Point Stuart Coastal Reserve

Test Your Expedition Party

Stuart’s expedition was successful because of his experience, careful planning, discipline, bush skills and persistence. However, he laid down strict rules for his party. If your ‘expedition party’ would like to travel by Stuart’s rules, first nominate two officers - Exploration Leader and Stock Control Officer - and some expeditioners. Here are the rules:

Rules Enforced by Supply Control Officer

- Nothing to be taken out of bags without the Stock Control Officer’s knowledge.
- When anything is removed from a pack it is to be packed up in the same manner as it was found.
- Each pair of bags to be of equal weight.
- Breakfast to be ready at the same time for which an ½ hour will be allowed.
- Riding horses saddled first and everything belonging to them placed on the saddles.
- When on the march, no water to be used from the canteens without permission from the leader.

Rules Enforced by Expedition Leader

- Officers to see that orders to be promptly and willingly obeyed.
- Any disobedience, disagreement or neglect of duty must at once be reported to the leader.
- The officers will ensure that every man does an equal share of work.
- No horses are to be abused, kicked, or struck about the head.
- Everyone must be up at break of day, the bedclothes etc to be put into their proper places.
- Horses brought in and unhobbled.
- No one is to leave the line of march without the leader’s knowledge.
- No one is to fire on natives without the leader’s knowledge.
- No one is to leave the line of march without the leader’s knowledge.
- No one is to go without arms and ammunition.
- No one is to sleep on natives without orders unless in self defense.
- No swearing or improper language.
- No journal to be kept or notes taken (except the Naturalist).
- Saddles are not to be sat upon (except when on a horse).
- Anyone detached on special duty from camp or on the march must report himself on his return.

Walk to Coast via Memorial

(Sorry - no road access)

Start: Day Use Area
Distance: 6 km return
Condition: exposed floodplain and broken ground.
Time: Allow 2 hours return.

Drinking Water

Carry and drink plenty of water - there is none in the Reserve. Calculate your needs at 6 litres per person per day.

A Great Explorer

John McDouall Stuart was arguably the greatest inland explorer of Australia. He was an experienced surveyor and bushman; had led expeditions to the north and west of South Australia (SA) looking for copper, gold and pastoral lands; and, from his previous attempts to cross the continent, knew a well watered route between Adelaide and the ‘interior’.

Telegraph links

By 1861 the four mainland colonies (NSW, SA and Qld) were telegraphically linked. Interest and pressure grew to link Australia to England and Europe by extending the British submarine cable from Java to the nearest land point on the continent where Darwin now stands.

Reward Offered

The SA government was keen to discover a route for the proposed telegraph link to Britain, and offered £2,000 to the first person to cross the continent from SA to the north coast.

Financing the Journey

Stuart’s friends, William Finke and pastoralists James and John Chambers financed the expedition hoping Stuart would also find new pastoral lands.

Stuart’s Previous Attempts

Stuart had a strong personal ambition to cross the continent, and had previously attempted to do so. In March 1860 he led a party of William Kekwick, Benjamin Head and 13 horses. They reached Attack Creek (70 km north of Tennant Creek) but turned back after an almost fatal attack by hostile Aboriginal people.

Stuart then set out (Jan 1861) with a larger party of 10 men and 44 horses. They advanced 150 miles (250 km) beyond Attack Creek, but the tough, stony Sturt Plains were too hard on the horses (their shoes wore out, concealed potholes were dangerous, and water was scarce), so Stuart turned back to ensure the expedition survived the return journey.

Burke and Wills

The Victorian government was also keen to support a successful expedition to cross the continent. Burke and Wills set off from Melbourne on 20th August 1860, reached the Gulf of Carpentaria on 11th February 1861, but tragically died on their return journey.

Stuart knew of their success and death before he set out in October 1861 for his last successful attempt.
An Epic Journey

Stuart’s last expedition party was larger than his previous parties. It consisted of 72 horses and 10 men: Stuart (Commander), William Kelkewich (2nd in Command), Francis Thring (3rd Officer, Cadet Surveyor), William Auld (Assistant), Stephen King Jnr, John Billiat, James Frew Jnr, Heath Nash, John McGregor (Shoeing Smith), Frederick Waterhouse (Government Naturalist).

They officially left North Adelaide on 25th October 1861. When they reached the previous camp at Newcasttle Waters where they rested the horses for a week before attempting to cross Stuart’s Plains. Stuart scouted ahead finding waterholes, creeks, springs and rivers, which he named after his exploration party. As they neared the coast they followed what we now know as the Mary River, camped near what is now Mistake Billabong and Shady Camp. Then, via a similar route to today’s Pt Stuart 4WD track, they reached the northern coastal floodplains.

‘The sea has been reached’

On 24th July 1862, Stuart rode ahead on the coastal plains, he could hear the sea. The rest of the party crossed the plains and entered the coastal plains, he could see the sea. The rest of the party continued onto the beach, Stuart named the area Chambers Bay in honour of Elizabeth and the Union Jack had cleared an area and stripped the finacier. The Union Jack made by Elizabeth Chambers, daughter of James (expedition financier). The Union Jack had its flag sewn in the middle. After their departure, Stuart’s party had travelled to the coast via a completely different river. In the 20 years it took to officially find the tree, there was doubt about Stuart’s success, although an NT Government resident report states that Wulna Aboriginal people remembered Stuart’s arrival and knew the location of the tree. ‘Sonnie remembered his uncle telling him how he first saw the flag while walking on the beach, and that at first he thought it debbil debbly called by the natties, Peyarn (evil spirit); how his uncle took down the flag and followed the white’s track till he was knocked up, and then returned, when he cut up the flag and divided it amongst his friends.’

In 1884 a search party set out when he cut up the flag and divided it amongst his friends. His map was so correct that we used simply to put a protractor and scale on it, get the bearing and distance, and ride with the same confidence as we would ride from Adelaide to Gawler. R. Knuckey, Overland Telegraph Line.

References:

Stuart’s Great Northern Exploring Expedition across the Continent: October 1861 - July 1862

As an expedition leader, Stuart had travelled over 12,000 miles (about 20,000 km) in just over 4 years, usually under harsh conditions, with limited rations and little or no water.

Adelaide’s Biggest Celebration

On 21st January 1863 Stuart and his expedition party and its 48 remaining horses were cheered down King William Street, and the people of Adelaide witnessed the biggest celebration of the town’s 26 years. Sadly, on the same day Victorians stood in silent tribute as the remains of Burke and Wills were laid to rest.

Stuart received the £2,000 reward for reaching the coast, but his expeditions ruined his health.

He returned to Britain where his achievements meant little. He died at London on 5th June 1866 aged 50, and was buried at Kensal Green.

The Mystery of Stuart’s Tree

Stuart’s diaries stated he reached the coast west of the Adelaide River, rather than west of the Mary River. It was understandable that Stuart mistook his coastal position. He calculated latitude using the sun and stars, but without a chronometer, he could not accurately calculate longitude. Just half a degree of longitude separates the Adelaide and Mary Rivers. Also, he used a map produced from the Admiralty surveys of the Beagle in 1838-39 which identified the Adelaide River as the only river west of the Alligator Rivers. Interestingly, Waterhouse (government naturalist on the expedition) reported to the SA Parliament that he suspected they had travelled to the coast via a completely different river. In the 20 years it took to officially find the tree, there was doubt about Stuart’s success, although an NT Government resident report states that Wulna Aboriginal people remembered Stuart’s arrival and knew the location of the tree. ‘Sonnie remembered his uncle telling him how he first saw the flag while walking on the beach, and that at first he thought it debbil debbly called by the natties, Peyarn (evil spirit); how his uncle took down the flag and followed the white’s track till he was knocked up, and then returned, when he cut up the flag and divided it amongst his friends.’

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Reflections on a Great Man

...nothing touches one more than the remembrance of the deeds of a truly brave man. We had the honour of having served one.’ Auld, Expedition Member.

‘He was simply a marvell for horseback traverse. His map was so correct that we used simply to put a protractor and scale on it, get the bearing and distance, and ride with the same confidence as we would ride from Adelaide to Gawler.’

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Stuart’s Tree carved with large 2 ft (61 cm) initials. Photo Paul Foulkes 1861.