Remote roadhouse true winner in long, long run

MATT GARRICK

RUSTING and buckled car bodies, sand and spinifex; that’s about the extent of what lies out along the long dusty road linking Alice Springs to Halls Creek.

The Tanami Track runs for 10,583km, stretching like an endless serpent from the centre of Australia to the East Kimberley cowboy town.

Heeding out on to the track, one finds themselves bouncing between bitumen sections and bumpy red dirt.

Years of government funding have eventuated in partial paving of the road, but because of the remoteness, size and cost of the job, great chunks remain unsealed. These patches have wreaked havoc on the tyres of many a four-wheel drive over the decades.

And for some unfortunate souls, the harsh driving conditions of the lonely Tanami have even cost them their lives.

This intrepid desert crossing from the Northern Territory to the far reaches of Western Australia is not for the faint hearted – and it demands proper preparation.

In 2014, just one petrol stop still stands along the track: the Tilmouth Well Roadhouse.

It’s an oasis for thirsty travellers to shake the dust from their trousers, fill their tanks and sip an icy brew for the long drive ahead.

Situated 195km from Alice Springs, 559km from the West Australian border and a monstrosity trek of more than a 1000km from Halls Creek, the Tilmouth Well Roadhouse acts as an antidote to the tedious hours spent concentrating on the rocky road.

Set on the edge of the 4000sq km Napperby cattle station, the business is as busy as an isolated outpost can be.

For the last two years, the roadhouse has been run by Robert Stein; a towering bushman with cattlemen’s blood pulsing through his veins.

In a previous life, Robert managed a caravan park on the rocky road, but he also understands the harsh driving conditions of the Tanami.

As well as a handy stop for provisions and a priceless source of information for travellers, Tilmouth Well also provides accommodation for the weary wanderers who happen to roll through.

“We’re pretty busy – we’ve got government service workers, truck drivers and local Indigenous people who come through pretty regularly,” Robert explained.

“Now we just go out the back and try to shoot camels and roos.”

Robert is used to the isolation; he spent years of his childhood growing up on the remote cattle stations of Paroo in the Pilbara and Gogo in the Kimberley.

“The bush has always been in my blood,” he said with simple pride.

But he also understands that travellers who set path across the Tanami may not be as accustomed to the barren desert wildernesses as himself.

Some people come out here, and they don’t have the concept of what they’re in for.

“They turn up here at three in the afternoon, in an old Commodore with no water and four bald tyres, hoping to get to Halls Creek by sundown.

“You have to turn them around. You have to say to them: ‘Do you know what you’re doing?’”

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“Were pretty busy – we’ve got government service workers, truck drivers and local Indigenous people who come through pretty regularly.

“We’ve got an airstrip out here, so we’re also a major stopover for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. If they need to attend an accident out on the track.”

As well as attracting thousands of flies in the summer, the business also pulls in brave backpackers looking for unique employment during their Aussie adventure.

One of these hardy souls is German-born traveller Marika Gargulak, 28, who has been spending the winter months of this year working as an all-rounder at Tilmouth Well.

“I don’t mind living in these remote parts,” Marika said through a heavy accent.

“This is what I want to see – I was in Melbourne and I didn’t like it.

“Out here in the outback, you meet all types of people, and you become like a little family.”

Although she had warmed to the camaraderie out in the bush, there was one thing that bugged Marika about living out on the Tanami.

“The flies, I hate them. I’d rather share a room with a million cockroaches than have half a million flies in my face.”

As the sun begins to heat up, heralding the start of summer, the droves of tourists rocking up to Tilmouth Well have started to diminish – but nothing will stop the flies.

Roadhouse staff Codie Alexander, Marika Gargulak, Samantha Barnes and manager Robert Stein with Tanami Transport road trains parked up in front of the Tilmouth Well Roadhouse, the last remaining roadhouse on the Tanami Road since Rabbit Flat Roadhouse, near the WA border, closed in 2010.

Picture: PHIL WILLIAMS

Rusted car bodies mark the landscape along the Tanami.