

Photo by Alan Horsfield



# The ghost town of Cook

One might think that a town with the name of Cook would have to be on the east coast. As isolated towns go, it doesn't get any more isolated than Cook. At the centre of the Nullarbor Plain lies Cook, a lonely ghost town straddling the Indian Pacific train tracks. Going east or west, nothing but desert. Adelaide and Perth are over 1000 kilometres away in either direction. The nearest town, which is Ceduna with a population of just over 3500, is on the coast, but a five-hour drive away.

What was once a community of 300 people has dwindled to four, including two recent arrivals. The tourists that drop in out of curiosity, and the train drivers that stop to refuel and rest here, provide their only other form of social interaction.

There was once a school, a hospital, a golf course and even a swimming pool. Now most of the houses are abandoned or relocated to Ceduna on trucks. A few are still used as resting homes for passing train drivers. Little more than a souvenir shop on the train station remains. The closest local doctor is a twelve-hour drive away in Port Augusta.

A member of the Royal Flying Doctor Service pays Cook a monthly visit.

The town's four residents depend on the Indian Pacific train to drop off their supplies. The train journey spans three states in three days, starting in Sydney and arriving in Perth 4300 kilometres later. Cook is a halfway and driver changeover point. The Western Australian drivers and South Australian drivers come as far as Cook and then go back. The souvenir shop opens for about half an hour each time a train brings inquisitive travellers.

Apart from a twice weekly gaggle of tourists who have rolled off the Indian Pacific to stretch their legs with a few laps of the deserted township, the only people who come to stay are the train drivers.

The 'town' operates on dual time zones. Why? As the story goes, the rivalry between the Western Australian and South Australian drivers is so intense that they keep to their own time. Visit the WA driver's place, you're in Western Standard time. His SA colleague, like the rest of Cook, is on Central Standard Time.