

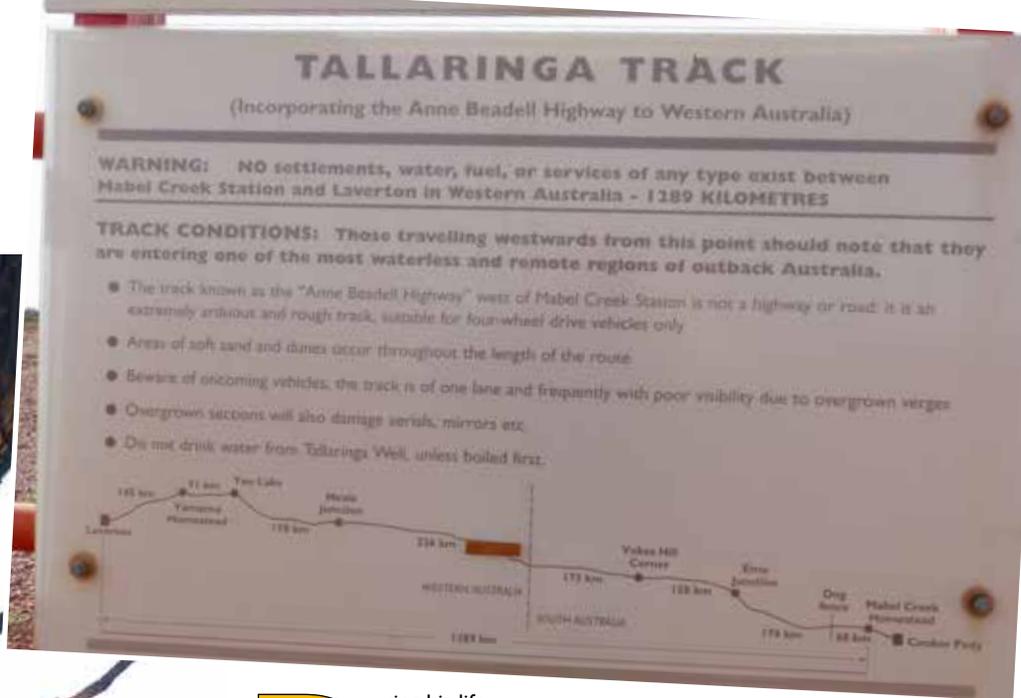
YOU TAKE THE HIGH WAY...

The Anne Beadell Highway is an 823-mile Outback trail passing the site of an atom bomb



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test – and very little else...



During his life, celebrated Australian explorer, artist, author and surveyor Len Beadell was responsible for building some 3700 miles of unsealed roads in the Outback. Almost a quarter of this distance is accounted for by the first road he started work on – the Anne Beadell Highway.

Named by Beadell after his wife, this isn't a 'highway' in the traditional sense. In fact, it's said that he used the word, here and elsewhere, with the humour for which he was to become known. Built in five stages between 1953 and 1962, the road is an unsealed ribbon of sand, stone and, often, corrugations which stretches some 823 miles across the Great Victoria Desert from Coober Pedy to Laverton.

The road was originally commissioned in the post-war years to provide access to Emu

Field – which had been identified as a suitable location for British atomic bomb tests. It skirts round to the north of the Woomera military reserve and passes through Aboriginal lands and restricted conservation areas, and it's cut by both rabbit and dog fences.

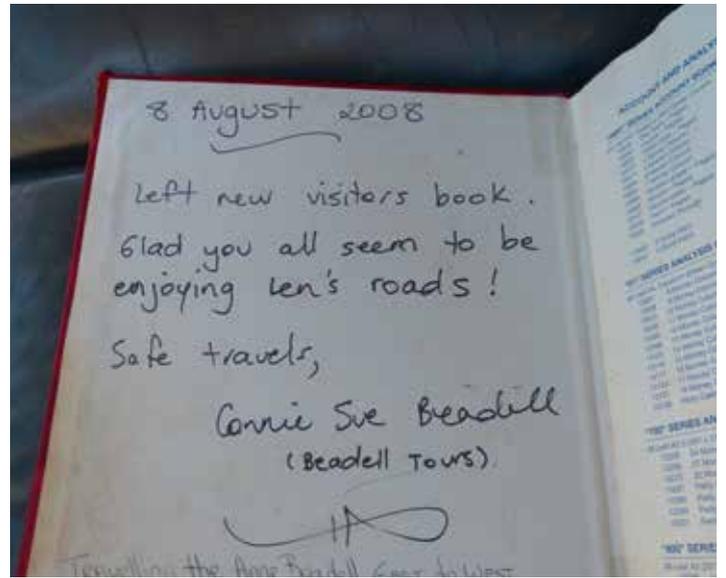
Thus you need a lot of permits to drive the Anne Beadell. And even then, it's apt to be closed when Woomera is in use. But given the right paperwork, and favourable conditions, it can be done in something like five days.

That's what we set out to do as part of a much bigger expedition around Australia aboard our 100-Series Toyota Land Cruiser. And sure enough, our departure was delayed by military operations in Woomera. Someone in Coober Pedy told us the USAF was testing a new version of the Stealth bomber, which obviously wasn't

Top: Whoever wrote this sign definitely doesn't want you to go into the desert without knowing what you're letting yourself in for. Imagine London to Edinburgh and back, without services, fuel, shops, nothing, and on a rough green lane. That's Anne Beadell's legacy to the world...

Below: The Outback is a dry, arid place – the sign above even points out that this is one of the most waterless regions of Australia. So turn up and what happens? It rains, obviously





Two very different messages from the same corner of the Outback. The original Ground Zero was the site of a British nuclear test in 1953 which was the original reason for the Anne Beadell Highway being built. At the track's intersection with the Connie Sue Highway, a visitor's book left by Connie Sue herself, Len and Anne Beadell's daughter, greets travellers on the roads her father built

stealthy enough to go unnoticed by Aussie bushmen.

Not to worry, Coober Pedy is a pretty interesting place to hang out – even when it's raining. This doesn't happen very often, but it did while we were there. Driving out of town (which doesn't feel much like a town, because it has less than 2000 inhabitants and a good bit of it is built underground to keep out of the sun), the road was flooded and muddy in places. Add the bizarre landscape, which is pock-marked by thousands of spoil heaps from the opal mining industry which brought people here in the first place, and it doesn't feel as if you're about to spend a week in the wilderness.

We allowed ten days for the journey, but by the time we made camp at the end of day one we suspected we wouldn't need them all. Our Land Cruiser was purring as we passed through a dog fence and into the Tallaringa Conservation Park before kicking back and enjoying the intense desert silence while tucking into rib-eye steaks done on the campfire.

The next morning was similarly idyllic... until we got underway. The going was smooth to start with, but then the corrugations started. And they were savage, violent, throwing us up and down over big, rough waves as we struggled to get above 10mph.

Meeting some drivers coming the other way, we were relieved to hear that though it would get worse before it got better, they had only taken six days to drive from Laverton. To keep up a pace like that in the sort of conditions we were enduring at the time would be impossible, which means the road would improve further on for certain. A relief!

We stopped for lunch at the Tallaringa Well Plaque, which celebrates Len Beadell's pioneering work to open up the Outback. Beyond this, too, we approached Ground Zero – the exact point where the British nuclear test was carried out.

We read that the heat of the detonation turned the desert sand into glass – and also that there would still be radioactive contamination lingering on the ground. Exciting. But we were reassured to think that it couldn't be really serious, otherwise no way would anyone be allowed anywhere near the place.

We camped about an hour from the test site, relaxing around the fire in the windless warmth... whereupon it started raining again. Just softly, but it clearly wasn't going to let up so eventually we retreated into our Land Cruiser's pop-up tent and fell asleep to the sound of raindrops on the canvas.





Overlanders tend to be pretty assiduous about keeping their vehicles clean. It's your home, after all, and you depend on it not to break down for the want of a regular hose-off underneath. But then something like this comes along...

A feature of the sandy terrain here is that when it rains, the road surface is smoothed off. Not enough to get rid of those corrugations, sadly, but it does allow you to see whether you're the first to pass that day – which, the following morning, we were. It was dry now, though still grey, but this little part of Anne Beadell was untouched. It was our Toyota that got to draw the first beautiful tyre tracks upon the surface, giving us a moment of satisfaction which was soon shattered as we got closer to Ground Zero and the state of the ground became worse than ever.

The Atomic Site is a vast, barren plain. The map tells you all sorts of interesting things, but in reality there's nothing to see. It feels exciting nonetheless, but in a chilling sort of way.

There are two obelisks to mark the site, but mainly there are signs telling you not to settle there

Right: Corrugations. These are the bad guys, and there are sections on the Anne Beadell with enough of them to drive you nuts

Below: Just in case you fancied moving in to a featureless, irradiated wasteland next to one of the most desolate roads in the entire world... sorry, but you can't



to live, nor to kill and eat any kangaroos you happen to see in the vicinity. Today's signs are given in pictorial form, too – because the Aboriginal tribespeople who lived here, and still do, might not be able to read. It made us realise that at the time of the tests, indigenous Australians may have been roaming in the area, knowing nothing of the nuclear danger that had been brought into their midst.

Further on, nature's beauty took back over. The corrugations started to subside and the blooms of vegetation started to take over the land – desert oaks, acacias and grey-green mulga trees, as well as acre after acre of spinifex. It's like driving through a formal garden. Long, red sand dunes started to spring up around us, too, clustered with vegetation and providing another layer of softness to the barren landscape. The trail was much more pleasant again now, meandering

in and out of the curves of the landscape – no longer did it feel like an effort but just a journey to enjoy.

It got better still, too, when we picked up a set of tyre tracks. We had noticed by now that whereas we were content just to pitch up and camp wherever we fancied, Aussie travellers prefer to search out clear locations with more space around them – so we guessed that having spent the night at Emu Junction (we knew that much, because it's where the tracks started), they'd be heading for a night at Vokes Hill Corner.

Sure enough, when we arrived at Vokes Hill, which is just a T-junction on the Anne Beadell Highway, there it stood – a 70-Series Land Cruiser pulling a strong overlanding trailer behind it.

We spent the evening chatting together around the campfire they had already made, until the rain came back at around ten o'clock to

chase us off to bed. Again. But the following morning, praise be, the sun emerged in all its glory! We had almost forgotten how wonderful that is – and from now on, the landscape was lit up beautifully.

The part of the Great Victoria Desert we were cruising through is marked as 'woodland' on the map. It's no a dense forest by any means, but with the variety of black desert oaks, many kinds of shrubs and a mixture of spiky spherical pollen and gently welcoming ring spinifex bushes, it does feel surprisingly lush. All was well with the world... until the corrugations came back, and soon the going had gone from easy to exhausting.

We reached a 35-mile stretch of road through a 'culturally sensitive' region in which camping is forbidden. Our friends from last night, with whom we had been driving in convoy this morning, decided to stop here for lunch,





Top left: Outback wifi has really come on in the last few years

Above left: You'll see camels strolling around this landscape as frequently as you'll see deer in Britain

Above right: The wreck of a light aircraft is one of the primary attractions as you travel along the Anne Beadell. It looks more like a heavy landing than a full-on crash; what's known is that it happened in January 1993 and all those on board survived. The plane remained intact for a while, but in the time that's passed someone has had its engines away and it's been shot several times. Because who wouldn't travel all that way just to shoot at a wrecked plane? The site is a few miles from the highway itself, accessed by a track someone created a couple of years after the crash

but we wanted to press on so we said our goodbyes and headed for the border with Western Australia. Here, a billboard announced that we were just under a hundred miles from Ilkurlka – the only roadhouse on the Anne Beadell, and our one chance for a shower en route!

For now, though, we continued to do it on our own. Amid beautiful dune pans, we found a great spot to camp, eat, sleep and check over our truck. If anything was ready to work loose, all that bumping would certainly find it – but no, the Toyota had endured yet again.

We gathered wood, cooked and warmed ourselves by the fire. When the sun disappears in the desert, it cools quickly. The sky was clear for the first time in many, many nights. The moon had not yet risen, and above us was a dome of stars. Life was perfect.

So too was Anne Beadell's mood from here on. The corrugations had now given way to soft, easily

driven sand with just the occasional washboard – though even these could be skipped over at a good 25mph or so.

Having paused to let a family of camels reunite after being panicked by our arrival and ended up on opposite sides of the track, we upped our pace still further for a section of the track whose surface could best be described as giga waves. Take them fast or take them slow, there's no middle ground – and we were trying to reach Ilkurlka for lunch, so taking them slow wasn't really an option.

Again, the Land Cruiser was unperturbed by all this punishment. And so we rolled in to Ilkurlka unperturbed – to be met by Graham, the manager, his two dogs and precisely no other people. To be fair, this remarkably sleek, modern building has been called the most remote roadhouse in Australia, so perhaps that's no great surprise. Having said that, a

week earlier we'd have made the acquaintance of about a hundred Aborigines from the Spinifex Tribe, who camped there on the way to a tribal gathering.

We bought a few odds and ends and paid for our water, showers and wifi. Possibly the most remote wifi in the world? Either way, how on earth did Len Beadell manage to build this road without it...?

By now we were more than halfway to Laverton, and close to reaching one of the most famous landmarks on the Anne Beadell – the wreck of a light aircraft. You take a detour off the track – a sign says it's '10km give or take a couple of sand dunes' and there it is. A crash? An emergency landing? Either way, it's not taking off again any time soon.

Having explored the wreckage of the old plane from the Goldfields Air Service, we camped next to it and enjoyed another star dome from horizon to horizon. We were

up early the next morning, cruising smoothly along a beautifully flat section of the highway – through a landscape which had clearly seen a brush fire in recent times

We reached the junction with the Connie Sue Highway, another of Len Beadell's creations, which is named after his daughter. Connie Sue Beadell continues to run an Outback tour company to this day, and she had written the preface in the guest book we found at the intersection. There can't be many people with a highway named after them who didn't have to pay for the privilege one way or the other...

The Anne Beadell shows signs of more frequent use from here on, but it's still very quiet. We paused at a memorial plate for Anne herself, who died in 2009 (some fourteen years after Len), then took a detour to Yeo Lake Nature Reserve.

Along the track on the way here, a magnificent rock mesa called Bishop Riley's Pulpit rises up out

'If anything was ready to work loose, all that bumping would certainly find it – but no, the Toyota had endured yet again'



of the desert floor. The Toyota got covered in salt and clay mud here, which we weren't overjoyed about (she's our home, and we put a lot of effort into keeping her clean), and then we found the remnants of Yeo Farm – now a camp site, where a solo traveller in yet another Toyota came wandering over for a chat and then, a little later, we made friends with another family of camels.

A 'no trespassing' sign in the Cosmo Newberry Aboriginal Reserve, which warned of an active search for minerals in the area, held us up for a while. In fact, it convinced us to camp right next to it and sit basking in the evening sun with a drink in one hand and a book in another. Shucks.

After that, it felt less and less like being in the wilderness. A fibre optic cable was being laid next to the road, and the search for minerals was indeed up and running. As were we, cruising the last part of the Anne Beadell Highway until finally we rolled into Laverton.

What is there to do in Laverton? Go to Leonora, mainly. Laverton itself has a museum dedicated to the great explorers of the western Outback, and a 'deli' where it would probably have appeared rude not to order a burger, but it's a sleepy old place. Especially on Sundays, we discovered.

So having spent so much time getting there, we were soon motoring on. Leonora has proper

facilities and was therefore ideal for a few days' on-the-spot rest – as well of course as vehicle maintenance, which in this case meant removing the steering guard for a full inspection of what lay behind it, as we'd been hearing the occasional noise from down there.

We took a walk through the village – or at least, the 300-metre main road along which it's huddled. Here's a fascinating fact: prior to becoming President of the USA, Herbert Hoover lived and worked in Leonora. So inevitably there's a White House Hotel, and Hoover's former home has become the Hoover B&B.

A beer in the White House bar was very, very welcome, as you can

imagine. Afterwards, we strolled back to spent the night aboard our trusty Toyota.

After a week in the empty, silent company of Anne Beadell, sleeping with street lights around us and road trains rumbling by through the night was something we weren't used to. And yet, it was too familiar. Turn back the way we had just come? It was tempting.

No to worry, though, the next part of our itinerary around Australia was already planned. From here, we would be heading towards Darwin – which meant traversing the infamous Canning Stock Route. Our time with Anne Beadell was done – but already, the desert was calling us back...

