For many four-wheel drivers, crossing the Simpson Desert is one of the great ‘must dos’. On the other hand, some find the very thought so daunting that it is never contemplated. The Simpson Desert is one of Australia’s great wilderness areas.
It’s a place of stark beauty and, for the most part, wonderful serenity. It is a place that is quite accessible with the right vehicle, the right preparation and the right attitude.

Not a bad part of the world, aye?

My experiences crossing the Simpson

With so many people having 4WDs, but not leaving the bitumen, the potential for many more people to experience this amazing area is enormous. This is the first of 3 articles which will cover the essentials for planning a successful crossing that will provide great stories and significant “bragging rights” for years to come. There are significant challenges, but meeting these is not only rewarding but a whole lot of fun.
Having made two previous crossings and with number three about to happen, it’s certainly not a trip I take lightly, and preparation is the key to success.
The 3 articles will cover the following: Vehicle preparation and how to get there, Meeting the challenges of remote area travel, and A retrospective: what happened on our most recent trip

Safety in numbers.

The Vehicle

- A high clearance 4WD with low range capability is a must and it must be in tip-top condition. This is not a place for all wheel drives and “soft-roaders”.
- Have your mechanic give the vehicle a thorough check and service and ensure they know you are about to do a Simpson crossing so they appreciate the importance of the job they are doing.
- It’s also important to note, even though they are not currently banned in the Simpson, that I am strongly of the opinion that this is not a place for trailers, no matter how strongly.
- The desert contains the rusting remains of many that didn’t make it, picked over for any useable parts and left as a constant reminder of the folly of this action.
- Another constant reminder of the inadvisability of trailers is found at the top of most dunes.
- The large pot holes found as you near many crests are the result of wheel-spin as vehicles try to crest the dunes. The most common reasons – trying to haul a tonne or more of trailer over the top, or tyre pressures too high causing a lack of traction.
- Having a broken down vehicle recovered from the desert could cost you thousands, so place as little stress on it as possible. I have little doubt that it will only be a matter of time before trailers are banned.

Now let's look at some specifics.

Fuel

One of the biggest challenges of all – how do you carry enough fuel and water and not exceed your Gross Vehicle Mass?

Shade is handy in the fierce desert sun.

- Depending on where your last fuel stop is and which route you intend to take, you will need enough fuel to travel from 600 – 800km. Not nice smooth hig h range bitumen driving, but power sucking sandy tracks, dune climbs and probably some low range work for good measure.
- Obviously there will be many factors that will contribute to your fuel consumption so a very handy reference is the ExploreOz.
- Keep in mind that a good margin for error is required. Bad weather can require much harder going than usual, sucking even more fuel out of the tank.
- A long range fuel tank is a great asset here, but not essential. If this is not going to be the type of trip you do often, the expense of a long range tank is probably not justified.
- The other option is to use fuel safe jerry cans. These come in 10 and 20 litre sizes and, especially if carrying petrol, should be carried on roof racks.
- Diesel, being far less volatile, can be carried inside the vehicle. Make sure you have a funnel with a fine mesh filter to ensure no dirt gets into the tank.
- Also keep in mind that roof racks and the roof itself will have a weight limit – check your manufacturer's recommendations. Never exceed this as broken racks from over-loading are quite common – they form another part of the litter found in the desert.
- Every litre of fuel is just under a kilogram in weight.
- You will only need to fill the jerry cans at Oodnadatta, Mt. Dare or Birdsville. I know, it's a lot cheaper to fill up in the city or large towns and save "massive" amounts with shopper dockets, but this is false economy. The wear and tear carrying all that extra weight for great distances is not a risk you need to take. Fill these at the last possible opportunity and empty them into the tank at the earliest opportunity. This is simply good risk management.

Tyres

A good set of tyres is essential, including a second spare. This is not an area requiring highly aggressive treads, with an all-terrain pattern usually providing better traction with less "digging in" in sandy terrain.

- A good compressor is an essential piece of kit as having the correct pressures for the terrain is one of the best actions to ensure a safe and trouble-free crossing.
- Don't be afraid to get out and adjust pressures as often as required as laziness in this area considerably increases the risk of punctures.
- The South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage in their Desert Parks Information Pack suggest 18-20 psi (120-140 Kpa) when crossing the sandy dunes.
- A puncture repair kit is also useful for temporary repairs of small punctures. Know how to use this and perhaps even practice on an old tyre but keep in mind that these repairs are only temporary.
- Be sure to have the tyre checked out by an authorised tyre dealer as soon as possible and don't take the risk of using a tyre you have repaired in high speed situations.
- Another great reference is the Cooper Tires "4WD Driver's Guide" available from Cooper Tires dealers.
- Check out Morgan's Essential Tyre Pressure Tips for 4WDs for some extra handy hints.

Spare Parts

- The spares you carry will depend on the age of vehicle, but the most common items carried are belts, hoses, fuses and a fuel filter.
- If any of these are close to replacement, then have them replaced before leaving and keep the ones removed as spares.
- Essential fluids such as engine oil, gear oil, brake fluid and coolant should also be carried in remote areas, and some epoxy ribbon or paste can be very handy to repair small leaks in fuel tanks and radiators.
- If travelling in a convoy, share the load around – your luck has turned really bad if everyone needs the same spare!

Come prepared.

Getting There

- For most people, just getting to the Simpson is a fairly major undertaking, so a couple of weeks, at least, are needed to provide an un-rushed, enjoyable experience.
- The most common, and easier way to cross the Simpson is from west to east, leaving from either Oodnadatta and along the Pedirka Track to Dalhousie Springs, or from Mt. Dare and then on to Dalhousie.
- This is the direction of the prevailing winds which has the effect of making the climb up the western side of dunes gentler than the steep eastern side. This factor takes on an

increased importance when you realise there are about 1100 dunes to cross!!

- Some do make an east-west crossing leaving from Birdsville. This adds an extra challenge as you meet on-coming vehicles along one lane tracks and climbing steep dunes with a blind crest. The UHF will get a work out.
- It is possible to cross the Simpson following only the French Line. The shortest route and pretty much dead straight.

Take a variety of tracks

To fully enjoy the beauty of the area, I prefer to take a variety of tracks that allow you to see more of the desert and provide a more varied driving experience – not just relentless dune climbing. Sure, it takes longer, but you've come this far, take the time to enjoy it. Our group's trip starts from Adelaide and takes 2 weeks. I try not to rush the days and generally plan on leaving camp by 9am and arriving by 4pm, at the latest. I've included a general Simpson Desert itinerary at the bottom of this article.
Don't be put off- start planning now. If you have a reliable vehicle, there is no reason why you shouldn't experience this magnificent area. Better still, get a group together and travel in a convoy for a lot of fun and an extra level of safety.

Check out Part 2 of this series for information that will cover more aspects of that all important planning. In the meantime, check out David Leslie's articles, 8 4WD Tips That Could Save Your Life and 5 'Must Haves' for your 4WD Recovery Kit for more information on 4WD safety. Catch you soon.

Day 1 Adelaide – Roxby Downs 561km	• Staying in cabins at a Myall Grove Caravan Park. • Takeaway for dinner.
Day 2 Roxby Downs – Algebuckina 406km	• Camping at the Algebuckina railway bridge.
Day 3 Algebuckina – Mt Dare 337km	• Camping at the Mt. Dare pub dinner at the pub.
Day 4 Mt. Dare – Dalhousie Springs 81km	• Camping at Dalhousie Springs. • Spend the day soaking in the springs.
Day 5 Dalhousie – Simpson camp approx 130km	• Taking the track from Dalhousie to Purnie Bore. • Turn on to WAA line at Wonga Corner. • Look for campsite after crossing Mokari Airstrip.
Day 6 Rest day – no travel	

Day 7 Travel through desert approx 156km	• Turn north on Colson Track and travel to French Line. • Along French Line until Erabena Track. • Follow Erabena Track to WAA Line and then to Rig Road junction. • Find campsite along Rig Road.
Day 8 Rest Day – no travel	
Day 9 Travel through desert to Eyre Creek 197km	• Follow Rig Road to Knolls Track. • Then follow Knolls Track to French Line. • Follow French Line to Poeppel Corner. • Turn east on to QAA Line and travel to Eyre Creek.
Day 10 Eyre Creek – Birdsville 56km	• Camp at Birdsville Caravan Park.
Day 11 Rest day in Birdsville	
Day 12 Birdsville – Mungerannie 286km Via Inside Track	• Camp at Mungerannie. • Dinner at Mungerannie Pub
Day 13 Mungerannie – Copley 321km	• Cabins at Copley Caravan Park. • Dinner at Leigh Creek Pub at Copley.
Day 14 Copley – Adelaide 569km	

Next: Crossing the Simpson Desert for Beginners (Part 2)