

PERFECTLY TRAINED

Jonathan Ralph, 48, has managed to combine his two passions – food and trains – by working as a chef on The Ghan

A few months ago after we'd finished the dinner shift on The Ghan, the other chef and I went into the dining car to meet the passengers. "I know your accent!" said one of the English travellers, picking up that I was originally from the UK. "How did a Liverpool lad end up working on a train in Australia?"

"It's a long story," I laughed. "But I can tell you, once I did get here, I made it my business to get a job on this train."

I've always loved trains and food. My dad gave me my first train set when I was seven, and I began collecting them. Eight years later, I left high school to become a chef.

After working for big hotels in UK, I moved to the Channel Island of Jersey where I met my wife, Carol. Then in 2003, needing a change, we moved to Adelaide, South Australia, and set up a catering business. I brought my trains with me and set them up in the garage to play with in my spare time.

A year later, I read about The Ghan finally reaching Darwin. I remember the first day I actually saw the train at the station, and thinking how beautiful it was.

I kept thinking about The Ghan, wondering what it would be like to work on. When we sold the business, I decided to send in an application.

I got knocked back, but a few months later, I rang one of the

bosses directly and asked if there was any work for a chef on the train. It turned out there was and I was asked to start straight away.

I couldn't wait to get on board, but I wasn't prepared for the challenges I'd face.

"It's a nightmare. I can't get back on that train!" I told Carol after my first trip to Darwin. "The kitchen is so tight and cramped, and it's difficult and hot. I don't think that I will ever get used to working that way."

Carol wisely asked me what I did like about it. "The train is beautiful," I began. "And the scenery through the desert is unlike anything I have ever seen – it changes all the time. It was also such an adventure. It was cold when we left Adelaide and then the next day in Darwin, it was hot and tropical. We also passed some amazing wild animals along the way. Oh, and the food was also great to work with..." She looked at me with a smile and said, "I think you'll get used to it." Which indeed, I did.

We leave Adelaide twice weekly and travel overnight to Alice Springs. We get there at around 2pm and stop for four hours. Then it's overnight to Katherine and on to Darwin. The next day, we turn around and head back.

I am usually up at 5.30am to

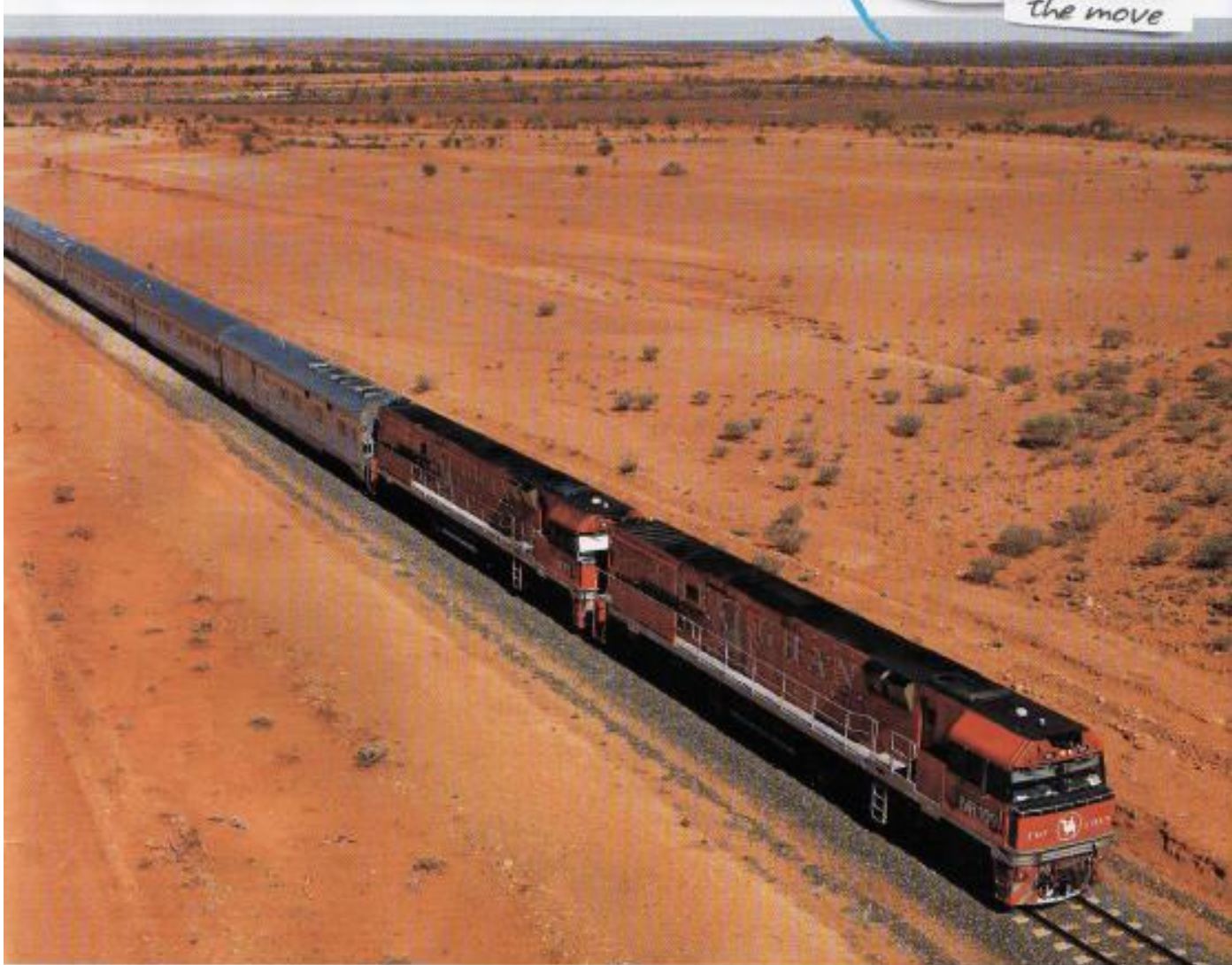


get ready for breakfast. As that is finishing up, we prepare for lunch. In the afternoon, I get a few hours' rest, and then we're back in the kitchen for dinner, which winds up around 10pm.

The Ghan had a busy time last year with its 80th birthday and we had a lot of Chinese, British, French and American passengers.

Some passengers can be particular about what they can and can't eat. We have had coeliacs, who can't eat gluten, and people with food allergies, so you work out what you can serve them. On every trip, we will also have at least one person who says there is nothing on the menu they want to eat. Then it becomes a matter of sitting with

SEEING RED: Jonathan (inset) loves the ever changing desert scenery as The Ghan crosses Central Australia between Alice Springs and the South Australian border.



THE GHAN

- The first Ghan train left Adelaide on August 4, 1929, bound for Alice Springs.
- The Ghan's name was inspired by the Afghan camel traders who roamed Australia's Red Centre in the 1800s.
- The Ghan originally ran from Adelaide to Alice Springs, and finally made it all the way through to Darwin in 2004, a distance of 2979km.
- It leaves Adelaide for Darwin on Sundays and Wednesdays, and departs Darwin on Wednesdays and Saturdays.
- Fares from Adelaide to Darwin start at \$716 for an adult in a daynighter seat and \$1312 for a basic sleeper cabin. Gold service is \$1973 and Platinum will set you back \$2987.
- For more details, see www.gsr.com.au

them, working out what they do like and creating something so they have a happy trip.

It is really nice when people say to me, "I am so surprised – the food on the train is really good," but I do wonder what they think I've been doing in the kitchen! We spend hours getting everything right, and take pride knowing that this is fine dining, just like any top restaurant.

It's very different to working in a restaurant, though. There, you do the same thing in the same place every day. But on a train, the scenery changes all day.

Even though you are going along the same track, the colours and what happens out in the desert changes dramatically.

Since I have been working on The Ghan, I don't seem to play with my toy trains at home so much, as I feel I have my own real train to play with now.

When I am about to begin a shift and walk along the platform at the railway station, I still get excited, knowing that the train is about to take a journey – and that the people onboard will be eating very well. There's a lot of pride in that. *w*