

WORKING PAPER · DRAFT · 7 OCTOBER 2026

Motor transport for the homelands

Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands

Part — Bush taxis

Bush Taxis: How People and Goods Move When There Is No Other Option

Hired four-wheel drives, pooled fares and book-up in north-east Arnhem Land

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This is a draft paper that will be continually updated with new information as it comes to hand.

Summary. In north-east Arnhem Land a “bush taxi” is a hired four-wheel-drive vehicle, usually based in Nhulunbuy, that carries homeland residents, their children and their shopping over unsealed roads to and from town. For families without a working vehicle it is, with the air charter, the principal means of reaching shops, banks, clinics and ceremony. This paper assembles what the public record says about how these services operate: who runs them, how they are licensed, what they charge, how fares are raised and paid, and where they will not go. The record is thin. Published fares come from submissions to parliamentary inquiries, a book chapter, a community organisation’s website and news reports rather than from any fare schedule, and for homeland trips they run from several hundred dollars to about \$1,500. Two practices are documented more than once: families pooling money to meet a single fare, and drivers holding passengers’ bank or Basics cards until the next payment arrives. Much of what drivers and passengers know about how bush taxis work has never been written down. The paper states where the evidence stops and identifies the questions that only Yolŋu passengers and drivers, the operators and the homeland organisations can answer.

This paper is a companion to Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands (Botsman 2026), the main paper of the set, and to its Roads paper. It is a first draft. It links to the Mata Mata Transport feature on isx.org.au (<https://www.isx.org.au/features/planes-roads-automobiles-bush-taxis>).

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Figure 1. The Central Arnhem Road near Mainoru, 4 September 2017. Photograph: Ian Cochrane. Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/iancochrane_2011/36941181752/. Licensed CC BY 2.0.

1. What a bush taxi is

The term has no statutory definition in the Northern Territory. In East Arnhem usage it denotes a four-wheel-drive passenger service working the unsealed roads between Nhulunbuy and the homelands, as distinct from the town taxis that work the sealed streets of Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala and the Gove Peninsula. A regional tourism directory describes one operator, Gove Transport and Bush Taxis, as running “a taxi and mini bus service on the Gove Peninsula and surrounding homelands”, with vehicles that “are 4WD and are suitable for transportation on unsealed roads”; the listing is marked as expired, and how current it is cannot be determined.¹ In 2018 a second company, Nhulunbuy Transport Services, described itself as operating bush taxis in the region and drew the distinction directly: “There is a difference between the town taxi and my bush taxi, because my bush taxi drivers are Yolngu.”² A business directory also lists Arnhem Bush Taxi Services Pty Ltd at Nhulunbuy.³ On Galiwin’ku, the website of Marthakal Homelands & Resource Centre listed a Marthakal Taxi Service and Marthakal Hire Car Services among its business enterprises in 2012 and 2013; the archived pages give no detail of routes, fares or vehicles, and whether either service still operates is not known.⁴

Bush taxis exist because little else does. In 2008 Laynhapuy Homelands Association told a Senate committee that its homelands lie “up to 260 km from Nhulunbuy”, that some are “inaccessible by road in the wet season”, and that “Many homeland residents do not have their own vehicles and rely on either air charters or ‘bush taxi’ services to access services in Nhulunbuy.”⁵ Its health service added in 2009 that “there is no affordable public transport” and that “private ‘bush taxis’ and air charters are prohibitively expensive for individuals on low incomes”.⁶ The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) reported in 2014 “a lack of regional public transport from Gove to the surrounding communities”.⁷ Vehicle ownership is the other half of the explanation. At the 2021 Census two-thirds (66 per cent) of First Nations households in the Territory had a vehicle, against 88 per cent nationally, and in 2014–15 only 60 per cent of First Nations people in the Territory said they could easily get to the places they needed to go.⁸ The main paper of this set sets out the much lower vehicle counts recorded in Arnhem Land communities and

homelands, and the author's own account of Mata Mata, where up to two or three hundred people may live with perhaps one working vehicle, often borrowed.⁹

The bush taxi is therefore one strand of a mixed system that also includes family cars, the vehicles of service organisations, air charters and hitched rides. Writing of the homelands around Maningrida, Fogarty described the school truck as the vehicle through which homelands "did business with the main township": it "brought supplies of food from family in town, mail, medical supplies from the clinic, various forms of cheques and payments".¹⁰ NTCOSS observed that, for want of transport services, support organisations "often take the initiative to provide transport for their service users" at high cost in wages, accommodation and fuel.⁷ At a Yirrkala funeral the organisers must coordinate "planes, taxis, cars, buses".¹¹ What distinguishes the bush taxi from these is that it is a commercial service, bought by the trip.

2. Licensing and regulation

Carrying passengers for reward in the Territory is regulated by the Commercial Passenger (Road) Transport Act 1991. A person "must not operate a commercial passenger vehicle" unless accredited or exempted, with a maximum penalty of 85 penalty units. The Act defines several classes of commercial passenger vehicle, among them the taxi, the minibus, the private hire car and the tourist vehicle. A taxi is a vehicle "fitted with an approved meter", whose fare is calculated "primarily by reference to distance travelled"; the Minister declares taxi areas by notice in the Gazette, and a taxi licence specifies the area in which the taxi may ply, with an exception for passengers driven in from outside the area and taken home again.¹²

Where bush taxis sit within this scheme is not clearly documented. In April 2021 an officer of the Territory's infrastructure department met the Nhulunbuy Town Board, whose list of concerns included "Registered Taxi Services currently operating in Nhulunbuy", "Negotiated fares and proper use of taxi meters", "Criminal matters such as retention of bank cards and basics cards being a NT police matter", and "Bush Taxi (TV registration plates) regulations and frequency of vehicle assessment inspections". The minutes record that "Non compliance in Nhulunbuy is generally to no greater degree than other areas in the NT."¹³ "TV" plates denote the tourist-vehicle class: operators elsewhere in the Territory describe their four-wheel drives as "licenced and registered Tourist Vehicle (TV Plated)" and subject to "NT Tourist Vehicle In-Service Maintenance Standards".¹⁴ The minute therefore suggests that at least some East Arnhem bush taxis are registered as tourist vehicles rather than as metered taxis. The Act, however, frames the tourist vehicle around "the carriage of tourists for hire or reward ... pursuant to pre-arranged bookings, outside the environs of a municipality".¹² No published source found for this paper explains how that class applies to a service whose passengers are residents travelling to shop, bank and see a doctor, or what fare rules then apply.

Fares are the clearest gap. Taxi fares inside a declared taxi area are set by meter at government rates. Minibus fares, by contrast, were described by NTCOSS in 2018 as "structured differently and not regulated in the same way as taxi fares": "With minibuses there is a system of fare by negotiation, but this does not have the same consumer protections in place as that for taxi users", and passengers "may not all have the English language and negotiation skills to ensure a fair price for themselves." NTCOSS recommended that minibus fares be regulated on a rate per kilometre.¹⁵ No published source states how bush-taxi fares are set, whether by meter, by a posted schedule or by negotiation. The wide spread of reported fares in section 3 is consistent with negotiation, but does not establish it.

The Territory has long had rules on one practice discussed in section 4. A 2002 report for the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) quoted the Northern Territory Taxi Drivers and Operators Code of Conduct, approved in 2001, under which drivers “are not to hold or take any form of passenger’s credit or savings card ... for future journeys”, and noted “similar provisions” in a code for minibus operators.¹⁶ This research found no published enforcement action, prosecution or compliance report concerning bush-taxi operators in East Arnhem.

3. What a trip costs

No operator’s fare schedule for homeland trips was found. The fares on the public record are figures quoted in submissions, research and news reports, gathered in the table below.

Year of source	Trip	Reported cost	Reported by
2008	Laynhapuy homelands to Nhulunbuy, return shopping and banking trip, by bush taxi or air charter	\$500 to \$1,200	Laynhapuy Homelands Association
2008	Laynhapuy homelands to Nhulunbuy for groceries, by air charter or bush taxi	Up to \$1,200; up to 422 km return by road from Dhuruputjpi	Laynhapuy Homelands Association
2009	Homelands up to 210 km from town, return trip for groceries (mode not stated)	Up to \$1,400	Laynhapuy Health Service
After 2012	Nhulunbuy to Gapuwiyak by bush taxi	\$1,500	Bunggul Djama Aboriginal Association
2016	Donydji to Nhulunbuy, four-wheel-drive bush taxi, return	\$950	White (2016)
2017	Mata Mata to Gove, without a car	About \$650 each way; bush taxis often would not go	Peter Botsman, personal communication
2019	Some Laynhapuy homelands to Nhulunbuy, bush taxi, return	\$720	Laynhapuy Homelands, in NT Independent
2019–20	Laynhapuy homelands to Nhulunbuy, bush taxi, round trip	\$1,300	Miwatj Health, citing Bulloch et al. (2019)
c. 2022–23	Surrounding homelands to Nhulunbuy, taxi	Up to \$600	Miwatj Health
2020	Yirrkala to Nhulunbuy, town taxi	\$50 each way; bus \$5, limited hours	Miwatj Health
2008	Barunga, Eva Valley or Wugularr to Katherine, taxi, one way	\$160 to \$220	Smith and Jackson
2021	Barunga or Beswick to Katherine, taxi, each way	\$250; new community bus \$20	Katherine Times

The sources for the table are given in the notes to this section.^{5 17 6 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25} The figures are not a price series and should not be read as one. They span almost two decades and different homelands and distances; some are return fares and some one way; two combine bush taxis with air charters, and one does

not name the mode. None says whether the price is for a seat or for hire of the whole vehicle. Two sources describe several people or families combining to meet a single fare, which implies that at least some quoted fares are for the vehicle rather than the seat, but neither says so in terms.^{18 24} What the figures do show is consistent: a trip between a homeland and Nhulunbuy has cost several hundred dollars, and a return trip has often cost more than a thousand.

Against homeland incomes those sums are very large. In 2009 the Laynhapuy Health Service noted that most people on CDEP and Centrelink payments earned considerably less than \$20,000 a year.⁶ At the national scale, Spandonide estimated that combined personal and external transport costs equal 60 to 80 per cent of median income in very remote communities.²⁶ At Donydji, White recorded one family that “spent \$950 to sell \$1,200 worth of craft”, and noted that the bush taxi was still cheaper than a charter flight.¹⁹ The Mata Mata figure, about \$650 each way in 2017, sits inside the range recorded for Laynhapuy homelands.²⁰

On homelands, bush taxis are often an act of desperation, which leaves people with no money, debts, and a formidable personal pressure.²⁷

Like anyone, bush taxi drivers can be saints or devils.²⁸

It is easy to portray them as predators, but without them sometimes nothing would ever happen, and people would starve or suffer.²⁹

It should be noted, in all this, that on most homelands there is a huge labour of hunting and gathering, and there cannot be a 100 per cent reliance on goods from outside.³⁰

The pattern is not confined to Arnhem Land. The author has observed that in Johannesburg, and throughout Africa, people travel in utility vehicles in very dangerous ways and at high speed, with catastrophic accidents as the result, and that Arnhem Land is not far removed from that pattern.³¹ The general point is consistent with the World Health Organization’s finding that road traffic death rates are highest in its African Region, and with its statement that an increase in average speed is directly related both to the likelihood of a crash and to the severity of its consequences.³² This paper cites no casualty figure for Africa or for the roads of Arnhem Land, and the comparison rests on the author’s observation rather than on a study of either setting.

4. Raising the fare: pooling, book-up and held cards

Two ways of meeting a fare recur in the record. The first is pooling. Laynhapuy told the Senate committee in 2008 that “a great deal of ‘income pooling’ occurs in order to fund both the food purchases and shopping travel”.⁵ A homeland association later wrote that “each week several families wil pool together and take the bush taxi out to the community in order to get the children and shopping back home from Nhulunbuy”.¹⁸ In the Katherine region in 2008, Smith and Jackson found that with “perhaps one in 10” people owning a car and no regional transport system, “the only way to get into town is for a few people to band together to pay for a taxi”.²⁴ Pooling is not peculiar to taxis: the main paper records that in the wet season Centrelink accounts at Mata Mata were pooled so that the community could charter a flight, buy food and share it out.³³

The second is credit secured by holding the passenger's card, known in the north as book-up. Laynhapuy described the contrast in 2008: while its own airline, Laynhapuy Aviation, allowed "a tightly controlled and limited 'book up' system and/or payment up front", "the bush taxi operators more usually rely on unregulated bookup by holding people's bank cards to secure payment by instalments as funds come into their accounts."⁵ ASIC's national reports place taxis among book-up providers: in 2002 a taxi driver was one of the "typical traders", and an Aboriginal Legal Aid Service had recovered "\$2,000 from a taxi driver who had wrongfully deducted funds from a consumer's account using a keycard"; in 2015 ASIC listed "taxi services" among providers that commonly hold the customer's debit card and sometimes the PIN.^{16 34}

The most detailed account concerns town taxis on the Gove Peninsula. In 2018 a petition signed by more than 250 residents of Nhulunbuy, Wallaby Beach, Ski Beach, Yirrkala and the homelands complained of taxi drivers' conduct. The allegations included Basics Cards "being held by drivers until the next payment came through", with some drivers allegedly "taking more money from the account than the agreed-upon fare". Djawa "Timmy" Burarrwanga, a Gumatj tourism operator, said: "It's been long now, and it's been abusing our family members and our people in Gove Peninsula." The local member, Yingiya Mark Guyula, said about ten people had complained to him, including of "theft of more money than was agreed upon from the card", and that many "did not want to approach the police". A former women's activities leader said it was not "Yolngu style to complain". The two town-taxi companies denied the allegations, and the bush-taxi operator Nhulunbuy Transport Services said it had "never had those kind of issues". The Territory's infrastructure department said it was working with police on the allegations.² The Town Board's 2021 minute treating the "retention of bank cards and basics cards" as a police matter shows the issue was still live three years later.¹³ No outcome of either inquiry was found.

Income management changed how fares could be paid, and the record points two ways. Laynhapuy warned in 2008 that it would "reduce the cash available to secure transport services", and reported advice that managed income could not be deducted to pay Laynha Air for shopping transport or the association's workshop for vehicle repairs; it feared people would be left stranded in town while they saved for the trip home.⁵ In the Katherine region, by contrast, Smith and Jackson reported that a taxi counted as an essential service, so that "income management funds can be diverted from food to taxis".²⁴ How bush-taxi fares are paid now, in cash, by card at the end of the trip, by deduction or on book-up, is not documented.

5. Where bush taxis will not go

A bush taxi depends on a road it can drive. The roads that connect the homelands are roads in their own right, not driveways: the road into Mata Mata runs about 70 kilometres along the ridgelines and crosses several major creeks after leaving the Central Arnhem Highway about 61 kilometres from Nhulunbuy. The companion Roads paper documents how the wet season brings restrictions, washouts and closures to the highway and how homeland roads are cut for longer.³⁵ Laynhapuy told the Senate committee in 2008 that some of its homelands are inaccessible by road in the wet season.⁵ In those months the choice narrows to the charter flight, the clinic plane or staying put.

Distance and road condition also decide whether an operator will take a job at all. The author's observation in 2017 was that bush taxis often would not go to Mata Mata, and charged about as much as the trip without a car otherwise cost, about \$650 each way.²⁰ A bush taxi cannot be taken from Mata Mata to Elcho Island (Galiwin'ku) at all.³⁶ No published source documents bush-taxi services to any Marthakal homeland, and none records how operators price distance, creek crossings or the risk of damage on homeland roads.

The vehicle sets limits too. In 2019 a Laynhapuy homeland resident's electric scooter "doesn't fit in a bush taxi", so it stayed at his other home in Yirrkala.²¹

6. Alcohol, contraband and the limits of the record

Some sources link taxis with the supply of alcohol and over-priced goods. A respondent to ASIC's 2015 survey, location not given, said "Taxi ... drivers use book up on the sly and also sell grog via book up."³⁴ The 2018 Gove allegations included the sale of "a packet of cigarettes to a passenger for \$75", which the operators denied.² In August 2026 NT Police charged a 42-year-old Nhulunbuy taxi driver over the alleged secondary supply of alcohol, including transporting alcohol bought in Nhulunbuy to Yirrkala and covering the taxi's CCTV camera; he was also charged with "several traffic and taxi-related offences". These are allegations, to be heard in November 2026.³⁷ All three concern town taxis or taxis generally; none concerns a bush taxi.

The kava trade is a separate matter. Police releases describe kava seized at airports, on roads and at or near East Arnhem communities and outstations, and in two 2026 cases near Ramingining those charged were found with a utility and charged with entering Aboriginal land without a permit.³⁸ No published source found for this paper connects bush-taxi operators with kava, and this paper draws no such connection. Accounts of over-pricing by vehicle operators in the homelands, beyond those above, rest at present on unpublished observation and are not reported here.

7. Alternatives that have been tried

Yolŋu organisations and others have tried several ways to reduce dependence on bush taxis. Laynhapuy Aviation ran charters on a not-for-profit basis, with commercial charters cross-subsidising members' transport, and the Laynhapuy Health Service organised group charters and charged them to the patient travel scheme by the seat.^{5 6} Laynhapuy Health's homeland stores attack the problem from the other end: Miwatj Health credited them with saving residents "a \$1,300 round-trip bush taxi fare into Nhulunbuy", while noting that they had struggled to find funding outside health budgets.²² Laynhapuy has also run an airport shuttle from Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala.¹

Subsidised buses have reached the towns but not, on the record found, the homelands. NTCOSS reported a trial of remote passenger transport at Yirrkala in 2014, and in 2018 recorded that the Remote Bus Program, under the National Remote and Regional Transport Strategy, had funded bus services in the Gove region among others.^{7 15} By 2020 a bus ran between Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy for \$5 each way, but only in limited hours.²² Nhulunbuy now also has a town bus service.³⁹ In 2010 a north-east Arnhem Land bush-taxi driver argued publicly that Indigenous people "should not have to pay hundreds of dollars for taxis" and sought to start a community bus service; what came of it is not recorded.⁴⁰

The clearest comparison is on the western end of the Central Arnhem Road. After a bus trial for Beswick, Barunga and Manyallaluk ended early in 2011, the taxi companies were "the only providers of publicly available transport in those three communities".⁷ In March 2021 the Bagala Aboriginal Corporation, with the Aboriginal Investment Group, launched a nine-seat bus between Barunga and Beswick six days a week and to Katherine three days a week, at \$20 a trip against a taxi fare of \$250 each way; the Territory was to fund three years of maintenance, and the service was to employ local drivers.²⁵ Whether it still runs was not established. Barunga and Beswick are on the sealed section of the road, 82 and 112 kilometres from

Katherine; the homelands of north-east Arnhem Land are further out, on harder roads, with fewer passengers per trip.

Providing a vehicle does not by itself resolve the demand for transport. ISX bought a bus for Birritjimi, the community adjoining Nhulunbuy and the Gove mine. Its use was set at nominated times, about three return journeys to town. The person given access to the vehicle was “humbled”, pressed repeatedly to drive to town outside those times, and the demands placed a heavy burden on that one person. The bus was damaged and made inoperable, and the venture ended badly. Birritjimi had previously been accommodation for the mine’s managers and senior staff, and was once a quite beautiful and well-maintained place.⁴¹ The author regards the episode as a clear example of frustration: where needs are overwhelming, providing a piece of infrastructure is unlikely to solve the problem. It also marks the limit of ISX’s role, which is to support Yolŋu-led communities, not to run them.

Any service for Mata Mata is a matter for Yolŋu to decide. The homelands are Yolŋu-led; Mata Mata is supported by Marthakal, as the Laynhapuy homelands are by Laynhapuy. What vehicle or transport arrangement suits the homeland, and who holds and runs it, is for Gaypalani, the senior family members and Marthakal to determine. ISX’s part is small and practical: helping with vehicles, repairs and fundraising when asked.

8. What is not known

The public record answers few of the questions a reader would ask about how bush taxis operate. It does not say how many operators work out of Nhulunbuy or Galiwin’ku, how many vehicles they run, who owns them, or how many drivers are Yolŋu; the only statement on drivers is one operator’s, in 2018. It does not say under which class of the Act each operator is licensed, whether fares are metered, posted or negotiated, whether a quoted fare is for a seat or for the vehicle, or how fares are adjusted for distance, road condition, waiting time or the return of an empty vehicle. It does not say how often bush taxis run, how they are booked, whether they operate in the wet, or which homelands they decline to serve. It records card-holding by bush-taxi operators in 2008 and by town taxis in 2018, but nothing since about whether the practice continues.

Above all, the record contains almost no first-hand Yolŋu account of travelling by bush taxi or of driving one. The voices it does contain come from petitions, a member of parliament, organisation staff and an operator. A fuller account would need to come from passengers, drivers and families, with their consent and through the homeland organisations, and from the operators’ own records and the Territory’s licensing data. Until then, the honest description of how bush taxis operate is partial: they are expensive, they are paid for by pooling and, at times, by surrendering a card, and they stop where the road stops.

9. Conclusion

The bush taxi is what homeland transport looks like when there is no bus, few working cars and a long unsealed road. The evidence assembled here is consistent on the main points. Families without vehicles rely on bush taxis and charters to reach Nhulunbuy; a trip has cost several hundred dollars each way and a return trip often more than a thousand; families combine to meet the fare; and operators have secured payment by holding cards, a practice the Territory’s 2001 code of conduct for taxi drivers forbade. Where licensing, fare-setting and day-to-day practice are concerned, the record is silent or nearly so.

That silence is itself a finding. A service on which homeland families spend a large share of their income is almost invisible in the official record: it falls between taxi regulation designed for towns, tourist-vehicle rules designed for visitors, and bus programs that, on the record found, reach Yirrkala but not the homelands. The documented alternatives, not-for-profit charters, homeland stores and community-owned buses, show that Yolŋu organisations have already found ways to cut the cost of moving people and goods. The task now is to document the bush taxi properly, with the people who use and drive it, so that decisions about homeland transport can rest on evidence rather than anecdote.

This paper returns, finally, to the central rationale with which the set began. There need to be operating cars on the homelands, working for the community and for family members. That is what started this work.⁴² Bush taxis are often an act of desperation; they are not a substitute for a working vehicle that the homeland itself can use. The main paper of the set, Planes, Roads, Automobiles, is built on that point. ISX's part is to support Yolŋu-led homelands; it does not run them.

Notes

1. Visit East Arnhem, "Taxi & Transport Services" (listings for Gove Taxis, Gove Transport and Bush Taxis, and the Laynhapuy airport shuttle). The page carries the label "Expired"; when the listings were last current is not stated. Seen 9 October 2026.
2. Matt Garrick, "Taxi drivers in outback NT's Gove Peninsula accused of ripping off vulnerable people," ABC News, 1 December 2018. The article reports allegations, which the operators named in it denied; it does not report any finding.
3. AussieWeb Local Search, business listing for Arnhem Bush Taxi Services Pty Ltd, Nhulunbuy, NT (listed under taxi services; no website given). A directory listing shows only that the business name was registered there; it says nothing about current operation.
4. Marthakal Homelands & Resource Centre website, menu of Marthakal Business Enterprises, as archived by the Internet Archive on 3 May 2013 and in 2012 (listing Marthakal Taxi Service, Badurru Mechanical Workshop and Marthakal Hire Car Services, among other enterprises). The archived pages give no detail of these services.
5. Laynhapuy Homelands Association Inc., Submission no. 28 to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities, 2008 (homelands "up to 260 km from Nhulunbuy"; some "inaccessible by road in the wet season"; reliance on air charters or bush taxis; return shopping and banking trips of \$500 to \$1,200; "income pooling"; book-up by bush-taxi operators; Laynhapuy Aviation's limited book-up and not-for-profit charters; advice that managed income could not be deducted for Laynha Air shopping transport or for vehicle repairs at the association's workshop).
6. Laynhapuy Homelands Association Inc., answers to questions on notice, Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities, 2009: Attachment A, advice from Jeff Cook, Manager, and Dr Sarah Chalmers, General Practitioner, Laynhapuy Health Service, 25 May 2009 ("Residents travel up to 210 kilometers, paying up to \$1400 for a return trip to town to buy groceries"; the passage does not name the mode of transport); Attachment B, Patients' Assisted Travel Scheme ("there is no affordable public transport, private 'bush taxis' and air charters are prohibitively expensive for individuals on low incomes"; group charter flights organised by the health service and charged to the scheme per seat).
7. Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS), submission on the NT Transport Planning and Investment Roadmap, February 2014: trial of remote passenger transport services in Katherine and Yirrkala; "In the East Arnhem region, there is a lack of regional public transport from Gove to the surrounding communities"; minibus

- drivers able to charge a “fee by negotiation” with no consumer protections; support organisations providing transport at high cost; the Beswick, Barunga and Manyallaluk bus trial that ended early in late 2011, leaving “the taxi companies as the only providers of publicly available transport in those three communities”.
8. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and National Indigenous Australians Agency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, Measure 2.13 Transport, 2024 (2021 Census: 66 per cent of First Nations households in the Northern Territory had one or more vehicles, against 88 per cent nationally; 68 per cent in remote areas; in 2014–15, 60 per cent of First Nations people aged 15 and over in the Territory could easily get to the places they needed to). Seen 9 October 2026.
 9. Botsman (2026), Planes, Roads, Automobiles, sections 4 and 5.1, which give the sources for vehicle counts at Maningrida, among Kuninjku people and at Donydji, and the author’s first-hand account of vehicles at Mata Mata.
 10. W. Fogarty, “You got any Truck?” Vehicles and decentralised mobile service-provision in remote Indigenous Australia, CAEPR Working Paper No. 30/2005, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, pp. 1–2 (the homeland school truck around Maningrida “brought supplies of food from family in town, mail, medical supplies from the clinic, various forms of cheques and payments”). Read directly, 9 October 2026.
 11. Botsman (2022), “Bunguldjama,” Working Papers, 27 September 2022 (“Planes, taxis, cars, buses all have to be coordinated”).
 12. Commercial Passenger (Road) Transport Act 1991 (NT), as in force at 1 July 2026: section 3 (definitions of commercial passenger vehicle, taxi, minibus, private hire car and tourist vehicle); section 8 (operator to be accredited; maximum penalty 85 penalty units); section 15 (exemptions); section 16 (taxi areas declared by the Minister); section 21 (taxi to operate in its taxi area, with an exception for passengers driven in from outside the area and returned).
 13. Nhulunbuy Corporation, Nhulunbuy Town Board, minutes of meeting of 27 April 2021, item 8, “Taxi Industry Regulations & Compliance Discussion” with an officer of the NT Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics; action 95/21.
 14. Trek Support, “Larapinta Trail Transfer Vehicles” (operator’s description of its four-wheel drives as a “licenced and registered Tourist Vehicle (TV Plated)” that “complies with the NT Tourist Vehicle In-Service Maintenance Standards”). Seen 9 October 2026. Cited only to show what “TV” plates denote in Territory practice; the operator has no connection with East Arnhem.
 15. NTCOSS, Cost of Living Report No. 22: Transport, December 2018: minibus fares “structured differently and not regulated in the same way as taxi fares”; “a system of fare by negotiation”; passengers who “may not all have the English language and negotiation skills to ensure a fair price”; the Remote Bus Program and, as at 2015, eight new bus services in the Territory including in the Gove region (citing Transport and Infrastructure Council 2015, p. 20); recommendation 6, regulated minibus fares.
 16. Gordon Renouf, Book Up: Some Consumer Problems, ASIC Report 12, March 2002: typical book-up traders include “stores, taxi drivers, hawkers and regional airlines”; footnote 8, an Aboriginal Legal Aid Service client who recovered “\$2,000 from a taxi driver who had wrongfully deducted funds from a consumer’s account using a keycard”; the NT Taxi Drivers and Operators Code of Conduct, approved 16 May 2001, under which drivers “are not to hold or take any form of passenger’s credit or savings card ... for future journeys”, with “similar provisions” in a code for minibus operators.
 17. Laynhapuy Homelands Association Inc., submission to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs on the proposed introduction of income management on 9 June 2008, section 5.2, Improving

Nutrition (published as attachment 6 to Senate submission 28): groceries in Nhulunbuy “can entail up to \$1200 in aircraft charters or ‘bush taxis’, or up to a 422 km return road trip (from Dhuruputjpi)”.

18. Bunggul Djama Aboriginal Association (BJAA), “BJAA Homelands,” bungguldjama.com, undated; the page refers to the Territory’s homelands policy of August 2012 and so was written after that date (“\$1500 from Nhulunbuy to Gapuiwiyak via a Bush Taxi”; “each week several families wil pool together and take the bush taxi out to the community”). Seen 9 October 2026.
19. Neville White, “A history of Donydji outstation, north-east Arnhem Land,” in N. Peterson and F. Myers (eds), *Experiments in Self-Determination: Histories of the Outstation Movement in Australia*, ANU Press, 2016, ch. 16 (“a four-wheel-drive bush taxi to Nhulunbuy to purchase parts and food and sometimes sell their craft work—at a cost of \$950 for the return trip (this is cheaper than a charter flight)”; one family “spent \$950 to sell \$1,200 worth of craft”).
20. Peter Botsman, personal communication, October 2026, restating an observation recorded at the time of the Mata Mata budgets of 2017: without a car the trip from Mata Mata to Gove cost about \$650 each way, and bush taxis often would not go to Mata Mata and charged a similar amount. The 2017 observation gave the same figure for the trip to Elcho Island, but that trip cannot be made by bush taxi (Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026). The same observation appears in Botsman (2026), *Planes, Roads, Automobiles*, section 6.1.
21. Kylie Stevenson and Tamara Howie, “Is the National Disability Insurance Scheme failing Australians living in remote communities?”, *NT Independent*, 11 October 2020 (first published 5 November 2019): Vanessa Gillett, Laynhapuy Homelands, “It’s \$720 return (in a bush taxi) to get from some Homelands to Nhulunbuy and back”; a resident’s electric scooter “doesn’t fit in a bush taxi”; Miwatj’s four-wheel-drive bus for NDIS clients on Elcho Island.
22. Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation, Submission 91 to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities, 14 July 2020 (Laynhapuy homeland stores save “a \$1,300 round-trip bush taxi fare into Nhulunbuy”, citing Bulloch, Fogarty and Bellchambers 2019; from Yirrkala, “a bus that costs \$5 (each way) that runs during limited business hours, or ... a taxi \$50 each way”). Read directly, 9 October 2026.
23. Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation, submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Inquiry into food security in Australia, undated (it cites material from November 2022): “Those living in surrounding homelands face the choice to spend up to \$600 to get a taxi into Nhulunbuy”.
24. Claire Smith and Gary Jackson, “Income management in the NT: Food for taxis,” *ABC News*, 6 October 2008, drawing on their report *A Community Based Review of the Northern Territory Emergency Response* (118 people in the Katherine East region).
25. Tom Robinson, “No more \$250 taxi fares – New bus service for Barunga and Beswick,” *Katherine Times*, 11 March 2021.
26. Bruno Spandonide, Transport costs in remote communities, Ninti One, CRC-REP Working Paper CW017, 2014 (abstract: combined personal and external transport costs equal to “60–80% of the median annual income of people living in very remote communities”).
27. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: “On homelands, bush taxis are often an act of desperation, which leaves people with no money, debts, and a formidable personal pressure.”
28. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: “Like anyone, bush taxi drivers can be saints or devils.”

29. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: "It is easy to portray them as predators, but without them sometimes nothing would ever happen, and people would starve or suffer."
30. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: "It should be noted, in all this, that on most homelands there is a huge labour of hunting and gathering, and there cannot be a 100 per cent reliance on goods from outside."
31. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: "In Johannesburg and throughout Africa people travel in utility vehicles in very dangerous ways and travel at high speeds, resulting in catastrophic accidents. Arnhem Land is not too far away from that."
32. World Health Organization, "Road traffic injuries," fact sheet, 20 July 2026 ("Road traffic death rates are highest in the WHO African Region and lowest in the European Region"; "An increase in average speed is directly related both to the likelihood of a crash occurring and to the severity of the consequences of the crash"). Read directly, 9 October 2026. The fact sheet does not discuss minibus taxis, utility vehicles or any particular country, and its figures are not reproduced here.
33. Botsman (2026), Planes, Roads, Automobiles, section 5.3, citing the author's first-hand account.
34. ASIC, Report 451: Book up in Indigenous communities in Australia: A national overview, October 2015, paragraphs 15–16 (book-up providers include "taxi services"; providers commonly hold the customer's debit card and sometimes the PIN) and paragraph 41 (survey respondent: "Taxi ... drivers use book up on the sly and also sell grog via book up"; the respondent's location is not given).
35. Botsman (2026), Roads: The Central Arnhem Highway, sections 3 and 9, which give the sources for wet-season restrictions and closures and for the homeland roads; and Peter Botsman, personal communication, October 2026, on the road into Mata Mata (about 70 kilometres along the ridgelines, crossing several major creeks, from a turnoff about 61 kilometres from Nhulunbuy).
36. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: no bush taxi can be taken from Mata Mata to Elcho Island (Galiwin'ku).
37. NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services, "Man charged over alleged secondary supply of alcohol – Nhulunbuy," media release, 18 August 2026. The matters are allegations; the man was served a notice to appear in court on 11 November 2026.
38. NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services, "Police reel in 125kg kava haul – Ramingining," 28 August 2026, and "Ramingining police seize 24kg of Kava and more than \$21,000 cash," 25 September 2026. Both report charges, not convictions.
39. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: Nhulunbuy now has a town bus service. No current public source giving the operator, route, timetable or fares was confirmed for this paper.
40. Jane Bardon, "Bush taxi driver calls for remote bus service," ABC News (video), 22 March 2010. The video has expired; only the published summary survives.
41. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026, on the bus that ISX bought for the Birritjimi community and on Birritjimi's earlier use as accommodation for the mine's managers and senior staff.
42. Peter Botsman, personal communication, 9 October 2026: "We also need to return to the central rationale for all of this. There need to be operating cars on homelands, working for the community and for family members. That is what started all of this."

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