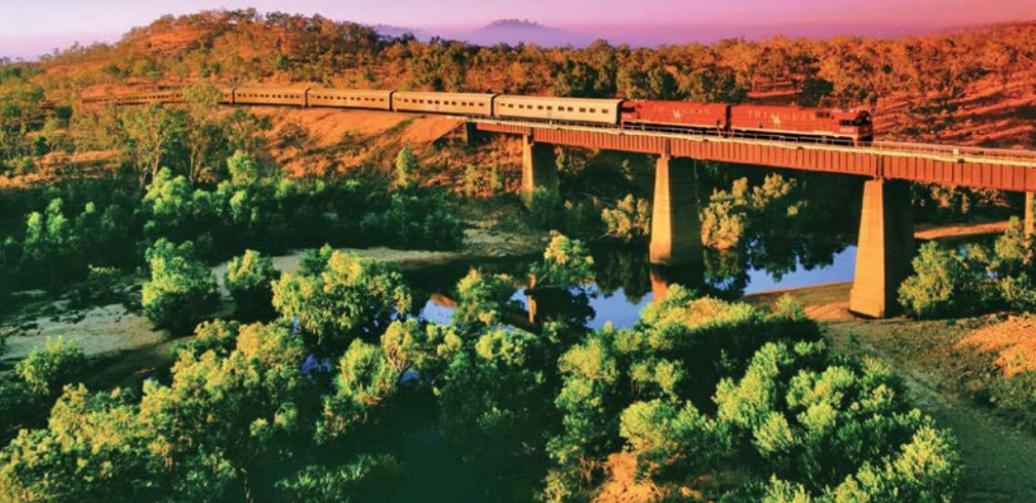


# GOING PLACES

ROBERT UPE



## FAIR DINKUM

*Australia's Red Centre by rail*



The European tourist at Adelaide's Parklands Train Terminal has finished his cold drink in Choo-Choo's Café, but there's little relief for him from the potentially rail-buckling 42-degree heatwave. So he wanders on to Platform 1 to look for his air-conditioned carriage on *The Ghan*, scheduled to leave soon on its regular three-day run to Darwin.

**H**e walks back and forth eyeing the train and heaving a bag, and becomes flustered, unable to find his place on this 2979-kilometre transcontinental rail journey.

As passengers take photos of the famous red locomotives with the camel logo, and beetroot-faced porters help others find their private cabins – with carpets, soft-cushioned couches, fold-out beds and en suites – the European asks a rail worker for directions.

He is directed to Platform 2, out of sight via an underground walkway, on the other side of the train. “But how can that be?” he protests. “*The Ghan*’s right here on Platform 1 ...”

The answer is that the train is split into two. It’s almost one kilometre long, with two locomotives and 34 carriages that won’t fit along a single platform. Depending on demand, even more carriages can be added to stretch it to 1.2 kilometres, putting it among the longest passenger trains in the world. It will be coupled together only when it’s ready to nose out of the station – on a track that will take it past Port Augusta, the Flinders Ranges, Woomera, Alice Springs, Katherine and finally Darwin.

Paul Theroux, in his book, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, writes: “I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it.” And so it is with *The Ghan*. You wouldn’t be anywhere else as its mighty NR class diesel-electric locomotives start up and the two sections of train shunt together with a jolt, ready to speed across the continent through wheat-belt and red-sand desert as the upper-class passengers eat barramundi and spanner crab.

Australia’s former deputy prime

minister, Tim Fischer, is a rail enthusiast, and in his 2011 book, *Trains Unlimited in the 21st Century*, he selects 10 long-distance trains he regards as stellar. “*The Ghan* is among those,” he says. “You can sit back and not have a worry in the world. I recommend it as a rite-of-passage for every Australian,” he says.

I occasionally see a kangaroo eyeing us curiously as we speed along (the average speed is 85km/h, but the train gets up to 115km/h) – and even more curious train-spotters armed with cameras and notebooks at level crossings.

**T**he *Ghan*’s inaugural journey from Adelaide to Alice Springs was in 1929, but this trip is to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the route extending all the way to Darwin, on February 1, 2004.

Fischer is on board for the run, as well as two of *The Ghan*’s drivers – Graham Sharp, who’s been with the railways for 57 years, and Graham Dadleh, who’s a





descendant of the pioneering Afghan cameleers, after whom the train is named. Both were drivers on the inaugural Ghan journey to Darwin 10 years ago.

The drivers don't take the train from start to finish, but they work in relay teams and only on the sections of track for which they are qualified. On *The Ghan*, which can take 1.5 kilometres to stop, they need to know intricacies such as the gradient, curves and speeds.

Sharp says one of the toughest things about the job is staying alert. To help drivers do this, there's a 'vigilance' button in the driver's cabin that needs to be pushed every 90 seconds. If the button's not pressed, a bell rings in the locomotive cabin and gets progressively louder. If there's still no reaction, the train undergoes an emergency stop.

Except for the ever-vigilant drivers, the journey on *The Ghan* is punctuated by drinks and meals. The drinks are served in the comfortable lounge cars, where passengers mingle, play board games or read – with meals served in the Queen Adelaide dining car:

Nullarbor Plains kangaroo loin mignon, saltbush lasagne, beef cheek with shitake mushrooms and medium-rare lamb

cutlets are among the three-course lunch and dinner mains ... while breakfasts and brunch are equally exciting, with wild-peach parfait, eggs florentine, crispy-skinned salmon and Barossa Valley chorizo.

The train's senior chef de partie, Joseph Cobiac, says *The Ghan* serves 1.3 million dishes a year from the narrow kitchens that have limited storage and fridge space, and only two ovens. "Obviously, we can't have big pots simmering away for eight hours, so the sauces are pre-made to our recipes," he says. "But everything else is done fresh."

The most popular choices are barra-mundi and lemon meringue. Cobiac says in future he wants to create menus with more emphasis on regional produce, including crocodile sausage as the train reaches the Top End.

After dinner one evening, I go for a long walk to the back of the train. There, the European gives me a wave, happy to have found his place on Australia's most iconic train trip. ❁

---

ROBER UPE IS AN AUSTRALIAN TRAVEL WRITER.  
REPRINTED WITH THANKS FROM 'TRAVELLER'  
WEBSITE – WWW.TRAVELLER.COM.AU – PUBLISHED  
BY FAIRFAX MEDIA

---

Join Grapevine's John & Robyn Cooney for 15 days in June 2015



## Midlife Madness on the GHAN

Great Aussie Train Journey – Adelaide to Darwin

Adelaide • Hahndorf • Barossa • Alice Springs • Uluru  
Kings Canyon • Katherine Gorge • Darwin • Kakadu

0800 277 477 — roger.glynan@lionworld.co.nz