

The Flinders Ranges is one of the nearest destinations in South Australia where Adelaideans can get a taste of the outback, and has long been a popular choice for hiking, cycling, camping and vehicle touring.

For those wanting to go off-road with their four-wheel-drive vehicle, options are available in the National Parks and along Public Access Routes, but many station properties have opened self-drive tracks and there are now plenty to choose from.

The unmissable sign on the main road, for the turn off to the Caernarvon Track front gate.

Where is the Caernarvon Track located?

The Caernarvon Track is a little different than most self-drive 4WD tracks. It is situated on the Bunkers Conservation Reserve, which is managed by the not-for-profit [Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby Preservation Association](#) (YFRWPA) Inc.

The Reserve is a unique property covering 140 square kilometres within the lands of the Adnyamathanha people and shares boundaries with Willow Springs Station, Martins Well Station, and the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park.

Grazing ceased in 2001 when the Reserve was established, and ongoing control of feral animals has reduced environmental pressure on the local habitat, which is aiding the recovery of native flora and fauna.

A light sprinkling of rain on Saturday morning was enough to create a rainbow while the surrounding country remained dry.

The highest self-drive track in the Flinders

The Caernarvon Track's claim to fame is that it allows you to drive the summit of Mt Caernarvon at 921m, making it the highest self-drive track in the [Flinders](#). However, as we found out on a cold and windy day in June, there are plenty more reasons to drive the Track than just to be able to say you made it to the top of Mt Caernarvon.

The track was mostly smooth gravel and rock, with no clearance issues for most 4WD vehicles.

Accessing the track

Access to the Bunkers Conservation Reserve is in the North-Central Flinders Ranges near Wilpena Pound on the way to Blinman. The drive from Hawker is picturesque and a bit sporty in the rolling hills after Wilpena, before you turn onto the dirt just past the Oraparinna airstrip for a 25km drive to the Caernarvon Track front gate.

Our convoy driving the first hill.

Setting off on our trip

We were lucky enough to have a member of the Association along for the trip, allowing us to camp on the property the night before driving the track. We awoke early (for a weekend), breakfasted and set off at 9:30 am. Five to six hours is the recommended time to drive the 50km track.

Our convoy was made up of a variety of 4WD vehicles: an old Nissan Patrol, a Rodeo ute, Mitsubishi Challenger, Landcruiser and a fresh-faced Ford Everest.



The first five kilometres took us through sparse country, with most vegetation found along the creek beds.

A 'track notes' booklet provided a running commentary on the history, flora, fauna, and geology of the region. Arriving at the first gate – there are several control gates along the track – we let our tires down slightly, to try and minimise the wear on the track and the tyres.



A few dark rainclouds blew across the mountains on the morning of our drive. By midday, the sun had come out and we had clear weather.

The first couple of hill climbs

The weather was sunny but cool, with patches of rain moving across and a blustery wind on top of the hills that was strong enough to make opening the car doors a challenge. The first couple of hill climbs had blind crests that kept the drivers on their toes, with constant chatter over the radio: “we’re through, send the next contender...”. There was plenty of peering over the bonnet to determine where the track went next when the windscreen was full of blue sky.



The old Nissan Patrol gave its occupants a taste of the hardships of the outback.

Arriving at Murray’s Gulley

We passed through some low-lying hills and along a creek bed, through the sparse country that supported a few scraggly trees. The white soil changed to the typical deep orange soils of the Flinders, and we arrived at the first picnic spot ‘Murray’s Gulley’ for a cup of tea. The two picnic spots provided along the track have benches and even drop toilets, an unexpected luxury this far into the bush.



Two picnic grounds on the track were well-equipped with benches and drop toilets.

The sun was shining brightly but the air still had a quite a chill, probably 10 to 15 degrees Celsius. The area was flat enough to have a kick of the footy, so that’s just what we did while waiting for the kettle to boil, although there were a few close calls due to badly-aimed kicks from our resident cricketer.



The country soon changed into deep orange soils typical of the Flinders.



Continuing along the track

After the morning tea break, we jumped back in the cars and continued along the track which climbed out of the creek and started to follow the ridgelines. Some of the climbs were underlain by loose rock, but nothing to trouble the four-wheel drives in the dry weather. As the track wove higher and higher, the gum trees and native pines of the creek were replaced with spinifex and soon we had expansive views of the Bunkers and Little Bunkers Ranges, and out to the eastern plains and Martins Well station.



Murray's Gulley picnic ground was surrounded by gums and low shrubs.

The summit of Mt Caernarvon

A series of final ascents took us to the summit of Mt Caernarvon at 921m. The northwesterly winds were blowing the clouds to create a natural light show with the surrounding mountains - alternating between shadow and bright sunlight. We filled out the visitors' book next to the large rock cairn on the top, took some group photos, and then set off down a spur on the other side of the mountain.



Not far from the top of Mt Caernarvon, with views of the Little Bunkers Range and across the plains to the east.

The descent was fairly steep and had sections where the track looped back almost 180 degrees. You could wave across the valley at the drivers further behind in the convoy! Despite a high rainfall event in February, the country is still recovering from years of low rainfall and this could be seen as we passed some very dry-looking shrubs on the south-eastern side of the ranges.



View looking south from Mt Caernarvon summit.

Stopping for lunch after the descent

The track dropped back into the creek bed, and we stopped for lunch and a cup of tea at the second picnic area, a pleasant spot out of the brisk wind that had sent us from the top of Mt Caernarvon. The older folk in our group ate pre-packed sandwiches, while the young guns decided to break out the BBQ.

However, finding a level spot proved difficult and those with sandwiches were finished and ready to go before the first snag had even hit the hotplate.



Descent from Mt Caernarvon, view looking east toward the Bunkers Ranges.

Ascending to the Southern Lookout

With the BBQ saga completed, we followed the creek along the narrow valley before ascending to the Southern Lookout. The descent from this saddle was steep enough to warrant a group briefing. We sent the brave driver of the Rodeo first, and thoughts such as

“wonder if an old Falcon or Commodore could make it this far...” vanished as we watched the ute descend sharply into the valley.



The start of the infamous steep section. Of course, the photo never quite captures just how steep it felt.

It was one vehicle at a time on this section: proper first gear-low range stuff. The drivers held on with white knuckles, while the passengers enjoyed a spectacular view of the Flinders Ranges to the south. After all the vehicles had reached the bottom, some of us made a brief recce on foot back up the steep section, which proved difficult to even walk up. The track had a smooth but shaly base and would be rather slippery in the wet. There were rocks either side and some in the middle, with others having been pushed aside by descending vehicles. The track skirted through the valley, and the country opened out and became drier as we neared the fence at the southern boundary of the property. Every few minutes the track crossed small creek bed washouts that required a gentle approach, low speed, and good control of the throttle. A few washouts were deceptively sharp and sent a solid clunk through the suspension when hit any speed above walking pace.



The windmill at Boulder Bore.

The final 15km

On the final fifteen kilometres, a couple of old sheep yards and Boulder Bore with its decommissioned windmill gave us a taste of the property's pastoral history. The old water tank at Boulder Bore was full of holes – we hoped these had formed after the windmill had pumped its last drop.

We turned north at about 3 pm and drove along the valley floor between The Bunkers range and the Little Bunkers range. The sun cast long shadows to create a colourful palette across the mountains and with several patches of thick bulldust, we kept the vehicles a good distance apart so as to avoid the onslaught of dust from the car in front.

Near where the track passes Pinnacle Gap we spotted a few Euro kangaroos, but they quickly bounced away into the shadows.



We frequently came across bulldust on the final stage, driving through the valley between the Bunkers and Little Bunkers Ranges

Arriving at the final gate

We arrived at the final gate just as the sun dipped behind the ranges; we had taken just over 6 hours to complete the track at a leisurely pace with a couple of breaks. Once all the cars had passed through, we stopped for a moment to take in the warm sunlight on the Little Bunkers range and savour the satisfaction of finishing the drive.

The Caernarvon Track was an enjoyable day tour with superb views, enough challenge to keep it interesting for the drivers, and the knowledge that we were contributing to conservation efforts in the Flinders.



Some Euros grazing as the sun went down behind the Ranges.



Details and accommodation

The Caernarvon Track is open all year, subject to weather conditions and availability. The self-drive 4WD tour is \$60 per vehicle, plus camping fees (if required). Camping is only available when a volunteer member host is present at the campground. All funds raised go directly to assist the work of the Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby Preservation Association Inc.



The Caernarvon Track is located on the private Bunkers Conservation Reserve, managed by the Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby Preservation Association.

Bookings can be made via e-mail at bookings@caernarvontrack.com. Information about the YFRWPA is available [here](#) while information about the Caernarvon Track is available [here](#). Camping and accommodation are available at several stations and resorts near to the Bunkers. Station Stays SA has a good map of accommodation [options](#) and the [Flinders & Outback Guide](#) provides useful details about tourism and touring the Flinders.

What's the best 4WD track you've driven on in SA?