



135 years ago, visionaries dreamt of a ribbon of steel linking the north and south of the country. Called the Great Northern Railway, but later simply known as “The Ghan”, the first sod was turned at Port Augusta on the 18th January 1878.

Those visionaries would not have dreamt that the first passenger train undertaking the journey from Port Augusta to Darwin would not arrive until 4th February 2004, 126 years after construction began. I guess you can’t rush these things!

For the adventurous traveller interested in a very significant part of our history, the section of this railway between Port Augusta and Alice Springs provides a brilliant insight into the hardships and magnificent achievements associated with this engineering masterpiece.

A significant length of the railway runs alongside another great Australian icon, the Oodnadatta Track. Even though this track does not officially start until Marree, the Old Ghan began its often arduous journey from Port Augusta.

Conditions of the track

Luckily for the modern day traveller, this trip is pretty easy going for anyone with a 4WD or SUV, with the dirt section of the track north of Lyndhurst being well maintained.

The only exception to this is with the advent of rain when the track can become quickly impassable and is closed by the road authorities to prevent damage.

Caravans set up for dirt road travel should not have too much trouble, although corrugations can be rugged at times. Camper trailers are a common sight along the track.

Once you reach Oodnadatta there are several options if you wish to continue on to Alice Springs, however, to follow the Old Ghan route requires high clearance, dual range 4WDs. Fortunately, there are other options.

Travelling the Oodnadatta Track is a surprisingly accessible adventure and this series will provide you with the information to confidently give it a go – it’s your one-stop shop for a successful trip.



Significance in Australian history

This trek can immerse you in some of the most significant aspects of Australian history. The rich indigenous culture can be discovered, particularly in Port Augusta, Marree and Oodnadatta. The ochre pits just north of Lyndhurst are a graphic reminder of the aboriginal trade routes that crisscrossed this area and the importance of these coloured soils in aboriginal culture. This is the area covered by John McDouall Stuart on his famous attempt to cross the continent from south to north and return successfully.

It is along this route that the groundbreaking Overland Telegraph Line was established, with some of the telegraph stations still standing and accessible. The Old Ghan railway line is now largely gone but the embankment and regular station and siding ruins will be a constant reminder of the enormous feat of engineering involved in making this connection to Alice Springs.

One can only wonder why it took another 100 years for the connection between Alice Springs and Darwin to be made. You don’t have to be a history buff to appreciate the incredible



achievements of the indigenous and European peoples who settled in these areas.

Port Augusta - Lyndhurst (297km)

What will you see

From the top of Spencer Gulf to the northern section of the Flinders Ranges, a few days can easily be spent exploring museums, rail heritage, and some magnificent natural beauty. Port Augusta is a major centre and the last opportunity to stock up on provisions at the major supermarkets and variety stores in town.

This town is also a major rail hub servicing the passenger and freight services north to Alice Springs and Darwin, west of Perth and east to Sydney. The enormous coal trains from Leigh Creek pull in daily to the major power station that provides much of the power for South Australia.

Once past Hawker, the magnificent Flinders Ranges rise to the east and flat desert country disappears to the horizon in the west-what a contrast. The old Ghan Railway runs right along this section, crossing the road in a couple of places.

The ruins of station buildings and sidings are quite obvious and worth a poke around. The famous Prairie Hotel at Parachilna beckons, especially if you can time your visit around a meal break. You won't be hungry after an FMG (Feral Mixed Grill).

Copley also has a good pub and excellent caravan park. Grab a quondong pie from the bakery-delicious! Just a little further you come across Lyndhurst and it's time to say goodbye to bitumen.

The Towns

Port Augusta

• Wadlata Visitor Centre and Museum

a wealth of information can be found here, together with an excellent display of outback heritage and indigenous culture that will set the scene for your upcoming adventure.

• Arid Lands Botanic Gardens

Stroll through the garden and learn about the flora that you will encounter on your trip and gain an understanding of how these plants survive in such a harsh environment.



Port Augusta Railway Station

All trains, both passenger and freight pass through the station – great for trainspotters. For a ride on what is left of the old Ghan line, hop on a historic Pichi Richi train that leaves from here on some weekends. Check www.prr.org.au for details.

• Gladstone Square

The Historic heart of the town is now a beautiful park flanked by the old courthouse and surrounded by the CBD. This is a significant area for the local indigenous community with an interpretive pathway detailing indigenous involvement in the area.

Quorn

Quorn was a major siding on the original Ghan Railway and is now home to the Pichi Richi Railway that uses lovingly restored engines and rolling stock that once travelled these lines to take passengers on a trip into yesteryear. See [here](#) for details and timetables. Around the town are some great old buildings that hark back to the days of steam trains and a bustling rail centre. Take a walk around, you won't be disappointed.

Hawker

Another station on the old Ghan railway, Hawker boasts a well-restored railway station that is now a restaurant and gallery. Hawker is also the gateway to the Flinders Ranges with Wilpena Pound, the heart of the Flinders, only 55km away.

Parachilna

Even if you don't arrive here at meal time, pop in and have a look at the Prairie Hotel. There is usually some magnificent artwork on display and a coffee, cool drink or ice-cream may well tempt you.

The Prairie is famous for its menu of feral food, so give a go to a camel burger, kangaroo steak or perhaps a goat pie. Keep an eye out for the massive coal trains that go past twice daily.



Leigh Creek

This town was built solely to support the workers at the nearby Leigh Creek Coalfields. There are a few shops, petrol station, tavern and a caravan park, but not much else.

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Copley

A stop on the old Ghan Railway that also supported the early days of the coalfields, this town is a little gem, particularly if you are looking for a place to stay overnight. The caravan park is excellent, has cabin, caravan and camping sites and the owners are extremely hospitable. In the cooler months, an evening campfire is provided where you can sit around, chat and meet fellow travellers.

The park also operates the bakery where some very yummy delights are to be had. The pub is just down the street and a small store can provide basic provisions. Fuel and mechanical assistance is also available.

Lyndhurst

The last stop on the bitumen, Lyndhurst is also the turning off point for those travelling the Strezlecki Track. This is a tiny settlement with a few houses, roadhouse and a pub. For something a bit different, travel about a kilometre up the Strezlecki Track to see Talc Alf. You will be amazed at the carvings he does in zebra stone and may get caught up in quite a conversation about the ways of the world.

Accommodation

- Port Augusta – all forms of accommodation, including a fairly fancy motel
- Quorn – several hotels and motels and a good caravan park with cabins
- Hawker – a hotel with motel rooms and two caravan parks
- Merna Mora Station – camping and cabin accommodation
- Parachilna – the Prairie Hotel has accommodation ranging from camping to cabins, hotel rooms and a very fancy, partly submerged rammed earth hotel wing if you want to do it in style
- Leigh Creek – a basic caravan park and motel
- Copley – an excellent caravan park with camping, caravan sites and cabins
- Lyndhurst – Lyndhurst Hotel offers hotel rooms, converted rail carriages, camping and a caravan park.



Side Trips

The most significant side trip in this section is to the Flinders Ranges. The road to Wilpena and Blinman starts at Hawker and takes you through the heart of the Flinders and some of the most spectacular scenery the area has to offer. To get a really good feel for the area take the road to Wilpena and then go through Brachina Gorge, meeting the next section of this trek 70km north of Hawker. Allow at least several hours to enjoy this 110km detour.



Another alternative is to continue past Wilpena to Blinman and then travel through the Parachilna Gorge to re-join the main trek at Parachilna, 90km north of Hawker. This 153km detour provides magnificent scenery and a chance to look around the old copper mining town of Blinman and, if the time is right, enjoy a “Big Blinman Burger” at the Blinman Pub.

Merna Mora Station has some 4WD tracks through their property, one of which will take you to Lake Torrens. There is a fee to travel these tracks, but 4WD enthusiasts may find this well worthwhile.

Just 12km north of Copley, turn east for a couple of kilometres and visit the Leigh Creek Coalfields lookout. The kids will thank you! (*UPDATE: As of September 2014 this lookout is no longer accessible*)

Along The Way

Pichi Richi Pass

The drive between Port Augusta and Quorn winds through the picturesque Pichi Richi Pass, with the old Ghan railway line your regular companion. If lucky, you may see the steam train that takes passengers between Port Augusta and Quorn.

Warren Gorge

About 10km out of Quorn, this beautiful gorge provides a nice camp spot or a beautiful picnic spot.

Gordon and Wilson

Two of the old Ghan railway sidings are just on the roadside between Quorn and Hawker and have significant ruins that are worth having a poke around.

Kanyaka Ruins

Take the signposted turnoff 32km south of Hawker to the well-preserved remains of a major sheep station.

Aboriginal Paintings

Look out for the sign and turn off about 10km south of Hawker. This will lead to a parking area and walking trail to the cave paintings. The last part of the trail is steep. Allow at least a couple of hours.

Old Ghan Railway Sidings

The old rail line runs adjacent to the road in most of this section. Look out for the ruins at Hookina, Edeowie, Brachina, Commodore and Nilpena.



It is worth getting out and wandering around at least a couple of these to marvel at the conditions of the time and also some of the beautiful stonework involved in the buildings and bridges.

Beltana

This is now basically a ghost town with only a few hardy souls enjoying the isolated life. Once a bustling mining and rail town, many of the buildings are intact and good signage explains the history. Turn off the main road 20km north of Parachilna for the 17km of dirt road into Beltana.

From there you can take the 10km road out past the Beltana Roadhouse or continue north along the 17km road through Puttapa Gap following the Old Ghan—far more picturesque.

Distances and Services

Fuel: U = unleaded D = diesel L = LPG

Accommodation: CP = caravan park H = hotel/motel C = cabin

	Distance from Port Augusta	Fuel	Accommodation	Public Toilets
Quorn	41km	U,D,L	CP,H,C	Y
Hawker	107km	U,D,L	CP,H,C	Y
Merna Mora	150km		CP, C	N
Parachilna	196km		CP,H,C	Y
Leigh Creek	260km	U,D,L	CP,H,C	Y
Copley	264km	U,D	CP,H,C	Y
Lyndhurst	297km	U,D,L	CP,H,C	Y

NB. – there is no LPG fuel available beyond Lyndhurst.

[Download the Oodnadatta Track Distances and Services PDF](#)

Maps

- Hema Maps Great Desert Treks–South East
- Royal Automobile Association of S.A. – Flinders Ranges and Outback

Check out Part 2 of this 3 part series [here](#). Do you have any tips for the Oodnadatta Track?