

How to enjoy two nights and three days on the ultimate journey

ARCHIE BAYVEL
takes The Ghan for a ride

The Ghan, all 700 metres of it rolls serpent-like out of Adelaide's Keswick station into lush countryside on what its operators describe as the ultimate journey.

We view this through double-glazed windows from a day-night seat in a Red Service carriage aboard this iconic train. We of the Red Service fall into four broad categories:

- Elderly retirees innocently embarking on a \$710 adventure
- European back-packers who after travelling half-way around the world see the oily rag on whose smell they exist as the warm rug the train's managers advise them to carry.
- Young, under-40, Australian travellers whose previous experience of long-distance train travel is the Sydney to Gosford Tangara.
- Four Aboriginal groups – three of whom carry large quantities of quilts.

The Ghan rolls ever onwards smooth as silk; a line of some 30 huge power-generating windmills float by.

Then one goes to the toilet. There are two in each Red Service carriage. One marked for ladies, the other for gentlemen. It is not until Alice Springs, 24 hours away, that the train hostess announces that it is permissible to use either toilet in an emergency. "We don't want you wee-ing on the floor," she announces.

It's an extraordinary concern given the men's cubical contains a urinal the size of a large tombstone in addition to a normal WC and a washbasin the size of a small pudding bowl.

But we are running ahead. Long before Alice Springs comes Night. The first of two on this three-day 2790 km journey.

Night is when the elderly think it's time to sleep. They adjust what the brochure describes as their comfortable recliner lounge and find it reclines a few centimetres at most. They also discover there is neither footrest nor lip to their seat to prevent them sliding to the floor under the seat in front.

There are many vacant seats however so they try lying diagonally across two of them.

The space is too short so they try another position, and another, all night.

A brace of young women are petite enough to curl up and sleep like babies, the hardened backpackers after a similar night in Adelaide have already been unconscious since Port Augusta and will not revive until Alice Springs when they leave the train.

The purpose of the Aborigines' bundles becomes clear when they pile them on the floor between the seats where they sleep in chaotic comfort. A young mum with an astonishingly blonde toddler beds down in a space beside the toilet – Ladies of course – and runs an iPod lead through the door hinge to the razor power and rocks off to the music of her dreamtime.

The fourth group of Aborigines – those without mountains of bedding – do the night sitting up. Come morning their faces are deeply crevassed, their complexions as ashen as everyone else enjoying the Red Service experience which the brochure describes as the most economical way to travel.

By now we are rolling, still smooth as silk, through the dry country around The Alice where everyone gets out for four hours' sightseeing.

There we confront The Ghan's other passengers – those of the Gold Service (\$1980 for those, the ad says, who want to travel in comfort) about whose comfy beds, luxury showers and personal service travel writers rave. You are one of the first people ever to read about the Red Service.

These other people wear fluffy twinsets, new suede slippers, iron-creased jeans and look fresh from a retirement village. Their Red fellows' twinsets are piled, they look as though they haven't slept and have had difficulty adjusting their dress before leaving.

Then time to roll and it is night again. Some of the backpackers have abandoned their day-nighters, paid extra for a bunk and vanished from our company.

How the Ghan's advertising sees the Red Service



The Top End

In due course it's lights-out and the carriage becomes a restless dormitory again. Time to explore its safety features.

Full marks for the first of them. All external doors are centrally locked and sealed and emergency turnkeys are inconspicuously stored against unauthorised use. There are no emergency exits to tempt intruders as the train rolls at 115 kph through the dark. With everything safely sealed there's no point in having emergency or floor lighting that would only keep people awake.

Perversely, however, one recalls pictures of derailed carriages lying on their side and wonders how elderly passengers, how anyone would escape in the dark with all these backpackers and their belongings piled on top of them and the carriage in lockdown. But then, they don't have parachutes on airliners do they?

Putting these thoughts aside one scrambles back past the legs, heads and arms to one's own seat and falls happily asleep. This is work, after all.

Not so for any of the others however who - 12 hours later and as the train, now in tropical

savannah and two hours late on the third day of its roll - are treated to a farewell message from one of the train staff. He hopes we have enjoyed our trip and looks forward to seeing us on another of Great Southern Railways' wonderful journeys.

The carriage erupts with jeers and the leader of a group of English ladies shouts: "Our country has the world's worst trains but this beats them all."

Bloody Poms! They'd complain about anything. ▲▲



*The reality:
How travellers have to spend their nights*