RON MOON reckons a quick trip to The Big Desert in Victoria’s Mallee offers plenty of excellent sand driving and great camping.

Pioneer pastoralists had opened up much of Victoria’s western regions by the 1840s and, within 20 years, sheep were grazing through large tracts of the Big Desert and Wyperfeld areas of the drier mallee region of Victoria.

The Nullarbor track and the Mallee stations, just south of the small, modem-day hamlet of Cowangie, were used along the track over the next 30 years to make the job of shifting sheep and cattle easier because there was very little surface water during the long dry summers. Today many of those bores and tanks remain.

As the Big Desert area was explored, small open plains were found hidden among the sea of spindly mallee trees, dense broombush and wiry native pines that, even today, are an almost-impenetrable barrier. These areas became the focus of graziers who used them up until recently, some erecting bores and even small huts, such as those that could once be found at Cactus Bore.

In later years broombush fence-cutters and beekeepers cut a myriad of tracks through the dense scrub linking many of the open areas and opening the region to us lucky four-wheelers.

The first part of what was to become Wyperfeld National Park was reserved in 1909 and it grew in stages taking in the regions north and south of the Chinaman’s Well Track west to the Nullarbor track in 1982. Much of this last extension was declared a wilderness area, but in a victory for four-wheelers the Chinaman’s Well Track remained open for desert tourists.

While west of the Nullarbor track was declared the Big Desert Wilderness Area in the 1970s, the northern-central area of the desert has now been declared a State Forest, although you’d be hard pushed to find any valuable or even large timber in the region. Still, having a State Forest means that all 4X4 tracks are open and you can camp without National Park restrictions.

TREK START, FINISH AND STANDARD

This trek starts on the outskirts of Nhill on the Western Highway, 380 km west of Melbourne, or 370 km south-east of Adelaide. It heads north through the Big Desert, passing through the south-eastern sector of the Wyperfeld National Park.

APPROACHING THE BEACHING POINT: The first 4X4 track to open for desert tourers, the Chinaman’s Well Track is located near the south-western border of the Big Desert. Sand driving west of Cactus Bore, Melbourne parking bay.
Park, and then a short distance north along the Null-Murrayville Track. The trek then leaves this main dirt road and heads west through the Big Desert State Forest to the SA-Vic Border track. You follow this track north to the Mallee Highway, just east of the SA town of Pinnaroo (244 km east of Adelaide) and 22 km west of Murrayville in Victoria.

The trek, about 180 km long, is easy to moderate with only a few sections that can be either hilly when it’s not, or roughly sandy when it’s dry. While there are no real steep sand dunes, you still may need to lower your pressure (18-20 psi (115-140 kPa)) makes the sand a lot easier to travel on for you and everyone behind you.

TIMINGS
This trek makes an enjoyable weekend (or longer) jaunt from either capital city. Join it up with our SA-Vic Border Trek (4X4 Australia, Jan 2001 issue) and make a longer loop journey out of the two.

BEST MAPS
It’s a bit untapped, so there’s not one really good map of the area. The Victorian Dept of NRE has a small brochure titled Big Desert State Forest – 4WD Touring Map that covers the region and Hema’s Western Victoria map is also helpful.

BEST TIME
Spring and autumn are the best times. Summers can be hot and the sand soft.

CAMPING AND THINGS TO DO
There are some excellent camping spots here, especially in the State Forest and at Big Billy Bore on the Murrayville Track. In spring the wildflowers can be very good. The area is a great carribean fishing area and rich in wildlife, although because of people generally see big kites, runners and lots of kangaroos.

ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPLIES
Murrayville is a decent-sized town that can supply trekkers with all their requirements. For tourist info, ph: 05 5391 3086. Murrayville is a small community where you should be able to get all of your basic supplies, fuel and accommodation.

Pinnaroo on the SA side of the border can supply a trekker’s needs. For more info the Pinnaroo Tourist Centre, ph: 08 8577 8644.

PERMITS AND RESTRICTIONS
No permits are required to travel this route. The tracks are generally open all year round. Check with Parks Victoria, ph: 13 19 63 or check out the VAFWDC website at www.vafwdc.org.au. Gas fires are required from the November 1 to the end of April.

MORE INFO
For more info, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, ph: 13 61 86 can help, or check out www.nre.vic.gov.au.
NHILL TO BIG BILLY BORE TO MURRAYVILLE

0.0 0.0
NHILL – junction NHill–Netherby Road with the Western Highway. Head north, crossing railway line. GPS S 36° 20' 8" / E 141° 39' 32" 20.5 (20.5) Cross roads – PSA. Left leads to Netherby South. 24.5 (4.0) Cross roads – dogleg to right then left (PSA) onto narrow bitumen. Left leads to Netherby. 30.5 (6.0) GPS S 35° 59' 57" / E 141° 42' 40" 30.7 (0.2) Track on right – VR onto ‘Chinamans Well Track 15.5 km’ (SP). 32.2 (3.5) GPS S 35° 53' 01" / E 141° 39' 35" 37.9 (5.7) Old windmill/tank on left – PSA. 42.2 (3.9) Dam on left – PSA continuing on track. 46.7 (4.5) Lost Lake – reasonable camping spot. Tracks can be boggy through this section when wet. GPS S 35° 52' 25" / E 141° 39' 54" 52.3 (5.6) GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 52.4 (0.3) Campsite. 6.8 (6.8) Tracks right/left – PSA. Right leads to crest of a large dune. 10.0 (3.2) Track on left – TL onto Cactus Bore Track. Sim Perrys hand bore pump on right. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 17.9 (7.9) Track on right – PSA. Right leads to Chinamans Well Track. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 23.4 (5.5) Track on left – TL onto Cactus Bore Track. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 23.9 (0.5) T–junct – TL. Right leads back to Cactus Bore Track. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 28.7 (4.5) Track on left – VR. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 29.5 (0.8) T–junct – VL on main track. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 34.4 (5.1) GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 48.0 (8.5) Track on left – TL onto Coburns Tk. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 49.7 (1.7) T–junct – TR onto Border Track. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 49.8 (0.1) Gate. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 51.1 (1.3) Gate. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 52.6 (1.5) Track on left – PSA on Border Track. GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 54.6 (0.7) GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 56.7 (2.4) GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 58.8 (1.4) GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 60.7 (1.9) GPS S 35° 31' 02" / E 141° 18' 56" 63.5 (2.8) T–junct with main Mallee Highway & railway crossing – left to Pinnaroo, right 20.4 km to Murrayville.

For more treks and four-wheel drive
information check out the Nissan