

Bewitched by the **WITCHELINA TRACK**

By Grant & Linda Hanan

South Australia's far north is full of pastoral, railway and geological history. Grant and Linda share some highlights of this track that has it all.





The iconic Marree Hotel was the perfect ▲ place to start and finish our adventure.

Pulling up at the Marree Hotel in SA's far north, it's about now we're thinking ourselves lucky that our Witchelina Track adventure starts here. Well perhaps that's not quite right, when it really starts around 40kms south of Marree. But when this pub is where we pick up a gate key and pay access fees for the track, there was no complaints from us. Whether it was perfect timing of our afternoon arrival or as I like to call it, excellent planning, we spent a night right alongside the hotel. It's been a bit of a local institution for nearly 140 years and a dominant feature in Marree.

Luckily for pub visitors, there's a large sized designated camping area only a dozen or so steps from the pub. It costs just a few bucks per person a night and that's not bad when a hot shower and toilets are included. We also took advantage of a pub-cooked meal with a few drinks to kick this adventure off before stumbling back to the camper later that night.

For the next couple of days our plan was to explore a bit of the Witchelina Nature Reserve's 420,000 hectares. It's a track that may not be as well-known as its Oodnadatta Track neighbour up the road, but it has a lot going for it. For us 4W drivers, there's a few tracks (loops) of varying length and difficulty. While most of these start and end on the southern entry point by Farina, our loop departs from the northern end by Marree. This particular loop is a 138km round trip with 68km being off road, so it's not a long track by any means. But what makes the Witchelina Track such a drawcard is its diversity. Besides providing



▲ *Afternoon colours along the track.*

visitors with just a good dose of an outback experience, there's plenty of pastoral and geological history as well. And with two old Ghan railway lines passing smack-bang through the old station, these top this track experience off nicely.

If we go back to the early days of South Australia's colonisation, it was Edward John Eyre who came through the area in early 1840. At that time, two indigenous groups associated with the land within the reserve as we know it today. Nearly 20 years after Eyre's visit, it was the surveyor Samuel Perry who mapped the region in 1858. George Goyder then continued the job in 1859 and got as far as Lake Eyre.

With everything the Witchelina Track had going for it, it was one track we'd had on our radar for ages. We were two very happy campers who were about to finally make it happen. After a solid night's sleep in the camper, it was an early start the next morning. Breakfast was done and dusted

in next to no time and the camper packed up and vehicle checks completed. Time to head south. Having picked up the gate key and mud map the night before, we high-tailed it out of Marree along the bitumen for a little under 40km to the Witchelina Track turn-off. Here we hit the dirt and followed a track in for a short while before arriving at the locked gate. This spot marks the Witchelina boundary with the neighbouring Farina property.

As far as outback stations in South Australia go, Witchelina was originally established in the 1870s. The land was initially designated as two separate parcels that were set up for pastoral use. Over the next 130 years, cattle and sheep were grazed on Witchelina. It turned out sheep were better suited as they coped better with saltier water. For more than a century, there's been a number of Witchelina landowners. The station even formed part of Sidney Kidman's empire at one stage. A little more than ten years ago the property was again put on the market. This time it was picked up by the not-for-profit Nature Foundation SA. They've done significant work since taking ownership to de-stock and remove feral animals, plus they've got ongoing programs in place today to help restore the land and its habitats.



Comprehensive track notes are provided ▲ which highlights many points of interest along the track.

After unlocking the gate to drive on through, it was a quick job to lock it behind us and get going. At this point, we referred to the mud map and noted we'd just crossed the spot where the original narrow gauge (3 feet, 6 inches) railway line to Alice Springs remains. For railway buffs, this is the original Ghan line that was extended from Farina to Marree in 1884. Our mud map explains that the 4WD loops at Witchelina have signposted coloured arrows as markers for loop differentiation. As sections of the loops are shared, we read that you can't go wrong if you stick to the colour representing the track you're supposed to be on. Fair enough.

Following our mud map instructions and our black signposted arrow, we immediately took a turn and followed the nature reserve's boundary fence line. In fact, it turns out the fence has been erected on top of what was the old railway line and is hard to miss. After reaching a vehicle turn-around point, we got out to look around and saw this section of the line had been built on a floodplain. But it's some stone paving laid beneath the tracks that caught our eye. Around 300 metres of incredible stonework has been laid to prevent floodwaters washing out the ballast and undermining the tracks. Reflecting on this back breaking work makes us really appreciate this amazing piece of history before us that remains in such excellent condition.



A section of the hand laid stones. ▲

Back in our vehicle and heading west, we made out a large railway bridge not too far off in the distance. A quick look at the mud map indicated this bridge is part of a newer Ghan line put in only a little more than 60 years ago. Unlike the old Ghan line, this newer version uses standard gauge (4 feet, 8.5 inches). This line was put in to originally supply coal from Leigh Creek to

▼ *We came across all sorts of relics.*



Port Augusta's power station before the line was extended to Marree. Being a warm day, the shadows from the bridge ended up providing a perfect spot to park the 4WD while we had a mid-morning cuppa. It was then time to stretch the legs and take a walk up to the top where we could see for miles in all directions.

At this vantage point, we spotted a large span of water in the distance and hoped the track took us past it. It did. While we learnt Murrumbidgee Waterhole can be dry more often than not, we were grateful to see a series of shallow pools along the creek bed. Without doubt, the several black swans and other water birds we saw also enjoyed a bit of water as well. After leaving the floodplain, the track took us through some rolling hills and provided another aspect to the track. There were numerous creek crossings along this section that were either steep or a bit washed out, but nothing too serious. By taking things slow in the 79, our Ultimate camper simply rocked gently behind until the track smoothed out again.

We found it slow going for the first 25km of the track. Not because of the track's conditions, but simply because of the number of attractions that grabbed our attention. Whether it's simply by chance or good planning by those who put the track in, there's many pastoral relics to look at in this section. Old wells still remain, plus an assortment of water tanks of varying age,

▼ *Murrumbidgee Waterhole doesn't always have water, so we felt very lucky this visit.*



Building tanks with moats was ▲ a clever way to water stock.



An indication the area ▲ was once under water.

size and condition still standing. Spring Well and its stone tank are prominent features along here, and the old sheep yards nearby still get used occasionally for trapping goats.



Further on, we again stretched the legs to walk up into Spring Gully Gorge. Here it's hard to miss an old slate trough about 20 metres in length located at the gully's entrance. Used for watering stock, it more than likely was made using some of the colourful slate rock we found close by. Back on the track, we came across a pocket of mulga and mallee cuttings which we learnt were used as old fence posts. While mulga may be more sought after for its longevity and resistance to white ants, mallee also couldn't be discounted when it has the ability to re-sprout after cutting.

We now found ourselves following a dry Willawalpa Creek for around 13km. Along this section we passed a ridge of quartz strata. This natural ridge of this rock is pretty incredible. It rises a few metres above the ground and spans a couple of hundred metres in length. It actually looks so good, it could easily pass as being man-made.

▼ *Heading into Old Mount Nor'West Gorge.*



We stumbled across this colourful rock ▲ ridge during one of our walks.

The track swung northeast at this point and we arrived at the entrance to Mt Nor' West Gorge in about a kilometre. This was the only place during the loop where we needed to lock in low range. This section of the track is along a creek bed for well over a kilometre. The landscape here is dominated by 25 metre cliffs and the creek bed is full of large rocks. It was slow going in the 79 as we rolled over the rocks especially as we had the camper bobbing along behind. The track criss-crossed the creek bed for most of the gorge drive, but completely disappeared on a couple of occasions. This is when a spotter came in handy to help choose a line that avoided the vehicle getting hung up on rocks. It was a highlight driving this section and a good place to stop for a few pics.



With the shadows getting longer as we exited the gorge, it was a good time to pull up stumps. As it turns out, a campground and drop toilet are located only a few hundred metres from the gorge near the Old Mount Nor'West homestead and ruins. That's perfect timing. Setting up just as the sun was dropping, it was good to put the feet up and take in our surroundings.

The next morning, we wandered around the station's old stockyards that sit alongside the campground before continuing on. Back in the vehicle, we crossed the dry creek bed where we found the old homestead only a short distance away. This area was originally part of a separate lease to Witchelina called Old Mount Nor'West Station. The station was established by Henry McConville in 1873, but he didn't hold the lease for long. As is the case with many pastoral properties, getting water around the place for stock was a costly exercise. Henry ended up selling a portion of his land to his Witchelina neighbours later the same year. The station's old homestead has since been restored by the Nature Foundation and is available for overnight stays. Alongside the homestead, we explored the ruins of an original store and an office building of sorts. We also found a few bits and pieces scattered around the place from the station's smiddy.

Leaving the homestead and only travelling a few hundred metres up the track, it wasn't

▼ *Witchelina's shearing shed ruins.*



The site of the Old Mount Nor'West Homestead and ruins. ▲



A few bits and pieces around the old shearing shed. ▲

long before we were out of the vehicle again. This time we'd come across the ruins of what was once old stone shearers' quarters. It was a substantial building, but no roof and the walls were in a poor state. Amongst the site we found a few shearing implements, plus an old bread oven and a couple of coppers for washing clothes. The ruins of the station's woolshed were located



not far after here. Also built in the 1870s, the woolshed had 24 blade shearing stands. But with advancements in technology, blade shearing changed to mechanical shearing in about 1918. In its heyday, we learnt the station ran around 24,000 sheep. Taking a walk around, there were numerous old blade shears, shearing combs, kerosene tins and other bits and pieces to fossick through. We love the fact we can see all this stuff in its natural state for visitors to appreciate.

Over a rise, we experienced another change in the landscape. Where we had previously been traversing through sections of sandstone and siltstone, we now reached a pocket of glistening white gravel. These were remnants of weathered quartz outcrops. As we reached the far end of the outcrop, we found the track again runs parallel with Willawalpa Creek.

As we got closer to the end of the track, it swung by an impressive embankment of the standard gauge Ghan railway. There's a 19-span bridge here that's impressive to say the least and made for an excellent lunch stop. The outlook from atop provided us with spectacular 360° views of the reserve's land including the magnificent Willouran Range in the distance. What a fitting way to end the track. Just prior to reaching the Witchelina boundary fence and another locked gate, we crossed the original narrow-gauge Ghan railway for the last time. A line of decaying wooden sleepers stretched either side of the track here gave us a final glimpse into this remarkable track's history.

For our visit to Witchelina, we also took a side trip to the Witchelina Station homestead area. This section isn't part of the Marree loop and is generally accessed from those loops starting from the southern end by Farina. We knew accommodation and camping was available at the station, but were eager to look through the



Inside the woolshed at Witchelina Station. ▲

magnificent shearing shed that's been restored. The detour was well worth it!

Now that we've completed one of the Witchelina Track loops, we know we'll be back to explore the other loops. This reserve is like visiting a museum ... on its own, it's just a great place to learn about the region's pastoral, railway, and geological history. But when you can still touch, feel and experience relics of yesteryear in this day and age, well that's something else. Combine this all with some of the most diverse and spectacular outback landscapes of South Australia's far north, and this track has the lot. It might be a big call, but the Witchelina Track could be one of the state's best kept secrets ... for now.

INFORMATION BAY

Best time to go: Anytime except summer.

Distance: Approx. 170km

Terrain: The unsealed track is generally in good condition with a few steep creek crossings (dry) and washouts to negotiate. The section through the gorge comprises large rocks where low range will need to be engaged.

Accommodation options:

Camping is available at Witchelina Station and Old Mount Nor'West Station.

Overnight stays in the homesteads are available with prior arrangement.