

JOBS

'It's shocking when you stumble across a metre-long goanna in your laboratory.'

Test your mettle

A chemistry degree and a backpacker's ticket to West Australia has set up a golden career.

WHEN Eleanor Drake set out into the world to find a more interesting job, the 29-year-old, fresh-faced Northlander says she knew nothing about the industry nor the environment that was about to captivate her.

"I began my career as an analytical chemist at a Wellington laboratory. After a year in front of a computer screen analysing data, I realised I needed a job with more variety.

"Armed with my chemistry degree, I backpacked from Melbourne to Western Australia. A few weeks later, I secured a job as a metallurgical technician and chemist at a Perth-based laboratory. After six months training, I was sent on my first site placement in the Pilbara, a dry, thinly populated region in the north of WA. It's known for its Aboriginal peoples, stunning landscapes, red earth and vast mineral deposits. It felt like I was walking into an oven but after a

couple of days I acclimatised and am now fine with the heat as long as I continuously drink water.

"I assisted with the sampling of an iron ore processing plant during commissioning. We were housed in a makeshift camp and just seven of the 125 occupants were females. I quickly learned not to let myself be intimidated by a male-dominated workforce by making sure I'm always being myself.

"In 2008, I was part of a metallurgical team involved in commissioning a WA copper and gold processing plant. This fuelled me with a curiosity to learn more. Despite doubting my abilities in maths and thermodynamics, I returned to university and ended up being awarded six university prizes.

"My current job involves the extraction and purification of about two grams of gold from one tonne of mined ore. The role combines the fields of engineering, chemistry and geology. Watching a gold pour and seeing the end product is pretty special.



►Northlander Eleanor Drake, 29, has braved a male-dominated workforce in hot, remote areas of Western Australia to develop her career as a metallurgist.

"It is still a novelty working in remote parts of Australia. Coming from Northland, I still find it hard to comprehend that a number of the barren, dusty sites that I worked on are actually cattle stations.

"It is rather bizarre witnessing emus, cows, kangaroos and lizards mulling around the process plants and it's shocking when you unexpectedly stumble across a metre-long goanna which has waddled its way into your laboratory – but they are all pretty friendly.

"I am proud to work for a company that is a signatory of the cyanide code, the best practice for the management of cyanide used for gold recovery. One of my roles is to

enforce and monitor the destruction of cyanide used during the leaching process.

"The hardest part of the job is being away from family in New Zealand for up to two years at a time. Sometimes it can be difficult to maintain a balanced lifestyle. I work eight days at the site then have six days off at home in Perth.

"I am proud that I took the risk not knowing anything about mining and giving it a go.

"Financially, my career has enabled me to live out my travel dreams. I've met many colourful characters and it has given me the confidence and skills to adapt to many incredible environments."

CV: ELEANOR DRAKE

2011- present Graduate metallurgist, Barrick Gold, Plutonic Mine, WA

2011 Graduate Diploma in Extractive Metallurgy, Murdoch University, Perth

2006 -2010 Metallurgical technician, chemist, analytical technician, Independent Metallurgical Operations, Perth

2004-2005 Analytical chemist, AgriQuality, Wellington

2004 Graduated with Post Graduate Diploma in Chemistry, University of Canterbury

2003 Graduated with Bachelor of Science, University of Canterbury

2000 A bursary, Kerikeri High School, Northland

Career goal To gain an international placement with Barrick.

www2.careers.govt.nz/chemical-engineer

How to get into this role

"As a New Zealand chemistry graduate, I had to move to Australia first before I was offered a job. The major mining companies advertise vacation and graduate programmes on their websites early in the year with applications closing midyear.

"A qualification in metallurgy or chemical engineering is generally required. While studying, apply for vacation work with a mining company or metallurgical laboratory. Don't be afraid to take educated risks and to work outside your comfort zone, it will be worth it in the end!"

Rosalind Le Bas Walker
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