

Into the Red Centre: Notes on the Aussie Great Desert Expedition



Canning Stock Route

My memories of the Kimberley in 2014 kept the juices flowing for more. There was something about the desert that I had not had nearly enough of. I wanted sand dunes and endless plains. I wanted big skies and big empties and great distances without people. I loved the desert flowers and I wanted more. So we began to plan, idly at first, but avidly within a few weeks. Why not have a crack at the Canning Stock Route? John had been on a big part of it back in the day and he was definitely up for another crack. We started pouring over maps and I got keen enough to buy Hema's Great Desert Tracks—a mighty tome that was read cover to cover by both of us several times. We also bought track Guides for the Canning and the Anne Beadell Highway, which turned out to be outstanding. Then John came back from a trip to Adelaide and said we had it nailed. A 4WD hire company would rent us the vehicles and we would be off. What about a month away in the desert? Our mate Bill was also keen so we began to plan.

We got ambitious. While we were about it why not cut right across the middle of Australia on the Anne Beadell Highway, seeing as it was on the way to the Canning [known universally as the CSR]. And, why not cut up on the Connie Sue Highway to Warburton to refuel and get us onto the Gunbarrel Highway and across country to Well Nine on the CSR while we were about it? And then why not come back down via the Tanami Track to Alice just to round it out? That way we would make a circuit right around the centre of Australia. More than 4,000km in 4WD. Choice!

After a year of planning we have finally arrived in Adelaide to get the expedition going.

We have two 4WD Land Cruisers, one a truck, the other a wagon organised for us by Rob at Complete 4WD Hire. He is an affable guy and really interested in our trip. He provides us with four spare tyres, a roof rack, a fridge, flags for visibility in the dunes and a recovery box full of good stuff like compressor and strops and tire levers, spare diesel cans. I would recommend them to anyone considering a trip like this. It worked out as exceptional value. We could carry 310 litres in our tanks plus eighty in cans, and eighty litres of water plus forty in bottles. We outfit from Snowy's, the best camping store I have ever been in, with excellent helpful staff. We buy everything we need there including our own collapsible dunny. This is to be a comfortable trip wherever possible. The tents are so good I bring mine home with me.

Two days to stock up load our trucks and Coober Pedy is our first stop 900km away. Not much to say about the town other than run down and industrial with diesel. The landscape is dotted with trial holes, some are larger where opals have been found. It is a poor-man's field in that individuals and families stake claims of 30x100 metres. There are no conglomerates working the opal fields. The town is populated by Italian and Greek families who have been here for fifty years or so. There is a Greek and an Italian Miners Club which are open to all for dinners and drinking.

We stay in a basic underground motel, called Radeka's. Wouldn't recommend it. The manager is as mad as a snake, with notices all around saying what you are not allowed to do. It is interesting in a mild manner to sleep underground but not very. Whilst it is a boiler in the summer at over 50 degrees, in winter it is a cool 1-3 degrees in the morning. We stock up and refuel for the Anne Beadell Highway.



We are supposed to have permits to cross the Woomera Range, and being government we should have had them a month in advance. No problem to John. He calls them up from NZ and Glen chats to him for a while and then passes him over to Frank who writes out the permits. We also need permits for the Talaringa Conservation Park, available from the Coober Pedy Library. Further permits are required for the CSR, available via the Australian 4WD Association on line at \$100 per vehicle.

Right at the start we are informed that this is neither a highway nor a road but a serious and isolated track with the nearest fuel at Ilkurlka, 748 km away, and no help along the way. Built by Len Beadell, and named after his wife, as an access route for the Woomera Nuclear Testing site in 1954, the road is narrow—the width of a Toyota just and sometimes less, so it gets scratchy. It is a windy track and for the most part it is corrugated sand. The country goes from desert near Coober Pedy to savannah country further inland. It is surprisingly high at 500m ASL, which might help to explain the ice in our bucket at the second camp. We travel west along the troughs and turn north into the dunes when we need to climb them. Most of the time we manage 40km per hour. Sometimes a whole lot less. Ghost gums become more frequent as the sand dunes get higher and the swales between them deeper. Shelter from the wind I imagine.



We have excellent gear, including pull-out stretchers with their own tent attached. With open cell mattresses and good sleeping bags we are comfortable at a sitting height, warm and out of the wind. We have a great little dutch oven hanging from a tripod for our meals and a small gas stove for our cups of tea. We also invested in a jaffle iron for making our lunches. It turns out to be a highly valued thing for lunches.

Days are split into morning sessions and a cup of tea, mid-morning session and lunch, then an afternoon session. We stop around 4pm in South Australia as it is dark by 6pm, and you need plenty of time to set up camp and get a decent fire going. Once the sun goes down you put on all clothes available. It takes about thirty minutes to erect the tents, get a fire going and set the cooking stuff up. We stop a couple of hours out to cut firewood as there is never any wood near a campsite. For this we have a Stihl chain saw, our best friend.

Bill is our cook and chief quartermaster. He has organised everything edible in brilliant fashion, with a printed menu of what and when and where and how much and all that. It works really well for a week or so but then it descends into a nice 'What do you think we might have tonight?,' sort of provisioning. Bill is a dab hand at bread making and the casseroles are truly memorable. We could probably have done with more utensils and bowls but it does keep the washing up down to a minimum.



I don't care what anyone says—there is nothing quite like sitting around a fire at night, a couple of drinks and a few cups of coffee—more stars than should be allowed, waiting for shooting stars, with not another soul within cooee—or even further than that. We see maybe five vehicles in our first few days. But as the fire goes down and it gets really cold, it is a toss-up whether to keep the fire going or hit the pit, which we so thoughtfully set up while it was light.

Getting up in the morning is a rapid affair. It is bloody freezing. Basically you get on all available clothing and stamp around to get warm, preparing yourself for that one exercise of the day that has to be done, and soon, but which involves digging a hole and placing the porta-dunny over it and exposing bare flesh to freezing surfaces. But afterwards a cup of tea and some porridge erases all memory and the new day is before us.

Something new comes to us each day. Sometimes camels who feel that the track belongs to them and make that point by trotting along it for miles and miles in front of us. Sometimes rock and jump-ups that can take you by surprise. Actually it is really important not to get taken by surprise as the desert is unforgiving and distances are vast and traffic non-existent. So if you stuff things up you are in deep doodoos. Big time.



After three days we cross into Western Australia and set our clocks back 1 ½ hours. It now gets dark at 5pm so we need to set off earlier. We arrive in Ilkurlka, a tiny outpost with a store, a camp and diesel. A t Ilkurlka, Wally and Clare look after the roadhouse shop. They were relievers from Adelaide up there for a holiday in the desert. A happy couple, they chat away to us. There is a party of Spinifex people outside waiting to top up their tank. They are going through to Wingellina for a corroboree [funeral] 290 km across a narrow track through the desert that we did not even know about. It is a two wheel drive hatchback. There are eight people in the little wagon and they will travel overnight. Here we are, intrepid expeditioners with all the mod cons thinking how brave we are. For this family it's normal.

We've used a little less than expected so put only 50 litres of diesel in the wagon, plus another 40 from the cans. This just about fills the 130 litre tank on the wagon. The truck carries 180 litres so has enough to get to Warburton, the next refuelling place 460km away. We work out we are using around 14 litres per hundred which is as good or better than the main blacktop.

We come across families of wild camels quite a lot, running down the red sandy track rather than across country. They run at a real gallop until they swerve into the scrub and stand snorting at us. There were also the occasional, dead ones alongside the track.



From Ilkurlka to Warburton we turn off the Anne Beadell Highway 940 kms from Coober Pedy and turn right and north on the Connie Sue highway, also built by Len Beadell in 1962. It is 220km of sand and corrugations with a lot of serious washouts that can come up on you real quick, but there are also fast sections so we make the whole way to Warburton in the one really long day, tired but happy. We have moved from the Great Victoria Desert, with its spinifex and ghost gums and desert oaks and sand to the Gibson Desert with its spinifex and ghost gums and desert oak and stones and sand. The desert goes on and on.

We stay at the cabins in the Warburton roadhouse—basic is the word, although another word for it was total rip-off at \$150 each room per night for which we got very little other than a bed and secure parking. But there is TV and an All Blacks v Oz in the Bledisloe to watch.

Warburton is a tiny settlement, originally a mission station. We are not permitted to visit the indigenous settlement as we would not be welcome. Alcohol is forbidden in Warburton. Most of the customers in the roadhouse are indigenous people but it's almost as if they're not there as far as the white customers are concerned. Perhaps it is such an ongoing thing that the Oz whites don't see their fellow citizens. What we observe however is two peoples ignoring each other.

The roadhouse at Warburton is run by Ted and Anthony with a staff of ten—they also run the community store across the other side of the highway. Anthony is used to the local lifestyle having spent many years running a store in PNG. Kevin is one of his workers—English, his wife the local nutritionist—he too is used to this desert lifestyle having served in the British Army in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have been in Warburton for three years and will have enough money by Xmas to buy a business of their own in England—so long as it is not Salford, where he was brought up. The whole roadhouse is in lockdown at night with giant gates and chains. That also means unchaining the tire hammers and levers that are available during daylight hours. To get the air hose you have to make a \$50 deposit before taking it from the counter inside. On our first night just before dark we meet a group of police who have driven up from Laverton. After refuelling they head off to a crime scene in Blackstone, a mere 300km away.

A large truck-bus arrives with large camping trailer and no passengers. Barry has been driving cross country tours for 42 years. His house is next door to the trucking company that John used to work for in Perth 40 years ago. Australia might be a big country but it is still a small world. Barry is big and bearded with an easy going

manner. He is driving back to Perth to pick up another tour, a mere 1600 km. He has come down from Darwin and Alice.

Even though the tracks we have been on are remote we are been surprised how few Aussies are having a crack at it. Aussies love their 4WD lifestyle. Yet we've only met three parties over the first 1000km, although we passed a couple camped up, we heard a few more on Channel 40.

On the Connie Sue Track we were called up on the RT by Glen who asked who we were and how far were going. We asked him where he was and he replied right up your date, and indeed there he was. We suggested he might like to pass us but he decided to wait for his mate Gary to catch up. We carried on and never saw him again, wondering why he came up so fast if he never intended to pass us. Later on the track we heard they were going to camp some 35 km short of Warburton.

We have a satellite phone for emergencies...and also for calling our wives. Wonderful to be able to do this from the middle of the Aussie desert and have the feeling of attachment to our loved ones even though the phone is for emergency services primarily.

The Gunbarrel Highway at long last, and the second stage of our adventure begins. We're headed for Carnegie station, a mere 1.5million acres, where we will refuel. It should take two to three days. Well, talk about rough Trev! Talk about corrugations, Brucie! Talk about rock and washouts! Corrugations the size of a truck tire. Put simply they do your bloody head in. The Gunbarrel is a shit road through beautiful country and not to be repeated but I'd do it again in a heartbeat. A day on the Gunbarrel is like an endless flight in economy with screaming babies and a smelly toilet and the kid next to you wants to go to it every twenty minutes. You forget all this by the time you book the next flight.



The first part is a doddle but then the legendary mind-numbing corrugations pick up, along with the rock and the number of washouts to be navigated. We pick away at it slowly but by the time we get to Geraldton Bore where we camp we're shagged. Apart from a few rocky outcrops the Gibson desert is flat and featureless—few trees, mostly spinifex, the odd camel, including the large bull that chose to die about fifty metres from our campsite and the only trees within cooe. We're too stuffed to move on. A very smelly night when the breeze wafts our way. To our delight the next day the road has been graded all the way to Carnegie, like a major highway, we cover the 200km in three hours flat!

Carnegie has always fascinated me as being the most remote cattle station in a remote desert in an isolated Western Australia. It has a homestead and a camp kitchen a few cabins and diesel. Mary runs the tourism side of the station and cooks for the guests and the musterers when they stay over. She is easy going, from

Rotorua, and happy to be away from it all. She is a fit 60 and in great health. She has picked up the WA 'youse' in no time flat. The camp is pleasant with a chip heater for the showers. We top up there with enough diesel to get us to Kunawarritji 860 hard kms away. From here to Billuna is 1400km and the end of the Canning Stock Route.

Our pull-out stretcher tents are a hit. Up off the ground, with their own tent and fly, they take less than five minutes to put up and are extremely comfortable. You have to hand to the Aussies, they know how to do camping equipment. Everything we have bought for the expedition is excellent.



THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

Built in the late nineteenth century this former drover's track has become a mecca for the adventurous 4WD drivers. It is an expedition in itself at 1800km from Wiluna to Halls Creek. It's narrow, not maintained and you are on your own out here. We cut through the Glenayle Station to reach the CSR at Well 9. There are old wells every thirty miles or so for cattle droving. A number of them have been restored and are in working order. The highlight of the first week is Durba Springs, an oasis in a gorge with water, and abundant birdlife, ghost gums and grassy places to camp. Apart from the flies it is idyllic. It even has a long drop toilet.



Durba Springs—rest from the corrugations

From here to the Talawana Rd, an emergency route to Newman in the Pilbarra, it is close to 200kms. Thence via Lake Disappointment to Kunawarritji is 350km and refuelling. We are much slower on the CSR, the track being only as wide as a vehicle hemmed in by spinifex and desert oaks. The track is just that, unmaintained, rutted from washouts and corrugated where it is not washed out. As usual there are diversions on diversions so we take our pick which track to take. We stay over at Georgia Bore, a hand pump bore with excellent water left behind by a prospecting company.



Motor bike riders resting in the shade.

Dead camp trailer

Finally we are in sand dune country and there are hundreds of them to be traversed. I don't make them all and have to have several goes. John, who is far more experienced, never misses a trick, finally teaching me the best way to get over the dunes, by ramming it into first gear just before second dies and idling over the top of the dune. We come across four blokes doing it hard on motorbikes. They are completely knackered from the dunes and the corrugations—and they have 1200kms to go! We also pass a number of dead vehicles and trailers, one of them near new by the looks of it. The CSR is tough on gear.



Evidence of my failure on the first go! Deep ruts from spinning wheels.



Ford Explorer that didn't make it.

Over the VHF comes a titbit that there are beds and showers in Kunnawaritji so we decide to collapse two days into one and go for it, arriving at 5.45 just on dark. Luxury of power, kitchen beds and showers. Oh, and did I mention the TV to watch the Bledisloe?

Kunnawaritji is a closed indigenous community with a fuel depot, small shop and donga accommodation to the side, where we stay for two nights. Visitors are not permitted inside the community, and we see little of the people, another example of peaceful coexistence? Kevin and Malcolm are staying overnight at the camp. They work for the regional Aboriginal Services company, providing power and water to remote communities. They have come in from Port Hedland, 750km away and tomorrow will drive to Kirrikura, the most remote community in Australia out on the Wappet Highway. They are to test water and install two industrial washing machines, come back to Kunnawaritji and then back to Hedland, servicing communities all the way. The two men are fifos on three and two, which is Fly In Fly Out, three weeks on and two off. Kevin is from Perth and Malcolm is from Hervey Bay in Queensland. This is the first time they have worked together. They like the lifestyle. Home is a Toyota Land Cruiser and heavy trailer. They stay in bunk rooms in each community and are fully self-contained.

We meet another bloke who is heading south. He swears he hasn't had to put his Prado into 4WD so far. We refrain from letting him know it is permanently AWD. I for one would think hard before taking a Prado into this country, not only for toughness but also it will get the shit scratched out of it. Rent them! That's the trick.

Another group of three hard doers is headed south, Blue, Shorty and Grass. They are from Rockhampton in Queensland. This is their second trip and they are not in a hurry as they are marking time on the CSR while they wait for the Birdsville Races, which are six weeks away. They will go through to Wiluna, and then across the Anne Beadell and over the Birdsville Track to Birdsville. They have little rituals, like having one beer only, before camp is set up, and then five before dinner. They are towing a seriously large camping trailer, and I suspect there is not much room for food!

Bernard is the accountant for the Aboriginal Land company that runs Kunnawaritji. He is up from Adelaide and arrived on the mail plane two days ago. He has to wait for another week to get home. In the meantime he is in charge of the accommodation and fuel, as Reuben, the young guy who runs the place has gone home to Punma with his wife because there is rumour of trouble from a couple of hard heads who have turned up and want grub and fuel on tick. With the nearest police being in Jigalong, 350km away, he's taking extra care. Bernard is sleeping with a knife under his pillow just in case. He recently walked the pilgrimage route to Santiago del Compostela from France. He carried a small stone to place in the altar for his sister Catherine, who was suffering from breast cancer. He was quite uplifted by it all and wants to do it again with his son. He also has an eye for the main chance. A tour group is camped down at Well 33 and they have roast pork on the menu, and he is off like a dirty shirt.

Four days to Billuna and our CSR expedition will be over. Ahead lie hundreds of dunes and zillions of corrugations. Make that a hundred zillion.

As we move further North it gets warmer during both day and night. We try to finish our day as close to sundown as possible to get as little fly-time as possible. There is something weird about deserts. No matter how far we are away from any animal life the flies will be there within thirty seconds. Another amazing thing is how finches in their millions can survive in arid places. At Well 42 I pour some water on the top of a drum

and finches come from everywhere. Finally we see the last well, the last dune and the last rutted washed out track and reach the lowlands of the Tanami Desert and the end of the CSR.



Finches drinking from the lid of a drum.



Bore 44—time to fill up with water



Rutted track through the grass.

An easy ride along the Tanami Track to Alice Springs for some R&R, a long shower and a proper bed, and then the long two-day drive down to Adelaide.

Looking back on the trip, we travelled well. Toyota V8's are truly awesome and never let us down. We had three punctures requiring two new tires. That was the total of our problems. The grog lasted—just, although we were short of beer for ten days. A tip—don't buy beer in cans. The corrugations will make sure the sand drinks the beer before you do. Most of them ruptured.

We covered a little over 4,000 in 4WD at around 1200-1500 revs, although these trucks are still pulling at 400. On average we made 14liters/100km which is bloody good for such rough terrain. Anything that can rattle will, including your teeth, so stowing gear is a vital exercise each day. Do it again? Maybe not exactly but there are other deserts and the Birdsville Races sounds right up our alley.

I have to thank my mates Bill and John for putting up with my snoring and general uselessness at times. With blokes like them around a man is bulletproof.

Peter Dale August 2015.