


This 3-part article covers history, distances, attractions and facilities for the Strzelecki Track and the areas around Innamincka, and is fourth in a series of articles covering great outback tracks of South Australia, the others being:

- [Crossing the Simpson Desert](#)
- [Travelling the Oodnadatta Track and Old Ghan Railway](#)
- [The Birdsville Track](#)

The first part of this topic is a little long, if you want to skip the history and get travel tips and distances, go to [part 2](#).

Like the previous articles, this trek involves another amble into the South Australian desert... but this time with a twist.

At the end there is water and usually plenty of it. The Cooper Creek meanders into South Australia from Queensland where it is fed from cyclonic rains that often soak the catchment areas during summer. In times of drought the flow will stop but the creek is so deep in spots that permanent waterholes exist along its course. A brilliant example of this is the Cullyamurra waterhole to the east of Innamincka, a broad and long stretch of water providing some of the best camping opportunities in the area. 

However, don't lose sight of the fact that getting there involves considerable desert travel with all the planning and preparation normally required for a trip into harsh and isolated areas.

As with other desert treks in South Australia, rain can make roads quickly impassable and summer temperatures are mind boggling. Travel in the cooler months is definitely the key to success and enjoyment with the risk of rain and high temperatures greatly reduced.

The South Australian government is currently considering sealing the Strzelecki Track and a sealed road from Queensland is not too far away, so if you want the true outback experience don't wait too long to get out there.

This area is in the middle of the Cooper Basin gas and oil fields with exploration and wells radiating out from the processing, maintenance and administrative centre of Moomba, thus the motivation for an all weather road to cater for the considerable traffic, including many trucks, that travel from Adelaide to Moomba. Moomba is a closed town, only accessible to workers, but the small township of Innamincka, on the banks of Cooper Creek, provides a great outback pub, general store, fuel and is the administrative centre for the Innamincka Regional Reserve that covers 1.3 million hectares of land.

Not a national park, the reserve aims to support mining, pastoral and tourist activities allowing appropriate access for each without overly restricting any of these pursuits.

Established in 1988 and being the first reserve of its type in Australia, it seems to have worked successfully for all concerned with travellers having access to many areas along the creek, the very significant Burke and Wills sites and tracks leading to many areas further afield.

“The South Australian government is currently considering sealing the Strzelecki Track”


Other than in the town common, camping in the reserve requires a Desert Parks Pass. These can be purchased from the reserve headquarters or the Trading Post in Innamincka.

However, I recommend purchasing before leaving as, although quite expensive (\$150 at time of writing), the pass provides comprehensive information and maps of the area that are

invaluable for trip planning and is valid for 12 months (purchase from RAA offices or on the [National Parks SA website](#)).

With much of Australia's early European heritage coming from the forced work of convicts, it is perhaps not so unusual that what we now know as the Strzelecki Track came to prominence thanks to the mis-guided efforts of a cattle thief.

In 1870 Harry Redford, later immortalized as "Captain Starlight" in the film *Robbery Under Arms*, decided that a mob of cattle were better in his hands than those of their Queensland owners. But where do you take them? His answer was to drive them south, where he sold them at Blanchewater for a reputed \$10000. Although not the first to follow this route, Harry unwittingly demonstrated that this was a viable and quicker route to market for the inland pastoralists. In the end Harry's venture came unstuck with him being arrested in 1872 and sent to court.

But the story does not end there. The judge, so impressed with Harry's driving skills and with the appreciation that he had performed a great service to pastoralists, let him off and he continued life as a highly respected drover. Who says crime doesn't pay. 

While painstakingly pushing his cattle south, Harry Redford could not have imagined the scene today. A wide, well maintained dirt road stretches from Lyndhurst in the south to Innamincka in the north. The drover has given way to massive multiple trailer road trains carrying stock and mining supplies, drilling rigs and a whole range of other mining paraphernalia. In the cooler months 4WD's, camper trailers and even caravans are a common sight as people head to the Cooper to camp, relax, fish and visit a range of historic sites. In dry conditions the track is suitable for a well maintained conventional vehicle but accessing some of the camp sites along the creek does require a high clearance vehicle.

History

When Harry Redford made his move south, providing water for the cattle was a major concern.

From central Queensland water courses that eventually led into the Cooper were followed. Near what is now Innamincka, he came across the Strzelecki Creek, an overflow from the Cooper that weaves its way south to Lake Blanche. The existence of this creek was confirmed by explorer Charles Sturt in 1845 on one of his treks to find the fabled "inland sea", and named it after another explorer and scientist, Polish born Paul Edmund de Strzelecki. Following Sturt's discoveries, in November 1845 Cooper's Creek was named after the South Australian Chief Justice, Sir Charles Cooper.

The first recorded movement of animals along this route was undertaken in 1867 when John Conrick moved 200 horses from a station near Quilpie in Queensland to Kapunda in South Australia. Despite the harsh conditions and times of extreme drought, stations were established along the track. At the time the area around [Coongie Lakes](#) was seen as particularly promising due to the large amounts of water in the river and lake system. So mesmerised were they that in the mid-1870's Norman and Hector Wilson established a station and named it "Land of Promise". The establishment of this station however had a much more sinister side.

Local indigenous groups, the Yandruwandha and Yawarrawarrka, were seen as trouble by the station manager. They are believed to have been constantly harassed and many of the

women stolen, eventually leading to retaliation resulting in the spearing of two stockmen. In a rage, the manager went about systematically killing all the indigenous people he could find. The nearby Lake Massacre is said to be named after this event. Any remaining aborigines quickly left the area, never to return.


Like the Birdsville Track further to the west, the Strzelecki suffered from extreme droughts and became impassable at times, not from flooding but from massive sand drifts.

“The nearby Lake Massacre is said to be named after this event”

The Cobbler Sandhills, about half way between Lyndhurst and Innamincka were particularly troublesome, building to such a massive size that in the early 1930's the route was rarely used. Other than station homesteads, there was no settlement along the track and waterholes in the creeks were the only source of water. A few bores were drilled along the southern part of the track with Montecollina Bore still existing on the northern edge of The Cobbler.

On the southern section of the track, before reaching The Cobbler, you will come across the ruins of the historic Blanchewater homestead.

It was this homestead, the most northerly in the region at the time, that the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition was attempting to reach when both Burke and Wills died on the banks of the Cooper. By the 1890's the wealthy pastoralist, Thomas Elder owned Blanchewater and it became famous for the quality of horses bred there. Many of these were purchased by Cobb & Co. to pull their coaches that were opening up travel to many outback areas.

The reputation for breeding excellent horses travelled widely, with the Indian Army being a regular customer. At its peak the station ran up to 20000 horses. 

By the late 1800's Adelaide had developed excellent stock markets (the animal kind), well regarded by inland pastoralists and the market of choice for selling their stock.

The Old Ghan Railway had been established and passed through the southern ends of both the Strzelecki and Birdsville Tracks, making rail transport available for the rest of the trip to Adelaide. As traffic built up it was clear that a settlement was required, with an area on the banks of the Cooper Creek being established. Originally called Hopetoun after the Governor of Victoria, this name was short lived.

There was one survivor of the Burke and Wills expedition, John King. His survival was due entirely to assistance from local aboriginals and in gratitude the Government had allocated land to them, known as Innamincka.

It was this name that people wished maintained and it was duly changed. Although it developed slowly, a hotel, customs house and homes developed and soon the Australian Inland Mission established the Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home, providing medical services near and far.

However, by the mid 1950's, Innamincka had all but disappeared. The imposing stone nursing home was now a crumbling shell and very few people called the town home. But soon all was to change. The Cooper Basin oil and gas field discovery was just around the corner, bringing new life to the region. From the first hydrocarbon discovery in 1963, the area has been transformed with a maze of tracks, wells and pipelines to ensure our insatiable thirst for oil and gas is met. One of the earliest developers was SANTOS (South Australian & Northern Territory Oil Search), a company whose name is now synonymous with development in the area. [Follow this link for an extremely comprehensive history of oil and gas search in the Cooper Basin.](#)



“There was one survivor of the Burke and Wills expedition”

The area is also rich in Aboriginal history but, as previously explained, initial contact with the European settlers was fraught with difficulty. They were rightly very suspicious of the incursion of pastoralists onto their land.

Perhaps these suspicions were further strengthened by the arrival of missionaries in a number of desert areas who, no doubt in good faith, attempted to convert the aboriginal people to Christianity and have them adopt a European lifestyle. At the same time pastoralism was rapidly expanding with many leases being granted in the area most of which eventually ended up in the hands of Sir Sidney Kidman. With these incursions the fate of the local people was sealed.

Although destroying much of the native culture, at least the pastoralists provided some work, especially for the men, and the legendary skill of the aboriginal drover developed.

That's a little of the tracks history, check out [part 2](#) to find out how to get there and detailed information on the towns you will see along the way.