



## Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail



On June 24, 1954 *The Ghan* left Quorn for Alice Springs with two new diesel locos at its head for the first time. At Alice Springs, Prime Minister Robert Menzies and most of the towns-people were there to greet the train's arrival.

The last *Ghan* train ran through Pichi Richi Pass in August 1956 and in 1957, Marree became a break of gauge station with the opening of the standard line to Port Augusta. The Old Ghan line survived, however, from Marree to the Alice for another 23 years. In the final months of the line, people journeyed from far and wide to savour one last trip on the Old Ghan Railway - one of the most memorable rail journeys of the world.



Fettlers clearing sand from line near Bundooma late 1930's

### The Old Ghan Railway Lives On

Although the Old Ghan Railway was abandoned in 1980 - following completion of a new standard gauge line to the Alice - its heart and soul survives.

The Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society operates the original route from Port Augusta to Quorn. Distinctive dry stone walling, magnificent cast iron bridges and towering cuttings hewn through Pichi Richi Pass are displayed in their century-plus glory. They provide a stunning

### Travel the Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail and discover the very essence of the Outback.

Follow the triumphs and heartaches of pioneers in a challenging landscape, etched on a rough canvas of rich hues, under cobalt skies. From Port Augusta to Alice Springs, the Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail is a fascinating story of pioneering Australians - and a gateway to further Outback experiences such as the Flinders Ranges, Lake Eyre National Park and the Simpson Desert.

Interpretive signs on replica railway trolleys are located at 20 key points along the trail, providing interesting information about a story of great achievement.

### Great Northern Railway to Asia

The Old Ghan story begins at Port Augusta, South Australia, in 1878 when, with picks and shovels, men began work on a narrow gauge railway planned to snake its way to Darwin, and a link to Asia.

The railway grew in stages, shadowing the Overland Telegraph Route. Services to Quorn began in December 1879. It was a mammoth engineering project - not solely men's work. North of Beltana in 1881, women got work as navvies by dressing as men.

Ten years later the Great Northern Railway - as it was then known - ground to a halt at Oodnadatta for lack of money. It was another 38 years before trains finally wheezed into Alice Springs.

### A Link with Civilisation

The impact the new railway had on the Australian interior was enormous. The line opened up the Outback, enabling pastoralists (such as the giant

Anna Creek Station) to get their stock to market within days, instead of weeks or months. In the first 10 months of the extended line, 15,000 cattle were railed south for stock sales.

The railway brought development to Alice Springs and the beginnings of a tourist industry as travellers came to experience a Territory steeped in larger than life folklore. Most importantly, the railway provided 'Centralians' with a tangible link to the rest of the nation.



Puttapa Gap - in the line's early days

### Why The Ghan?

Early last century wizened Afghan cameleers led their 'ships of the desert' to meet trains at Oodnadatta and Marree, ferrying passengers and goods to remote outposts. They were an exotic sight in Australia's Outback but a vital part of the transport scene.

In 1923 a railwayman at Quorn saw an Afghan passenger alight from the first Terowie-Oodnadatta train service, to pray in the station yard. He joked that the new train should be called the 'Afghan Express' if the worshipper was any indication of its passengers. The name stuck, being shortened by degrees to *Ghan Express* and *The*



Ghan arriving at Alice Springs 1957

backdrop for the panting trains using original Old Ghan Railway locomotives and rolling stock.

At the Northern Territory end, the Ghan Preservation Society operates trains on the 'newer' line, between MacDonnell Siding and Ewaninga. Throughout, however, there are countless relics of this historic line through the desert. Whether it's the impressive Algebuckina Bridge, the sentinel-like water treatment towers, the station buildings or coal stages - all add character to this most famous of railways.

Photo credits: Mortlock Library and Port Dock Railway Museum.



Coward Springs Interpretive Rail Trolley

### Old Ghan Railwaymen Reminisce

Horrie Simpson, who was a fireman and later driver on the Central Australia Railway, recalled the destruction of the Finke River Bridge in his memoirs.

"At the time of the destruction of the Finke Crossing, Driver Mayes and I were part of a crew heading north for Rodinga with a work train loaded with rails and sleepers and 25 workmen. Washways had severely damaged the track near Rodinga, some 50 miles north of Finke.

At Pedirka we crossed the Ghan heading south and the engine crew - Hawke and Trask - told us we wouldn't cross the Finke. They had raced the head floodwaters to the crossover by a narrow margin. On arrival at Finke we were stopped by ganger Charlie Williams who said the right of way over the river had vanished. He said it was an awe-inspiring sight as the mighty volume of water ate through the embankment blocking its course, then with a roar it broke through, tossing foam and sand into the air.

Big river gums hit the embankment like battering rams. The small bridge lost most of its cement pylons as they sank into the gaping hole of quicksand. The bridge girders were hanging by a few bolts. The hole was 15 feet deep and had 12 feet of water in it. It appears the bridge site was an old waterhole which, over the years, had filled up with drift sand."

Horrie Simpson

Other railwaymen reminisce about their time spent working with the Central Australia Railway.

"Once we had a circus train through Pichi Richi Pass and had elephants in one of the old trucks. One elephant was at one end in a cattle truck and it derailed right on the bridge. The leading bogie broke loose and had been pushed back to the back bogie. So, the elephant's weighing that end down and it's rocking.

I didn't know where the guard was - I couldn't see behind because his van was around the curve. I ran back to see where he was and as I came back the elephant's dancing from one foot to the other - and the truck's rocking, ready to fall over the bridge. So, I'm saying for chrisake stop - I didn't know what else to do! I'm trying to get this elephant to stop - but he wouldn't stop.

### A Railway at War

In the 1930s the Old Ghan Railway was a lightly laid line, snaking through sparsely populated country, lucky to see three trains a week. This changed dramatically with the outbreak of the Second World War and hostilities in the Pacific.

The railway line between Adelaide and Alice Springs became a key route in the war effort; and the Alice home for 5000 troops and a rail-head for military supplies for the north.

Civilians not required for the war effort were expelled. The Old Ghan Railway weathered a huge increase in traffic and the three trains a week rocketed to 56.

Derailments were frequent during the war as the light, un-ballasted track subsided under phenomenal loads. Engines were worked past their limits and splitting of trains, to conquer gradients, was common. Trains took three days to reach the Alice from Quorn but up to five to return, as northbound traffic had priority.

Times were tough. Men and machines were pushed to their limits. Yet the Old Ghan Railway triumphed - through the sheer guts of those who worked the trains - and peace was won in the Pacific.

### Poignant Pastiches in Harsh Country

The history of the Old Ghan Railway is peppered with moving tales of people who've faced heartache and tragedy.



End of line Oodnadatta 1905

The breakdown gang came along with sleepers and they put them under the front end of the truck, so it didn't go off. I don't know how long the elephant was in that truck but it took a fair while to put it back."

Stuart Holland

"I reckon the old steam engines had a soul. They had an air compressor on them and when you used the brake and pulled up, they panted - puff, puff, puff. It just sounded like the locomotive was panting."

Dave Martin

"We always carried rifles on the engine - there was a lot of wild turkeys the other side of William Creek. Of course if you saw one of those, you don't let that go because that's a really good feed at Alice Springs. The guard in the brake van would handle it - mostly the guard would cook food for the crew."

Pat Brooks

"At Edwards Creek you used to stop to water the coaches. And this woman went up to the driver and said can't you go any faster, driver? He said yes lady but we're not allowed to leave the engine!"

Alf Harris

"The funny part, during the war you know they blacked off all the locomotive headlights.

We're going along in the dark but you'd get to Alice Springs - probably the biggest staging camp in Australia - and it was lit up like a circus."

Stuart Holland

"The biggest delay that I had was 12 days without turning a wheel. That was in '66. All you can do is go fishing. We were on a freight train...going north with a refrigeration train and, anyhow, we had to attend to the refrigeration. Actually, they said help yourself to any tucker that's in there."

Fred Gaghan

"We were working the Mixed train to Alice Springs one time and we'd brought some new fettlers to Anna Creek. We dropped them off, and the next morning they were going out on a job and one of them got speared with a crowbar and died - first day on the job."

Dave Martin



T and NMB class locomotives at Coward Springs, 1942

Near Strangways Springs a lonely cemetery holds the remains of several railway workers, the victims of a typhoid fever outbreak. Coward Springs once boasted a small population and combined hotel/store. In 1962, however, the proprietor, who was living alone, was found dead on his premises. With his death came the departure of Coward Springs' last resident.

At Bundooma a fettler died just days after joining the track gang, the man a victim of summer's fierce century-plus heat. Yet he was far from an isolated casualty.

### Floods, Drought and a Railway Spurned

Rivers running bankers, line washaways and marooned passengers awaiting rescue were constant themes throughout the Old Ghan's history. Train delays were often measured in weeks, instead of hours. At Finke, the rail bridge over the river was on three occasions destroyed or badly damaged.

In 1930 floodwaters tore apart the bridge pylons, severing the line. Marooned passengers and mails were rafted over the swollen river. Trains were cancelled for two months.



### For more information

**Northern Territory Holiday Information Helpline**  
Tel: 13 3068

**Central Australia Visitor Information Centre**  
60 Gregory Terrace  
PO Box 2227, Alice Springs NT 0871  
Tel: (08) 8952 5800 Fax: (08) 8953 0295  
Website: www.centralaustralian.com

**South Australian Visitor and Travel Centre**  
18 King William Street  
Adelaide SA 5000  
FreeCall: 1300 655 276  
Website: www.southaustralia.com  
Open seven days: Mon - Fri 8:30am - 5pm  
Weekends & Public Holidays 9am - 2pm  
Closed Christmas Day

Call 1800 633 060 to receive your copy of "Flinders Ranges and Outback Secrets"

When driving in the outback always remember to:

- Inform family and friends of your travel plans and intended route.
- Check the conditions of outback roads before leaving the nearest major town.
- Take care when driving 4WD vehicles, eg. drive at reduced speeds on unsealed roads.
- Note where petrol stations are en route.
- Take frequent breaks and change drivers regularly.
- Carry extra supplies of water and food.
- Carry extra spare tyres and tools in remote areas.
- Hire appropriate emergency communication equipment, eg. satellite phone.
- Obey road closure signs and stick to the main roads.
- In an emergency, stay with your vehicle.

Call 1300 655 276 to receive your copy of "Driving Safely in the South Australian Outback".



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In January 1953, passengers were stranded for four days by Finke floodwaters, staying off boredom with singalongs and bush cricket. Finke's policeman brought goats' milk for six young train passengers and permission to sell kegs of beer (bound for Alice Springs) to the parched travellers.

In 1962 a new Finke bridge was completed. This too was destroyed by floodwaters in 1967. A further bridge was opened in 1969 - but in January 1974, this again was badly damaged by floods.

Drifting sand was also a constant problem on the Old Ghan Railway at many locations. In the late 1930s, two sand scoop teams were worked almost continuously between Marree and Oodnadatta. Wind chutes, put up at several locations, provided effective solutions.



Railwaymen get their feet wet as they propel a group of northbound passengers across the flowing Finke River on a hand trolley during the 1930s

In 1952, it was decided a new standard gauge railway to Marree would be built, by-passing Quorn and the sharp curves and steep grades in Pichi Richi Pass.

# OLD GHAN RAILWAY TIMELINE

**65,000 yrs ago**  
Evidence of occupation by Aborigines in Arnhem Land, Death Adder Gorge.

**20,000 yrs ago**  
Present day Australian climate established.

**10,000 yrs ago**  
Aboriginal people well established throughout coastal and mainland Australia and Tasmania.

**5,000 years ago**  
The dingo arrives in Australia.

**1872**  
The Overland Telegraph from Adelaide to Port Darwin is completed. For years the world's news arrives in Australia and New Zealand along these two wires stretching 2230 miles.

**18 Jan, 1878**  
Work begins at Port Augusta on the Port Augusta and Government Gums Railway - the Old Ghan Railway. A crowd of about 2000 turns out to see the first sod turned by the Governor, Sir William Jervois.

**15 Dec, 1879**  
First section of the Port Augusta and Government Gums Railway opens to Quorn.

**28 June, 1880**  
Section of line between Quorn and Hawker is opened to traffic.

**1 July, 1881**  
Section between Hawker and Beltana opens for traffic.

**17 May, 1882**  
Section between Beltana and Farina opens for traffic.

**7 Feb, 1884**  
Line from Farina to Marree opens for traffic.

**1 June, 1889**  
Section between Marree and William Creek opens for traffic.

**1 November, 1889**  
Line from William Creek to Warrina opens for traffic.

**15 Jan, 1891**  
Line between Warrina and Oodnadatta opens for traffic. Oodnadatta, for 36 years, becomes the terminus of the Great Northern Railway.

**1 Jan, 1911**  
The Port Augusta-Oodnadatta Railway becomes property of the Commonwealth Government, under the Northern Territory Acceptance Act. Commonwealth agrees to extend the railway to Darwin but does not set any date for construction.

**August, 1923**  
First reference to The Ghan when a railwayman, seeing an Afghan passenger alight at Quorn to pray in the station yard, remarks the new through train service from Terowie to Oodnadatta should be called the Afghan Express, if this is an indication of its passengers. The name is later abbreviated to The Ghan.

**21 Jan, 1927**  
Construction work begins on a line to Wire Creek, the first section of the railway extension to Alice Springs.

**23 Dec, 1928**  
The line from Oodnadatta to Rumbalara is opened to traffic.

**2 Aug, 1929**  
The Rumbalara to Alice Springs section of line opened for traffic.

Three days later the first train (complete with new dining and sleeping cars) arrives. The line is now known as the Central Australia Railway.

**January, 1930**  
Train services suspended for nine weeks after the Finke River bridge is destroyed by floodwaters.

**1939-42**  
The outbreak of the Second World War and hostilities in the Pacific result in massive increase in traffic on the Old Ghan Railway. Trains increase from just three per week, to 56 trains.

**19 Feb, 1943**  
Strangways is the location of a spectacular head-on railway collision. Fireman Leslie William Thomas cheats death when the tender of his locomotive somersaults onto the engine's cab, after his train collides with a southbound troop train. Thomas is buried beneath coal in the cab and in danger of being scalded by escaping steam.

**1952**  
Announcement that a new standard gauge railway will be built from Stirling North to Marree, bypassing Quorn.

**24 June, 1954**  
The Ghan departs Quorn for Alice Springs with two diesel locomotives at its head for the first time.

At the Alice, the Prime Minister Robert Menzies and most of the townspeople come to see the train arrive.

**August, 1956**  
The last Ghan passenger trains run through Pichi Richi Pass.

**June, 1957**  
The standard gauge line from Stirling North reaches Marree, and it becomes a change of gauge station.

The Old Ghan continues to operate between Marree and the Alice on the surviving narrow gauge tracks.

**July, 1974**  
The Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society begins operating steam trains on a section of the original Old Ghan Railway, between Quorn and the Summit.

**18 Oct, 1974**  
The Tarcoola-Alice Springs Railway Act is passed by the Federal Government to enable a new all-weather standard gauge line to be built northwards from Tarcoola. Consequently, the fate of the Old Ghan Railway to Alice Springs is sealed.

**December, 1980**  
Last trains use the Old Ghan Railway. The line is closed entirely between Alice Springs and Marree from January 1981.

**28 Jan, 1981**  
A public meeting is held to elect office bearers for the Ghan Preservation Society.

**October, 1985**  
The Ghan Preservation Society takes over the line between MacDonnell and Ewanning. The remainder of the Old Ghan Railway is lifted.



Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail	Visitor Information	Accommodation	Airport	Camping Site	Caravan Park	Fuel	Hospital	Rest Area	Information
Pt Augusta	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Quorn	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Hawker	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Parachilna	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Beltana R-house	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Leigh Creek	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Copley	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Lyndhurst	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Farina	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Marree	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Coward Springs	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
William Creek	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Oodnadatta	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Mt Dare	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Finke (Aputula)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Maryvale	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Alice Springs	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

### OLD GHAN HERITAGE TRAIL MAP LEGEND

	Old Ghan Heritage Trail		National Park/Reserve Boundary
	Old Ghan Railway Line		Salt Lake
	Explorer Highway		Opal Fields
	Pioneers' Path		Farina
	Discovery Trails		Ingomar
	Dreaming Trails		Visitor Information Centre
	Sealed Road		Look for the Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail symbol along your travels to direct you to interpretive sites.
	Unsealed Road		
	4x4 Track		



**Desert Park Pass**  
When travelling through outback South Australia you will need a Desert Park Pass. The Desert Park Pass information pack contains a comprehensive Desert Parks Handbook, providing information on preparing for your trip, the other areas you will visit and a detailed series of colour maps, along with other information on the SA outback and desert. For further information call the Desert Parks Hotline on 1800 816 078 or visit [www.parks.sa.gov.au](http://www.parks.sa.gov.au)

**BELTANA**  
Six miles south of here, at Breakfast Time Creek in 1891, a spectacular derailment occurred. A double-headed train with 34 cattle vans and two brakevans was heading south to Quorn, from Marree. Shortly after 2am, three axles broke on the train. Twenty two cattle vans and a mid-train brakevan were derailed and telescoped. The smashed brakevan was carrying chief guard, William Edmonds, engine cleaner Aveling and an unnamed coal man who received a bruised head. At first, Aveling was 'lost', thought to be under the brakevan debris. He was discovered reading a book in the rear brakevan, unaware the rest of the train had derailed!

**560 MILE (five miles south of William Creek)**  
Site of a fatal wartime derailment: 18th April 1944. Two-thirds of a military train derailed. A private travelling in a motor vehicle on a rail truck was killed and another injured after their vehicle plunged into a watercourse. A van containing beer was also derailed and a military guard posted to prevent pilfering. As trains slowed to 5mph to negotiate the deviation line around the smash, crews would jump off and grab a few bottles to have at shift's end. The guards never appeared to see this performance!

**PEDIRKA sandhills**  
Travelling over this section of line was once described by a Governor's wife, Lady Gowrie, as "a series of minor train accidents". Crews eventually convinced the railways to lengthen timings along this section - so reducing jolting and drawgear damage on rolling stock. Passengers could finally have a meal without having to chase their food all over the table, or spilling it over laps or shirt fronts!

**RUMBALARA (not far north of Finke)**  
An unusual looking point which can be seen on a range of hills, about two miles out of Rumbalara was known to early railwaymen as the Virgin's Breast. Later renamed Colson's Point - after a grand Territorian who at one time owned the Finke pub, a cattle station and store - the 'nipple' of the point is 13 feet high.

*Follow the trail and discover more about the Old Ghan Railway whilst enjoying the Australian Outback. For direction to interpretive sites just look for the Old Ghan Railway Heritage Trail symbol on roadside signage.*

**APPROXIMATE DISTANCES TO INTERPRETIVE SITES**

- Port Augusta (315km from Adelaide)  
Location: Wadlata Outback Centre in Port Augusta.
- Quorn (41km from Port Augusta)  
Location: Historic Railway Station.
- Hawker (67km from Quorn)  
Location: Visitor information area, near the historic railway water tower.
- Parachilna (89km from Hawker)  
Location: Car park area, western side of the Prairie Hotel.
- Beltana (44km from Parachilna)  
Location: Historic Beltana Railway Station.
- Copley (51km from Beltana)  
Location: Copley Information Bay.
- Farina (58km from Copley)  
Location: First historic ruin, right hand side of road to Farina.
- Marree (55km from Farina)  
Location: Northern end historic railway platform.
- Curdimurka (120km from Marree)  
Location: Historic Curdimurka Siding.
- Coward Springs (15km from Curdimurka)  
Location: Coward Springs Camping Ground.
- William Creek (69km from Coward Springs)  
Location: Historic railway platform, western side of the William Creek Hotel.
- Algebuckina Bridge (150km from William Creek)  
Location: Historic Algebuckina Bridge.
- Oodnadatta (52km from Algebuckina Bridge)  
Location: Historic Railway Station and Heritage Museum.
- Pedirka (124km from Oodnadatta)  
Location: Historic fettlers' cottages.
- Finke (Aputula) (192km from Pedirka)  
Location: Historic fettlers' cottages.
- Engoordina (55km from Finke)  
Location: Historic fettlers' cottages.
- Bundooma (18km from Engoordina)  
Location: Parking area near historic railway water tank.
- Rodinga (45km from Bundooma)  
Location: Historic fettlers' cottages.
- Ewanning (60km from Rodinga)  
Location: Historic fettlers' cottages.
- MacDonnell (25km from Ewanning)  
Location: Entrance to MacDonnell Railway Station and Museum.

