

THE RED CENTRE

Australia is famous for its deserts, and the long-distance trails that cross them. But there's

a great deal more to this glorious wilderness than just endless sand dunes



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Back in 1999, we spent two months touring Australia aboard a hired 4x4. It was a great trip – but it made us yearn to return with our own expedition-prepped Toyota Landcruiser so we could explore the country in greater depth.

Finally, in 2012, we got around to making the trip we had been promising ourselves for so long. Over the course of 18 months, with a break in the middle for Christmas back home in the Netherlands, we followed two separate itineraries taking in some of the best off-road

trails Australia, and the world, has to offer.

In previous issues of 4x4, we've recounted two specific trips – one on the Anne Beadell Highway, which goes right past the site of Britain's atomic bomb tests in the 1950s, and the other on the Old Telegraph Track

in northern Queensland. This month, we're telling a more general story – of what it's like travel solo in the Australian desert.

The first thing to say is that it's hot. Make that HOT. Especially when your air-conditioning isn't working. We had sought the advice

of a mechanic in Broome, who diagnosed a broken compressor and ordered a new one. It would arrive in three days, so we were going to have to suffer until then.

Not that 60 miles on the wide, smooth, bright red sand road to Cape Leveque can be called

suffering. Neither can the cape itself, where the track dead-ends at the coast and you sit gazing at a crystal clear and incredibly blue ocean squeezing itself violently through the strait next to One Arm Point. Mesmerised, we watched for a while before walking down to

the beach, where the setting sun turns the fantastically shaped rock formations of the cliffs a deep orange colour.

With the Toyota's air-con finally fixed, and its brakes and steering sweetly, we could head for the horizon once again. A common sight in northern Australia is signs warning you not to enter Aboriginal lands without a permit, something you need to observe if you don't want to risk big fines. We camped at Eighty Mile Beach and made plans for the desert crossing ahead – which needed to include a fuel-stop strategy, as our Toyota's maximum range is 'only' about 800 miles.

The route ahead would take us through the Great Sandy Desert and Gibson Desert. Soon, we were cruising through lovely open space punctuated with rocky outcrops, then we moved into the hills of the Laga Peak – where the countryside was burning. Wildfire rushed forward with the wind, the air full of thick smoke. It was a beautifully surreal image.

We continued to Marble Bar, which claims to be Australia's hottest town (and that's hot). This comes from 1923 and 1924, when temperatures above 37.8° were measured for 160 days in a row. This is called natural.

Beyond here, the track to Nullagine is magnificent. Orange brown mountains, eroded into sharp pinnacles, overlook slopes covered

with spinifex grass and slender silvery trees with white-yellow flowers. As is so often the case here, the desert is not just endless sand – though there was plenty of that to come...

There's a Hema Atlas called Great Desert Tracks, which as you can imagine is required reading. As well as being essential when you're planning your route, it contains all sorts of information about the deserts themselves and the plants and animals you'll see there. The latter does include human beings, especially in parts where mining is prevalent, but mainly you'll be able to enjoy complete, intense silence when you settle down for the night. It's wonderful.

We found a large community of desert oaks en route to Karlamilyi National Park, where we followed a 20-mile track made up of rough, loose rocks. It hadn't been used for ages, judging by the amount of vegetation overgrowing it, but it wound through a series of beautiful, rugged mountains and valleys, so it was well worth the effort.

With a lot of effort, we managed to fill a few bottles from a water pump we passed on the way to the Talawna Track. Just as well, because next one we found produced smelly, dirty water. There's a lesson there.

Another lesson worth learning is that water pumps are likely to have snakes lurking around them. They're likely to do a runner when you come



Above: Following the track alongside the Old Ghan Railway is a bit like Route 66 – it's no longer used but still as evocative as ever, and along the way you keep passing abandoned relics from the past

Right: The marker for Australia's Geographical Centre is surprisingly unpretentious for something so significant

Below: Len Beadell's old grader is displayed at Giles Meteorological Station. Finding a junction marker placed by the man himself is always a special moment – and a sign telling you that 280 miles away there's another sign is typical of his sense of humour



close (or whatever the anguine equivalent of a 'runner' is...), but don't count on it.

Yet another lesson is to take your rubbish with you. We found a camping spot next to the track which people had left looking like a trash heap, and to make matters worse they had burned the vegetation around them. Not cool at all.

Corrugations aren't cool either, but you can't avoid them. Wherever you go in the desert, sometimes the track will be beautifully smooth – and on other occasions, for no apparent reason, it will be savage. You just have to deal with it, and of course so does your vehicle.

It was springtime, and we drove for hours between flowering bushes,

shrubs in yellow, silver, purple, white and gorgeous silver-grey flowering trees, the Sandhill Spider Flower. Eventually we saw a camel, too – a feral descendant of the animals brought from Arabia to work on the construction of the telegraph lines and railway across the deserts of the Red Centre.

The Talawna Track ends at a place called Windy Corner (which it was), where it meets the Gary

Highway. Here, we found a marker left by Len Beadell, the pioneering surveyor whose teams built almost all the roads through the Australian desert. The Anne Beadell Highway is named after his wife, and the Gary after his son. In each case, 'highway' is a bit of an in-joke: they're just single, graded tracks in the sand.

The risk of fire, on the other hand, is no joke at all. We passed a burned out Land Rover and Nissan, as well as no end of warning signs.

Grass and flowers grow up from the track, and as you drive over them they can accumulate – perhaps around your exhaust, and of course they're very flammable. The only answer is to make regular checks.

One of these revealed what looked like a bale of hay above the back axle.



Big Red wasn't quite as big as the local tales of a giant sand dune had led the authors to expect. The Super Pit gold mine in Kalgoorlie, on the other hand, is vast, at half a mile deep and with the same footprint as the town itself

Amazing how sharp and spiky dry grass can be. That could be sorted with a pair of work gloves, but worse was to come when the air-con let go again. By a happy coincidence, the weather changed the following day and the temperature dropped by about twenty degrees, but still, this wasn't good.

Near Casuarina, we found the Len Beadell Tree. The marker didn't explain what this particular tree had to do with our hero; perhaps he peed against it. It was a lovely place for a coffee break, anyway, and then in Kiwirrkurra we found Len's burned-out truck. These are the events

that mean something during a long journey through the desert.

Finding an identical Landcruiser to ours in Kiwirrkurra meant something, too, as it was in the process of being stripped and the owner was willing to sell the parts needed to fix the air-con. That was great, though with the weather having turned much fresher (for now), it was no longer urgent.

Finding that a twig had penetrated the rubber boot protecting our front left driveshaft wasn't urgent either, though it was one to add to the list for when we made it to Alice Springs. Driving through water

would become a concern, but until that we could live with it.

Before that, our route took us through the Olgas, a rock monolith which has been eroded over time into a series of mini-mountains, and on to Yulara, a tourist village from which, in the distance to the east, we could see Uluru.

Pushing ahead on the Lasseter Highway and Mulga Park Road, we encountered more ridges – and then started to hear a worrying noise. Using the old heads-out-of-the-window test, we figured that it seemed to be coming from the front bumper – and sure enough, some

nuts had started to come loose, allowing it to rattle.

So that was that. Or so we thought. We had run a seed net around the structure to keep spinifex out – and it turned out that this was literally the only thing keeping the bull bar in place. One bolt was sheared, the other pulled out completely... the only answer, we decided, was for it to end up strapped to the roof!

A couple of days later, we arrived in Alice Springs, where we could take a rest for a few days and give the Landcruiser all the attention it needed. These are vehicles built





It doesn't matter how well suited and well prepared your vehicle is: when you go overlanding in the desert, bad stuff will happen to it. Broken wood, baked hard as steel by the sun, is very good at puncturing rubber gaiters, and spinifex grass will gather under your vehicle to the point at which it becomes a fire risk. Even something as simple as pulling a tyre off its rim is an ever-present hazard, because you certainly don't want to be going about on unnecessarily high pressures. With all this to worry about, something as simple as washing your vehicle might be easy to forget about – but when you only get to do it once every few thousand miles, it's quite the occasion

to take a constant pounding in the world's toughest terrain, but if you want them to keep on doing it you need to look after them along the way – and we had been in Australia for more than six months by now. Servicing and repairs are always part of long-range travel... the air-con still wasn't right, for example, and we had been living for many miles on a trail-fixed mounting for our long-range fuel tank.

So all three of us were feeling suitably refreshed as we hit the road again a week or so later, stopping at the amazing rock formations of Chambers Pillar and Castle Rock en route to the Old Ghan, a trail which used to run alongside the famous steam railway between Alice and Port Augusta. Every now and then, we'd pass ruined railway buildings and info boards telling us about the history of the line. Apparently, the bridge at the Finke River collapsed three times, leaving travellers waiting for weeks on end.

You're close to Lambert's Center of Australia here, too, where a flagpole marks the geographical centre of the continent. Pretty much obligatory if you're passing.

Talking of obligatory things, our map contained unusually strong warnings about the Mulga Park Road. This passes through Aboriginal land, and if you pass through these areas without the right permit you can land yourself in a world of trouble. We had a stroke of luck, though, when we stopped at Kulgera Roadhouse, as there was an Aboriginal guy working there – he told us it was a great track and didn't say anything about permits or prohibited areas, and he was right.

As it turned out, the Mulga Park Road is part of the old Gunbarrel Road – another Len Beadell creation. And it was fantastic, with endless views across the deep red landscape and a beautiful surface that allowed us to cover around 350 miles in a day. To top it off, we

found a beautiful camp site by a mountain road with only camels for company – though we were woken up hours later by dingoes howling in the distance, which was spooky and wonderful at the same time!

In Wataranka, you can see the grading machine used by Len Beadell to create the track we were following. There's a museum about him and the legacy of Outback trails he created while working for the government in the 1950s and 60s.

The road was rocky in places, sandy in others, with occasional water splashes and, here and there, small brush fires which appeared to have been started by lightning – which we could see in the distance. Definitely time to keep checking your vehicle at every stop! Further on, we joined the Connie Sue Highway (named by Len after his daughter), and here too there was widespread evidence of recent fires.

Now we were entering the Great Victoria Desert, which one of our

guide books says is the toughest in Australia. Sounds like fun, especially when you can still see fires burning in the distance...

For days, literally the only people we saw was a quartet of men coming the other way on trail bikes. So we alone were treated to the surreal view of an intense storm, with clouds as dark as night, lit up in a deep orange by fires blazing on the ground below and flashing all around us from the bolts of lightning. Surreal, scary, beautiful... and the following day, the weather had turned cold! In Australia, the surprises never end...

We weren't expecting to be greeted by an exceptionally sour-faced and rude lady at our camp site in Kalgoorlie, for example! But then, nice showers and a lovely Thai-Japanese restaurant were nice surprises, too. Before dinner, we took a ride out to see the Super Pit, a huge opencast gold mine on the edge of town that's almost half a

mile deep and covers a similar area to Kalgoorlie itself.

After a prolonged spell in the desert, readjusting to urban life takes some doing. Hairdressers, bars, lads out street cruising in their Ford Falcons... and for us, giving our Toyota its first wash since Darwin! It's all very normal but also very odd when your only company has been camels, dingoes and lizards.

For us, this was good practice as we'd soon be putting our Landcruiser into storage for a spell and flying home for Christmas. Before that, though, we visited Wave Rock, a remarkable example of wind erosion which has weathered a vast

sandstone massif into the shape of a giant breaking wave, and, at long last, got our air-con fixed properly.

Cue more cold weather, naturally. We had several days of wind and rain as we followed the coastal tourist trail en route to Perth, which would be our Landcruiser's home while we reunited with our family.

We returned to Australia a couple of months later, but it wasn't until May that we ventured back into the desert. We headed through Sturt National Park, where ranches were bought one by one to create a region in which nature could take back over, and passed through

the Strzelecki Desert en route to Simpson Desert. Here, about twenty miles out of Birdsville, is Big Red – a monster of a sand dune which everybody in the area seemed to be talking about.

First, we spotted a lovely looking dune with tyre marks running up it. Rude not to. Our Landcruiser was in its element, romping up to the top – and what a surprise, beyond this was a beautiful lake. Up, down, again and again... it was great fun!

After this, what would Big Red be like? We found out soon enough, when we continued on our route only to find a sign pointing back to the dune we had just been on. The stories had made it sound bigger and higher and redder than it really was, but not even as beautiful...

A couple of days later, following the famous French Line through the desert, we came across some guys tackling dunes in vehicles with big V8 engines and way too much air in their tyres. Lots of revs, not much brain. We decided to show them how a Landcruiser does it... one or two high, 1200rpm, a little gas and a nice, deep growl, and we were sitting at the top. What a feeling!

We weren't feeling quite so exuberant when, on one of the

endless sand dunes of the WAA Line, we managed to unseat a tyre from its rim. The fact that this happened while we were playing around taking photos of the Landcruiser in the sand didn't make it any less embarrassing.

It was windy and gritty, but with the vehicle jacked up we got stuck in with our shovel and half an hour later we were able to get going again. Still, a reminder that the desert is not to be messed with...

It was a timely reminder, too, because a couple of weeks later we were to be taking on perhaps the most famous, or infamous, trail in the whole of Australia – the Canning Stock Route. That's a story in itself, and one we'll tell another time – first, though, we followed the route of the Old Ghan once again as we headed for Oodnadatta, then we encountered rain on the way to Coober Pedy – and, something you don't normally associate with Australia, mud.

And guess what? It was thicker, stickier, heavier mud than you get anywhere else. As we had discovered, the deserts are about a lot more than just sand. And as everyone discovers when they come here, Australia doesn't ever do things by halves.

The authors must be among the best-travelled 4x4 drivers of all time. Since 2002, they've been exploring almost non-stop, aboard a variety of vehicles and on every continent in the world. Their website tells a whole world of tales which will make you yearn to pack your life into your truck and head off in search of adventure – you can find it by visiting www.exploringtheworld.nl.



Above left: Maps and road signs alike carry stern warnings about the consequences of trespassing on Aboriginal land – though in reality, the situation on the ground can be a lot more chilled than all this suggests

Above right: Weathered by wind erosion into the shape of a giant breaker, Wave Rock has got to be one of the most extraordinary natural phenomena in the world

