



If you're heading from Mt Isa to Alice Springs on a road trip, you can maximise your trip to see the most that Australia has to offer by taking the scenic route down the Plenty highway. Here are all the details of our journey - including where we camped, the sights we saw, the day walks we did, and how we made the most out of our trip.



Trephina Gorge is one of the many sights to see along the way. Photo: Bob West.

Beginning our journey

Our time limits had been changed. We needed to get back to Quorn in the Flinders Ranges sooner than we thought. As we sat in Mt Isa looking at the map we could see there were three ways we could do this. The first one, and least attractive for us was to follow the bitumen east to Threeways in the Northern Territory and then turn south on the Stuart Highway following the bitumen all the way home! Not an option.

The remaining two were of real interest to us. Our choice was the Sandover or the Plenty Highway. They both appealed greatly as they were remote dirt roads across the Barkly Tableland region. Eventually, we settled on the Plenty as towards the southern end of it we could readily divert onto Gardens Road and then the Ross Highway doing a circuit of the East MacDonnell Ranges before arriving in Alice Springs.



With a stretch of road ahead of us, we decided on the scenic route to Alice. Photo: Bob West.

Leaving Mt Isa

We left Mt Isa on the single lane bitumen Diamantina Development Road, heading south towards Boulia. Along the way, we turned southwesterly on a gravel road to Urandangi and then Tobermorey Station, on the Plenty Highway. When we left the bitumen we dropped the tyre pressure on the car and the camper and readily soaked up the odd rough patch of road and of course, the usual corrugations.



Packed up and on the road to Tobermorey. Photo Bob West.

Arriving at Tobermorey

We arrived at Tobermorey at lunchtime so decided not to stay the night despite the inviting green patch the owners had created as a camping area. Fortunately, we were carrying extra fuel as the station could only sell us 30 litres. The week before there had been 40 mm of rain through the area and the road had been closed to all traffic. Cars were now allowed through but it was still closed to trucks, so fuel supplies were starting to run down.



Our vehicle before we set off down the Plenty Highway. Photo: Bob West.

On the Plenty Highway

Out on the Plenty and it was obvious that bulldust wasn't going to be an issue for us this



time. These patches were now muddy holes which were mostly skirted around or straddled. Choosing your path ahead became an enjoyable challenge in itself. The country was flat and full of scrub with the occasional hill or creek to break things up. Eventually, after a long but enjoyable drive, we found a spot on a rise to pull over for the night. We shared this with a zillion stars and the quiet of the outback night.

The following day gave us more of the same conditions, including a variety of termite mounds. A couple that stood out included one that had a tyre placed over it. The termites had continued to build unimpeded by this. The other was massive, being at a guess between 5 to 6 metres tall.



One of the termite hills we saw along the way. Photo: Bob West.

Jervois Station

Mid-morning we arrived at Jervois Station. Here you can obtain fuel and also camp. Camping options here are either the commercial area provided by the station or the Marshall River Rest Area by the road. The facilities you require will make the decision for you as the Rest Area is only for the fully self-sufficient.

West of Jervois there had been roadworks happening and the rain had made some of the areas a real mess. Usually, there was a simple bypass to get around waterlogged, muddy holes which required care and higher attention whilst driving. At one point though, the bog was so large a rough new track headed off into the scrub to get around this obstacle. It was easy to see why the road was still closed to trucks. The further west we went the more advanced the roadworks got and eventually we were driving on a very solid stable hard-packed road.

Low hills had appeared on our route as well as intriguing closing views of the Harts Range. We camped the night in the scrub on the edge of a popular fossicking area. The road by then had become bitumen.



We could see the Harts Range in the distance. Photo: Bob West.

Stopping in Gemtree

The next morning we quickly drove into Gemtree to top up on fuel and get some information. Numerous caravans and campers were in the camping area and people were heading off on guided or self-driven fossicking activities. A busy area after the quiet and solitude we had experienced for the last two days.

Alatyeye road/The Binns Track

We then turned back east for 8km and took the dirt road south. This is the Alatyeye road that is, in fact, part of the Binns Track. This was a rough and corrugated road that in contrast to the open of the Plenty Highway was a narrow and winding track through the rough hills south to the Gardens Road. The Gardens Road east of this intersection is another part of the Binns Track mosaic. Basically, it's a good gravel road so was easy driving.



Taking a little detour. Photo: Bob West.

Hale River Homestead

Just before turning south to join the Ross Highway we stopped to explore the offerings of the Hale River Homestead. This was an unknown but very pleasant surprise for us. It's a family run enterprise with the husband continuing to run cattle while wife, Lynn has developed a wide range of accommodation facilities for the traveller. This extends from a basic camping area through to a variety of thoughtfully restored old homes and station buildings.



A restored building at the Hale River Homestead. Photo: Bob West.

The Workshop

The focal point for all of this is 'The Workshop'. Here we were able to enjoy a good coffee and take in the memorabilia that adorns the walls. A bar is to one side of the area while a large kitchen occupies the other. Meals are served here and the family actually eat their meals there as well. As it was only lunchtime we opted to continue on through a narrow track to the Ross Highway.



Continuing along the Ross Highway. Photo: Bob West.

Arltunga Historical Reserve

After a pleasant and straightforward drive, we arrived at the centre point of the amazing Arltunga Historical Reserve. Here a number of tracks split off to take you to a wide number of walks, ruins and cemeteries. One also leads to the Visitor Information Centre with a detailed display of the life of Arltunga, the first town in Central Australia, supported by an informative film show.



We stopped to have a gander at the Arltunga Historical Reserve. Photo: Bob West.

Trephina Gorge Nature Park

After an all too short stop at Arltunga, we moved on to Trephina Gorge Nature Park to camp. We could have stayed at the Old Arltunga Pub Campground but our time constraints meant we needed to move on. Trephina is a gem. There are a number of well-organised camping areas which were all full while we were there. Being only 85km from Alice Springs and the road bitumen, except for the last 5km, it's a popular day trip.



Watching the afternoon sun fall over Trephina Gorge. Photo: Bob West.



Gorge Walk/Loop and the Panorama Walk

We managed two great walks during our stay – the Gorge Walk/Loop and the Panorama Walk. The Panorama has a steep approach climb that slowly reveals more of the area as you go, and eventually provides a panoramic view of the gorge and beyond. The Gorge walk starts with an easy climb above the western wall of the gorge before dropping back into the Gorge itself and then returning to the start. Both walks are a bit over 2km in length and take an hour or so to complete.

The walks, the scenery, and the colour changes during the day making this a great place to experience the feel of the East MacDonnells or as the locals say 'East Macs'. A great finish in our journey to Alice Springs from Mt Isa.



The ascent up the Gorge Walk. Photo: Bob West.

Emily and Jessie Gaps Nature Parks

The next day we explored the small nature parks of Emily and Jessie Gaps. These have informative displays showing the Arrernte peoples connection to the land. Not long after, we headed into the milling maelstrom that is Alice Springs in high season. After the quiet of the previous weeks' travel, this hustle and bustle needed to be experienced while we restocked supplies for our continuing journey home.



The floor of the gorge at Trephina Nature Park. Photo: Bob West

Driving through Central Australia

The Plenty Highway and the other unsealed roads are all enjoyable drives that take you through a variety of the terrains of Central Australia. However, there are some essentials that you need to tackle these roads.

Your vehicle, and the attendant camper or caravan if you have it, needs to be in good order with sound tyres and essential spares onboard. You should have plenty of water and food with you to tide you over if you break down as it's going to be quite some time before help can be organised.



Take your time to enjoy the scenery when driving through Central Australia. Photo: Bob West. Even though you could drive the Plenty in a day, the road conditions constantly change and would make this a seriously hard day's drive. Better to take your time, drive to the conditions, and enjoy the journey!

What are your must-sees for a road trip from Mt Isa to Alice?