

Across the Simpson with a Trailer

(“Take it easy – they all roll over”)



Why tow a trailer across the Simpson Desert? For me, the reason was that I had a good off-road trailer and I planned to be away from home for at least five weeks – only four nights of which would be spent in the Simpson Desert. I wasn't too keen to spend the other thirty odd nights on an air-bed if I could help it. Furthermore the trailer has a 60 litre water tank, a carrier for three jerry cans, and the capacity to carry a lot of gear such as gas bottles which I didn't want in or on the vehicle.

But before I finally decided to take the trailer I needed to consider three important questions. One, would the trailer survive the crossing? Two, would my vehicle be able to get the trailer over the sand dunes?

And three, what support would I have if I got into difficulties?

The trailer

My trailer is described as a Group 2 Track Trailer Camper. I purchased it new in 1992 and since then have towed it over some of the roughest tracks in Australia including the Gunbarrel Highway, most of the top end, the Tanami, and many tracks in between. It is a very light, well sprung trailer. I call it my bed on wheels – but it's really a tent on wheels – no frills, no solid floor, just a big six inch foam mattress. The trailer has independent suspension, coil springs, and adjustable Koni shocks. The only trouble I have had with it is with the

electric brakes which tend to rattle to pieces in the wheels. The wheels and tyres were matched to my old 60 series LandCruiser (10R15 Bridgestone Desert Duelers).

I was confident that the trailer would survive the crossing.

The vehicle

The towing vehicle was a 200 series LandCruiser. With its 4.5 litre V8 twin turbo diesel motor, automatic gearbox, and all of the bells and whistles that are supposed to stop the wheels from spinning I decided it had better do the job or I'd be talking to Mr Toyota. But just in case, I talked to others who had made the Simpson crossing with a trailer, and I sought the advice of members of our 4WD club. Everyone said that the vehicle would do it easily.

Support

My travelling companions (who didn't tow trailers) were two couples from Gippsland who were very experienced 4WDers. One had already done three Simpson crossings.

Their vehicles were powered by 6.5 litre GM diesels and they each had a winch.

One vehicle was a late 60 series LandCruiser (our leader) and the other a Troop Carrier. We had a mini Toyota convoy.

We had plenty of spare wheels, tubes, multiple snatch straps and a good collection of other recovery and repair equipment.

Our Achilles heel was the 200 series wheels. All of our other wheels were interchangeable between vehicles and the trailer. But the mongrel size of my wheels was a potential problem. Apart from that, we thought we had prepared ourselves as well as we could for the crossing.

The chosen route

Our leader, Laurie, (every convoy needs a leader – official or unofficial) decided that we would travel East to West across the French Line. He had already crossed three times and chose that particular route because he wanted a challenge. We met in Burra and headed for Birdsville, camping in the Flinders Ranges and at Mirra Mitta Bore along the way.

The plan was to leave Birdsville a week before the annual races to avoid the crowds (camp ground fees doubled from \$22 to \$44 a night on the day we left Birdsville). In preparation for the races most roads in the district, including the Birdsville Track, had been graded. That was fine from Marree to the Mirra Mitta Bore. It was easy to maintain speeds between 80 and 90 kph along this section. But north of the bore, long stretches of track had been 'repaired' by shifting rocks from the Great Stony Desert onto the road and levelling them with a grader. Unfortunately for us (probably one of the first to travel on the repaired sections) the grader had split the rocks leaving many jagged edges exposed. I shredded one tyre and the Troop Carrier did two tyres and a tube. What fun the pair of us had stripping wheels in the afternoon sun in the desert. Laurie, who had matching wheels, was in a bit of a hurry. He had gone on ahead and was out of radio contact when the fun started. Plan A was to use the trailer spare wheel on the Troop Carrier, but the Troopie's wheel nuts were not long enough for the trailer mags and the road was too rough to risk cannibalising nuts from the trailer wheels. So out came the bead-breaker and tyre levers.

Fortunately, the Birdsville garage was able to replace my tyre, but couldn't help with a 32" BFGoodrich for the Troopie.

Then it rained.

Nine mils of rain fell on the night before we were due to head in the direction of Big Red. The Birdsville pub was busy that night and we were bombarded with pessimism about the prospects of getting the trailer across from East to West along the French Line. We listened. Laurie and I remained confident but our Troopie companions started to get cold feet.

Next morning we sought advice from the local police and from the mechanic at the garage. The police said that the trailer would not be a problem but the rain could make the clay pan crossings difficult. More rain was forecast in two days' time. The mechanic was a man of few words. He just

said "take it easy – they all roll over" and he pointed to the line-up of wrecks out the front, which included a very bent 100 series cruiser.



The crossing

So we set out that morning, two of us without any reservations but with a couple of Nervous Nellys in the Troopie. We decided to play it by ear. We had no time constraints and plenty of food, fuel and water – and a Sat phone. If the going got tough we were prepared to sit it out and wait for conditions to improve.

I approached the first sand dune with some trepidation but followed Laurie over the top with no effort at all. I asked him if it was a big dune or a small one. "That was the chicken run" he said. We had been over the south end of Big Red. It was then on to the base of Big Red proper where a couple of other vehicles were attempting to go over from the west side – with long run-ups, much screaming of motors, and no success. The sand was still wet from the previous night's rain and the going quite heavy. Laurie tried his luck with his 6.5 litre GM and couldn't make it on his first two attempts so I decided to have a go minus the trailer and got over with ease. The rev counter barely got above 2000 rpm as the auto gearbox did its work. I didn't try with the trailer.

As we travelled west that day we encountered no oncoming traffic. The rain had been much heavier at the Dalhousie end of the track and had stopped most traffic from that end. But conditions got better for us as a strong wind dried the

sand during the day. The trailer was no trouble at all and the snatch strap didn't come out until day three. Fine, hot days (the forecast rain didn't eventuate) and a strong wind combined to make conditions tricky at the top of some dunes. If you stopped you sank in the fine loose sand – and sometimes it was necessary to stop at the top to find the track on the other side of a dune.

At the top of one dune we managed to break my 'old faithful' snatch strap at both ends at once. Then with the new strap (which I should have been using anyhow) we bogged a vehicle at each end with the strap pulled tight between us. Then it was out with the long-handled shovels. The whole exercise took no more than twenty minutes – which prompts a bit of advice for what it is worth.

If you don't quite make it to the top of a sand dune and you already have another convoy vehicle at the top, don't bother to back down and try again – that's when roll-overs occur, either on the way back down or because of excessive speed on your second or third attempt. Just get the snatch strap out and you'll find that it usually takes very little effort to get up and over. And that applies whether or not you are towing a trailer.

Being able to back a trailer properly is essential for anyone who tows a trailer anywhere (and especially in the Simpson) but is no help when the trailer slips sideways and out of line near the top of a dune. Once again, the easiest – and sometimes the only – way to recover is to get snatched from the top.

We completed the crossing from Birdsville to Dalhousie in the standard four days. None of the track was particularly difficult but conditions changed from wet and heavy on day one to very dry and soft on days three and four. The track is very rough, not naturally but from the effects of traffic. At times corrugations turn into moguls, both of which are punishing on trailers. I would not attempt to tow a standard trailer across, but I have no doubt there will be some who have. At Dalhousie there was a collection

of all sorts of vehicles and trailers heading east to the Birdsville races. Many seemed to be poorly prepared. One group thought they would make it in a day! We wished them luck. At Mount Dare a couple of trailers recovered from the desert proved that they don't all make it.

Next time I cross the Simpson, if I tow a trailer, I will fit a different coupling to the trailer. With hindsight, my standard coupling was obviously a weak point although it held together. Tell-tale scrapes on the tow bar indicate that at the top of some steep dunes, and on some of the moguls, the coupling hit the tow bar as it exceeded the limit of its flexibility. Maybe I was lucky.



A ban on trailers?

It has been suggested that trailers be banned from the Simpson. I would not agree with that. My limited experience is that if conditions are favourable the crossing can be easily managed with the right vehicle (preferably an automatic) a good off-road trailer, and the support of at least one other well prepared vehicle. While I did see several trailers that failed, I also saw a line up of wrecks (non of which towed trailers) and a hair raising photo gallery at the Birdsville garage. The bottom line being that you need to prepare well, and as the mechanic said – take it easy, they all roll over.

Report by Bruce Gooday