



The Afghan Cameleer, classic icon of The Ghan train, now takes pride of place at the terminal.

Enlivening the Red Heart

Philip Drake explains how to extend the visitor experience beyond the core attraction

For those in the attractions industry who look into the future, the concept of the 'visitor experience' looms large. There is little doubt that the greatest value of the visitor experience is in driving return visits and word-of-mouth promotion. With all the pretty pictures and all the brochure superlatives in the world, nothing beats someone who's been there telling others that it was the experience of their lives.

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer for achieving this and the challenge is certainly different for each attraction. Beyond the obvious theme parks and adventure tours we need to also remember that aquariums, museums, family fun centres, bowling alleys and even hotels or tourist resorts are all selling an 'experience' of some type.



A simple barrier fence provides visual definition to the platform and a guiding link to the terminal.

One of the biggest issues I encounter is owners and operators not quite knowing where their experience begins and ends. An attraction may put all its effort into a fantastic core attraction but if the public has to spend two hours outside the front gate queuing in the sun, if they can't find or can't bare to enter aging toilets or are frustrated even finding your venue, then no amount of heart stopping thrills are going to send them away with 'experience of my life' type of phrases for anyone who'll listen.

It is important to remember that every part of the journey the guest takes, from the approaches to the departure is, in fact, the visitor experience. No part should be left out when considering the effects and the outcomes.

Last year, Atomiq was contacted by Tony Braxton-Smith of Great Southern Railway who operate, among other things, the Indian Pacific and The Ghan rail journeys. In Australia and around the world the mention of those two great rail journeys understandably has the word 'experience' following quickly behind. However, they had come to realise that their stations didn't nearly match up to the 'experience' of the train journey itself. And as the crucial departure point (or in some cases: mid-point stopover) of these famous journeys the stations were an important part of the total experience.

Atomiq set to work immediately on their Alice Springs terminal. We gathered information and feedback from guests, train and terminal staff and the forward tour operators servicing those coming off the train. We wanted to understand the current 'experience' of Ghan passengers arriving or departing from 'the Alice'. Fortunately, the station only caters to the Ghan tourists, there are no transit or standard passenger rail services into Alice Springs, so many common experiences could easily be identified.

The Ghan stops for around three to four hours at Alice Springs and passengers coming off the Ghan fall broadly into three categories; those with pre booked tours for the stopover, those who are staying in the area and generally moving on to local accommodation and those with really nothing pre organised to do until the train pulls out again for Darwin or Adelaide.

In the first two categories guests needed clear directions to meet their bus tours or ongoing transport points. Those in the last category really needed some information about the options available for the area.

Alice Springs Rail Terminal has no raised platform as such and guests step down onto a strip of indistinct bitumen which loosely serves as a platform. However, with a train that would sometimes reach a kilometre long and a slight curve in the tracks it can happen that those coming off the last carriage may not even be able to see the terminal and, given the somewhat desolate surroundings, would wander aimlessly in all directions.

For those trying to make the most of a stopover in the Alice, it could be difficult to locate the tour operators, buses and taxi points or an information counter. And such was the lack of signage and information that many would even be oblivious to the town centre and its many interesting sights, even though it is a mere ten minutes walk from the station.

Furthermore, after a day and a night inside the distinct order of the train it seemed to many a little overwhelming to be suddenly ejected onto a strip of dusty bitumen in an arid landscape with no clear definition to anything, let alone the platform.

But most inexplicably for a journey that would take 24 hours to reach the centre of Australia there was actually very little to give you the sense that you had indeed arrived in the red heart.

A tiny plaque near the front door revealed that that terminal building had received an architecture award in 1984 but by now the bare block walls, sunflower yellow spaceframe awnings and bright blue exposed air conditioning ducts were looking decidedly uninviting. A mixed collection of furniture and brochure racks gathered over perhaps twenty years was not helping.

Many travellers simply bypassed its unwelcoming interior by skirting around the sides, in effect ignoring it. It is no wonder



A clear and bright interior with a new café area, internet kiosk and clear signage provides a more pleasant waiting environment for travellers.

that the local tour operators were struggling to convince travellers to come back and stay a little longer in Alice Springs if this was the initial impression they were receiving.

With a limited budget for this first stage we settled on five main interconnected approaches:

Sense of Arrival

We needed to create a clear message that you had indeed reached the heart of Australia. To achieve this we drew our colour schemes from the surrounding country and developed a major 'Alice Springs' platform sign. A sculpture of a camel and Afghan cameleer, the very icon of the Ghan train, was moved from inside the terminal to take pride of place in the 'you have arrived' moment at the centre of the platform. This was to become the focal point of the terminal. (As a courtesy I sought the blessing of the artist for this move and learnt that this had been his intended location anyway).

Clear Signage

Providing clear directional and informational signage throughout the terminal and platforms was essential. We needed to take care of most of the standard 'where is' and 'what nows', allowing guest services staff to concentrate on more specific passenger assistance. We developed colour co-ordinated signage with clear international icons to direct travellers to all their major needs, both across the extended exterior and throughout the interior. The platform signs even indicate the direction of the town centre and duration of the walk should they wish to discover a little more of the Alice before departure.

A Bolder and Brighter Terminal

We refurbished and de-cluttered the interior and immediate exterior of the terminal to provide a more inviting and functional environment. We were able to push out a couple of interior walls into unused back-of-house areas giving us some much needed extra space in the waiting hall of the terminal. It also provided room for a new information counter, internet kiosk and a fresh face and layout to the café. We removed a mixture of old freestanding brochure racks in favour of a standardised wall mounted system. We retracted the big blue air conditioning ducts, replacing it simply with bulkhead vents. The budget dictated very economical furniture specifications but selecting bold shapes and colours allowed us to continue to uplift the interior and unify the exterior.

Define the Platform and Exterior Space

Rather than landscaping the entire site at this initial stage we simply provided a visual edge to the 700 metre long platform that would define the functional space and highlight the direction of the terminal. Mainly due to cost constraints we settled on a simple barrier fence that carried the unifying colour motif along the platforms toward the terminal.

Settle into the Landscape.

You simply cannot go into central Australia without feeling the impact of the landscape. It is just too overwhelming to either

ignore or try to work against. We thought it important to draw from the rich tones of the surrounding desert with colour and shape to enhance the sense of place and unify a large, rambling site. The terminal was painted in the warm earthy tones of the desert and we chose a single dominant colour, an orange inspired by the rock of the nearby McDonnell ranges, to provide unity across the interior and exterior. Rock and boulder shapes and a graphic motif representing the train line arriving through the desert ridges was repeated in the furniture, signage and terminal walls.

Along the way we had a number of operational upgrades to include in the works such as extended water refill points and new bins including new recyclables collection.

I am happy to report that we have had a tremendously positive response to the initial refurbishment. Arriving guests are now lining up to have their photo taken with the iconic Afghan cameleer sculpture as a souvenir of travelling the Ghan into the centre of Australia. We have since provided a master plan for the upgrade of the remainder of the terminal precinct which includes three potential new tourism ventures on site and a much enhanced walking connection between the terminal and the town centre.

Northern Territory Chief Minister & Minister of Tourism Clare Martin officially opened the upgraded terminal in March this year and announced that the NT Government would fund that enhanced connection to the town centre, a recognition of the importance of that broader and extended visitor experience. I think this may be a lesson to us all; concentrating on extending and completing the experience of guests not only on your own premises but by working with neighbouring businesses and government to offer as complete an experience as possible.

Next, we have our sights set on that terminal in Adelaide. **Philip Drake is Creative Director of Atomiq Design Group, a multi-disciplinary team of designers and architects who specialise in designing the visitor experience. He can be contacted at 07 3255 2656, email: philip@atomiq.com.au, www.atomiq.com.au**



The new position for this Ghan icon sculpture provides a 'you have arrived' photo opportunity as a centrepiece to the platform.