble Bar on their bucket list," he says. The annual races attract thousands every July and the afterparty is the pub's biggest night of the year. The menu includes fish and chips, pizza and a big focus on local beef from Yarrie Station, owned by Thomas's wife, Annabelle Coppin. Accommodation is available in motel-style cabins.

Leaning on a pool table, visiting tradesmen David Simpson and Michael Brockman are celebrating the end of the week with a couple of cold ones. In town from Broome to work on Marble Bar's century-old stone courthouse, David says the Iron Clad has been their home away from home for more than a fortnight. "When we first turned up it was 44°C and we had to be in a roof, so that wasn't too good, but thankfully we've had a couple of cool days this week, around 38," he says. "But this place is unreal; it's a good, old-school country pub, and after the first week here we pretty much knew everyone by name." Not surprisingly, David reckons after a day in a tin roof, the cold beer at the Iron Clad is hard to beat. "It's the best thing in the world," he says, grinning.

Born-and-bred Marble Bar girl, Cheryl Manurung, is the pub's cook. "Marble Bar is a great place to live and bring up kids," Cheryl says, taking a break on the verandah. "It's safe and everyone looks out for each other." She has worked at the pub on and off for years, and says it has always been the town's meeting place. "We always say, 'No wi-fi here – talk to each other, make a new friend'," she says. "So if I see someone's sitting by themselves and there's other people sitting around, I'll make people sit together and meet each other," she says. "Because if people feel included and welcome, they'll come back."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Iron Clad Hotel publican Thomas Fox at the bar; the pub's historic corrugated iron facade; Yarrie Station stockman Will Garde and pastoralist Annabelle Coppin cook up some local beef in the pub's beer garden; cook Cheryl Manurung.