



# RED DESERT REIGNS

RON AND VIV MOON join Central Australian identity, Jol Fleming, for a cross-country trip through the northern Simpson Desert

PICS BY RON & VIV MOON





**T**he last vestiges of the old shotline we were following petered out. Standing on the dune looking over the vastness of red raw sand in front of us not one, even small glimmer of mankind could be seen. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

In fact, there was hardly any living thing – plant or animal, past or present – in view. A wildfire had devastated a huge area of the Simpson some months previously and the result was, for much of our travels north, like drifting through an enormous bare sandpit. And with the lack of spinifex and cane bush clumps along with the other hardy scrubs that normally cloth the sand, it made for much easier travelling for most of the way. Still the crests of the bare dunes were much more mobile than the norm – taking on the shape of waves at sea running before a strong south-wester and you had to watch out for the sudden lip and drop at the top.

We had left Birdsville two days previously and travelled out via the normal Simpson Desert crossing route and the QAA line to Poepel Corner. The 'Corner Post' now seems

to have more posts and signs than ever before while the visitor's book had three pages of inscriptions for the previous month alone, although we only saw two groups between the Post and Birdsville.

From the junction of the QAA and the K1 lines we had struck north into the Northern Territory (see Our Trek Notes, page 72) on what was once a pretty good clay-capped oil rig road. Running for the most part between the dunes the drive was an easy one and only where the route crossed an occasional dune did the track show any signs of being washed out.

We stopped for a short time at the remains of the Poepel Oil Well, which had been 'spudded' (the initial drilling) in August '84 and reached a depth of 8500 feet about one month later.

Beachcomber Oil Well, another 48km further north, was as far as we know the last oil well drilled in the desert with spudding taking place at the end of October 1988. Only a very rusted metal plaque marks the historic spot.

From here the route deteriorated and the old shotline we wanted to use took a little while to find. Once on it we headed eastward

■ **WARNING**

You must be experienced at remote desert travel, have a capable, well set-up 4X4 and be prepared for anything.

■ **DISTANCE (FUEL REQUIRED)**

From Birdsville to Jervois is approx 650km. Much of it is slow, difficult going.

A 6-cylinder T/D Patrol used 150 litres on this trip and the going was reasonably easy because of a lack of vegetation.

You must carry extra water and fuel.

■ **FUEL AND SUPPLIES**

Birdsville Auto Centre,

ph: 07 4656 3226;

Birdsville Caravan Park,

ph: 07 4656 3214;

Birdsville Hotel, ph: 07 4656 3244.

Jervois Homestead has camping, accommodation, fuel, water and soft drinks. Call during daylight hours only, ph: 08 8956 6307.

■ **PERMITS**

An SA Desert Parks Pass is required if you plan to visit Poepel Corner.

A camping permit is required from Qld NP&WS, Birdsville, for the Simpson Desert NP, ph: 07 4656 3272.

A Central Lands Council permit is required to travel and camp on the Atneye Aboriginal Land in the northern Simpson Desert (see below).

■ **LINDSAY'S CAMP**

You need a permit to camp and travel along Hay River, north of Lake Caroline.

Organise to stay at Lindsay Bookie's Camp on the Hay: hot showers, toilets, fire places, and bush shelters.

Spend at least two nights there.

Lindsay will take you out on bush-tucker trips as well as to spectacular rock formations around Goyders Pinnacle.

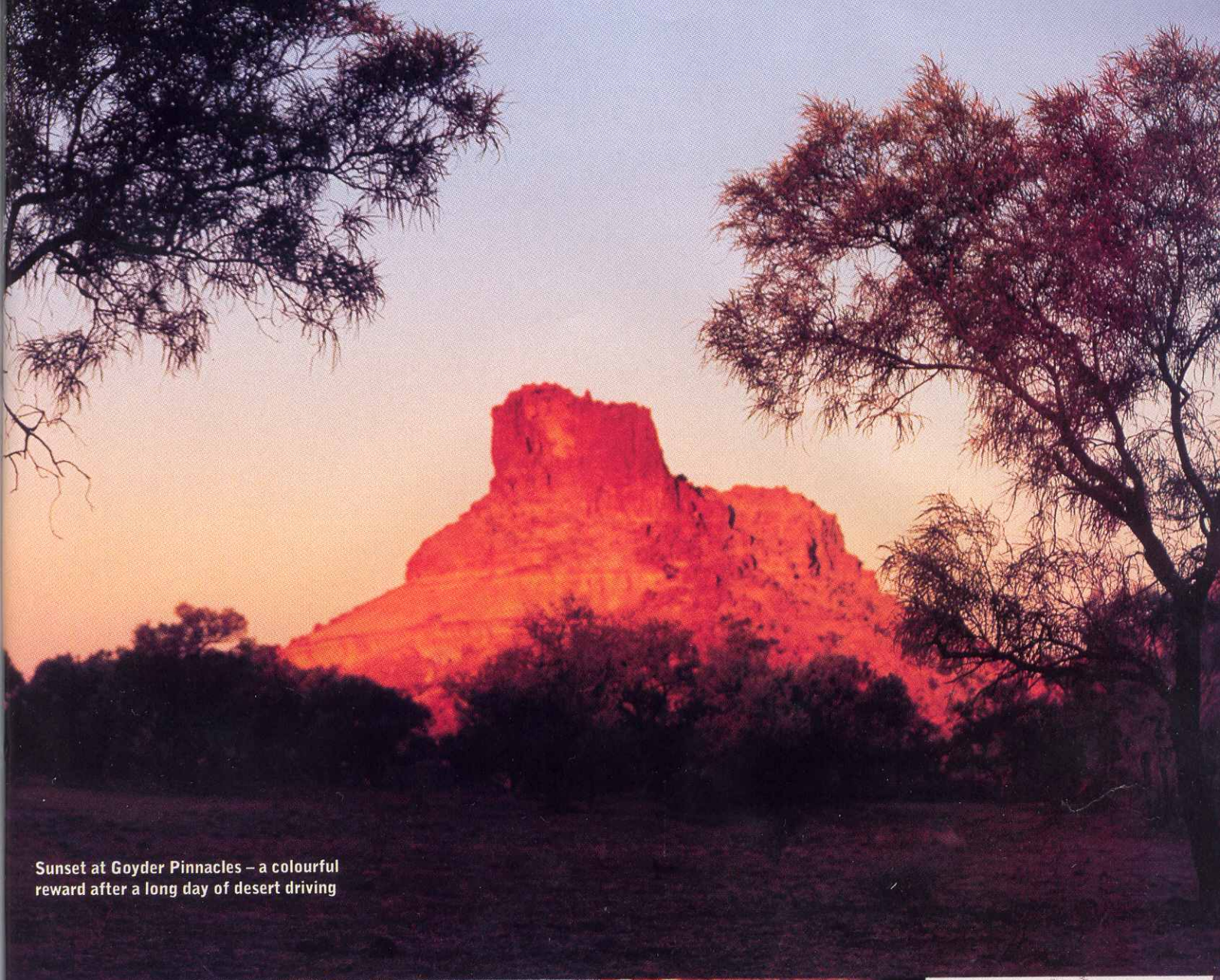
To book and get a permit, contact Jol Fleming at Direct 4WD Awareness, ph: 08 8952 3359, or check the web at: [www.direct4wd.com.au](http://www.direct4wd.com.au).

■ **BEST MAP**

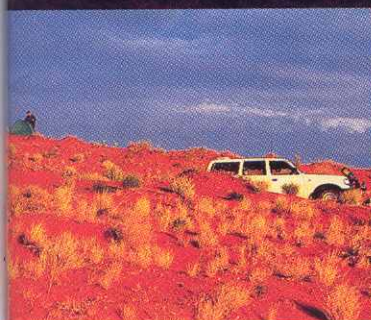
Hema's Simpson Desert map.

■ **HAY RIVER GUIDED TRIPS**

The best way to do this trip is with Jol Fleming of Direct 4WD Awareness, ph: 08 8952 3359. Jol has three trips for 2004. You'll have a safe and exciting trip, led by a person who really knows central Australia and the Simpson.



Sunset at Goyder Pinnacles – a colourful reward after a long day of desert driving



### > HOW MOONIE'S PATROL CRUISED THE SIMPSON

■ We had gone straight from our LOPE adventure (see September, October & November 2003 issues of *4X4 Australia*) and headed back into the desert with just a refuel and a good check-over of our 4.2-litre inter-cooled T/D Patrol cab chassis.

For such an adventure we were pretty heavily loaded but the Patrol took it all in its stride. All we had done over standard was fit tougher ST Cooper tyres and heavy-duty OME springs and shocks.

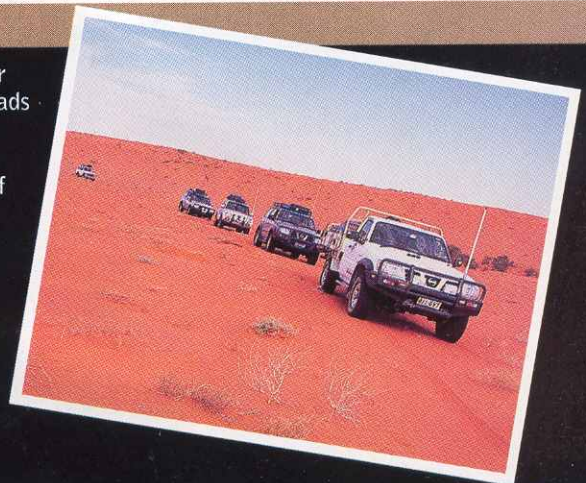
The now-standard inter-cooler gets the T/D Patrol up and running quicker with more

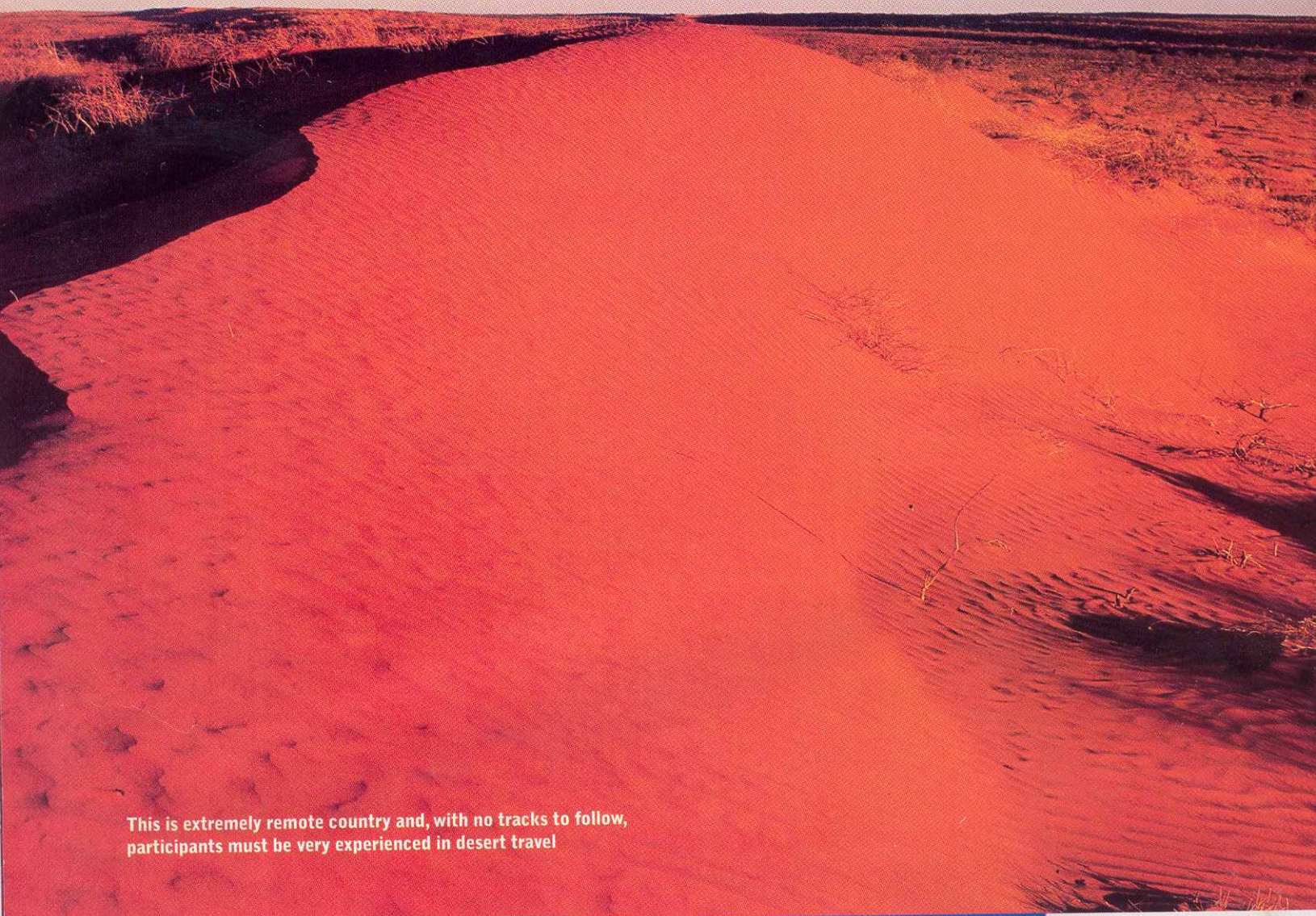
torque down low – the ideal thing for low-speed desert work or hauling loads away from a dead-start.

Loaded and working, it averaged 21.3L/100km for the desert stage of this trip.

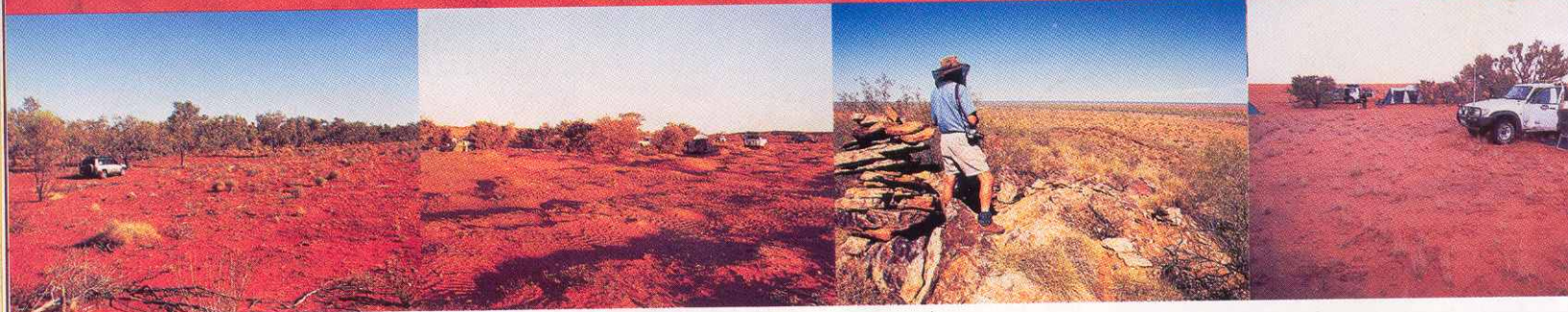
On the highway cruising at 110km/h, fuel economy was around 14L/100km or 20mpg.

Basically, all our Patrol needed was a quick service and it could have headed back out into the desert again.





This is extremely remote country and, with no tracks to follow, participants must be very experienced in desert travel

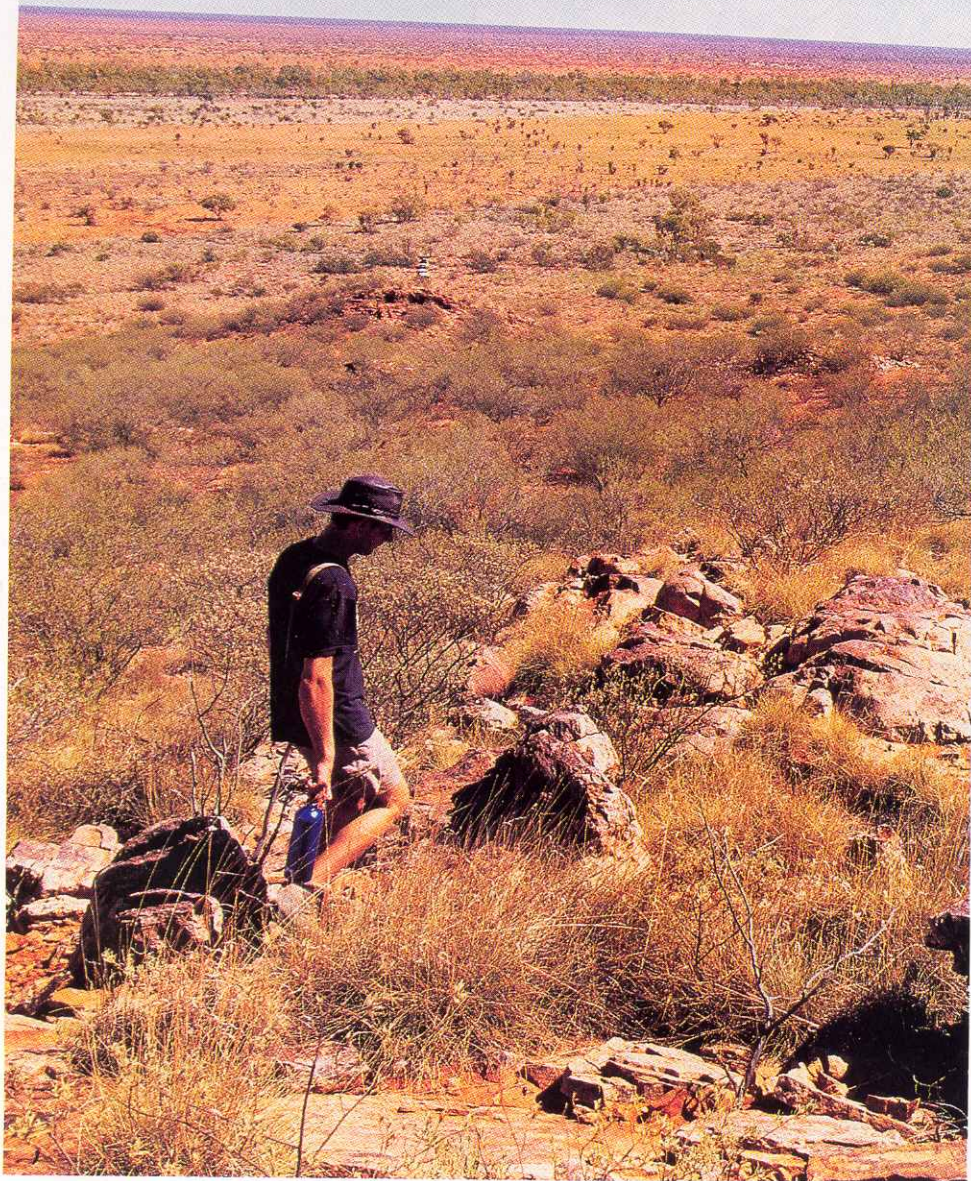


## ► OUR TREK NOTES

- 0.0 (0.0) Corner of QAA and K1 Line, 148km west of B'ville. Head north on lake's western edge
- 7.5 (7.5) Poeppel Oil Well site & plaque  
**GPS 25°47'29"S 137°57'11"E**
- 57.0 (49.5) Beachcomber Oil Well, plaque  
**GPS 24°22'38"S 137°48'12"E**  
**Zero Trip Meter**  
 Backtrack over dune, turn left and head north in inter-dunal valley. Within 500-600m you'll pick up a faint shot line on a bearing of 66°
- 15.0 (15.0) Faint track junction. TL (north) up inter-dunal valley

- GPS 25°19'04"S 137°56'29"E.**  
 Follow faint tracks when you can, but more importantly just keep heading north (approx)
- 50.0 (35.0) Small claypan and sign – southernmost Hay River  
**GPS 25°01'49"S 137°53'55"E**
- 90.0 (40.0) Madigan's Tree (Camp 16) and sign, Hay River  
**GPS 24°44'22"S 137°42'49"E**  
**Zero Trip Meter**
- 17.0 (17.0) Camp 15 & sign, Hay River  
**GPS 24°36'37"S 137°38'30"E**
- 40.0 (23.0) BM 109 and star picket

- GPS 24°26'18"S 137°32'24"E**  
 119.0 (102.0) Old fuel dump  
**GPS 23°49'44"S 137°15'40"E**
- 122.0 (3.0) Faint track junction. Left leads 11km to Lake Caroline. Station track north, near here
- 145.0 (23.0) Bloodwood Camp  
**GPS 23°37'02"S 137°10'48"E**
- 146.5 (1.5) Bore – emergency water (string and small tin required)  
**GPS 23°36'12"S 137°10'26"E**
- 220.0 (73.5) Lindsay's Camp  
**GPS 23°01'39"S 136°52'06"E**



until a hardly discernible track junction had us turning north again.

Then any sign of an old track vanished and it seemed as if we had been cast adrift on a vast rolling sea of red fine sand. Like a yacht running before a giant swell we tacked north running between the great waves only to turn and cross them at right angles, when

may push any waters that has reached this far into another parallel inter-dunal valley. Only when you climb to the top of yet another sand ridge do you realise that you had lost the river and the trees sometime previously and now it was again in front of you.

Our third night's camp was at the famous 'Madigan Tree', which Cecil Madigan had

## The river draws its final gasp as the sand sucks up its moisture

forced to do so.

Our GPS showed the way north to our next waypoint, a small claypan, which basically marked the southern most reach of Hay River. Here the final gasp of the river expires as the greedy sands suck up the last vestiges of moisture, with only a few stunted trees in the centre of the inter-dunal valley to mark the river's demise.

From this point though these small trees indicate the flow of the river and our route north, but they are so scattered at times that these markers, for that is what they are, vanish as any vagary of sand, scrub and time

blazed on the first crossing of the northern Simpson in 1939. His Camp 16 was located here and today a mini forest of star pickets adorned with plaques testify to those who have visited this isolated spot in more recent times.

For the next three days we headed along the edge of Hay River and the channel became more and more defined as we progressed. By the time we had reached the latitude of Lake Caroline the river's sandy bed was confined to tall sheer banks for much of the way while beautiful gums and coolabahs lined its edge.

### > SUPERB SHELTER



■ Staying dry and comfortable in a tent demands you buy a good one, while for general 4X4 touring an easy, quick-to-erect model is essential. Luckily, there are well-made Aussie tents on the market and the Southern Cross range of Bushmaster tents is hard to beat for quality, durability and it's able to be put up quickly and easily.

While Southern Cross has about a dozen Bushmaster Tent models – ranging in price from \$650 and varying in size from a two-three people sleeper to a whopper that will sleep eight – we opted for one of the most popular, the Ultimate 10 (from \$1050).

This tent, made from rot- and mildew-resistant 10oz Australian canvas, has a floor area of 3x3 metres with the height at the centre pole of nearly 2.3 metres. It easily sleeps two people and would take up to four. The tub floor is made from heavy-duty reinforced PVC vinyl and internally welded to withstand the harshest of conditions. Large O-rings for corner pegs are standard while all stress points are either welded with reinforced webbing or lock-stitched.

The two large windows and door are protected with super-fine mesh flyscreens and fully zippered canvas coverings keep the dust and rain out. Some models also have clear PVC windows while all models can have an optional small or large awning.

While we stayed with the simple centre pole, for those who want more available floor space a side-pole frame is also available for most tents.

This tent is simple to erect. Unfold it out of its carry bag, peg in each corner and slip the centre pole into place – that's it – done in about three minutes.

This is a very well-made tent designed to last for years as the five-year guarantee testifies. There's a heap of room inside it and the high-angle walls give plenty of standing room – unlike many cheaper tents.

For more info on Bushmaster tents and to find your nearest dealer contact Southern Cross Canvas Products, ph: 03 9729 5056 or check the web at: [www.southerncrosscanvas.com.au](http://www.southerncrosscanvas.com.au).



Charles Winnecke was the first European in this region, discovering and naming Hay River on his 1883 expedition. He also discovered and named Lake Caroline, Mt Winnecke and Adam Range.

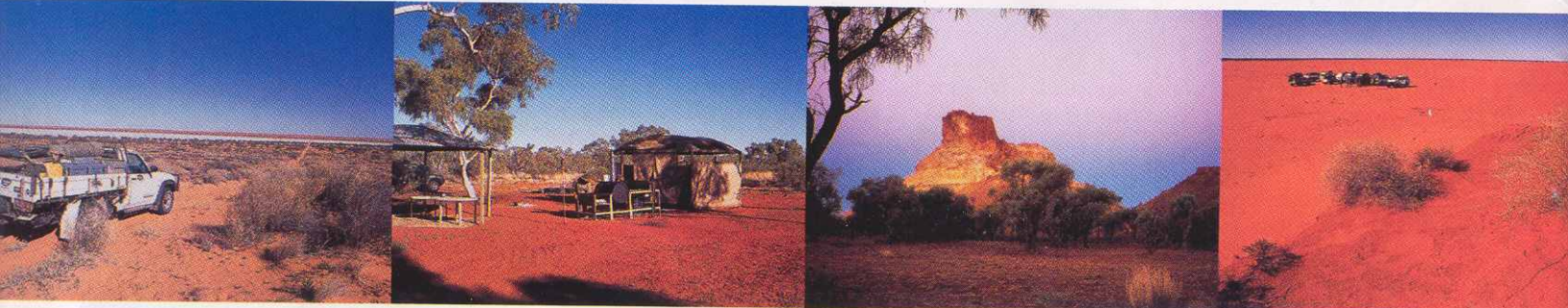
Close to where the vehicle route to Lake Caroline exits Hay River a soak, rediscovered just a couple of years ago by our group's leader, Jol and Lindsay Bookie, the area's traditional owner, was one used by Winnecke on his explorations.

The sandy swells of the Simpson gave way to better and better country as we traced the river's route north and on the last day of our cross-country adventure we took the opportunity to climb the flat-topped peak of Mt Winnecke. The view would have been exactly the same as Winnecke himself had viewed it more than 120 years ago, Hay River cutting a vivid green swath south through the golden spinifex and muted olive greens of the taller scrub.

Lindsay Bookies camp, established a short distance from the Hay and close to the northern boundary of Atneye (or Anatye) Aboriginal Land, is well set up among a scattered stand of impressive ghost gums. A few bough bush shelters, cleared camping spots, clean toilets and showers complete with hot water along with a bush kitchen, oven and cooking set-up make this a very comfortable spot to camp at and we settled in for an overnight stay.

As the sun set we sat and watched the gorgeous light change on Goyders Pinnacle, just a short distance from Lindsay's camp. Our

## The natural light show was a fitting finale



### ➤ TOUGH AS NAILS, COLD AS ICE

■ On this trip and a few other jaunts, we've been using a Tropical Ice Box. It's made from tough, lightweight, roto-moulded food-grade UV stabilised polyethylene.

With 40mm thick walls, 50mm base and 85mm lid the boxes will keep ice for a lot longer than many others. To keep things cool and as a tough go-anywhere storage unit, this Tropical Ice Box is very impressive.

Our unit came from Outback 4WD in Bayswater, Vic, ph: 03 9761 7722, or contact Tropical Ice Boxes in Caloundra, Qld, ph: 07 5438 0454.



group, captivated by the scene and looking back over the last few days knew we had been part of something special, and this extravagant natural light show was a fitting finale to our journey.

True, we were still in remote country, but next day we'd slip onto the Plenty Highway, fuel up at Jervois Homestead and be on the way to Alice Springs. In relative terms, compared to the journey we had just completed, we would soon return to civilisation and were back on the well-beaten tourist path.

It had been a top trip – and you really can't beat this area of the Simpson for restoring your taste for remote-country travel. 44