



The iconic Tanami Track, the longest shortcut in the country.

Almost as much as the Simpson Desert, Australians talk about “doing” the Tanami Track, or Road as some maps have it now. It’s one of those journeys that travellers talk about, almost using it as a yardstick of one’s bush experience.

Then, as now, once you reach Halls Creek the Kimberly and northwest Australia are open to you. Broome, Derby, the Dampier Peninsular, the Gibb River Road, the Mitchell Plateau, Fitzroy Crossing, the Bungles and Kunnunurra where the **best mangoes in the world** are grown. And of course the Argyle Dam.

The Tanami Track crosses the northeastern corner of the Tanami Desert in what is the red heart of Australia. It was carved out as a 1,100km, dirt road, **short cut between Alice Springs and Halls Creek**. Then, it was a rutted dirt track and followed a cattle droving route from the MacDonnell Ranges to Halls Creek. It was a real adventure. It was wise to keep an eye on the weather and to ring Rabbit Flat to see if the road was passable. If it even looked like rain it was wise to stay put.



Today the Road carries the road trains supplying the gold mines and is no longer the adventure it was even five years ago. Each side of the NT/WA border the local councils have upgraded the Road to take the heavy traffic. There is even talk of sealing the Road, mainly for the tourist traffic, but money will keep that a long way off.

It wasn't a fast road then and it isn't now. **The corrugations can be fearsome**. Even the road trains take it easy, not driving at their usual break-neck speed. The dust will stop you even thinking of overtaking. Pray for a cross breeze instead! It's a road for well-prepared vehicles, not the family sedan.

I last came “down” the Road, from Halls Creek to Alice Springs, in October 2011 at the end of the dry season and before the wet. Fires had burnt out much of the country either side and



were still burning with a lot of smoke. The fires are the way the **land regenerates itself** and are a normal part of nature. They can be started by nature, the Aboriginals as part of their land management or as a burn-off. They're usually left to burn themselves out. To see the **fires burning all around** or smoke rising in the distance is a fascinating, slightly unnerving sight. In the end, it exposes the red, sandy, gently undulating, mainly featureless country for miles around so that all that is left are the skeleton branches of the burnt desert bloodwood trees in all directions. On the positive side, the fires also get rid of the Spinifex, at least temporarily!

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I find the Tanami a fascinating part of Australia to travel through. Perhaps I have "a hunger for the wide open, empty spaces", to loosely quote *Lawrence of Arabia*, and the Tanami desert certainly qualifies. There are very few large animals to see and few birds. Because of the burning, it was hard to find smaller animals or insects on my trip. In fact, there is little wildlife in the Tanami at any time. There is a **wildlife reserve** at Billiluna where one can view the "locals" but permission is needed to visit it.



The most wonderful feature of the Tanami is the night. On a still, calm night, away from the dust of the road trains and the smoke of the fires you can see **more stars than you could count in a hundred years**. The sound of the desert at night is a silence only found in deserts. I've been in a few deserts and lonely places but this is beautifully different. We camped about the border and even at dusk when you can usually hear the wildlife stirring, bedding down or getting up. Here, there was silence. Not even the gentle sound of an evening breeze. But it's not a threatening silence, just **quietness**.

Some words of caution. If you are like me you like to know something about areas you are likely to travel through. History, the sights, population, dangers, places to stop on the way,



coffee, fuel and nature stops. Google is the obvious first research target. There are a couple of good descriptions of the Track and everyone has a different perspective. Beware of any site that mentions Rabbit Flat as a place to stop. **It no longer exists**. Even the sign post has been removed. I would question the up-to-dateness of the site.

The Tanami Track is a lonely drive. For fuel, there are the Aboriginal towns of Yuendumu and Billiluna. They are not welcoming places and the diesel is more than twice the price of Alice Springs or Halls Creek. **Wolfe Creek Crater** is interesting and well worth a visit but the only facility there is an information board under a roof. The Carranya Station closed some years ago and the mines don't welcome visitors and then only in emergencies. Take plenty of fuel and water with you – 1100km worth, plus emergencies.



At the Alice Springs end, Tilmouth Well would be worth a visit. Check the [Tilmouth Well website](#). The best time to travel is just after the grader had been through and even then not if it has been raining to any extent.

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