



# BIRDSVILLE OR BUST



To celebrate 40 years in the Aussie 4x4 accessories business, ARB decided to take four iconic off-roaders across the Simpson Desert. *Land Rover Monthly's* **PATRICK CRUYWAGEN**, a Cape Town *boytjie* now living in Britain, reports from the bloody, muddy Outback.



**WHEN** I looked out the plane's window, all I saw was the red dunes of the impressive Simpson Desert below. I was on a flight from Brisbane to Alice Springs, which is situated in an area they call the Red Centre of Australia.

They could not have come up with a more apt name, as Alice Springs lies more or less in the dead centre of Australia. These

Aussies are real clever buggers.

In about 48 hours I would be driving across the desert in what is now known as the ARB Icons, four specially selected and prepared vehicles that epitomise the past 40 years of the Australian off-roading scene.

According to the T-shirt they gave us, the Simpson Desert is the world's largest sand dune desert and, to cross it, we'd have to drive up and over more than

a thousand dunes. From up here, the dunes don't look much higher than the pile of sand Naas Botha once used to place the ball on when taking a *strafskop*.

A Simpson Desert crossing is one of those 4x4 routes that everyone in Australia should do at least once in their lifetimes.

The four selected ARB Icons for our trip were: a 1976 FJ40 Toyota Land Cruiser, a 1991 Nissan Patrol GQ, a 1994 Toyota Hilux SR and, last but not least, a 1995 Land Rover Defender 110. They were all purchased and prepared by ARB stores from four different states.

This was my fifth off-roading trip to Australia and the one thing I know is that while South Africans and Australians might enjoy combat on the rugby and cricket fields, when it comes to off-roading, we are cut from the same cloth.

There are subtle differences, of course. We braai and they have a barbie (barbeque), we have big lions and elephants that can kill you, they have deadly snakes and spiders, they sleep in a swag while we prefer ground or rooftop tents, they love the Nissan Patrol GQ while most South Africans hardly recognise the existence of it.

I was joined in Alice by six journalists from around the world, plus the ARB support crew. The four ARB Icons were all shiny and clean, while every bit of ARB kit imaginable has been added to each. Despite the fact that ARB was in the process of celebrating its 40th birthday, they still make a comprehensive range of gear

for older vehicles like our Icons.

This includes full suspension set-ups and ARB bull bars plus a host of other extras such as Outback Solutions Modular drawers, AR21 Intensity LED driving lights, ARB roof rack with awning, an ARB fridge freezer and ARB swag.

As seven journalists need feeding, help with recoveries or repairs and someone to take the pictures and video footage, we had some support vehicles. There was a 2016 Toyota Hilux, 2016 Mazda BT-50, 2016 Ford Ranger and the beast-like TDV8 Land Cruiser 79 Series double cab. The Mazda was my favourite, mainly because it was towing the trailer packed with grub.

After enjoying a bacon 'butty' – folding a single slice of buttered bread around copious amounts of bacon – at the Anzac Hill for breakfast (it was here that I learnt that many Australians lost their lives during the Boer War), our small convoy left the comfort of Alice Springs.

#### ONLY IN OZ

Just as we were leaving, another group of newer 4x4s stopped and told us that they weren't able to cross the Simpson Desert due to the rains and mud. Only in Australia can water and mud prevent a desert crossing.

I was starting to question the Simpson's 'desert' status. It was going to take us three days to get to the desert proper, though, and hopefully by that time it would've dried out a little. As this was a 4x4 trip, we decided to take the



dirt road south out of Alice.

The road followed the old Ghan Railway, which connected the coast with inland places such as Maree, Oodnadatta and Alice Springs. It closed for business in 1980 but has since reopened. This track also served as a good shakedown for all of the Icons.

Our first stop was to see some Aboriginal rock carvings at Ewaninga, and, as I disembarked from the Defender, I couldn't help but notice the big white puffy clouds and blue skies. I've been living in Britain for four years so this was like another world: a sunny one.

Our first night of camping was spent at the Chambers Pillar Historical Reserve. After spending the day surrounded by flat land and small, sandy hills, we were now confronted by the 50m high Chambers Pillar and several other large weathered formations. Early explorers used the pillar as a landmark

when travelling in the area.

After the first night in our very comfortable ARB swags, we continued south, on a parallel track to the one that is used for the Finke Desert Race. This two-day off-road race for bikes, cars, buggies and quads runs from Alice Springs to the small Aputula (Finke) community, it is supposed to be the toughest desert race in Australia.

Others say it is the *only* desert race in Australia. I reckon it's probably a bit like the Desert 1 000 race in Botswana. As we got closer and closer to Mount Dare, our next overnight spot, we encountered more and more mud and water. We even had to take a few detours to ensure that we got through, and so we arrived after dark and in the rain. It could be worse, I reckoned.

#### READY TO GO

At last we were about to enter the Simpson Desert, all vehicles were fuelled up as the next

time we were scheduled to see a petrol pump would be at Burnsville, several days away.

Compared to Europe, Australia was only relatively recently occupied by settlers; except for the indigenous Aboriginal stories of the past, it doesn't have too much history. While in Paris you might visit Versailles or the Eiffel Tower, in the Outback or Simpson Desert you often merely find yourself stopping at the ruins of some settlement, where the early explorers, telegraph line repairman, farmers, prospectors or miners once lived while trying to eke out a living.

A newish sign explaining why things didn't work out in this specific inhospitable part of Australia normally accompanies it. We stopped at several such places during our desert trek.

From Mount Dare it is only 70km to Dalhousie Springs but because of all the rain, we were a little wary of how long it

would take us. Our fears were justified, as we had to make our way through several tricky water sections. The Defender (I was not driving it at the time) had several attempts at the deepest one.

To level the playing fields, this superior vehicle (okay, so I'm a little bit biased towards Landys) had only the vastly inferior Marie biscuit-type tyres on and a rear ARB locker. All the other vehicles had mud tyres and ARB lockers both front and rear.

The FJ40 cut-out at the same water crossing and had to be recovered, although it didn't take long to get it going again. We suspect that the coil was not happy with the water.

It was late afternoon by the time we arrived at Dalhousie Springs, which lies in the Witjira National Park. The Great Artesian Basin sits beneath 1.7 million square kilometres of outback. Forty percent of all



**Clockwise from top left:** A curious dingo, checking out the convoy of 4x4s. ● An inland taipan snake, the most poisonous snake in the world, also came closer for a peek. ● The 1995 Land rover Defender 300Tdi managed the water and mud pretty well. **This photo:** The 4x4 icons parked on top of a dune in the exceedingly wet Simpson Desert. A Jeep Wrangler was also part of the original 'icon' line-up, but strict Aussie import regulations saw it sidelined for this trip. **Left:** Unusually heavy rainfall turned the dry desert into a watery challenge.

I DID A  
**RUNNER**  
 TO THE  
**SPRINGS.**  
 IT WAS FULL  
**MOON** I HAD  
 THE PLACE ALL  
 TO MYSELF,  
**I FLOATED**  
 ON MY BACK AND  
 WATCHED THE  
**SHOOTING**  
**STARS**

The convoy heading to an overnight stop after mechanical gremlins slowed the progress during the day. Crikey mate, that's one heck of a full moon.

natural water flows from this basin to the surface via more than 60 natural springs in the park. We now found ourselves in one of them.

The flow rate of the Dalhousie Springs is said to be thousands of litres per second – so much for us being in a desert. Most visitors to the park camp at Dalhousie Springs do so to relax before or after a Simpson Crossing, depending on the direction of travel.

The water in the 150-metre long spring is about 38 degrees Celsius, making it one of the most perfect places to kick back with a few beers before a long desert trek.

Crossings of the desert with a trailer are not recommended so that evening we were fed a six-course meal, which included lamb, beef, emu, kangaroo and oysters.

By the time dessert arrived, I did a runner to the springs. It was full moon and I had the place all to myself. I floated on my back and watched the shooting stars.

#### THE DESERT

After our lunch stop at Purni Bore, we officially entered the Simpson Desert Regional Reserve. Long poles with red flags were placed onto each vehicle to avoid colliding with other 4x4s coming the opposite way at the top of the dunes. The radio crackled to life and a halt was called.

We obviously hadn't eaten enough the previous evening because a shackle had come loose on the trailer and a new leaf pack had to be installed. This kept us waiting for an hour or two.

Boys will be boys and once we saw our first big dune of the day, even though it was not in the direction we were going, we just had to drive up it. While the other icons spluttered and faltered, Dean Mellor (former 4x4 Australia magazine editor) dropped the Defender tyre pressure to 1.1 bar and effortlessly cruised up the dune first.

Defender 1, Japan 0.  
 We were now on the French Line, the most direct route

across the desert. Nearly 440km long, it is home to some of the biggest and most technical dunes in the desert. Or so my guidebook says. Most of the main tracks in the desert are as a result of oil exploration in the '60s.

At the Wonga Junction we climbed onto the Rig Road, another exploration track but with less traffic. I looked in the Defender's rear-view mirror and saw a dingo standing in the middle of the track watching the convoy. After about 15 seconds, it trotted off into the bush.

Thanks to all the rain, the desert was a lush green, full of wild flowers. We set up camp between two dunes near the Mokari Airstrip. I helped start a fire and then the moon appeared from behind a dune.

Not long after crawling into my swag, the rain came and when I woke up at 6am, it was still raining. No one wanted to get up. The one

wanted to get up. The one downside of the swag was that you can't stand up in it and get dressed so this has to be done

next to the Land Rover in the rain. Still, I didn't want to be anywhere else.

#### A MUD BATH

Thanks to the rain and the nature of the tracks, we encountered some muddy sections and had to occasionally engage low range. After passing Linnies Corner, we got into the dunes proper. I've crossed the Namib several times and these dunes are nowhere as high nor as technical; there are just lots of them. If they stayed like this, no one was going to get stuck in the sand.

While the Simpson can get freakishly hot in the summer, the overcast conditions made it perfect travelling weather for the Defender, which does not have any aircon. Despite the cool conditions, its thermo alarm kept going off, even though it was not running hot, so we had to disconnect it.

We took a detour south to what is known as the Lone Gum Tree. Incredibly, there is a sign telling us that it is not actually



Clockwise, from top right: Starry repairs... when the Land Rover's alternator became clogged with mud, a good rinse with two jerry cans worth of water solved the problem. • The icons, framed by some heavily impregnated clouds. • Despite some, er, driver issues, the Nissan Patrol GQ scaled all the dunes. • When the Toyota FJ died in a water crossing, the author jumped right in to assist the recovery. It's not everyday he gets to help recover a Toyota.

a gum tree but a coolabah tree. Nothing else of significance has ever happened here, yet people still take a massive detour to the Lone Gum, which is actually not a gum tree. I didn't want to insult my Australian friends so I told them I thought it was a *very nice tree*.

We were on Knolls Track and not long after it turned north to rejoin the French line, our food-filled trailer ground to a halt. The plate on top of the coupling needed welding again. Because it was going to take a few hours, we decided to make camp. The mosquitos were out in force and trying their best to suck us dry. Not taking any chances, I drank beer to stay hydrated.

Not long after leaving camp the next morning, the FJ40 again came to a halt during a wet section. The coil was not doing its job and there was no spark. At this stage I was in the Defender and decided that now might be a good time to get that all-important Land Rover towing a Toyota picture and video.

For the next hour or so we towed it. During a quick halt, it miraculously started again and we unhitched it. This was not the last time that the FJ was towed. Lunch was taken at Poeppel Corner (snigger), the exact spot where three states meet. It is named after Augustus Poeppel who conducted a

survey here in the 1880s to find the exact location of the central Australian state borders.

Originally, he thought it to be in the nearby salt lake but his measuring chain was found to be the incorrect length. A later survey relocated the spot to its current position.

It was after lunch that the fun and games truly began. We were in a section of the Simpson that consisted of a chain of salt lakes, which, thanks to the rain, had turned into muddy puddles the size of several football pitches.

While crossing one of them, the Mazda with the food trailer got bogged down pretty badly and we (in the Defender) had to tow them out. Not bad for a little 300Tdi engine, eh?

The trailer bent its axle and the FJ40 needed another tow. This time the powerful TDV8 Land Cruiser 79 Series dual cab kindly obliged. The Defender was free to forge ahead. At times the Defender sounded like an old wooden ship as it creaked and groaned while making its way through the mud and water.

The convoy had split in two as those being towed fell further and further behind. The sunset came and went and the moon started to rise. We were booked to stay in the Birdsville Hotel,

**Below:** Water, water and more water. And mud. An off-road race, due to be held in this area, was cancelled thanks to all the water. But it didn't stop the old icons from completing the trip.



**ICONS – the inside info and opinions**

Dean Mellor, left, is an Australian 4x4 guru and former editor of *4x4 Australia* who shares with us why these particular vehicles are Australian icons.

South African Patrick Cruywagen, right, is the former bush editor of *SA4x4 magazine*, but currently resides in Britain where he is deputy editor of *Land Rover Monthly*.



**1976 FJ40 Toyota Land Cruiser**

Prior to the FJ40 arriving in Australia we only had Land Rovers, with the 2.25 four-cylinder petrol engines. Suddenly you had this 4.2-litre FJ40 and people were impressed by its performance. It did not take Toyota reliability and backup to surpass what Land Rover was doing. – **DM**

Yes, it did give us a few dramas but this is the closest thing I have ever driven to a Series Land Rover. It was just so much fun to drive, like being in an off-road go-kart. One could easily cruise along in it at 80–100km/h on a good dirt road. – **PC**

**1991 Nissan Patrol GQ**

The Patrol will always play second fiddle to the Land Cruiser in Australia; but in 1987, when the GQ launched, it was the first front and rear coil sprung 4WD wagon on the market, other than a Range Rover. All of a sudden you got this fantastic ride quality at an affordable price. It has a solid reputation for reliability, comfort and capability. – **DM**

The Patrol was like a tank. I can see why it is so popular in Australia. You don't need a brain to drive it. You just point it in the direction you want to go and it will get there, no matter what. – **PC**

**1994 Toyota Hilux SR**

This was the last of the live-axle Hiluxes and it was probably one of the first popularised dual cab utes to be used as a recreational vehicle. Lots of space to throw stuff in the back. Thanks to the live axles, it has great ground clearance. The fact that it is reliable and economical has made it the best-selling ute (it's a bakkie, mate – Ed) in Australia for the past 30 or so years. – **DM**

The Hilux is such an unassuming vehicle yet it does what all the other vehicles can do without ever moaning. It just gets on with the job. So what if it felt a little underpowered? – **PC**

**1995 Land Rover Defender 330Tdi**

The Defender has a very mixed reputation in Australia due to its poor reputation for reliability. Sometimes that is a bit unfounded. They got the basics right with the Defender: strong ladder chassis, live axles front and rear, coil spring suspension, lots of wheel travel, great comfort and good handling. I've driven Defenders all over Australia and they don't give you any more mechanical issues than other 4WDs. – **DM**

Yes, I have obvious bias towards this great piece of British design and engineering. They say that the 300Tdi engine is the best Defender engine ever and who are we to argue after it kicked some serious Japanese bottom while crossing the Simpson. The Defender is dead, long live the Defender. – **PC**



which was still about 100km away at this stage.

Suddenly the Defender lights went out and the vehicle just cut out. This was the moment Toyota and Nissan lovers around the world would have been waiting for. It had to be the alternator, we reckoned. No doubt clogged up from all the mud.

So we took two jerry cans of water and poured them over the alternator. It seemed to do the trick and off we went again. By the time we reached Big Red, the big dune at the end of the crossing, it was nearly 11pm.

The Defender was the first Icon at the top of Big Red while the Patrol GQ was having driver problems. Soon it, too, reached the top. We decided to push on to the legendary Birdsville Hotel as the FJ40 was at least an hour away.

They had kept the bar open for us even though it was around midnight when we parked our muddy Icons out-

side the hotel. Ben, the manager, was happy to see us. "Everyone else cancelled except you guys," he said.

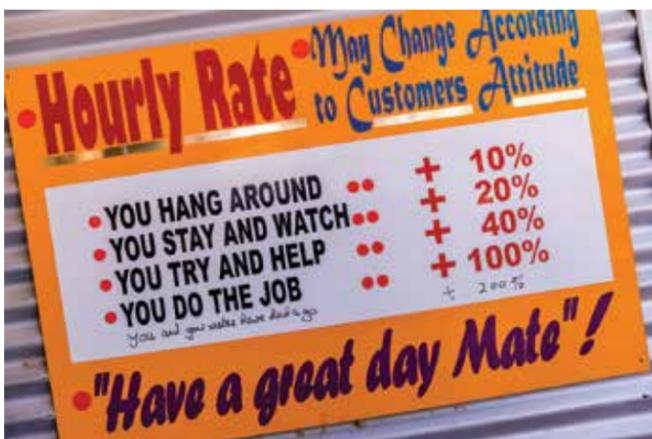
The rain and closed roads were having a devastating effect on local tourism. At 2am the Land Cruiser 79 Series and FJ40 made their appearance, the latter having been towed for 230km.

By now the tucker trailer was not at all well. Due to its bent axle, the wheels kept coming off. The main thing was that we had all made it across the desert in more or less one piece.

The next morning the trailer and the FJ40 were taken across the road to Barnsey at the Roadhouse. He said that in the past few months he had been fixing 20 alternators a month, due to the mud and rain.

He found a loose wire on the back of the FJ40's distributor and, after reattaching the wire, the Toyota started like a boss.

All the Icons were now good for another 40 years. Mostly. 



**Clockwise from top left:** Don't fiddle with an Aussie's tools, mate. • The 300Tdi and a splendid full moon. • If you want to hang around while this technician does his job, you may end up with a hefty bill. **This photo:** If you happen to be in the middle of a spectacular sunset after a few days in the Aussie outback, some creative jumping is in order.