

North of Alice

The Stuart Hwy shoots north of Alice Springs on its long march towards Darwin, and travellers heading this way could be forgiven for thinking there's little more than a few roadhouses and oceans of red sand and desert scrub until you reach Tennant Creek.

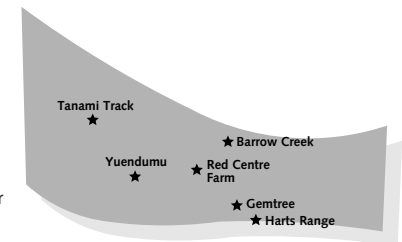
But this remote no-man's land has a story and a heart, both historical and spiritual. The desert landscape is the inspiration for, and the story behind, the world-renowned Aboriginal dot paintings and the work of the Utopia artists, as well as the growing reputation of the Warlpiri artists. The Utopia homelands – named after a station settlement on the Sandover Hwy – cover some 1800 sq km and are home to dozens of Aboriginal communities. Heading north you'll also see reminders of European exploration and history: old WWII staging camps, telegraph stations, wild camels and stock routes.

East of the highway around the Harts Range is a renowned gem fossicking area – the best place in the Territory to sift in the dirt and come up with ruby-red garnets and glittering zircons.

Travel around here usually means going somewhere else; if not north, then branching off on some of the Territory's remote desert roads – the famous Tanami Track to Western Australia, and the Plenty and Sandover highways to Queensland – which head to and beyond the state borders, all passing through vast areas of Aboriginal land. For these unsealed desert tracks a 4WD is the way to go, although the Tanami is passable in conventional vehicles if it's dry. For many travellers, this outback driving challenge tempts them away from the main highway and reveals the vastness of central Australia.

HIGHLIGHTS

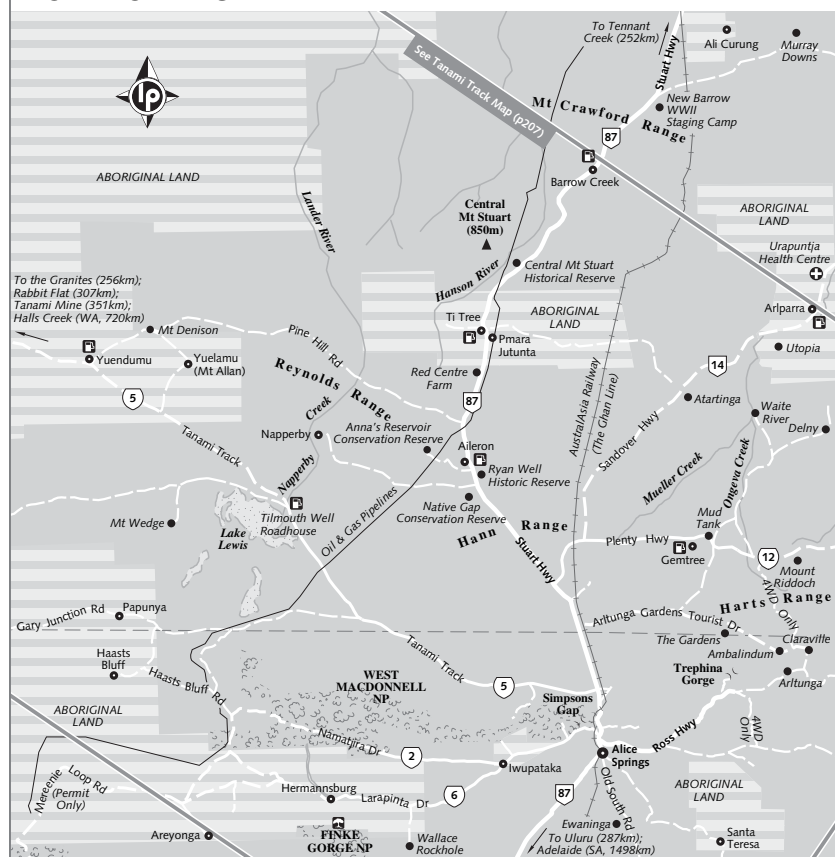
- Fossicking for garnets and zircons at **Gemtree** (p211) and the **Harts Range** (p211)
- Outback driving through some of Australia's most remote country on the **Tanami Track** (p207)
- Tasting central Australian wines and mango liqueurs and ice cream at **Red Centre Farm** (p206)
- Stopping at the Aboriginal art centre at **Yuendumu** (p209)
- Exploring the best-preserved telegraph station outside Alice Springs and retiring for a beer at the quirky pub at **Barrow Creek** (p206)



■ TELEPHONE CODE ☎ 08

■ NRMA: www.shift.nrma.com.au/travel/go/outback_tracks
■ Gemtree: www.gemtree.com.au

NORTH OF ALICE



UP THE TRACK

The Stuart Hwy heads north from Alice Springs, snaking through the low outliers of the MacDonnell Ranges before the road flattens out for the long haul north to Darwin.

About 20km north of Alice Springs is the turn-off for the Tanami Track, a gravel road connecting Alice with the Kimberley.

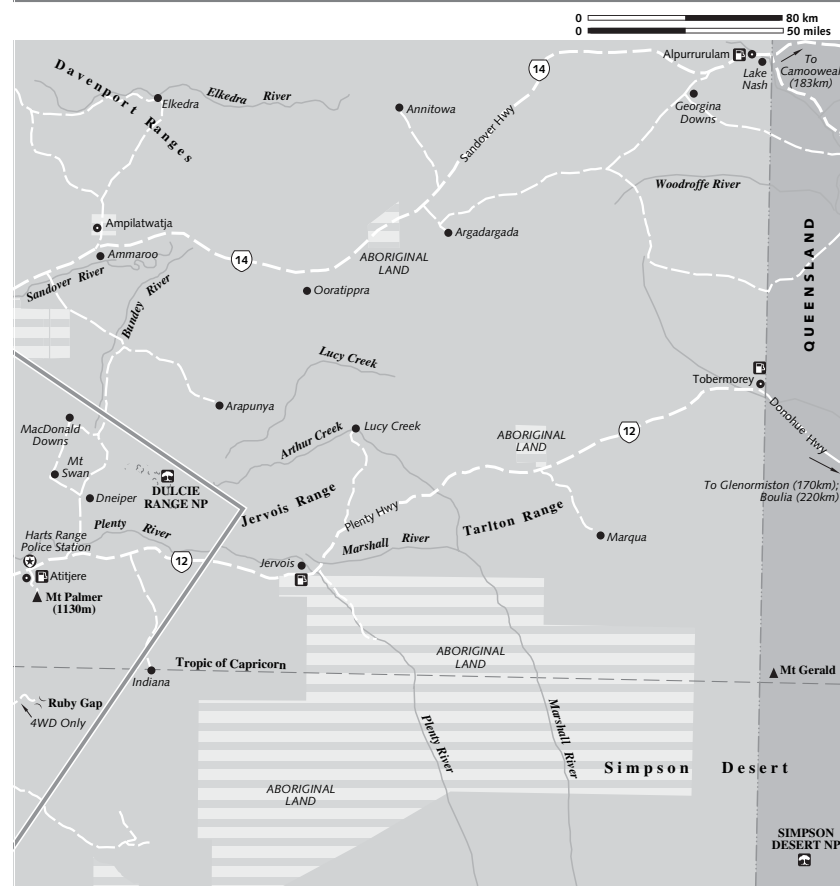
A further 11km brings you to the marker for the **Tropic of Capricorn**, a skeletal globe with some information panels. Although this marks the line of 23°44'S latitude, it's a long way north to 17°8'S before you feel the true transition from the dry Centre to the seasonally wet tropics.

The **Native Gap Conservation Reserve** is a small gap in the Hann Range, 110km north of Alice Springs. There's a rest stop on the Stuart Hwy and this is a registered sacred site, known to the local Aboriginal people as Arulte Artwaye.

After another 19km the road crosses the small **Ryan Well Historic Reserve**, which preserves the ruins of a well and the remains of an early homestead.

AILERON

The first major stop on this part of the highway comes 138km north of Alice Springs, where the Aileron roadhouse sits next to the homestead of Aileron Station. The historical homestead now houses a surpris-



ingly large collection of some 200 works by the Namatjira family – including about 10 painted by Albert. You can look around for free and there are also dot paintings by the local Anmatyerre community. Outside you can say hello to the pet wedge-tailed eagle, which has been here for 23 years after recovering from an accident. The quirky roadhouse owner is currently building a 13m-high statue of an Aboriginal warrior on the hill behind the homestead!

Aileron Hotel Roadhouse (☎ 8956 9703; www.aileron.com.au; camp sites per person \$8.50, dm \$30, s/d \$80/90; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 7am-9pm Sun; 📍) has grassed camp sites (power available till 10pm), a 10-bed dorm, self-contained motel units and a swimming pool. The li-

censed restaurant (meals \$10 to \$22) serves counter meals and a Sunday roast (\$17), as well as takeaways. There's a bar and also a small shop and ATM. All types of fuel are available. Ask here about access to **Anna's Reservoir Conservation Reserve** to the west, a 36km drive into the station property.

TI TREE & AROUND

pop 105

The small town of Ti Tree is 193km north of Alice Springs. It's a service centre for the surrounding Aboriginal communities, including Pmara Jutunta and Utopia (200km east).

The town, originally called Tea Tree Wells after the ti-tree-lined waterhole about 300m west of the roadhouse, began as a settlement

DETOUR

About 50km north of Alice Springs, a turn-off from the Stuart Hwy known as the **Arltunga Gardens Tourist Drive** heads east for 125km to Arltunga, the historical former gold-mining town at the eastern end of the East MacDonnell Ranges (p238). It's effectively an alternative route and means you can do a loop drive from Alice to Arltunga and back via the Ross Hwy. The dirt road passes through cattle country just south of the Harts Range. Along the way you pass through the Gardens, Ambalindum and Claraville stations. A couple of 4WD side routes off this road head north to the Plenty Hwy.

Although the road is accessible to conventional vehicles in dry conditions, a 4WD is recommended and it may be impassable after heavy rains. Allow two hours from the Stuart Hwy to Arltunga.

on the Overland Telegraph Line. In 1971 the Anmatyerre Aboriginal people won the lease of the Ti Tree Station and it's now the settlement of Pmara Juntuna.

Red Sand Art (☎ 8956 9738; www.redsandart.com.au; ☹ 7am-7pm), just west of the highway, is an excellent repository for artworks from the surrounding 1800 sq km Utopia homelands. Artists work in-house daily; prices for a didgeridoo run from \$100 to \$350 and dot paintings cost from \$100 to \$9000 for a large piece. There's a café (meals \$4 to \$7) serving sandwiches, rolls, pies and drinks.

Ti Tree Roadhouse (☎ 8956 9741; powered/unpowered camp sites for 2 \$17/11, tw/q \$45/55, motel s/d \$75/85; ☹ 6am-10pm Mon-Sat, 6am-9pm Sun; 🚻) has a range of accommodation, including motel rooms with TV, fridge and air-con. Flo's Bar – erroneously called 'the most central pub in Australia' – serves huge bistro meals (\$10 to \$18) all day and night, and has a pool table. There's an ATM here and fuel is available.

About 12km south of Ti Tree, **Red Centre Farm** (☎ 8956 9828; www.redcentrefarm.com; ☹ 9am-7pm), otherwise known as 'Shatto Mango', is an essential stop if you're interested in sampling some unique Territory wines. It's one of about a dozen farms growing table grapes and mangoes thanks to water provided by subartesian bores. The small store here sells a diverse range of mango and

grape products, including toppings, preserves, marinades and delicious mango ice cream. But the star attraction is the range of wines, ports and liqueurs, with free tastings. They sell for \$10 to \$15.

CENTRAL MT STUART HISTORICAL RESERVE

A cairn beside the Stuart Hwy 20km north of Ti Tree commemorates John McDouall Stuart's naming of Central Mt Stuart, a hill about 12km to the northwest. The cairn is part of the historical reserve that includes Central Mt Stuart.

Stuart thought he had reached the centre of Australia (although he was a fair way off; see Lambert Centre p243 for the true geographical centre), and named the 'mountain' Central Mt Sturt after his former expedition leader and friend, Charles Sturt. The name was later changed to honour Stuart himself.

BARROW CREEK

Historical Barrow Creek sits next to the Stuart Hwy, where the road passes through a dramatic gap in the Watt Range about 70km north of Central Mt Stuart.

It's the site of one of the few surviving OTL stations and has one of the quirkiest outback pub-roadhouses along the track. Barrow Creek received international attention in 2001 when British backpacker Peter Falconio disappeared in a high-profile murder case just north of here.

Sights

Next to the Barrow Creek Hotel is one of four original **telegraph stations** on the OTL from Port Augusta to Darwin. Built in 1872, it operated as a repeater station and post office until taken over by Parks Australia as a heritage building in 1988. The buildings, including a blacksmiths shop and wagon shed, are well preserved, although there's nothing to see inside. In February 1874 the telegraph station, under stationmaster James Stapleton, was attacked by a group of Kaytetye Aboriginal men. Stapleton and a linesman were killed; their graves are close to the station. The attack came as something of a surprise as Stapleton had adopted a fairly enlightened (for the times) approach to the local Aboriginal population, and had provided food for those who were ill. The

South Australian government authorised a punitive expedition that led to the deaths of at least 50 Aboriginal people.

The WWII staging camp of **New Barrow**, the largest in the Territory, lies signposted 1km east of the highway, about 30km north of Barrow Creek. There's very little left to see – just a few concrete foundations and various bits of scrap metal lying around. From 1942 to 1945 the station accommodated up to 1000 troops and equipment travelling up and down the Stuart Hwy.

Sleeping & Eating

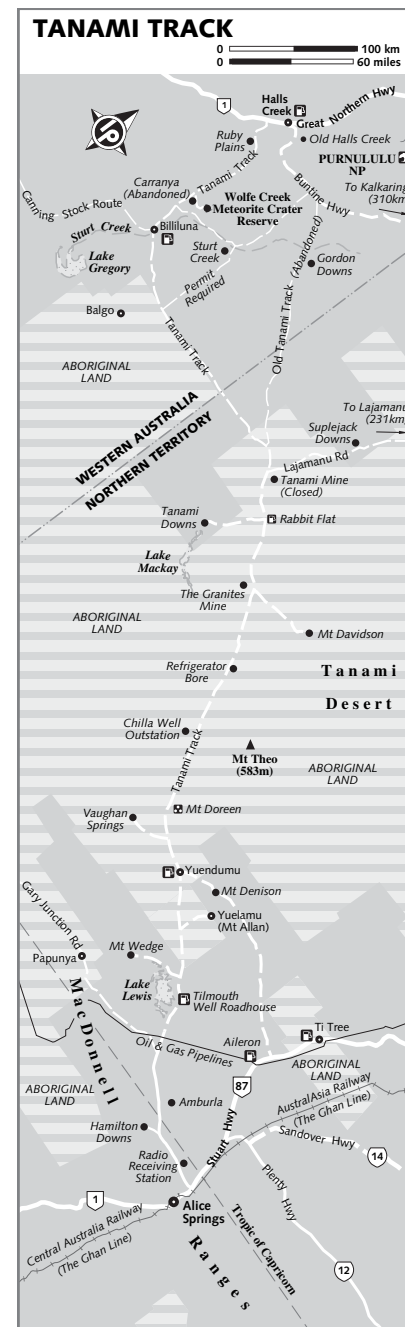
Barrow Creek Hotel & Roadhouse (☎ 8956 9753; Stuart Hwy; powered/unpowered camp sites for 2 \$10/6, tr \$50; ☹ 7am-midnight) One of the highway's oddball outback pubs, the crusty Barrow Creek Hotel opened in 1932. The walls are adorned with all manner of drawings, cartoons and bank notes – ringers (shearers) would leave a banknote on the wall with their name on it so that they would have enough for a drink the next time they passed through. Now travellers and passers-by follow suit. Fuel is available from 7am to 11pm, and main meals (\$8 to \$18) are served from 6pm to 8pm, but you can get snacks throughout the day.

TANAMI TRACK

Spearing 1000km through some of the Territory's most remote country, even the name of this track conjures up images of an isolated outback driving experience. The Tanami Track connects Alice Springs with Halls Creek on the Great Northern Hwy in Western Australia and is essentially a short cut between the Centre and the Kimberley region.

Despite the remoteness – or perhaps because of it – the Tanami is an increasingly popular route for travellers who want to get off the beaten track, and in the cooler months there is quite a bit of traffic (up to 100 vehicles a day pass through Rabbit Flat) so a breakdown need not cause alarm if you're well prepared with food and water. In summer the heat can be extreme – days where the temperature hits 50°C are not uncommon – so think carefully before setting off at this time.

In dry conditions it's possible to cover it in a well-prepared 2WD vehicle. The Northern



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TANAMI ON TWO WHEELS

If you think tackling the Tanami on four wheels is daunting – with your low-range gearbox, 100L of water, spare tyres and esky in the back – imagine doing it on a bicycle. Alice resident Ronn Slusser and his partner Dorinda Blok did just that in 1999 as part of a 6½-week, 3100km epic ride from Alice to Darwin via Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, the Gibb River Rd, Kununurra and Katherine. All for fun, of course.

Ronn says they averaged a whopping 100km a day (about 10 days' riding from Alice to Halls Creek), carrying 70kg of gear each, including tent, sleeping bags, self-inflating mattress, cooking gear, food and water. Although it was a tough trip, the pair encountered few problems on the corrugated and occasionally sandy track: 'We had to zigzag a bit to find the most comfortable line. You can hear road trains coming a mile away and move over – a bigger danger is tourists in their Britz vans!'

Ronn says the vastness of the desert scenery is ample reward for all the hard work: 'On a bike you've got plenty of time to stop and see everything in detail.' No stranger to danger, Ronn is an experienced bushwalker, balloon-pilot and reptile handler with two serious snakebites to his name! His tips for a safe cycling trip:

- Carry a good map showing water points along the way.
- Travel light, including easily prepared, high-energy meals such as dried and tinned food.
- Start early each day and ride within your limitations, setting up camp well before sunset.
- Make sure you're fit and healthy before setting out, and make a few shorter practice runs.
- Carry necessary spares including tyre, tube and repair kit.
- Avoid riding in summer.

Territory section is wide and usually well graded (sealed almost to Tilmouth Well), but between the Western Australia border and Halls Creek some sandy patches and creek crossings require care; a high-clearance vehicle is advisable. After rain (which is rare), sections of the track around Sturt Creek and Billiluna can become impassable. In any case, this is no Sunday drive, so notify someone of your plans.

The Tanami Desert is the traditional homeland of the Warlpiri Aboriginal people, and for much of its length the Track passes through Aboriginal land. Permits are not required for travel on the Tanami Track, unless you want to venture more than 50m either side of the road. You don't need a permit to visit the Aboriginal community at Yuendumu or to stop at Rabbit Flat.

Tourist sights along the track are few: there's an excellent Aboriginal art centre at Yuendumu, the quirkiness of Rabbit Flat Roadhouse and, on the Western Australian side, the detour to Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater. It's more about the outback driving experience and the stark desert scenery of low ranges, endless spinifex grass and the odd termite mound.

Fuel is available at Tilmouth Well (188km from Alice Springs), Yuendumu (288km, Rabbit Flat Roadhouse (590km; open Friday to Monday only), Billiluna (850km; business hours only) and Halls Creek (1020km).

Maps

The best map is Wesprint's *Tanami Track* 1:1,000,000, a double-sided sheet covering the track from Alice Springs to Halls Creek with GPS locations and places of interest. Hema's *Great Desert Tracks – North Central* 1:1,250,000 includes the Tanami, along with a large chunk of the centre, from Alice to Tennant Creek, Uluru and Warburton in Western Australia.

History

The first European exploration of the Tanami Desert was undertaken by the surveyor and explorer AC Gregory in 1855. His party headed south from the Victoria River to what is now Lajamanu, then turned west until they came to a dry watercourse near the present Western Australia–Northern Territory border, which Gregory named Sturt Creek, after the explorer. He followed the creek southwest to a lake southwest of Balgo,

which he humbly named after himself, before returning to his Victoria River base.

Allan Davidson was the first European to explore the Tanami Desert in any depth. In 1900 he set out looking for gold and mapped likely looking areas. Gold was discovered at a couple of sites and for a few years there was a flurry of activity as hopefuls came in search of a fortune. The extremely harsh conditions and small finds deterred all but the most determined, and there were never more than a couple of hundred miners in the Tanami. The biggest finds were at Tanami and The Granites; after many years of inactivity the latter was reopened in 1986 and is still being mined today. The Tanami Mine closed in 1994.

Pastoral activity has always been precarious, although some areas are suitable for grazing. Suplejack Downs and Tanami Downs, 60km north and southwest of Rabbit Flat respectively, are two that have survived. At the southern end of the track, Tilmouth Well is on the 3500 sq km privately owned Napperby Station. In 1962, the first stock route from Alice Springs to Billiluna was opened, and over the next decade it was realigned and upgraded to form the present-day Tanami Hwy.

TILMOUTH WELL

About 120km from the Stuart Hwy you pass the turn-off to Papunya (permit required) and from there it's 50km to the first major stop, the Tilmouth Well Roadhouse, which sits on the banks of the (usually) dry Napperby Creek at the southern end of the Napperby cattle station.

The roadhouse has fashioned itself into something of a tourist stop, with a nine-hole bush golf course, station tours, horse riding and bushwalking. You can buy a \$20 'station pass' and drive yourself around to see some of the station activities, or ask about guided tours. Also at the roadhouse, the **Wirmbrandt Gallery** displays reasonably priced Aboriginal art from surrounding communities, including Yuendumu, Yuelamu and Pmara Jutunta.

Tilmouth Well Roadhouse (☎ 8956 8777; www.tilmouthwell.com; sites per person \$8, s/d \$45/60; 🕒 7am–9pm; 📍 🚰 🚻) has pleasant, grassy camping, refurbished cabins with shared facilities, gas barbecues and a pool. It also has a bar and licensed restaurant with takeaways (try the

freshly ground hamburgers). Fuel and basic spare parts are available.

YUENDUMU

pop 740

Next stop is the Aboriginal community of Yuendumu, which lies 2km north of the track, 100km on from Tilmouth Well. Yuendumu has a thriving arts community and the work put out by the Warlukurlangu artists is highly regarded.

Permits are not required to shop or refuel in Yuendumu. It's worth popping into the **Warlukurlangu Art Centre** (☎ 8956 4133; www.warlur .com; 🕒 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, by appointment Sat & Sun), an Aboriginal-owned art venture specialising in acrylic paintings, screen prints and etchings, as well as crafts from the region.

The community has a **medical centre** (☎ 8956 4030), **police station** (☎ 8956 4004), school and a couple of stores. The **Yuendumu Mining Company store** (☎ 8956 4040; 🕒 9am–2pm & 3–5pm Mon–Fri, 1–5pm Sat & Sun) has fuel and grocery supplies, while the **Yuendumu Store** (☎ 8956 4006; 🕒 8.30am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat & Sun) also sells fuel and has a fairly well-stocked supermarket. Note that Yuendumu is a dry community.

Every year on the August long weekend, the town hosts the **Yuendumu Sports Weekend**,

YUENDUMU DOORS

Back in 1983 – some 12 years after the famous art movement had first begun in Papunya – a group of Warlpiri Aboriginal Elders agreed to share some of their *Dreaming stories* by painting them on 30 doors of the primary school in Yuendumu.

The designs represented 27 *Dreaming stories* associated with sites in the Warlpiri and Anmatyerre lands. The paintings were a way of reaffirming the Warlpiri's links to the land and passing these *stories* on, in a contemporary way, to the schoolchildren of Yuendumu. The doors are now preserved at the South Australian Museum in Adelaide, but they inspired an art movement that is highly regarded for its use of vibrant colours and rich, intricate designs.

Some of the original artists (Paddy Simms and Paddy Stewart among them) are still painting at Yuendumu. You can see their work, plus that of many other artists, at the Warlukurlangu Art Centre.

a sporting and cultural festival for Aboriginal people from all over this region. Visitors are welcome and no permits are required to visit the town over this weekend, although you will need your own camping gear.

GRANITES GOLD MINE

Just before the gold-bearing mine called The Granites, 256km northwest of Yuen-dumu, there's a low rocky outcrop on the left of the road and a couple of **old ruins** that date back to the 1930s.

The Granites mine site was first pegged in 1927. Then the returns were small, with a yield of only about 1000 ounces per year, and the mine only operated until 1947. In 1986 it was reopened and production is currently running at around 5000kg of gold per year.

RABBIT FLAT

Another 51km from The Granites, and just off the track, you come to the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse, probably the most famous place on the Tanami and often called the most remote pub in the country. It's nothing to rave about – a couple of breeze-block buildings, petrol bowsers from another era and a few fuel tanks – but it has a certain outback charm. Being the only place for hundreds of kilometres where thirsty locals and miners can buy a drink, on Friday and Saturday nights it can get pretty lively with all the workers in from the mines.

The roadhouse is only open from Friday to Monday, so it's worth planning your trip to pass through then, or ensure you have

DETOUR

The Lajamanu Rd heads north off the Tanami Track at the Tanami Mine for 230km to the **Lajamanu** Aboriginal community in the heart of the Tanami Desert. Although it's not a bad road, a 4WD is recommended to get through the numerous creek-bed crossings and sandy patches. A permit is not required to transit and get fuel and supplies at Lajamanu.

This route continues on to Kalkaringi on the Buntine Hwy, then to Katherine via Top Springs. The countryside changes noticeably as you leave the red spinifex plains of the central desert and enter the grassed and lightly treed cattle country of the Top End.

enough fuel to get to the next fuel stop at Billiluna. Diesel and unleaded fuel is available at some of the highest prices in the country – more than \$2 a litre at the time of writing.

Rabbit Flat Roadhouse (☎ 8956 8744; camping per person \$3, showers \$3; ☎ 7am–9pm Fri–Mon) has basic bush camping, and provisions and takeaway beer are available. There is an Eftpos facility for debit accounts (no credit cards).

RABBIT FLAT TO HALLS CREEK (WA)

From Rabbit Flat the track continues northwest for 44km to the now-defunct **Tanami Mine** (no public access).

After the Lajamanu turn-off, the Track swings west to the Western Australia border and beyond. The route between the Tanami Mine and **Billiluna** Aboriginal community was established in the 1960s by Father McGuire from what was then the Balgo Aboriginal Mission.

It is 78km from the Tanami Mine to the border, and another 86km beyond that will see you at the junction of the road to Billiluna, nearly 40km to the south. The track continues for another 48km through several floodplains to the crossing of **Sturt Creek**. Just north of here, on the western bank, are a couple of pleasant spots for camping. Further along is the turn-off to **Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater**, the second largest of its type in the world and one of the main locations for the gory 2005 outback horror flick, *Wolf Creek*. The major T-intersection with Hwy 1, just 16km southwest of Halls Creek, marks the return to the bitumen.

PLENTY HIGHWAY

Leaving the Stuart Hwy 70km north of Alice Springs, the 492km-long Plenty Hwy stretches across a semi-arid plain to the Queensland border at Tobermorey, where it becomes the Donohue Hwy and continues to Boulia in western Queensland. From there you can head north to Mount Isa or south to Birdsville, which makes this a rugged but convenient entry/exit point from the east.

This is very remote country and even in winter you can drive the entire route and see fewer than a dozen vehicles. Facilities are basic and a fair way apart, so you must be self-sufficient in everything (food

and water) and have a fuel range of at least 300km. Other than fossicking in the Harts Range around Gemtree, the only reason to venture out here is to get to/from Queensland and enjoy the outback experience.

The first 103km from the Stuart Hwy are sealed, but after that the road can be extremely rough and corrugated; large bulldust holes are a common hazard on the Queensland side. The unsealed section is passable only in dry weather and is normally not recommended for caravans. Fuel is available at Gemtree (140km from Alice Springs), Atitjere Aboriginal community (215km), Jervois Homestead (356km), Tobermorey Homestead (570km) and Boulia (812km).

History

The puzzling disappearance of the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt and his large, well-equipped party is one of Australia's great unsolved mysteries. Leichhardt vanished somewhere in the interior on his final expedition in 1846. It's possible he crossed the area of the Plenty Hwy while trying to return. In 1886 the surveyor David Lindsay, of Simpson Desert fame, found trees in the Harts Range that had been carved with Leichhardt's distinctive mark. Many years later, more marked trees were discovered along the Georgina River on Glenormiston Station (Queensland).

Henry Barclay was one of the next Europeans on the scene. In 1878, while carrying out a trigonometric survey from Alice Springs to the Queensland border, he was northeast of the Harts Range when he was faced with a critical water shortage. Barclay dug into a sandy river-bed and found ample supplies of the precious fluid, hence the name Plenty River, from where the present beef road got its name.

Getting There & Away

Desert Venturer (☎ 07-4035 5566; www.desertventurer.com.au) is the only public transport on the Plenty Hwy, with a twice-weekly three-day coach trip between Alice Springs and Cairns, overnighing at Boulia and Hughenden. The one-way fare is \$350 plus \$55 for meals.

GEMTREE

Around 70km from the Stuart Hwy you come to the Gemtree Caravan Park on the

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Gemtree Caravan Park (☎ 8956 9855; www.gemtree.com.au; powered/unpowered sites for 2 \$22/18, cabins \$65; reception ☎ 8am–6pm) is an obvious stop if you are planning on fossicking. The park has a peaceful bush feel with good facilities, including pockets of shade, hot showers, a shop selling basic groceries and meat, a public telephone and fuel. Games of paddymelon bowls, with damper to follow, provide some light entertainment on Saturday nights in the cooler months. Paddymelons, squashes that look like small round watermelons, are often found beside outback roads. There's also a parched nine-hole golf course – a round costs \$5 including club hire.

gum-lined banks of Gillen Creek. This is the only tourist facility of note on the Plenty Hwy and it's close to the heart of the gemfields, where garnets and zircons can be unearthed. From here there are daily guided tag-along **fossicking trips** (two people \$60; ☎ 9am) to the **Mud Tank zircon field** 10km away and to garnet deposits on a private lease about 30km away.

The zircon field and one or two of the garnet deposits can be reached by conventional vehicles (driven with care), provided it hasn't been raining. Fossicking permits (free) can be obtained at the Gemtree Caravan Park; permits are not required for the tour.

HARTS RANGE

Beyond the Harts Range fossicking area, high ridges and mountains keep you company for the next 40km to the **Harts Range police station** (☎ 8956 9772). The two police officers based here have the awesome task of preserving law and order over a sparsely populated area of 110,000 sq km. They're kept particularly busy controlling revellers during the colourful **Harts Range Races**, which take place here over the first weekend in August. This classic outback race day features a barbecue and bush dance on the Saturday night.

From the racecourse just south of the police station, a 4WD track leads to **Mt Palmer**. At 600m above the northern plain, this is one of the highest points in the Harts Range, and has many large cycads growing on its southern flank. It's well worth climbing – the

THERE'S GEMS IN THEM THAR HILLS

The gemfields of the Harts Range are littered with gems and minerals such as garnet, zircon, black and green tourmaline, sphene, mica, smoky and rose quartz, aquamarine, sunstone, ruby, iolite and kyanite. Between Ongeva Creek and the Harts Range police station is central Australia's premier fossicking area, and if you're prepared to put your back into it and be patient you should be able to find something. On the downside, this area is extremely rugged and the best fossicking spots are hard to get to – high-clearance 4WD vehicles are essential for most tracks. South of the Harts Range police station is an area of old mine sites where you can fossick through mullock heaps.

You'll need a fossicking permit (free; available from Gemtree Caravan Park), a bucket, shovel and sieve (preferably two – wet and dry) for sifting out the soil, and plenty of water. Garnets and zircons are found close to the surface, so you need only dig down half a metre. For garnets, dry-sieve the soil, then wash the remaining rocks and look for a dull red colour. The best stones are a rich claret colour with a transparency when held up to sunlight. Zircons (not to be confused with cubic zirconias) are often colourless (like a diamond) but can be black, brown, yellow or green. They're much harder to spot and you'll need a board to sort potential stones on. At Mud Tank, the top 80cm of soil conceals zircons of various colours (including yellow, light brown, pink, purple and blue), ranging in size from small chips to large crystals.

If you're a novice, the best way to get started is to go on a guided fossicking tour from Gemtree, where you'll certainly unearth either garnets or zircons. If you find anything worth faceting, Gemtree's gem-cutter can turn your find into a beautiful stone for \$20 a carat (minimum \$40).

atmosphere and the sweeping panorama from the top are magnificent.

The **Atitjere Community Store** (☎ 8956 9773; ☏ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) sells basic foodstuffs and cold drinks, as well as fuel (unleaded and diesel). Ask here about the community's **bush camping ground** (sites for 2 \$10), which has hot showers and pit toilets.

JERVOIS

Heading east, the first 50km from the police station are extremely scenic, with attractive tall woodlands of whitewood and weeping ironwood fronting the crumpled ranges. Mulga and gidgee dominate later. Past the ranges, scattered low ridges, flat-topped hills and occasional, beautiful, gum-lined creeks break the monotony of the endless plain.

About 130km east of Harts Range you reach **Jervois Homestead** (☎ 8956 6307), a scruffy place where you can buy fuel (unleaded and diesel) during the day; note that credit cards are not accepted. Public telephones, showers (\$2) and toilets are available here. You can camp either at the turn-off, where there's a lay-by, or at a small **camping ground** (sites per vehicle \$5) at the first gate about 1km in on the homestead access road.

For something different, you can inspect the huge rocket-proof shelter that was built at the homestead during the 1960s, when

Blue Streak test rockets were fired in this direction from Woomera in South Australia. Instead of huddling inside as they were supposed to, the station folk preferred to stand on top to watch the fireworks.

JERVOIS TO BOULIA (QLD)

The highlight of this section is right beside the road, 50km past the turn-off to Jervois Homestead. Here a conical **termite mound** nearly 5m high rears like a breaching whale above the surrounding sea of stunted mallees and spinifex – it's an extraordinary sight.

On the Territory side of the border, **Tobermorey Homestead** (☎ 07-4748 4996; camp sites for 2 \$20, air-con cabins \$75; ☏ 8am-8pm; ☎) has a small shop that sells drinks, snacks, minor grocery lines and fuel (unleaded and diesel).

At the Queensland border, the road becomes the Donohue Hwy. Crossing the border grid, you'll also usually notice a dramatic change in road conditions – the Boulia Shire does its best, but it only takes a few road trains to break the surface and form deep bull-dust holes.

At 118km past the border you come to the **Georgina River**. Other than the vast expanses of empty space, this waterway is the highlight on the Queensland side. About 30km west of **Boulia** you meet the bitumen and joyous relief from the dust and corru-

gations. Boulia, an isolated township, has a good range of facilities, including a hospital, police station, post office, hotel, caravan park and two garages.

SANDOVER HIGHWAY

Leaving the Plenty Hwy 96km from Alice Springs, the Sandover Hwy heads northeast across flat semidesert for 587km and terminates at Lake Nash Homestead, near the Queensland border. Named after the Sandover River, which it follows for about 250km, this wide ribbon of red dirt is an adventurous short cut between central Australia and northwest Queensland – from Lake Nash it's about another 200km to Mount Isa.

Prolonged heavy rain causes flooding that can keep the highway closed for days. In the late 1980s it was closed to all traffic for several months after long sections were washed away in a terrific deluge. Although often rough, when dry it's normally suitable for conventional vehicles with high ground clearance and heavy-duty suspension. However, it's definitely not recommended for caravans.

While tourist facilities along the road are nonexistent, you can buy fuel and supplies at the Arlparra Store (249km from Alice Springs) and the Alpururulam Store (643km from Alice Springs) – which means you'll need a fuel range of at least 400km.

History

For most of its distance the Sandover Hwy crosses the traditional lands of the Alyawarra people, whose lives until recent times focused on the relatively rich environment of the Sandover River. Europeans arrived in the 1880s, when the Lake Nash and Argadargada Stations were established for sheep and cattle grazing. The loss of food resources and the fouling of precious water by cattle caused bloody conflict between pastoralists and Aboriginal people. The so-called Sandover Massacre of the 1920s resulted in the deaths of about 100 Alyawarra, who were either shot or poisoned for spearing cattle.

Atartinga Station, about 140km north-east of Alice Springs, was taken up by RH (Bob) Purvis in 1920. Known as the Sandover Alligator because of his extraordinary appetite, Purvis was contracted in the late 1920s to sink wells along the newly gazet-

ted Sandover Stock Route. The route was continued through to Lake Nash after the 1940s, but the Sandover Hwy remained, for the most part, little more than a bush track until the 1970s, when it was upgraded to a standard suitable for road trains.

UTOPIA

Turning off the Plenty Hwy 26km from the Stuart Hwy, the Sandover crosses a vast plain of mallee, spinifex and mulga woodland with occasional patches of shady white-barked gums virtually all the way to the Ammaroo turn-off. This is marginal cattle country – the average station en route has only about 25% useful grazing land. In semidesert spinifex areas, a 10-sq-km area will support billions of termites, but only one cow.

About 127km from the Plenty Hwy you cross the western boundary of the Aboriginal-owned **Utopia Station**. Many well-known artists hail from the Utopia Homelands, but there's no art centre here and no access for tourists. The station is home to about 700 Alyawarra people, who live in 20 small outstations scattered over an area of 2500 sq km. These are governed by a council based at **Arlparra**, which you pass 27km further on. The fence 23km past Arlparra marks the boundary between Utopia and Ammaroo Stations.

The remote **Arlparra store** (☎ 8956 9910; ☏ 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) mainly serves the Aboriginal communities of Utopia Station. It sells fuel and has a well-stocked minimarket.

LAKE NASH

Past Ammaroo, the undulating countryside and stony rises give sweeping views over an ocean of grey-green scrub and the southern end of the Davenport Range.

About 317km from Ammaroo, the glittering iron roofs of the **Alpururulam** Aboriginal community come into view on the left. The end of the highway is just five minutes away, at Lake Nash Homestead, the centre of the largest of the Sandover's stations at around 13,000 sq km. From here you have a choice of three routes: north to Camooweal (183km), east to Mount Isa (205km) or south to Urandangi (172km). All are minor dirt roads. Black soil sections make them impassable after rain. Signposting is poor from here and maps seldom show the roads' true positions. If in doubt,

the best approach is to fill up with fuel at Alpururulam and ask for directions and an update on road conditions.

The **Alpururulam Community Store** (☎ 07-4787 4860; 🕒 8-11am & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) has fuel and basic food supplies. Nearby,

a **service station** (🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) sells all types of fuel and can attend to minor vehicle repairs. Although you're welcome to use these facilities, do not proceed further into the community without an invitation and permission.