

The first and second parts of this three-part series looked at issues relating to the vehicle, how to get to the Simpson Desert, possible itineraries, what to take and how to avoid any problems.

Barry and his convoy have now completed their adventure and are here to talk about everything else you need to know such as how much fuel you'll need, what kind of animals you need to be wary of, and some suggested camping spots along the way!

A retrospective of our trip

We did it! Eight vehicles, sixteen adults and six kids. No tyre problems, minimal mechanical issues and apart from minor cuts and scratches, everyone safe and sound. Just like it should be and just like it can be for you with the right planning and preparation.

For almost two weeks in mid-June, the sun shone, winds were light, the days were pleasant and the evenings, although cold, were not freezing.

For me, this was crossing number three and from a driver's point of view, the slowest but easiest. Slow because there were many undulations along the tracks that restricted speed, even in some of the flatter areas. Add to this a lot of bush dodging, the result of a number of years of good rainfall producing amazing growth that you might consider most "un-desert" like.

The easiest crossing because, again as a result of recent rains, the sand dunes were quite firm and compact. This, together with the right tyre pressure, made dune crossing much easier with most vehicles not requiring low-range, even at Big Red. Another positive side effect of this was a far better than anticipated fuel consumption - but more of that later. So, let's look at the highlights.

Outback hospitality

As mentioned in part 2 of this series, our group decided to eat out for dinner when the opportunity arose.

So we had the pleasure of dining at Mt Dare Hotel, Birdsville Hotel, Mungerannie Hotel and the Copley Pub. In each of these places, the food was delicious, copious and very reasonably priced.

Other good meal experiences had by our group were lunch/snack at the Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta and breakfast and lunch at the Birdsville Bakery.

An absolute highlight was our evening at Mungerannie. The staff were entertaining and couldn't do enough to make our stay fun. The kitchen coped with our large group exceptionally well and some of our team partied well into the night.

Simpson camping

It takes a while to get there, so make the best of it. Our plan included two full days where we stayed put and just enjoyed the desert, and what a great decision that was. On one of these occasions, we did not see another person for about 44 hours – ah, the peace, serenity and solitude. The kids could play, people went for walks around the dunes amazed at the growth and the incredible number of animal tracks and there was time for a sit-down, a read and even an afternoon back-bash.

Sometimes it is a challenge to find a good flat, clear campsite, especially with the amount of growth around, so here are three that were excellent, especially with a larger group:

- On Rig Road about 15km east of Mokari airstrip – 26 19' 14.9S 136 36' 02.4E
- Rig Road – 26 25' 42.0S 137 24' 09.0E
- On QAA line – 25 57' 22.5S 138 00' 12.4E

Desert Creatures

Dingoes were quite common and kept a good eye on us, coming quite close to camp and wandering through during the night. Keep an eye on the kids, especially the littlies, and don't leave anything outside the tent or vehicle at night.

Other unwelcome evening visitors were rats. These came right up to tents and swags and were prone to nibbling – on almost anything. Our two swag dwellers found some well placed small LED lights around the swags acted as a deterrent as they do not like the light.

The other precaution we took was to lift vehicle bonnets when arriving at camp to cool down the engine before nightfall. Rats can be attracted to warm places and nibble on vehicle wiring. A small LED light in the engine bay may also be a good idea. I had never encountered the rat problem in previous trips, doubtless another by-product of the excellent conditions.

Driving

For those who love driving, and 4WDing in particular, this is a great trip. In the main, all of the outback roads leading to and from the desert were in great condition – a credit to the road crews that constantly maintain them.

Lowered tyre pressures on these roads ensured a comfortable ride and a reduced risk of tyre damage. Not one tyre issue on our entire trip! That's 32 tyres covering a combined 26500 km – we were very happy travellers.

The desert driving was excellent with the first steep dune crossing always being a bit of a "heart-in-mouth" moment. "Will I make it??" The exhilaration of going over the top is worth any initial angst and you soon learn to gauge speed and gear choice. Sometimes you might misjudge and not quite make the top. The key here is not to sit there spinning wheels and digging holes but stop and carefully back down the dune and try again.

I've mentioned it a lot, but tyre pressures are critical to success. 20psi proved to be a pretty

good pressure in these conditions and although there were a few “second go’s”, everyone managed very comfortably.

✘ Big Red

If you’re travelling east, this is the last and largest sand dune of the Simpson. Everyone has to have a go at trying to climb it. There is an alternative easier crossing available if this is not your thing, but for our group, the challenge was out.

Confronted with several options, the consensus was “straight up”. Everyone made it and the view from the top, which usually is a large flat expanse and the road into Birdsville, was instead an enormous lake. This is the result of the incredible rains in the area in recent times. A number of our vehicles repeated the feat with others at the wheel just to be able to say “I climbed Big Red”.

Fuel Consumption

As covered in the previous two articles, there are a number of logistical issues to be addressed for a successful crossing, a key one being fuel.

Keeping in mind that every crossing will be different and that ours was probably on the easier end of the scale, due to the moisture in the sand, the amount of fuel used was less than anticipated. Our entire group had considerable reserves when arriving in Birdsville, but we were prepared for the worst and as you will know, those prepared are those who won’t get caught out.

Between Mt Dare and Birdsville our group covered 640km. Fuel usage was:

- Hilux 3l turbo diesel auto - 106 litres
- Landcruiser 100 4.7l V8 petrol auto - 154 litres
- Jackaroo 3.5l V6 petrol auto - 143 litres
- Landcruiser 100 4.2l turbo diesel manual - 101 litres
- Pajero 3.8l V6 petrol auto - 141 litres
- Landcruiser 200 4.5l V8 turbo diesel auto - 103 litres
- Prado 4.0l V6 petrol auto - 120 litres
- Landcruiser 100 4.2l turbo diesel manual - 112 litres



Toileting

Our group used a variety of options, most involving a hole in the ground with a variety of seat options that are available. A pop-up shelter provides the privacy. Ensure holes are dug at least 30cm deep and that toilet paper is burnt (supervise the children).

While travelling, a dash into the bush does the job. Ladies, take a zip-lock bag with you for used toilet paper and dispose of later. For the first time ever, I took a Porta Potti and it

proved to be another effective and simple toileting option.

Water

On a trip like this, water is at a premium. One way to save is to use baby wipes to clean the nether regions and provide a good level of personal freshness and hygiene. When it comes to dishes, use paper plates and bowls which can also be used to light the fire after.

Other useful information

- Fly nets: Make sure you have them.
- Fires: Bring your own wood, heat beads, briquettes, etc. There are still many old railway sleepers along the Oodnadatta Track so pick some up if you have space. Enjoy this luxury while you can as there is a proposed complete fire ban in some areas of the Simpson starting from 2013.
- Trailers: I made my feelings clear about trailers in the first article – don't bring them. However, there are still plenty out there, including some large and substantial camper trailers. Hauling these up fragile dunes is massively wearing on both the dunes and the vehicle. It's also responsible for many of the scallops or potholes that impede progress when nearing a dune crest. I have little doubt that they will also appear on the banned list in due course.
- Tarps: Great for providing shade, if you are spending some time camped in one spot, for giving a clean place for the kids to sit on to play games, and to put your clean gear on when setting up and dismantling camp.
- Now, I got this idea from Graham Cahill, Editor of 4WD Action magazine, and he is one tough 4wding dude – so don't laugh. The good old-fashioned stable table is great for eating a meal sitting around the campfire. Also great for the kids to use while travelling.

Well, there you have it, a brilliant trip with everything going to plan. The Simpson is accessible to anyone with a sense of adventure, a well-prepared vehicle and a couple of weeks to spare.

With all the rain in recent years the desert is at its best, so get out there and have a look.

Have you crossed the Simpson? Let us know, we want to hear about your adventure.