

My previous three-part blog on the Oodnadatta Track ([one](#), [two](#), [three](#)) and Old Ghan Railway took us as far as Oodnadatta, the railhead from 1891 to 1927. During the ‘big pause’ what was known as the Great Northern Railway, owned by the South Australian Government, was handed over to the Commonwealth Government and in 1926 was officially re-named the Central Australia Railway.

Perhaps this name change flagged an intent to push the line forward to central Australia, with work beginning in 1927. Over the next two years, gangs of men toiled in the harsh outback to push the line forward and build fettlers huts, bores and water tanks with the first passengers arriving in Stuart (later to be re-named Alice Springs) in August 1929.

Despite the 36 year ‘pause’ at Oodnadatta, the ‘much bigger pause’ at Alice Springs makes this pale into insignificance.

After 70 years to think about it, construction of the line between Alice Springs and Darwin began in 2001, with the first passengers arriving in Darwin in February 2004, covering the 2970km in 47 hours



*The green line on the map indicates the course of the Old Ghan Railway. The insert shows the track running from Oodnadatta to Finke. Maps are the Westprint Oodnadatta Track Map and Hema Central Australia Map.*

## The Old Ghan Railway Trail

The Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail loosely follows the old rail line between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs. There are places where the road diverges significantly from the rail line whilst in others you are driving on top of the original alignment. It passes through the beautiful outback country, visits a couple of Aboriginal communities, and takes you to the remains of rail sidings and buildings.

Interpretive signs at these sites tell of the history and significant events that took place along the line. This two-part article will have you well-prepared for an adventure into the past.

## Vehicle Preparation

The track is very accessible to well-prepared 4WD or SUV vehicles with a reasonable ground clearance, keeping in mind that rain can turn these tracks into mush very quickly and sections of corrugations are an ever-present occurrence on outback tracks. So keep a close eye on weather conditions and delay heading into remote areas if stranding is a possibility.

**Bonus Tip:** Keep those headlights on, reduce tyre pressure, and take it easy on the speed. A friend of Snowys, [Cooper Tires have a very useful guide to appropriate tyre pressures](#) in a range of terrains that you should check out prior to setting off.

## Camping, Fuel, and Important Info

There is no significant accommodation between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs so have your camping gear organised. You will be travelling through pastoral property and although there are many camping opportunities, don't camp anywhere near stock watering points or move large distances off the track.

Between May and October is the best time to visit when days are commonly sunny and in the mid 20's, but nights can be cold and down to around zero, so be prepared.

The only fuel available is at Finke and Maryvale. These stores are only open on weekdays and Saturday morning.

An excellent brochure on the Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail is available from:

**Central Australia Visitor Information Centre**

Phone: (08) 8952 5800 | [Website](#)

**South Australian Visitor and Travel Centre**

Phone: 1300 655 276 | [Website](#)

An excellent resource on the latest road conditions around this area is provided by the famous [Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta](#). And the [South Australian](#) and [Northern Territory Governments](#) provide information on road closures.


## Oodnadatta to Alice Springs - A Typical Trip

### Oodnadatta

This small townhouse a significant aboriginal community, government workers, and business people. Among Oodnadatta's claims to fame is being one of the hottest places in Australia - not somewhere suitable for tourists in the height of summer, but generally a delight in the cooler months.

An excellent museum is housed in the old railway station and the famous Pink Roadhouse beckons for re-fuelling and an Oodnaburger and chips.

On a recent trip, after significant rains had hit the area, the mozzies were diabolical in and around town so ensure you have a plentiful supply of repellent and good fly nets.

 *The famous Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta at the start of the Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail. Don't forget to buy fuel here.*

### Accommodation

- The [Pink Roadhouse](#) runs a caravan park with powered and unpowered sites and cabins.
- There is a free camping area adjacent to the railway station museum.

### Oodnadatta to Hamilton Station

Generally well maintained, this 119km stretch of mainly sandy track moves well to the west of the old line. The line itself moves through a number of station properties but there is no significant rail infrastructure remaining. Along the way, a large clay pan will be encountered. After rain, this can be a boggy mess and remains so for some time. If detour signs are up don't be tempted to ignore them. The detour skirts around to the west of the claypan on higher ground.



## Old Ghan Sites

The first significant site requires a 19km detour from Hamilton Station along the public access route to Dalhousie Springs. At this point, you will find Pedirka Siding with significant rail ruins in place. Building construction is no longer the beautiful stonework found south of Oodnadatta, but rather a far more utilitarian concrete is now used.

Continuing on this track leads to Dalhousie Springs and the Simpson Desert going further east, or through Mt Dare and onto Finke heading north. The track can be very rough, requires slow going and can be quite treacherous after rain, and is only suitable for well-prepared, high clearance 4WDs.

## Accommodation

- Hamilton Station has a bush camping area with toilets and fire pits. Look for the sign to the homestead to book in.

## A Detour to Dalhousie Springs

You may not want to cross the Simpson Desert, but a trip to Dalhousie Springs and a leisurely dip in the hot waters bubbling up from the Great Artesian Basin is an experience not to be forgotten. (Kevin Leslie has previously written about Dalhousie. See here: [part one](#) and [two](#).) However, this is 67km of rough bush track, only advisable to high clearance 4WDs.

It is slow going and you should allow at least a couple of hours for the journey. There is a campground with toilets and showers, so factor in an overnight stay to get the best out of the experience.

Also keep in mind your fuel consumption, ensuring you have enough for the return journey and the trip north to Finke – the next refuelling opportunity.



*Dalhousie Springs – well worth the 67km detour and an overnight stop. Image: [Kevin Leslie](#).*

## Hamilton Station to Finke (Aputula)

The track continues north, still some distance west of the rail line with sandy and gravelly conditions predominant. After travelling 68km, the magnificent Eringa Waterhole will greet you. What a great place to camp. There is normally water here year round and the old Eringa Homestead ruins are nearby.

Travel another 24km to become reunited with the Old Ghan line at Abminga (see below). After crossing the rail line, the track now takes us to the north-east toward New Crown Station and converging with the Ghan track again 87km later at Finke.

## Old Ghan Sites

- Abminga has significant infrastructure intact, including buildings, stockyards and water

tank. You can spend some time here looking around and there are plenty of flat spots to camp.

- Finke is an Aboriginal community with Ghan infrastructure along the western edge of the town, adjacent to the store. Fuel and supplies are available from the store which also stocks some excellent local art. There is no accommodation or camping in the town.



*Camping at Lambert's Centre, the Geographical Centre of Australia.*

## **A Detour to Lambert's Centre - The Geographical Centre of Australia**

Want to stand in the exact centre of Australia, geographically speaking? This can be done with a short detour from Finke. Take the road to Kulgera for 20km where you will find a sign to Lambert's Centre. The track heads north, is sandy, narrow and winds around considerably for about 15km, to get to the spot - 25° 36' 36.4" S, 134° 21' 17.3" E.

The Royal Geographical Society of Australasia calculated the spot in 1988 as a Bicentennial Project and the point named after Dr Bruce Lambert, who was a former Director of the National Division of Mapping. There is a plaque to mark the spot. This is recommended for high clearance 4WDs only.

***Check Part 2, for the remainder of the trip from Finke to Alice Springs, plus some other general information.***