

AustralAsia Railway

History Of Alice Springs

Alice Springs, nestled between the MacDonnell Ranges, is a pioneering town, with a unique outback identity. (The ranges are in the background of today's event.)

Known as 'The Heart, the Soul, the Centre', the town is home to 27,000 people. A quarter of the population is Aboriginal, most of them Arrernte people.

The original 'Alice Springs' was named by telegraph master Charles Todd to mark the site of the Overland Telegraph station established several kilometres from the current township. The town of Stuart grew nearby, the name being changed in 1932 to Alice Springs when the post office moved.

There were only 200 residents in the town by 1929, but the arrival of the first train fostered the economic growth of Central Australia and reduced Stuart's isolation, as well as bringing the golden era of cameleers to an end. Freight and building materials could be transported easily for the first time, prompting new buildings and an influx of new residents. The first trains south carried 3000 cattle from the property of Sir Sidney Kidman to market in Adelaide.

Tourists were quick to arrive, although in 1930 the first major flood in 15 years saw the first bridge across the Finke River washed away, major damage to the line, and a suspension of services for six weeks.

Harry Moss, who came to Alice Springs in 1943 as the second pilot with Connellan Airlines, recalls the enormous impact of the Ghan's arrival in the town in the 1940s. It would pull in on Saturday night, with the town assembled to check out the latest arrivals. The Ghan would sit in the yards overnight, then depart as the locals threw toilet paper in place of streamers and the train's driver kept an eye on cattle heading for Adelaide*.

Diesel trains arrived in the 1950s and in 1980 the new standard gauge line from Tarcoola to Alice Springs opened, replacing the worn out narrow gauge line through Oodnadatta and Finke.

Major tourist attractions in Alice Springs include the \$20 million dollar Alice Springs Desert Park, the School of the Air, Telegraph Station, Anzac Hill, and annual attractions such as the Henley-on-Todd, Finke Desert Race and Bangtail Muster.

Alice Springs is just four hours' drive from the famous Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) and three hours' from the spectacular Kings Canyon.

Although tourism is Central Australia's most valuable sector, attracting 300,000 visitors a year, the region also supports cattle and mining industries and has an injection of \$70 million a year through the Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap.

The climate has fostered a growing arid zone research industry, with technology being exported to desert countries across the world. This concept is being expanded under the Northern Territory Government's Alice in Ten project, which aims to establish an internationally recognised centre for desert knowledge.

The Alice in Ten program also includes plans to improve the town's environment to retain its outback character and charm, tackle alcohol and substance abuse issues, improve the quality of life for all residents, improve the Todd and Charles Rivers, better service the mining industries and develop a convention centre.

The town's Mayor is Mrs Fran Erlich.

**From an oral history held by the Northern Territory Archives Service.*



Northern Territory Government