

Cotton Self-Drive Trail

Distance: 94 km

Time: 1.5 – 2 hrs

Pack your thermos and some smoko on this 94 km journey that will have you become a cotton expert. Each stop features interpretive signage to help you delve into the local history and development of the cotton industry. There's no need to pack your skis for this journey through our fields of white; you'll see our cotton season in full swing between October and April each year.

Cotton is planted in spring with cotton seeds emerging from the ground five to 14 days after planting – depending on soil temperature and moisture. The seeds grow into green, bushy shrubs about a metre in height and require irrigation every 2-3 weeks, dependent on the climate. The plants briefly grow pink and cream coloured flowers that, once pollinated, drop off and are replaced with fruit, better known as cotton bolls. Inside each cotton boll is the fluffy white lint that we're all familiar with, as well as fuzzy cotton seeds.

Irrigation is vital for the production of cotton, as well as grapes and other small crops. The St George Irrigation Scheme was approved in 1953 for the purpose of irrigation and town water supply. The St George irrigation area consists of a channel system relaying water to a large farming area 8 km south east of St George. The vast 213 km open earth

channel system supplies water from Beardmore Dam located north of St George, via Thuraggi watercourse and the SunWater pump station facility. The water from the Thuraggi watercourse travels through Moolabah Weir and then Buckinbah Weir before being released into the irrigation farming area through manually operated gravity flow control structures.

The Balonne River forms part of the Murray Darling Basin system and is a short yet significant part of south west Queensland's inland river group. The river flows from St George in a south west direction towards Dirranbandi and breaks into two rivers – Culgoa and Balonne Minor River. The Balonne Minor River then separates into the Ballandool, Bokhara and Narran Rivers.

1. JACK TAYLOR WEIR – ANDREW NIXON BRIDGE

The Cotton Self-Drive Trail begins at St George Region Visitor Information Centre. From here, drive 1.3 km along St George's Terrace towards our first stop – the Jack Taylor Weir – Andrew Nixon Bridge. For the perfect photo opportunity with this local icon, constructed from 1948 – 1952, park at Cavanough Park. While there, find the commemorative stone to mark Major Sir Thomas Mitchell's crossing of the Balonne River on St George's Day in 1846.

2. BEARDMORE DAM (Lake Kajarabie)

Our next stop is Beardmore Dam, located 22 km north of St George. Start this part of the trail by driving back along St George's Terrace, where you will notice a large pump station on the corner of Hutt Street. The SunWater pump station on the corner provides water to the St George irrigation channels at a maximum rate of 110 megalitres per day and was constructed at the same time as the Jack Taylor Weir.

As you continue driving along the river, you'll be able to appreciate the magnitude of the beautiful Balonne River. Across from the St George Region Visitor Information Centre, you can find a marker that showcases the flood heights of the swollen Balonne River from years gone by.

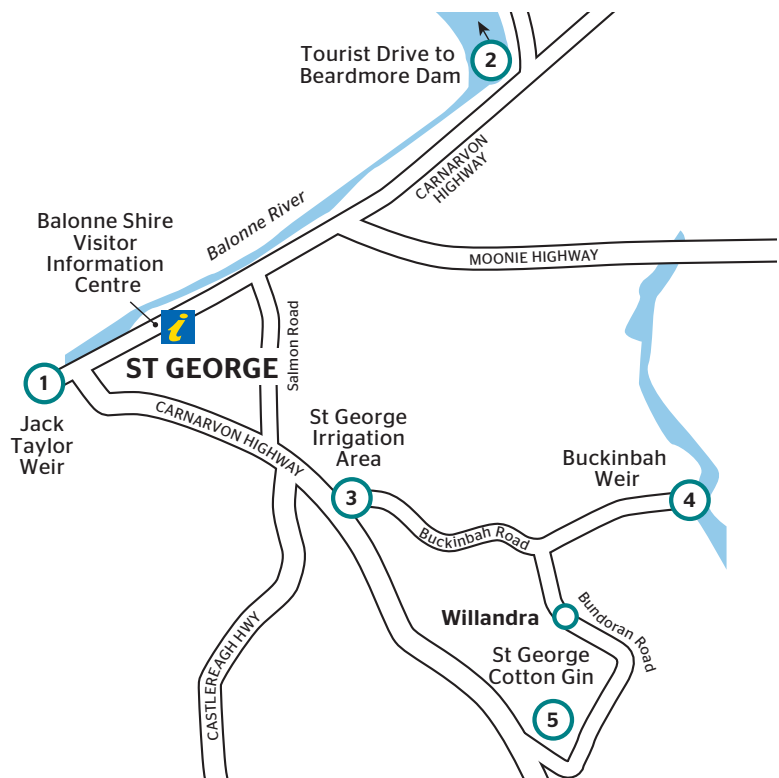
When you reach the end of St George's Terrace, follow the road before turning left onto Victoria Street which becomes the Carnarvon Highway. From here, travel 12.8 km, until you reach Thungaby Road and turn left. As you travel north along the Carnarvon Highway, you will be driving parallel to the Balonne River towards Surat. Turn onto Thungaby Road and follow the sealed road for a further 8 km to Beardmore Dam.

DID YOU KNOW?

You may be far from the tropics but did you cotton on to the fact that this natural fibre is grown on a plant related to the hibiscus?

3. ST GEORGE IRRIGATION AREA

After exploring Beardmore Dam, set your GPS for the St George irrigation area. Follow your tracks back along the bitumen road and turn right onto Carnarvon Highway, towards St George and from here travel 6.7 km until you see the Salmon Road sign. Make a left and follow the road to meet the Carnarvon Highway. Turn left at the T- junction, and only 3 km down the road you will begin approaching the St George irrigation area and cotton farms. You will approach a turnoff on your left to Buckinbah Weir, which is also known as Buckinbah Road.



DID YOU KNOW?

Australia's cotton industry is one of the most water efficient cotton industries in the world, thanks to biotechnology and advances in precision irrigation and timing

4. BUCKINBAH WEIR

The Buckinbah Weir is your next stop. To get there, turn left onto Buckinbah Road and follow the bitumen road straight ahead for 10.8 km until you come across a water reserve. Along the way, you'll spot several water storage dams on your right which farmers utilise to capture rainfall and hold their water allocation delivered via the St George Irrigation Scheme.

The St George irrigation area is part of the Murray Darling Basin and therefore is part of the broader Murray Darling Basin Plan. The plan provides a coordinated approach to water use across QLD, NSW, ACT, VIC and SA, and means a reduction in water allocation for agricultural purposes to ensure the environmental sustainability of the extensive river systems across the Murray Darling Basin.

The cotton farms are irrigated using siphons that flood the paddock and gravity feed down each row. Any excess water from the farm is recycled and pumped back into water storage facilities, to ensure limited water waste. After looking around, travel back along Buckinbah Road for 4.6 km until you reach Bundoran Road. Turn left onto Bundoran Road and check out the view of the cotton farms and paddocks.

During March/April each year our region goes into harvest-mode where the cotton is picked using large mechanical harvesters and compacted into cotton

modules. There are two types of cotton modules that are produced:

Rectangle cotton modules – Cotton harvesters pick the cotton which is then transported to the module builder machine via a boll buggy. The module builder compresses the cotton into large rectangular cotton modules which are then covered with a large tarp. The average rectangular cotton module weighs between 12 - 16 tonnes, producing 22 - 28 bales of ginned cotton.

Round cotton modules – 2010 saw a new cotton harvester introduced in which the cotton harvester picks the cotton and rolls it up at the rear of the machine and encases it in yellow plastic. This modern technology was developed to reduce the cost of labour and machinery by eliminating the boll buggy and module building process. The average round cotton module weighs approximately 2.5 tonnes, producing 4 bales of ginned cotton.

From here, the cotton modules are loaded onto trucks and sent off to the cotton gin, a factory that separates the cottonseed from the lint (raw cotton fibre) and is then pressed into rectangular bales.

5. ST GEORGE COTTON GIN

We're talking botanicals of a different kind here as you continue your journey to the cotton gin. Drive along Bundoran Road for 4 km until you approach an intersection with a sign indicating Ian Paul Road. Turn right and continue along

Bundoran Road until you approach the St George Cotton Gin on your right. Before reaching the Carnarvon Highway intersection, there is an area to pull over on the left. The St George Cotton Gin was closed in 2014, however, St George's Beardmore Gin still operates today.

Take a right onto the Carnarvon Highway and travel back towards St George. Along the way, you'll spot more cotton farms and irrigation channels traversing the highway.

DID YOU KNOW?

90% of Australian cotton farms are run and operated by an Australian Family? And that it's likely to have come from one or more generations

After 17 km, the St George Airport will be on your left and John Deere on your opposite right. Here you have the option of parking by turning left into the airport at Cliff Parsons Drive, to take a stroll across the road to catch a better glimpse of the machinery used on the farms including cotton pickers, tractors, harvesters, spray rigs and more.

Got questions about cotton? The St George Region Visitor Information Centre staff and volunteers are happy to answer your questions or help you organise a visit to a local cotton farm on one of our local tours.