

My name is Danielle Doyle. My husband, 3 boys and I live on Mittiebah Station, a remote cattle station in the Northern Territory. We are 5 hours north west of Mt Isa and this is our service town. Our closest town is Camooweal, a small town with a pub and a roadhouse – this is about a 3 hour drive away.

My oldest son Tom commenced boarding school last year down in Brisbane. We knew airfares out of Mt Isa were expensive but since sending Tom away we have realised just how expensive they are. I can't even imagine what it is like for families with more than one child flying out of Mt Isa, but I reckon my neighbour could tell you – she has 2 boys away at the moment.

I won't have to imagine next year as I will also have 2 boys away at school.

My boys did (and the younger boys still do) their schooling through Mt Isa School of the Air. Although we live in the NT, Mt Isa is our closest service town. Sending our boys to boarding school in the NT isn't an option for us – Darwin is 14 hours away and Alice Springs is a 10 hour drive. Now, because we live in the NT and send our children to boarding school in Queensland we miss out on the remote travel allowance that we would get if we lived in Queensland – this equates to around \$6,000 per year per child.

Driving to Mt Isa and putting Tom on a plane is our only option. I believe boarding school is essential to their development. On the station they don't get the opportunity to participate in team sports or have contact with other children – my youngest boys have just gone over 2 months without seeing another kid, and they haven't left the station since we arrived home from holidays at the end of January. Going to boarding school is so important for their social development and life long skills for the real world.

Getting Tom to and from Boarding school is quite the ordeal and looks something like this...

The School drop him at the airport, he checks himself in (he is 13) and gets himself to the correct gate. He flies for around 2.5 hours and we collect him from Mt Isa. For us to meet his incoming plane means we either have to head into Mt Isa the night before or leave at 4am and drive the 5 hours to town (did I mention the 190km of dirt road – not fun if it rains - and 12 gates?). We lose half an hour crossing the border into QLD. We then either turn around and drive the 5 hours home or we stay in Mt Isa.

I am sure most of the boarders in his year down in Brisbane only live a few hours away, some maybe 8 hours and they probably think it is a massive drive just to get their kids back to school – which it is – 8 hours is no walk in the park. But for us we have to drive 5 hours just to put him on the plane. If we were to drive Tom back to school it would be a 3 day drive with 2 overnight stops.

Due to the high cost of airfares we miss out on so much and don't get down to Brisbane very often. I really try to get down there once a term but sometimes even this isn't possible. My husband has not been down at all, it is just too expensive for both of us to fly down. When I do go I have to leave my husband and children behind and just go by myself. We miss out on things such as parent teacher interviews, watching him play sport, Father/Son breakfasts, award assembly's etc.

This year I thought I would get organised and purchase all of Tom's airfares early – when there was a sale on. The problem with these sales is that they don't cover all dates, and usually they are not available when school holidays happen. I often fly Tom home 1 or 2 days earlier to try and get the cheapest fare available. This means he misses out on a couple of days of school, just to get that cheap day during the week, which isn't usually all that cheap. This year his airfares varied and the prices were as follows with Qantas:

Return trip in June: \$765.30

Return trip in August: 463.68

Return Trip in September: 614.49

One way trip at the end of the school year: \$221.70 – very reasonable and happy to pay this.

To put it in perspective, at the moment Qantas is offering the following return airfares out of Brisbane:

Hong Kong \$585.00

Beijing \$609.00

Bangkok \$700.00

To get here today I drove to Mt Isa yesterday and onto Cloncurry this morning. I will hopefully head home today and then get up at 3am on Monday morning to head back to town to put Tom on the plane back to boarding school.

I really do wish the cost of flights out of Mt Isa weren't so high. This would give us the opportunity to head down to Brisbane more often, and maybe even go as a family instead of just me.

I know I speak on behalf of most remote families up here. This isn't just my story it is the story of all of my friends. People who are working hard to feed the country. Qantas commenced in Winton in 1920 and stands for Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services. They seem to have forgotten their roots and don't really care about rural and regional Australia anymore. Or is it the crazy taxes that they have to pay to land on these strips?

We all have to drive for many hours to put our children on the plane and I know when I head in on Monday I will see many friends who are also dropping their kids off to fly back to school. The kids are so young (12 years old) and once they head off to boarding school they are gone, only to come home during holidays. It would be so wonderful if we could fly down more often to see them.

Thank you.