

Outback ADVENTURE

Jessica Mauboy spread some Christmas cheer across the outback aboard Australia's answer to the Polar Express

She may be used to hanging out in LA with the likes of Snoop Dogg and Jay Sean, but for hometown pop starlet Jessica Mauboy there is only one place she wants to be these holidays – her family home in Darwin. But before then, the former *Australian Idol* star has busied herself spreading yuletide cheer across the southern stretch of Australia. 'I'm so excited to see our country and what amazing communities we have,' the 22-year-old singer says as she boards the train for the annual three-day Outback Christmas

journey aboard the Indian Pacific, which will travel from her current home, Sydney, to Perth. Along the way, she'll be giving performances at makeshift stages and train stations in towns and cities from Bathurst to Broken Hill and Adelaide to Kalgoorlie, as well as some of the country's most remote communities. Quite a trip considering Jessica has never been on an interstate train before! 'I had a pretty bad experience on a plane recently,' she shares. 'The engine was making this terrible noise and it felt like the floor was going to fall out from underneath me. We had to make an emergency landing. So, yeah, maybe trains are the way to go!'

Before departing Sydney, Jessica performs to a large crowd at Central Station – singing hits such as *Saturday Night*, *Inescapable* and a rip-roaring cover of Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas*. 'It's so great to see the smiles on the kids' faces,' Jess says after a repeat performance in Bathurst later that evening, where she is swarmed by adoring fans.

Arriving in Broken Hill later than scheduled the next day means Jessica's

performance is cancelled. However, she still finds time to meet and pose for photos with fans, who have been waiting all morning to see her. Leaving behind nothing but beaming grins, the train pulls on to Adelaide for a delayed but delightful performance at Parklands station.

Meanwhile, more than 100 people, mostly indigenous, are camping out overnight in the depths of the Nullarbor Plain, awaiting the arrival of the Christmas train. Some have travelled up to 300km to be there and none are disappointed when it arrives the next morning. One girl hugs Jessica as she sings and doesn't want to let go. Both are moved to tears.

'I'm from Darwin,' Jessica explains as she sits down on the dirt floor with children from Oak Valley Aboriginal School. 'In the Northern Territory,' she adds, pointing upwards, 'Do you mob know where that is?' The kids, for whom English is their second language, nod and smile appreciatively. 'They may be from different states but there is a sense of kinship. After all, Jessica's background is not so different from theirs.'



'It's such a wonderful feeling when I see these young kids with massive smiles on their faces,' Jess says

The annual Indian Pacific Outback Christmas train raises funds for the Royal Flying Doctors Service

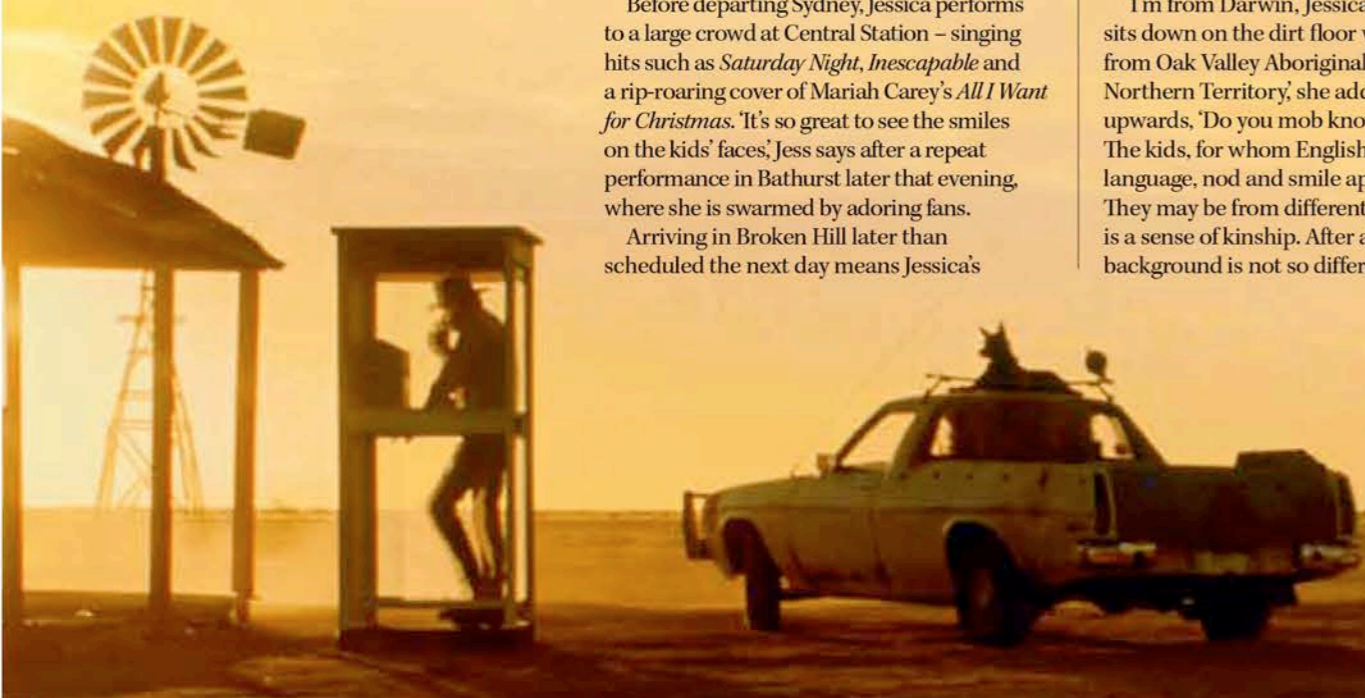
'I grew up in a small community, but we have a big family. I just had a normal upbringing, riding down to the creek, swimming in the waterhole or at the beach. I love it up there, but this is the outback I haven't seen before.' And it certainly is the outback. There is no stage or amplification here, allowing Jessica's voice to really shine.

'I love playing unplugged. That's how it used to be – just me and my dad in the garden. He'd be playing guitar and we'd both just break out into song,' says Jess, who is looking forward to spending time with her family. 'Hopefully we'll go fishing together and hang out. I just hope it doesn't rain too much!'

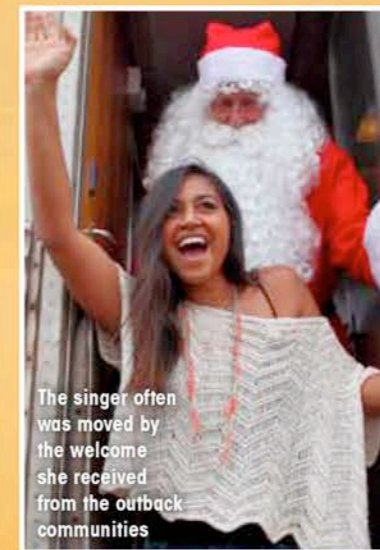
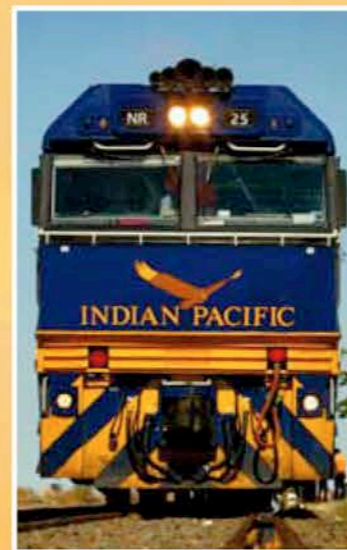
As the train moves into Western Australia and on towards Perth, Jessica says she's excited about the New Year. 'I've just finished filming *The Sapphires* and I'm really excited, as it's going to be out next year. It's about a group of [indigenous] country singers who go to Vietnam to sing for the troops. I cried twice reading the script. It made me angry but it also made me laugh,' she says. 'I'm also hoping to go to the UK to do some writing. I love it there.'

With a new album also in the pipeline, it is good to know Jessica will be getting all she wants for Christmas. After having helped spread so much festive cheer across the country, there's no question she's got a firm place on Santa's nice list. **OK!**

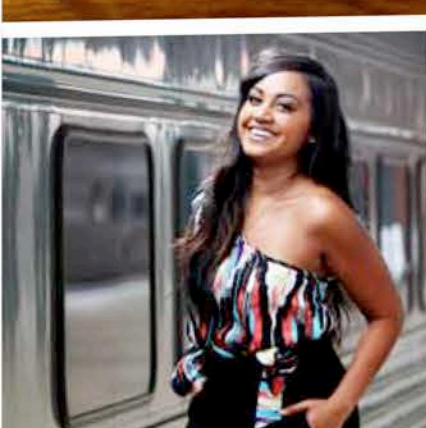
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Before the trip, Jessica had never been on an interstate train before



The singer often was moved by the welcome she received from the outback communities



SYDNEY

'When I came here for the first time [as winner of the 2004 Road to Tamworth Competition], I thought, "Why is everyone in such a rush?" But, since then, my music has taken me to lots of big cities, and I just love that energy!'



BATHURST

'What a great crowd! I'm so pleased they braved the cold to come out and see us. It's so great to see the smiles on the kids' faces!'

BROKEN HILL

'The mob that were there were great. Just seeing the kids looking up to me, I was telling them, "You know, I've grown up where you're growing up and just stay positive, always believe in something and if you really want something, just go for it!"'



WATSON

'Watson was deadly – everyone had a few tears. I'm from Darwin. I grew up in a small community. But I've never seen this part of our country before. The landscape, the people – just coming out here has been such an amazing time.'



RAWLINNA

'It's so nice to be here in Western Australia on such a lovely, sunny day! What a journey it's been. It's been amazing, seeing our country, seeing what amazing communities we have – it's insane!'