

DESTINATION MUNGO NATIONAL PARK

Outback Travel Australia braved flood-ravaged roads to visit Mungo National Park before summer heat could make the trip uncomfortable. Flooding rains have changed Mungo access, but this World Heritage Area is still a must-see destination.



Driving across the broad, grey-green carpet of the dry lakes in Mungo National Park is a time-warp experience. It's easy to imagine this vast expanse of saltbush covered by metres of water, lapping the fertile shores that were home to many groups of Aborigines.

It's also easy to imagine how the gradually drying climate changed the country and its inhabitants. Today the former lake system is arid, reliant for its moisture on occasional rain showers and soaks.

The first white colonists in the late 1860s in this area were pastoralists on the 203,000 hectare Gol Gol sheep station, which included Mungo. By the 1870s, gangs of Chinese miners were working in the area and felled thousands of white cypress pines with which the Mungo woolshed, outbuildings and yards were built. This denuded the western lake rim's pine woodlands.

Rabbits arrived, along with a series of droughts, culminating in the catastrophic drought of 1898–1900. Massive storms swept the area and sand swallowed fences, sheds and tanks. Ironically, it was the destabilising of the Mungo soil that exposed its ancient lake-shore history. The continually eroding eastern shores of the lakes give an ongoing picture of life as far back as 60,000 years, including the oldest recorded human cremation.



We've been to Mungo National Park several times over the past 30 years and witnessed the introduction of progressive tourist developments, including a cultural centre and museum. However, drought-breaking rains since early 2011 have strained road maintenance budgets and crews to the limit, so some of the attractions at Mungo are temporarily off limits to visitors. There's currently no road access into Mungo National Park from the north and the self-drive 70-kilometre tour around Lake Mungo is closed.

When it does re-open the drive into Mungo National Park from the north, via Pooncarie, is well worth the bouncing you'll get on decidedly unkempt access roads at the north end of Willandra Lakes. The road from Pooncarie to the top of Lake Garnpung was very rough, with bulldust holes when we last drove it. The turnoff south to Willandra Lakes was well signposted and the road surface was better. In contrast, there are well-graded dirt access roads south of Lake Mungo that lead to Mildura and Balranald.

Coming into Lake Mungo from the top end traces some of the original water course that connected a Willandra Lakes system measuring more than 100km in length. There's little publicity given to the north-Mungo area, despite its World Heritage status.

Arriving at Lake Mungo from the north you're greeted by the magnificent sight of the dry Lake Garnpung expanse stretching out before you. Shimmering on the horizon are white sand hills to the east and red ridges to the west.



Just as at Lake Mungo the white sand hills are the eroding ancient beachfront and the red ones are the encroaching sands, driven by the prevailing west winds.

The twin-tyre track runs across Lake Garnpung for more than 12 kilometres, before climbing the sand ridges that separate Lake Garnpung from Lake Leaghur - noticeably drier than its more northern neighbour. A narrow sand mound separates Lake Leaghur from Lake Mungo.

Driving into Mungo National Park from the south-east or south-west is an easy proposition, thanks to well-maintained bitumen and dirt roads. Entry is from Mildura or Balranald and all junctions are well signposted.

The currently-closed 70km Lake Mungo circuit track runs from the China Walls viewing boardwalk car park, east of the China Walls sand dune erosion area and through the wooded areas of Rosewood Rest and Mallee Stop. Belah Camp is on this circuit.

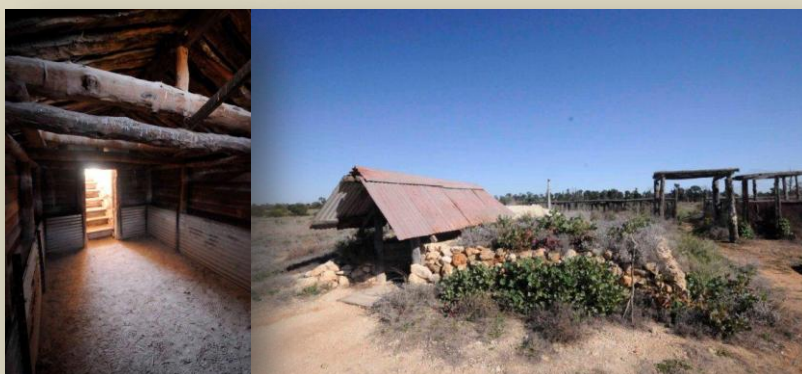


In the interim it's possible to join licensed tours of this circuit, but hopefully self-drive access will be restored as soon as possible.

Another recent initiative of which we approve wholeheartedly is closure of walking access to the eroding China Walls area on the eastern shore of Lake Mungo. On previous visits we've seen people climbing on these soft sand formations, so it's high time they were made 'look but don't touch'!

Although the self-drive Lake Mungo circuit is temporarily closed, an interesting Pastoral Loop is open and provides an excellent insight into pioneering pastoral life in the early years of white settlement. This loop track is one-way only and starts a few kilometres north of the Visitors' Centre.

Zanci Homestead site is the highlight of the Pastoral Loop and although there's only a beautifully constructed chimney remaining from the original house there are intact stables and a shearing shed. Our favourite building is the dugout; an underground retreat from the blistering summer heat, with its cypress walls and staircase still in excellent condition.



The shearing shed at Zanci was actually made from left-over structure when the large shed at Lake Mungo was downsized to its current five-stand status. The Pastoral Loop ends at the Mungo shearing shed, where a steam engine has pride of place: belts from the engine's flywheel drove the shearing stand gears and even powered sharpening discs that are still on their pedestal.

The sheds at Lake Mungo are notable for their use of durable cypress pine in a design that included easily cleaned, slatted floors.

Indigenous Ownership

Mungo National Park is wholly contained within the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, which has a record of Aboriginal life stretching back more than 60,000 years.

Rather than dividing traditional ownership responsibility of this World Heritage Area across three tribal groups - the Barkindji, Mutthi Mutthi and Nyiampaa - Mungo National Park is managed under a scheme of shared heritage by a Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council. The Council has agreed that management decisions inside the World Heritage Area are the business of all three tribes.

To formalise the involvement of traditional owners in the management of Mungo National Park, NSW's NPWS entered into discussions with the Elders Council and other Aboriginal community members about options for joint management. An Advisory Committee for Mungo National Park, with a majority of members from the Elders Council, became the basis for negotiating the Joint Management Agreement.



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FACT FILE

Where

South-west NSW

Time required

Two days minimum

Best time to go

This flat region bakes in summer, so the ideal time to visit is in late autumn, winter and early spring.

What to do

Camping, historic touring, guided tours, photography, bird-watching, bushwalking

Maps

Detailed road maps are sufficient for visiting Mungo National Park, in concert with the Park 'mud maps'.

Camping

Main Camp camping area is two kilometres from the Visitors' Centre and is laid out with well-separated bays and a few that can take two or three vans. Gas barbeques, fire pits are provided and some bays have picnic tables and seats. There are pit toilets in the camp ground and showers and flushing loos at the visitors' centre. Fees apply.

Permits

Vehicle entry fee and camping fees – payment by self registration at the Mungo National Park Visitors Centre

Track closures

Some roads in and around the park may be closed after rain

Fuel

Mildura, Wentworth, Broken Hill

Contact

National Parks and Wildlife Service
Buronga Tel: 03 5021 8900

www.visitmungo.com.au/

www.visitmildura.com.au/mungo-np.html