

DESTINATION

Sandover and Plenty Highways

Northern Territory and Queensland

It's often been said that the journey is half the fun and that's certainly the case with the gravel road alternative routes to the Red Centre from the East Coast. Outback Travel Australia checked out the highs and lows of the Sandover and Plenty Highways.



Unlike many better known roads in Australia's Red Centre the Sandover and Plenty Highways don't have a romantic origin. They can't, for instance, conjure up images of cattle droving down the Canning Stock Route or vie with the space age rationale behind Len Beadell's Gary, Gunbarrel and Connie Sue tracks. However, the Sandover and Plenty 'Highways' have their own attraction, and are far more interesting ways to reach The Alice than the bitumen alternatives. They also lead the traveller through interesting places that might well have remained unexplored dots on the map.

The Sandover Trek

The western approach to the Sandover Highway is easily found after a straightforward bitumen drive north-east from Alice Springs, but the eastern approach resembles navigating upstream in a river delta. Property access roads from Camooweal, Mt Isa and Boulia lead to Lake Nash, which is the eastern end of the Sandover Highway.

Our suggested west-running route starts in Winton and takes in some scenery and points of interest that shouldn't be missed. Lark Quarry is a must-visit site that's an easy gravel and bitumen road drive from Winton.

From Lark Quarry our route heads west, for Old Cork Station, on the Diamantina River. This abandoned house was constructed at great expense by Sir Thomas McIlwraith – later three times premier of Queensland – in 1875. The site is decaying rapidly and is in need of urgent restorative work. There is magnificent river-bank camping at Old Cork.



Our route continues west, through the supply points of Boulia and Dajarra, to Urandangi. The road crosses black soil plains and numerous channels, with low mesa-topped ranges in the distance.

Urandangi and the Dangi Pub

Urandangi has had its ups and downs in recent years, but has now entered a purple patch, with the pub now under the very firm control of Pam Forster. Now known as the Dangi Bush Resort the pub has free showers and camping in a grassed area, beside a dam at the back of the pub.

For those who want a rest from camping there's a choice of three well-furnished rooms – two doubles and a single - off a central dining area.

The dining room doubles as an art gallery where local Aboriginal artists sell their wares. We bought one of Abie Loy's beautiful paintings for much less than we'd have paid in the Big Smoke. The Dangi Pub is now at its pristine best – no more dogs in the bar – and there's no disorder allowed. Families are more than welcome.

Petrol and diesel are available and Pam hand-pumped diesel for us, after a disgruntled local had taken out some ill humour on the diesel bowser.

The track to Lake Nash heads north-west through Headingly Station and topographic maps are essential for this route, because there are no reliable road signs. We went through there after the 2008-2010 floods and much of the track was washed away, making for interesting navigation and driving challenges!



If you're towing a camper van or off-road caravan it's best to reach Lake Nash via the property roads from Camooweal.

More than a million dollars has been spent on the Sandover Highway since 2007 and it shows in brand new sections along the route.

Near Lake Nash it's a broad expanse of gravel, but soon alternates between that extreme and a two-tyre track through soft sand. High ground clearance is essential for The Sandover.

The road passes through arid country for its full length, with variations between grassland, open mulga woodland and spinifex desert.

Where the road crosses the Sandover River the vegetation improves and there are creek-bank stands of tall eucalypts.

No rest or overnight camping areas are shown on most maps, but there are three of them and all have water tanks and shelters: one is about 30km west of Lake Nash; another is opposite Ammaroo Station and the third is east of the Mt Skinner Station turnoffs.



Arlparra Store lies approximately 28km inside the boundary of Urapuntja, which is an area formerly known as Utopia Station. It's the major centre for a number of Aboriginal communities in the area.

Fuel and food are obtainable from Arlparra which is open weekdays, 9am-5pm and Saturday, 9am-12pm. Emergency medical facilities are available at the administrative centre of Urapuntja.

There's nothing much in the way off off-track excursions along the Sandover Highway, because it's mainly pastoral and Aboriginal land. However, it's possible to do a part-Sandover and turn off to the north at Ammaroo and join the Binns Track that runs through the Davenport Ranges and emerges onto the Stuart Highway near the Devils Marbles.

From Urandangi to Alice Springs is 750km of mainly dirt road driving, so fuel consumption is heavier than bitumen road driving. If you're travelling in a vehicle with a standard fuel tank it would be wise to fuel up wherever possible: Urandangi, Lake Nash, and Arlparra, but fuel isn't always available at Lake Nash. From Alice Springs to Arlparra is 310km and from Arlparra to Lake Nash is 340km. Lake Nash to Urandangi is 100km.

The Plenty Highway

Originally graded as a cattle property access road the Plenty Highway was upgraded in the early 1960s on the Northern Territory side of the border.

Queensland followed with improvements, but the eastern end remains flood-prone to this day. Much of the Gulf rain water that cuts off Birdsville for weeks at a time and floods into Lake Eyre passes across the Donoghue Highway channels.

The Plenty Highway is more trafficked than the Sandover and has more points of interest than the northern road. It becomes the Donoghue Highway at the Qld/NT border and the combined length of the joint roads is 820km, between Alice Springs and Boulia.



The surface is graded gravel, for the most part, with some bulldust, sand and corrugated patches that are best handled by high ground clearance 4WD vehicles. Camper trailers and off road caravans should be fine on the Plenty Highway, if you knock off velocity over the rougher sections.

The Plenty leaves the Stuart Highway 70km north of Alice Springs and is narrow bitumen for around the first 80km. (The blacktop length is growing gradually.)

There are reliable fuel and some supplies at The Gemtree (140km from Alice); at Atitjere (80km further west); and at Jervois (200km from The Gemtree). Jervois is the only fuel stop (cash only, no cards) after Atitjere, because Tobermorey Station is now closed – hopefully not permanently. From Jervois to Boulia is 470km, without supplies of any sort.

Fossicking on the Plenty

The owners of The Gemtree roadhouse are switched on to tourism, so the camping area has been refurbished and there are many tours for fossickers, as well as tours to the Boxhole Meteorite Crater, near Dulcie Ranges National Park.

The Gemtree Caravan Park is owned by Graham Short and his wife June, who have been taking people out fossicking every day for 15 years, they reckon. The main 'finds' are red garnets and the rarer natural zircon. (If you've got a spare half hour you can learn the difference between diamond-like zircon and man-made zirconia!)

Not far east of The Gemtree is a fossicking area that extends for several kilometres, if you want to try your luck. The turnoff onto the East MacDonnells 4x4 Route is at the eastern end of the fossicking area.

If you get lucky searching for gemstones you can have your find evaluated by Kerry Ruff, The Gemtree's resident gem cutter and jeweller.



Just after the Ongeva creek crossing the road undulates and the higher humps provide enough elevation for great views of Harts Range. There's not much at Harts Range other than the police station and the Spotted Tiger campground, but it's livelier on the first weekend in August, when the Harts Range Races are held at the racetrack.

Two kilometres past the police station is the Aboriginal community of Atitjere.

Aboriginal Initiative on The Plenty

The Aboriginal community of Atitjere has become much more tourist oriented recently and has fuel, some supplies, credit card facilities and a bakehouse.

The store's opening hours are 9.00am until noon and from 2.00pm until 4.00pm on weekdays and from 8.30am until 11.30am on Saturdays – closed Sundays and public holidays.



Of great interest to tourists is an active art and culture program, making it possible to join in bush plant tours and watch the locals create artworks.

It's impossible not to buy some of the bargain-priced paintings. Tour bookings can be arranged by phoning (08) 8956 9773.

The local kids participate in compulsory art classes every weekend and are painstakingly taught bush tucker and medicine lore.

After the appropriately named Mount Eaglebeak drops out of view in the rear vision mirror there's not much in the way of land marks before the Marshall River crossing near Jervois.

The Marshall is a tributary of the Plenty River that runs into the dune country of the Northern Simpson Desert, where it simply dries out in a series of salt lakes.

Jervois has fuel and a campground and is also the kick-off point for people visiting Lindsay Bookie's bush camp at Batton Hill, intending to head down the Hay River Track to Birdsville.



Permits for this trek are available through Jol Fleming's Direct 4WD (08) 8952 3359 (Note: the phone number shown on the Hema map is incorrect.)

As you head further east the country flattens, but there are different styles of termite mounds to break up the monotony. Emergency water is available at Heartbreak Bore and Cockatoo Bore and Waterhole. On the final NT leg to the border the Plenty Highway passes by Tarlton Downs, nestled in the foothills of the Tarlton Range. A series of conical hills lies close to the road, breaking up the otherwise flat landscape. Tobermorey Station is close to the border and used to be a great fuel and camping stop, but not any more.

Across the border the road is named after Cliff Donohue, who was a leading resident and businessman in Boulia and who agitated for years to have the road upgraded. Because it runs across the northern part of the famous Channel Country, the Donohue Highway traverses black soil plains, grassy clay pans and creeks. The dominant floodways are Pituri Creek and the Georgina River. After rain, forget it!

When it's dry the Donoghue is invariably dusty and pitted with bulldust holes, so caution is needed. A sign points out that The Donohue is not a state road and as such its maintenance is funded by the Boulia Shire, with contributions from the Queensland Government.

The Plenty/Donoghue Highway trek ends in Boulia, but as with the Sandover Highway trip there's further interesting travel possible. Many people drive south to Bedourie and Birdsville, but for those who've already been through Birdsville there's an alternative route to the east that's one of the most beautiful remote area drives in Australia. From Bedourie the well-graded Diamantina Developmental Road runs south-east to Windorah and the last 100km stretch is now sealed.



The country is gently undulating stony flats for the most part, with low ranges on the horizon. The late afternoon light effects are amazing. The road crosses the Diamantina River near Monkira Station, where there's a north-running turnoff to Diamantina National Park.

There's a new roadside rest centre with toilet at the Birdsville turnoff, just shy of the JC Hotel ruins.

From Morney Station the road is tarred and the scenery is magic. Mount Henderson has a largish hole through its summit, but in case you miss it a wrought iron arrow points from the roadside sign. Along this section of road are surviving mile post signs from the coach travel days.

Windorah has made great strides in attracting tourists and now is one of the best set up Outback towns in Australia. There are fuel, supplies and an excellent museum with a brilliant collection of historical artefacts. Windorah is also home to an Ergon Energy solar array that powers the town during daylight hours. Windorah is a soft introduction to civilisation and from there on there's the returning familiarity of more vehicles, roads with dividing lines down the centre and, horror of horrors: traffic lights.



So, which route is the better option to travel?

It depends on what you expect from a dirt route alternative to the blacktop: the Plenty has more interesting sites en route and some good bush camping opportunities; the Sandover is more remote, so you're less likely to come across other travellers, but the bush camping options are more limited.

Why Sandover?

This 550km stretch of dirt road isn't named after anyone notorious. William Sandover was a respectable hotelkeeper before he became a politician. William was born in Devon, England and migrated to South Australia in 1849, where he married Mary Billing Bate in 1854. During a visit to England in 1866 Mary gave birth to Alfred, who, in adult life, was a successful merchant in WA and the donor of the Sandover Medal that has been presented annually to the best and fairest player in the West Australian Football League.

William Sandover was a Member of the SA Parliament from 1868 until 1883, which is why the Sandover River, Stock Route and Highway in the Northern Territory were named after him.



**Bridgestone's
Dueler 694 AT
(LT)**
is our tyre choice
for this trek

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FACT FILE

Where

Remote western Queensland and Northern Territory desert region

Time required

Minimum three days on each highway

Best time to go

Late autumn to early spring

What to do

4WD touring, camping, fossicking, Aboriginal interests

Maps

Hema Great Desert Tracks NE sheet 1:1 250 000

Camping

Jervois, Gemtree, roadside camps

Permits

No permits required

Track closures

Road Conditions

NT 1800 246 199

QLD 1300 130 595

Last fuel

Jervois, Atitjere, Gemtree (Plenty Highway)

Alpurrurulam Store (07) 4748 4800

Arlparra Store (08) 8956 9910 (Sandover Highway)

Automobile Associations

Contact

AANT Alice Springs (08) 8952 1087

RACQ Camooweal (07) 4748 2155

RACQ Mount Isa (07) 4743 2542

Police

Alice Springs (08) 8951 8888

Camooweal (07) 4748 2148

Harts Range Police (08) 8956 9772

Mount Isa (07) 4744 1111

Tourist Information

Boulia Shire Council (07) 4746 3386 Central

Australian Tourism 1800 645 199

tourism@boulia.qld.gov.au

Tourism NT (08) 8936 2499