

DESTINATION

THE NEVER NEVER TRACK

Northern Simpson Desert

We joined an escorted tour through Aboriginal traditional lands – hopefully a promise of many more such initiatives.

It's an unfortunate fact that 4x4 enthusiasts are locked out of many Aboriginal lands, so it came as a refreshing change when we were invited by well-known Alice Springs based 4x4 guru, Jol Fleming, to join him and Central Lands Council chairman, Lindsay Bookie, on the 'recce' for what is now a regular tour through Aboriginal lands in the northern Simpson Desert.



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Lindsay is chairman of the Central Land Council, but his interest in improving access into these traditionally Aboriginal lands predates his election to this important office.

The initiative for the Never Never Track Tour, an escorted trek through what had previously been restricted Atneye Aboriginal land, came from [Lindsay Bookie](#), who worked on the Never Never Track concept with [Jol Fleming](#) and desert navigator, Ken Williamson.

Jol Fleming hosts tag-along tours through Aboriginal land, along the Hay River, in the northern Simpson Desert and the Never Never Track further extends this remote area touring domain. The Never Never Track departs from Jol's normal Hay River route after Lake Caroline, heading north-east across the dunefield to Mount Knuckey, where there are many relics of past Aboriginal occupation. From there the track veers north-west, past Mount Barrington, before swinging west, back to Lindsay Bookie's Batton Hill bush camp.

Mount Knuckey was once a haven for nomadic Aborigines, because the rocky range harbours permanent water sources and provides a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside, giving ample warning of anyone approaching the area.

Mount Knuckey is liberally decorated with Aboriginal petroglyphs and there is clear evidence of camp sites on the Mt Knuckey plateau. Lindsay Bookie knows this area very well. He was brought up in this country and began working on nearby Tobermorey Station in his teens.

On the Never Never Track

Jol Fleming's company, Direct 4WD, starts and finishes the Never Never Track trips in Alice Springs, but for those who are coming from the East Coast it's possible to join and leave the tours at Jervois, on the Plenty Highway, and that's what we did.



Jervois has an excellent camping ground, petrol and diesel at reasonable prices, hot showers and fireplaces, drinking water and – most importantly – the last ice cream you'll get for five days.

We met up with Jol Fleming just after lunch at Jervois and topped up our fuel. Jol likes everyone to fill up at this point, because although the Never Never Track is around 400 kilometres from Jervois back to Jervois it's very slow going across largely trackless terrain and that means heavy fuel consumption.

From Jervois the route heads briefly west on the Plenty Highway, before taking the turnoff to Lindsay Bookie's bush camp. This well-graded track runs east initially, along the Marshall River bank, before swinging south-east, beside the Hay River. The countryside is mainly mallee scrub and spinifex.

Lindsay Bookie's bush camp at Batton Hill is a beauty. The site is flat and compacted, with shade structures and fireplaces, and is flanked by ghost gums. The toilet and shower block has wood-donkey water heating.

After an overnight stay at Batton Hill, where we had ample time to meet and greet the other members of the tour, it was time to pack up and head further down the Hay River.

Jol took the convoy to an old bloodwood tree that he's pretty sure bears the remains of Charles George Winnecke's blaze, from his 1883 exploration of the area.

Jol doesn't run a frantic pace on his tours and we found the 9am daily departure quite relaxing.

The Hay River section was well-graded for most of the run to Lake Caroline and even where the grader hadn't been the tyre tracks ran across generally smooth ground, with only a few washaways that needed some concentration.

The track ran through mainly grassland and mallee scrub, studded with bloodwood and box trees.

Not far from the point where we had to cross the dry, sandy bed of the Hay River, Jol took the convoy to an old bloodwood tree that he's pretty sure bears the remains of Charles George Winnecke's blaze, from his 1883 exploration of the area. We'd earlier passed by Mt Winnecke on our way south-east, down the Hay.

The group had already dropped tyre pressures to slow-trail level and this was adequate flotation for the longish crossing of the river bed, as the convoy made its way west, towards Lake Caroline.

From the river bank it was only a half-hour run to the claypan expanse of Lake Caroline, where we set up camp for the night.

Our early arrival allowed plenty of time for some members of the group to go exploring on the neighbouring dry lake beds, including one interesting section that was fringed by 'breakaway' mesa formations.

Other crew members took advantage of the flat, hard surface to set up an impromptu golf course!

The claypan campsite made a perfect, dust-free environment where all the group members could mingle and by bed-time everyone felt like they'd known each other for years.

The next morning's relaxed departure saw us retracing our tracks to the Hay



River crossing, but instead of staying with the river-bank track we struck off behind Ken Williamson's ute, along the tyre tracks he'd made when planning the route to Mt Knuckey.



The northern Simpson Desert sand dunes run in a north-west to south-east direction, so our north-east track to Mt Knuckey took us across hundreds of them. Fortunately, the prevailing winds are from the west, so the dune faces are flatter on their western sides than they are on the eastern slopes. Nevertheless, some of the climbs were challenging for the unmodified vehicles, especially those dunes with large porcupine grass clumps growing thickly at their bases.

Driving over porcupine grass is a 'lumpy' experience. Mother nature has ordained that these tough desert survivors grow in an expanding fat, ball shape, but the centre dies off as the clump expands, leaving a ring-shaped lump, with a dead-frond depression in the centre. Wind and rain erode the clump bases, making deep gutters between the grass mounds. As a result, there's no such thing as a smooth pathway through porcupine grass: progress is done in a series of lurches from clump crest to hollow centre or erosion channel.

The convoy stopped for a break every hour or so, allowing people to have a rest from the ceaseless rocking. It took an entire day of dune field driving before we caught a glimpse of the stony bulk of Mt Knuckey, peering above the dune ridges in the late afternoon light.

The dunes close to the mountain range were steeper than those in the flat desert, so the vehicles had to work harder over this last sand ridge section before we were able to bounce across the flatter ground at the base of the hills.



We had time for a close encounter with Mt Knuckey, before following the tyre tracks to Lindsay Bookie's preferred campsite. We set up the tents for a two-night stay.

Lindsay Bookie went hunting for a traditional Aboriginal meal and soon returned with a small 'roo. While he was hunting Lindsay had asked some of the group to build a large gidgee-wood fire and dig a coal pit close beside it.

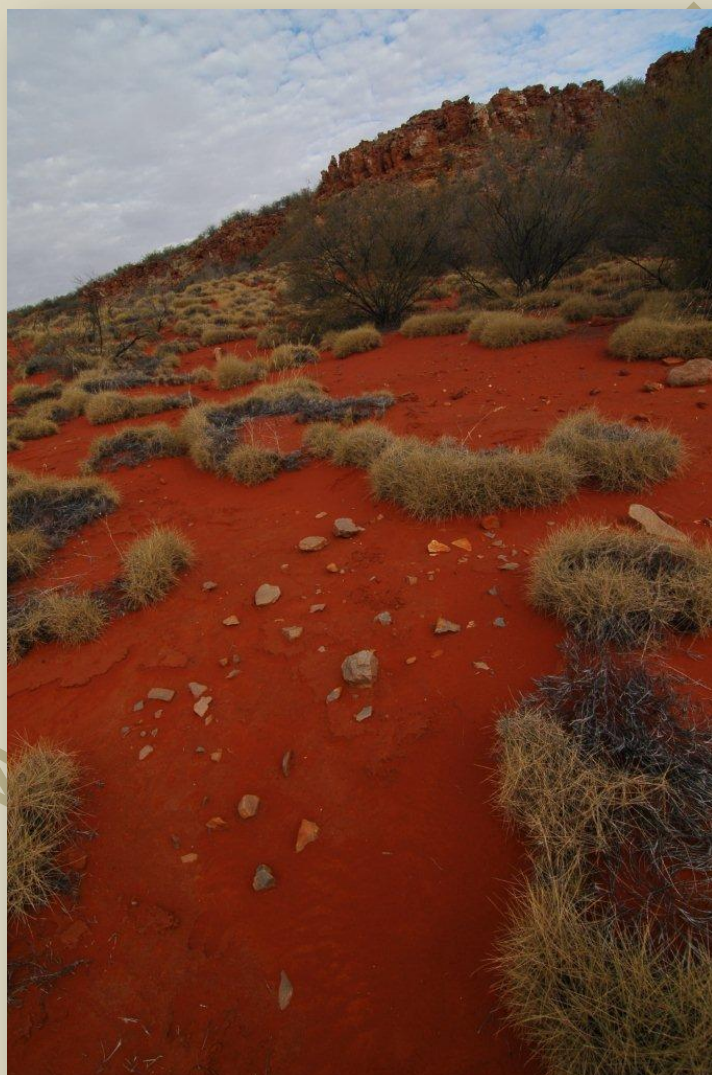
While the coals were building, Lindsay gutted the 'roo and put it on the fire to burn off all the hair. He then retrieved the carcass, cut off the tail, broke the legs and put the trimmed body onto a bed of coals in the pit.

More coals were shovelled on top and the 'roo was left for a couple of hours. When Lindsay deemed the meal was ready he opened the fire pit and removed the cooked 'roo.



He cut off the meaty legs and laid them and the torso on a bed of gidgee leaves.

The group helped themselves to the feast: well, most did, but some were put off by the lack of a butcher shop between the kill and the table! On Lindsay's advice I went for a piece of the fillet section and found it very tasty.



The next day was spent driving short stretches along the edges of the rocky hills, stopping behind Lindsay's wagon and following his lead up the breakaway slopes. We inspected several caves and rock waterholes and checked out the Aboriginal campsites on the Mt Knuckey plateau.

Evidence of long-term Aboriginal occupation was everywhere, as we expected in this rocky mountain terrain with its myriad permanent water holes. We came across areas that had been cleared for small gunyah perches, signs of stone-tool making and grinding stones. Aboriginal totems have been pecked into the rock faces at the cave entrances and at the rock water holes.

Lindsay led us to more recent Aboriginal evidence, including an old gidgee tree. His great-grandfather once cut a goanna dinner out of a tree on the way to Mount Knuckey and the axe marks are still visible in the aged trunk.

The fourth day saw us packing up in the morning and heading north-west, in the direction of Mt Barrington. Ken led the group again, having blazed a trail up the dune valleys a few months before our visit.

The going was easier than the trek across the dunes from Lake Caroline, because the sand ridges were shallower and we didn't have to cross many. The porcupine grass sections were separated by softer Mitchell Grass patches and mallee scrub that gave us a rest from the dreaded bouncing.

The terrain was generally flat for the first few kilometres, but soon the flat horizon was broken by far-off breakaway mesas that grew in size as we drew ever closer.

The final section of the track ran close by these magnificent breakaway ranges and we'd like to return and spend some time walking around them. The scenery on this north-west section of the Never Never Track is an absolute knockout.

Our track didn't pass close to Mt Barrington, because Ken Williamson hadn't yet blazed the final stretch, so we used some of the property tracks on Marqua Station instead. However, Ken planned to stay in the area after our departure, to lay in the final wheel tracks for future tours.

One side-benefit of missing out on Mt Barrington was seeing the rocket shelters at Marqua Station. These earth-topped bunkers were built during the Woomera rocket testing days and all the Station people were required to shelter inside when rockets were passing overhead, just in case one went astray.

The final night of the Never Never Track tour was back at Batton Hill.

The Never Never Track is a brilliant initiative by Lindsay Bookie and fits neatly into the expanding range of Central Australian experiences available through Jol Fleming's Direct 4WD Awareness.

There are very few trips that have such a high degree of Aboriginal input and involvement, and in this rare company the Never Never Track tour is a standout.

What You Need

The Never Never Track tour isn't a driver-training exercise – Jol can organise that in advance, if you need it – and is best done by experienced people in high ground clearance 4x4s.



That said, we had a very well driven, sump-protected, suspension-lifted Subaru Forester on our trip and it had no major traction difficulties at any stage.

Tyres shouldn't be an issue on the Never Never Track – it's the stony Plenty and Donohue 'Highways' getting to Jervois that are more likely to injure your rubber. LT tyres are a must in Central Australia and it's important to lower pressures by 10-15 percent when you hit the stony stuff, as well as dropping your cruising speed to no more than 80km/h.

You'll need enough fuel capacity to run your machine for 500 kilometres, for the Jervois-to-Jervois Never Never Track, in slow, off-road conditions. Our diesel HiLux averaged 14L/100km on the Never Never Track.

A camping trailer is a possibility, if you've had some dune-climbing experience, and you have enough on-board fuel to feed the towing vehicle.

You'll need to be self-sufficient – a minimum of seven days' food and water - and to carry your own first aid kit, recovery gear, spares and tools.

Jol Fleming travels with an HF radio and a satellite phone, but your own long-range communications equipment is a good idea.



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(LT)**
is our tyre choice
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FACT FILE

Where

Northern Simpson Desert

Time required

Six days

Best time to go

Details of tag-along tour dates at www.direct4wd.com.au

What to do

Four wheel driving, exploring, Aboriginal artefacts, remote area camping, camp-fire cooking.

Maps

Jol Fleming leads the Never Never tag-along tour so you won't need maps. (That said, our motto at Outback Travel Australia is not to go anywhere without topo maps for the area in which you're travelling.)

Camping

Lindsay Bookie's Batton Hill camp, and bush camps along the way

Permits

Jol Fleming organises the permits for this trip

Track closures

Jol Fleming www.direct4wd.com.au

Last fuel

Jervois Station (cash transactions only)

Contact

For information about this trip contact Jol Fleming at www.direct4wd.com.au