The Sandy Blight Track: A 4WDriver's Dream!

The Sandy Blight Track is a perfect trip for your 4WD as it is not only a great drive but it is filled with history, adventure and beauty for the whole family. Running north-east to the south-west on the edge of the Gibson Desert and crossing the Western Australia -Northern Territory border due west of Alice Springs the 350 km long. The track runs between the Gary Junction Road, that joins Alice Springs to Port Hedland on the WA coast, and the Great Central Road that runs across the centre of Australia and was part of the Gunbarrel Highway.

The first hour, after leaving Kintore in the NT on the Gary Junction Road, the track looks better over your shoulder. That's not because it's so terrible that one wants to go home, but because it presents a different historical aspect.

The track was created by Len Beadell in 1960 to give his Gunbarrel Road Construction Party a north-south access road after the Maralinga Tests. Today, it joins Docker River to Kintore; the Great Central Highway in the south to the north on the Gary Junction Road. The Sandy Blight Track was well travelled in those days but has now been overtaken by the airlines and the Stuart Highway.

The story of the naming of the Sandy Blight Junction Track goes that Len contracted the eye disease 'Sandy Blight' just short of Kintore. He couldn't see to navigate so he told his bulldozer driver to head for the distinctive Mt Leisler. The 'dozer driver took him at his word and the result is the 50 km of dead-straight road. It makes a good story.

Len made frequent use of roadside markers to record distances and note latitude and longitude for those who would nowadays have maps. It makes one think. He was actually putting the maps together- working on an almost blank sheet of paper. The only people who had been out there, apart from the very few local Aboriginal people, were the explorers and the odd pastoralist. A huge, lonely unmapped place.

While you're looking for the markers, keep a lookout also for a large, white painted rock. It wasn't placed there by nature. Len and his 'dozer driver brought it down from up north and dropped it there as a joke on his crew and, later, geologists.

Despite the inevitable corrugations, the road up to here is great with a solid underfoot. Abreast the Davenport Hills, it deteriorates until it would have trouble justifying being called a track. One wash-away after another. This makes driving interesting…

And look out for the local wildlife. Camels are rampant in this area. They're never alone but commonly roam in herds of a dozen or more. Expensive to hit, too… They usually stick to open country so, having come across several groups that actually forced us to stop, we were looking forward to the dune section.

Another feature on this section is the wrecked bus. This is almost the only wreck on this road unlike the Great Central Highway, where it is said there is a burnt out car for every kilometer. That says something for the solitude of the Track. What the bus was doing and how it got there, no-one has been able to tell me.

The sand dunes start soon after this. 50 km of driving down the slacks between the dunes until the track goes over a low bit of a dune or around the end. Then back the other way. How Len found his way through the dunes is a testament to his tenacity as well as his ability. The map says the average height of the dunes is 12m. Too high for short cuts. Did I say we were looking forward to the sand dunes? That thought didn't last long.

At last, we were through the worst of the dunes and, as the sun was sinking, we found a spot to make camp in a small grove of desert oaks. Tent up, fire started, dinner

prepared and with a drink in hand looking at a fiery sunset. It doesn't get much better. Mind you, the thought of rain from those clouds and being stranded hereabouts had us checking the whisky supplies.

Next morning had us up with the larks looking forward to bacon and eggs cooked over a camp fire. Thinking of larks, we remarked at this point on the lack of wildlife. Plenty of camels and the odd emu but little else. The recent rain had brought green to the desert, as can be seen from some of the photos, but very little wildlife. This was September 2009 and the drought was breaking. We were prepared for moderately warm weather but wore shorts on one day only. Otherwise long trousers and long sleeves. Maybe the fauna knew it was just a little early.

Packed up and ready to go at 0800hrs. A quick check of the vehicle and … flat tyre! Found we had been staked the previous day and we knew exactly where. Rounding the end of one of the sand dunes we had skidded off a very wet track straight into the scrub. We didn't notice anything at the time but an inch off the broken branch was still there and looking at us. Out with the tubeless tyre repair kit and half an hour later we were on our way. As a matter of interest, that tyre is still going strong with its plug still in place. It's no longer a 'bush' tyre but it's still on my vehicle, left rear, complete with plug.

First stop this day was on top of the Sir Frederick Range in WA, after a 1st gear, low range climb. 2200 ft and no trees to hide the fantastic view. We had to have a brew and add our names to the book in the tin in the cairn.

This range is quite curious. It rises smoothly but steeply from the plain. I have not asked my vehicle to climb any track as steep. It is made up of what looks like river stones with relatively little dirt binding the stones together. The stones are about the size of a football- not large; nothing a man could not easily lift. But they were all rounded like stones, washed by water over centuries. One might think that wind and sand might have worn the stones down over the aeons, but I doubt the wearing would have been so even. If anyone has an answer to this, I would love to hear about it.

Down onto the plain again and back into the sand dunes. Not so fearsome this time, only 10 m average height we were running with them. Len described his frustration when surveying this section when trying to find his way around Lake Hopkins. On a map, the lake looks like a mass of mercury blobs but with tributaries and joining necks of land everywhere. I would not like to attempt this trip without a map, GPS and a track to follow. Again, hats off to Len Beadell.

Then, at last, one emerges from the gradually decreasing sand dunes and low trees onto the plain. The track up till now has been wheel ruts through the sand. Now there is a junction, with another road, going east to the Aboriginal settlement of Tjukurla. The road is suddenly wider and more compacted, and we can pick up speed. We're running down the slack in between the sand dunes that are wider apart here. The road has also changed direction, from tending southerly and across the dunes to easterly and running with them.

Off to the right we're now looking at the craggy, shattered rocks of the Walter James Range, quite different to the Sir Frederick Range. This range rises abruptly from the plain and is made of great slabs of shattered volcanic rock. The road goes round the eastern end of the range and heads more southerly as we go.

Finally, we reach the gap between the Anne Range and the Bloods Range and look for the Malagura Waterhole of Lasseter's Reef fame, as well as the explorer Ernest Giles' lifesaver.

This is a beautiful spot in a very tough country. Unfortunately the day was overcast and chilly. I wish we'd seen it in sunlight. For the first time on this trip, we saw birdlife around this spot. Although we had seen plenty of evidence of running or flood water further up the track, this was the first water we had actually seen.

From here it's a hop, skip, etc (15 km) to the Great Central Highway; another dirt road. The Malagura Waterhole is a beautiful end to the track. However, reality sticks its rude nose into the day's proceedings. We were unable to top up with fuel at Kintore and, although we had enough to reach Alice Springs, my principal is to keep the tanks safely full if reasonably possible. Besides we wanted to see Giles weather station and Len's old grader that made the road we'd just driven down. So into Warburton for fuel and then next door to Giles. This remote weather post is, to my thinking, the real end of the track. After all, Len set out from here and it was his rear support base to which he returned for fuel, water and supplies while building the Sandy Blight Track.

The Sandy Blight Track is a trip I would recommend. Not too difficult, but 4 wheel drive only. I know that people tow trailers on the track, but the way parts of it are deteriorating that wont be for long. Visually, it is full of contrast: the flat open plain to the interminable sand dunes to the gentle rounded heights of the Sir Frederick Range; the jagged Walter James Range; the dry open plain to the relief of the Malagura Rockhole.

And the history of the area. Before starting out I knew a little of the story of Ernest Giles' expeditions through the area and the tragedy surrounding the naming of the Gibson Desert. I had travelled some of Len Beadell's roads and everyone knows something of the legend of Lasseter's gold reef. Since then I have read Len Beadell's story of the construction of the Sandy Blight Track, *Beating about the bush*. It is so full of information I had missed that I am determined to travel that road again.

Two words on safety. We were a single vehicle expedition. On the 350 km length of the Sandy Blight Track we saw no one else. Perhaps a dangerous situation, but we had vehicle based UHF radio and a hand-held unit in case one of us had to leave the vehicle. This happened once and the hand-held was useful. It told me when to put the billy on because my companion was almost back from a walk and needed a cup of tea. Seriously, he wanted to climb Haast's Bluff and, as I was unable to, the UHF radios were invaluable for safety. We also had a satellite phone, and I am coming to regard these as essential equipment for outback travel. EPIRB's are also a life saver but simply say "trouble". Sat phones can tell people what the trouble, is which can be a life saver in itself.

The second word. The explorer William Henry Tietkens wrote in his journal, after he climbed Mt Liesler in 1889, "…this desolate and waterless region…". The explorer Ernst Giles named the Gibson Desert after a member of his 1873-4 expedition, Alfred Gibson, who was lost in the desert without water and not seen again (even by local Aboriginal people). In 1960, Len Beadell commented in his book that he was probably the second white man to climb Mt Liesler. Today the region is still "desolate and waterless". It is not to be entered without caution.

Happy exploring.