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The Ghan: Great Train Journeys

Our series will help you tackle the world's greatest train journeys. This week: the Ghan.

THE GHAN



The route runs from Adelaide in the south to Darwin in the north

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Overview

Australia's red centre is one of the most spectacular wildernesses in the world, and the Ghan is unquestionably the most comfortable way to see it. The train runs through the heart of the country: 2,979km (1,861 miles) between the south coast at Adelaide and the north coast at Darwin, taking two nights and three days. It is named after the Afghans who helped to open up the Australian interior on camels imported from India.

Added to the allure of the outback is Alice Springs, a town of only 27,000 people that is known the world over as a symbol of isolation – so much so that even the philosopher Bertrand Russell had to go and see it for himself in 1950. From Alice, as the locals call it, you can visit the world's largest monolith, Uluru, or Ayers Rock.

Route

The journey begins at Adelaide station, a few kilometres from the city centre, and the train is soon bowling across the farming country of the Adelaide Plains, with the 700km-long (440-mile-long) Flinders Ranges coming into view to the north. By Crystal Brook, sheep have been added to wheat.

At Port Pirie, the centre of South Australia's heavy industry, colossal silver, lead and zinc smelters dominate the landscape. Within living memory Port Pirie was notorious as the meeting point of three different track gauges, necessitating much changing and trans-shipment.



The estuary-like Spencer Gulf is within view for much of the way to Port Augusta, gateway to the outback and its vital supply centre. This was the southern terminus of the original narrow-gauge Ghan train, which began its slow and fitful service to Stuart – later renamed Alice Springs – in 1929.

Disruption from frequent flooding prompted construction of a new standard-gauge railway, which by 1980 ran as far as Alice and in 2004 was finally extended to Darwin, an attractive town lined with single-storey houses in brick and stone surrounded by generous verandas.

It will almost certainly be dark as the train winds through sand hills and scrub forest before calling in the small hours at Tarcoola. If you are awake, it is worth getting off the train to be astounded by the brilliance of the night sky, so different from the northern hemisphere.

Manguri is the stop for opal-rich Coober Pedy, where the searing temperatures have forced some inhabitants to live underground. North of Kulgera is an Iron Man sculpture erected to commemorate the laying of the millionth track sleeper and honour the workers who built the line during the 1970s. As the train rumbles over the 15-span Finke River bridge, the railway is roughly as close as it gets to Uluru.

The approach to Alice is unmistakable. Ahead lie the tall MacDonnell Ranges, and the train heads for a gap so narrow that there is room only for the railway, the Todd River and a two-lane road. From a distance it looks as though a giant angle-grinder has been taken to the mountains.

Alice is like no other town, with its minority aboriginal population, its role as a hub for thousands of square miles around and its importance as a tourist centre. Hemmed in by the surrounding hills, it is having to expand to the south beyond the MacDonnells and near the airport.

The railway made Alice: pastoralists could send livestock to Adelaide in days rather than months, and in the first 10 months of the service 15,000 head of cattle worth \$436,000 were sent south.

The first trainload of conducted tourists arrived in 1930. Today the Ghan stops long enough for tours of the town, variously visiting the Flying Doctor Service Museum, Anzac Hill and its First World War memorial, the Women Pioneers' hall of fame, which pays tribute to early settlers, a reptile centre and the Telegraph Station (see below).

Pressing north across endless vistas of red earth under a sky of cobalt, the Ghan pauses at Tennant Creek, a centre of gold production and of the pastoral industry, which sustains cattle stations the size of Belgium. At Katherine there is another extended stop for a boat ride between the towering limestone walls of the crocodile-populated Nitmiluk Gorge, where the waters can rise 8 metres (more than 25ft) overnight.

The final stretch of the journey is through densely forested country interspersed with mango plantations and watermelons before mangroves lining the Elizabeth River herald arrival in Darwin, Australia's only tropical capital. The glossy laurel-like leaves and white flowers of frangipanis are typical of the luxuriant vegetation, a contrast with the arid country through which the Ghan has passed for much of the journey.



Highlights

At Alice Springs, passengers can visit the wonderfully atmospheric Telegraph Station a few miles out of town in a lonely but beautiful riverside location shaded by river red gum trees. The cluster of buildings at what was then named Stuart was part of the telegraph line that linked London with Darwin and Adelaide, which opened in 1872, reducing communication from two months to three hours.

Eucalyptus telegraph poles on the overland route were eaten in a matter of months by termites, and 3,000 steel poles had to be ordered from England. The first message Stuart received told of the death from thirst of the man making his way to become the first station master.

Booking

The Ghan is operated by Great Southern Rail (0061 8 8213 4592; greatsouthernrail.com.au), which also manages the other principal long-distance trains in Australia. At present there are two trains a week in each direction. The journey can be broken in Alice Springs, and GSR offers inclusive packages to Uluru, Kings Canyon and other attractions.

To book in Britain, contact Wexas (020 7590 0651; wexas.com/Australia).