

Dizzying heights

In just over a year, Australian Transit Group's Karratha fleet has grown rapidly. The recent addition of Zhongtong buses has provided the unit with a point of difference as it eyes further expansion in the Pilbara



Time has flown for Melody Faulkner. Just six years ago she started working with renowned operator Australian Transit Group (ATG), starting in the southern expanses of Western Australia like Busselton, Bunbury and Margaret River. Now she's the operations manager of ATG's Karratha network, leading a fleet that has quickly surpassed 65 buses.

How did Melody get there – from the south of WA to the Pilbara region and with a fast emerging number of buses under her leadership? It's a question even she's still trying to find the answers to.

"I've been working with ATG, one of Australia's largest operators, for six years now, and it's gone so quickly," she told ABC.

"I started mainly down south but I've worked in various parts of the business. In December 2024 I moved into the north-west area. It was very different and it introduced me to the resources side of Western Australia, which includes a very different climate and environment to run bus operations in."

It also signalled a change for the broader ATG network. Previously built on school runs, ATG has recently expanded into the state's various mining and resources sites, offering transport operations in a number of regions. A primary focus has been on the Karratha network, with this attention to the Pilbara quickly paying off for Melody and her growing team.

When Melody first made the trip north to lead the Karratha operations, the area had only the 17 buses under the ATG banner. In just over a year, this has sharply increased, with a roughly 53 per cent annual increase seeing ATG's Karratha depot now run 68 buses. While settling into the area and learning about the different operational requirements, Melody and her team also had to welcome a new bus every week for around 20 consecutive weeks – she says in some weeks they had up to three deliveries coming through for the team to process.

"In Karratha we mainly focus on resources transport, which is different to what ATG has been built on," she says.

Above: ATG has grown its Pilbara services and welcomed new ZBus models to the fleet. Image: Australian Transit Group

"I've been lucky to have the backing of ATG and its extensive policies and safety procedures to make the growth as smooth as it could be. I've got everything at hand to run a safe operational depot in Karratha, despite being in a remote region.

"It's been very exciting and humbling to have grown our operations to the point where we've had new buses coming from Perth to inspect and use so often. When I drive around Karratha I often see our buses out on the roads, and they look so good and it makes me proud. They're like my babies."

This exhilarating rush of rapid growth has been built on understanding – learning the local routes, the unique requirements and the crazy conditions that shape resources operations in the Pilbara. From Melody's perspective, she's had to quickly adapt to the particular specifications required to safely and efficiently run bus services in and around Karratha.

"I've been busy learning what specifications the buses need in order to go to certain sights, as well as what

the drivers need to operate in various conditions," she says.

"There's a lot of construction occurring in Karratha currently, meaning the roads aren't as well maintained as in metro areas. There's also a lot of heavy haulage and wide berths present, so there's more types of risk to manage here."

To put it into perspective, it's not a rare occurrence for a bus service to be held up by a cow walking across the road at any time of the day. It's also common for a bus to be stuck behind a road train ambling along the road. As Melody says, "anything can happen".

This doesn't just apply to the natural obstacles that emerge in the Pilbara. The different weather conditions, ranging from scorching summer days to cyclones, also impact how ATG can run buses in Karratha. When it comes to sourcing and operating heavy vehicles, it leads to a complex set of requirements.

"Consider the heat – we have roughly four months where the temperature is over 40 degrees Celsius every single day," she says.

"This has a huge toll on buses, meaning there's a lot of factors to consider. Mining and resources companies have lofty expectations for our buses, and we have to tick a lot of boxes when it comes to safety and compliance. We meet all of this while ensuring our buses are constantly serviced to remain up to date with all timetables."

When these factors pertain to a rapidly growing number of buses that is soon to surpass 70 vehicles, having suppliers to rely on has also been critical for ATG's Karratha unit. Since ATG CEO Ben Doolan first scoped out Karratha as a potential place for expansion into the resources sector, he has been consistently present in the region, so much so that Melody says he's often mistaken for a driver "doing a two-week swing". This hasn't changed as Melody has headed up operations, with Ben often travelling to visit her and learn how the developing network is fairing. On one of these numerous journeys, Melody was introduced to a new supplier partner that has already had a positive

impact on her fleet.

"One day Ben came to me and told me about new buses coming to us that were from a different company – Zhongtong," she says.

"He showed me some photos and described them to me, and I thought they looked really good. When the first model arrived in town, courtesy of ZBus, it was a very exciting day.

"We'd received roughly 40 new buses into the yard before we got our first Zhongtong, and when I first stood on the bus I instantly had this feeling that it was wider, longer and more spacious than any other bus we'd received at that point.

"It was deceiving. With overhead luggage removed, I noticed the difference straightaway."

The first two Zhongtong buses to be deployed were promptly branded with ATG's joint venture partner, Murujuga. The 50:50 joint venture, Murujuga Commercial Transport, sees ATG working closely with resources sector clients to deliver personnel transport services across Karratha and the broader Pilbara region.

A significant portion of this work involves servicing routes to Murujuga National Park, more commonly known as the Burrup Peninsula, where blue-chip clients such as Woodside and Perdaman have engaged ATG, via the joint venture, to transport their substantial workforces.

Locally, it has a reputation as one of Karratha's busiest and most intensively used construction zones, meaning buses used on these runs are rigidly inspected prior to entering service.

Melody recalls the supervisor completing the heavy duty inspection of the two Zhongtong buses and being "instantly impressed" by what he saw.

"I called him a couple of days later to see how the buses were going, and he told me nobody but him had driven the vehicles so far because he was in love with them," she says.

"The drivers were all fighting over who got to drive it – he told me he had no faults with the buses at all. Having worked with other bus companies in the past, he said he noticed a difference with these buses automatically."

They also noted the smoothness of the bus to drive – when you sit behind the wheel, it feels so nice to drive and has an amazing turning circle

A recent inspection of the buses, which are now in full service, has shown immediate durability. Melody says the driver cohort have raved about the quality of the air-conditioning units and their ability to withstand the scorching Pilbara days, while passenger comfort has been a major boost.

"They also noted the smoothness of the bus to drive – when you sit behind the wheel, it feels so nice to drive and has an amazing turning circle," she says.

"The safety features built in are also wonderful. Hats off to the Zhongtong designers, as the seatbelt alarms stand out, with all of the added safety systems being perfect."

With these initial two Zhongtong buses now out on rotation, Melody and her team have plans to welcome more vehicles from the supplier in the near future. A particular goal is to add a smaller 22-seater model to the fleet from ZBus, bringing the badge's classy features to different operations in Karratha.

Much like Melody's time at ATG, life with the two Zhongtong buses has flown by. Already half a year in with the pair of vehicles, Melody is excited about what the future holds for ATG's Karratha unit and their impending future with ZBus.

"Our focus is 100 per cent on growing our fleet more, meaning we have more buses to introduce," she says.

"We would love to introduce other Zhongtong models of various sizes to bolster our fleet. I'm not one to sit still, and I'm always looking for ways to grow – we've handled the hardest part of our initial growth and now I'm dedicated to building on it and helping grow the Zhongtong brand in our region." ■