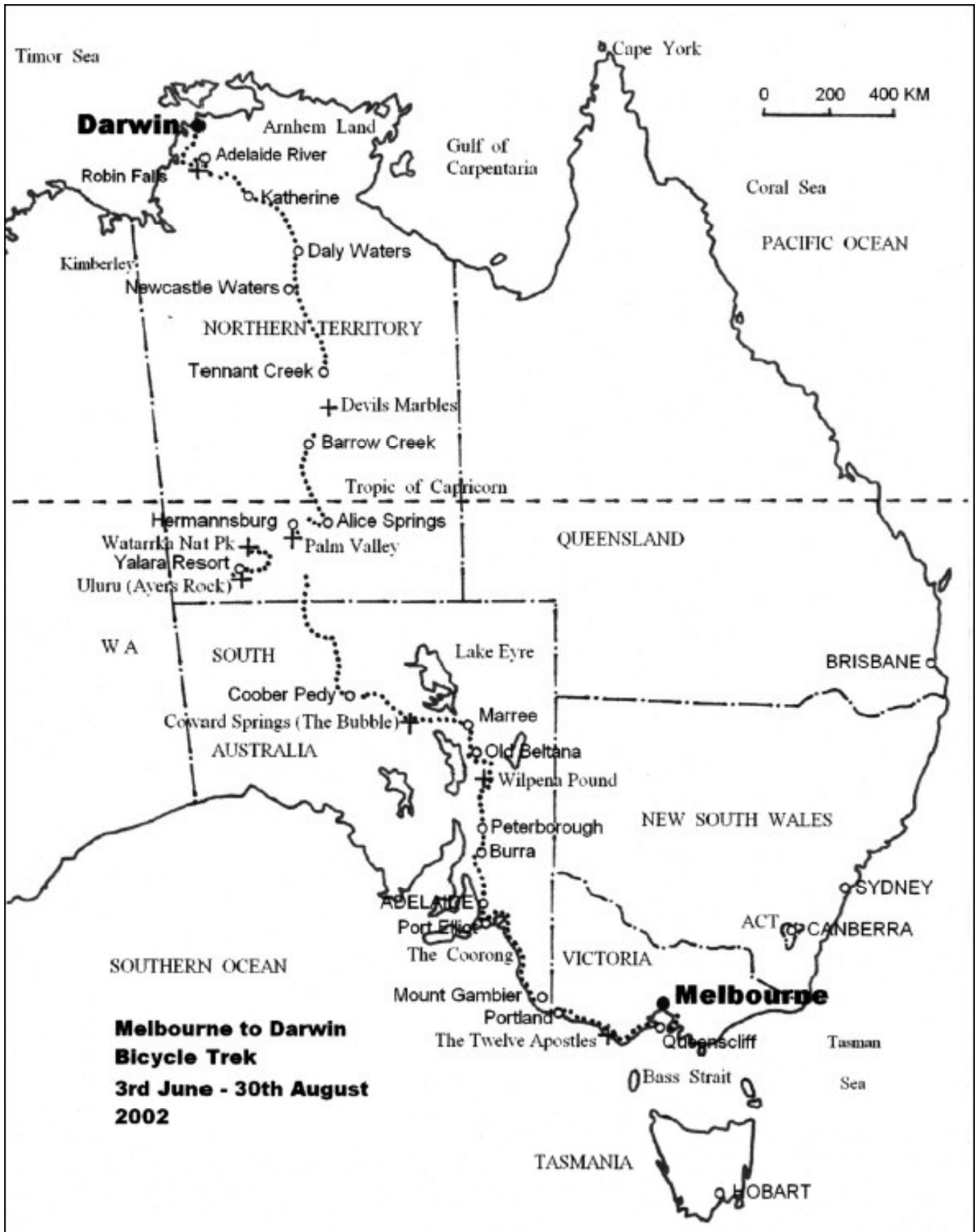


# The Outback Bicycle Diaries

A 5000km Melbourne to Darwin Tour

Seán D.



Seán Deany

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## Chapter One: Sea Change

My mother said “not to tell your father”. Eventually he heard news of my ambition and laughed it off as yet another pipe dream of mine. This would be to get back on my bike and cycle across the Australian continent, in preparation for a grander trek, which potentially would take me around-the-world. Mid 2002 was to be my target date to depart Melbourne for a 5000KM bicycle tour to Darwin.

Monday 3rd June arrived - the official start of my Melbourne to Darwin Bicycling Trek, outside *Degraves Espresso*, a favorite haunt of mine. Getting that essential morning caffeine fix would dominate much of the coming months. I had arranged an informal rendezvous with friends to see me off. After my first latté appeared on the table, Nicola, a previous housemate and writer from *Lonely Planet - Cycling Guides*, arrived. Some time later another friend, Wayne, turned up. I had the café’s proprietor John take some photos of us outside the café complete with the *Intrepid Duck*.

It was late morning, time to leave my friends and familiar surroundings. This involved a suburban train trip out of the city to Frankston, some 40KM south of Melbourne. This unusual route would firstly be travelling south, instead of north, as I wished to take Victoria’s Great Ocean Road. My first day’s destination was the *Sorrento YHA*.

The following morning I was enthusiastically up at 7AM to catch the *Searoad* ferry across Port Phillip Bay Heads to Queenscliff. Some of the boat’s crew had a laugh when I

told them I was cycling to Darwin. Attention had been diverted with the presence of a small pod of dolphins, swimming swiftly by the ferry on its course to Queenscliff.

Queenscliff is a charming old historic town with two lighthouses. One known as the Black Lighthouse, c1862 and still in operation, is Australia's only "black" stone lighthouse. Strategically Queenscliff is the base for the Port Phillip Sea Pilot Station.

I cycled out to Port Lonsdale, where an intriguing site was to be found, the alleged cave used by the escaped convict, William Buckley. Its small opening, long sealed behind metal bars, had actually been opened that day to a group of Aboriginal elders. Two men with welding equipment were re-sealing the vandal-proof entrance. One of the two said that there was nothing to be seen inside! This didn't detract from the mystery of this legendary escaped convict who from 1803 to 1835 lived amongst the local Aboriginal people.

While heading away from Melbourne's greater environs, I was still very much in its playground. Passing through Barwon Heads, over the old trestle bridge, I wanted to find a site made famous in the ABC TV drama "Sea Change". I did watch two or three episodes, and could visually recall the seaside ramshackle abode of the character Diver Dan. This was an old cool store, saved from demolition through public outcry led by "Sea Change" addicts, and had been converted into a classy café.

While at the official gateway to the Great Ocean Road, a busload of giggling Japanese girls pulled up. One of them clambered onto the base of the c1930s wooden structure to have her picture taken, jumping about with her little koala bag. I asked her if she could take my picture. Obliging she did so and this started a chain reaction amongst the tour group, all lining up to make a photo of their newly found attraction – the *Intrepid Duck*.

In the funky little town of Apollo Bay I bunked down at a most hospitable cosy backpackers' establishment. The owner Robyn was expecting me and put me into a room shared with a long-term guest, an Israeli working in the vicinity. He'd travelled much of Australia, but had returned to his favorite place.

By the time I got into Lavers Hill, at the crest of the Otway Ranges, an icy wind was blowing in from the south west. There I discovered another cyclist, an American woman shivering over a small camp stove. Kate had been cycling the SE of Australia. Sensibly she was going in the opposite direction to me, a better option I was soon to discover over the coming weeks, with all those headwinds encountered.

Crossing over the Otway Ranges from Lavers Hill marked a definite change in the weather. For the coming six days I was really in for some winter cycling. Nonetheless I pushed on into the gale force head winds and driving rain, at only about 6 - 12 KM per/h for much of the time. This weathering process was indeed exhausting, but certainly preparation to either make or break a real touring cyclist. I stuck it out with only one exception, a bus trip across into South Australia, to avoid what could only be described as seriously hazardous electrical storms on the 13th June.

One of the main reasons I had chosen to cycle the Great Ocean Road was to visit the Twelve Apostles, found in the Port Campbell National Park or what has also been referred to as the Shipwreck Coast. I arrived in between horizontal rain periods, but was not alone. There also braving the elements were busloads of tour groups, including yet more giggling Japanese girls. In between violent wind gusts I was just able to make a few dramatic photos of the enormous sandstone columns off shore. One has since disintegrated, after an earth tremor.

At the YHA in Port Campbell, my peace was shattered by noisy World Cup Soccer fans. Some were very selfish with the kitchen facilities. One left the hot tap running for some time unattended. I turned it off, just as she was returning and explained to her that this is a dry continent and water shouldn't be wasted. She looked at me as if I was crazy. This comment, although true, must have seemed a bit futile after all the rain during the day. Like many bus travellers, her experience of the Twelve Apostles was probably recorded simply as a disappointing day of wet weather.

On the Queen's Birthday public holiday, my destination was the seaside fishing village of Port Fairy, a sort of Australian Nantucket. En route I made a worthwhile detour to Tower Hill and the hidden town of Koroit. While travelling up the eastern side of Tower Hill, nearing my approach to the ridge of this ancient volcanic caldera, I noticed a lone cyclist coming towards me. Naturally he was surprised to see me touring in such awful weather. Together we pedalled towards town, where I was rewarded by a bakery unexpectedly open for business. Sustenance consisted of a large hot meal of pies, pasties and two plates of salad, followed by a couple of delicious pastries. The cold weather and all the cycling gave me a ravenous appetite.

One of the most beautiful hostels I've ever stayed at was in the village of Yambuk, in the old school house, a completely restored building from the turn of the last century. The most interesting aspect of the *Ehmeralla Hostel*, was that the local Aboriginal Association ran it. I cycled down to Lake Yambuk. Its name in the local Aboriginal language derives from the word "yambeeteh", meaning swamp weed.

Rain was intermittent on the approach to Portland, my last night of rest in Victoria, in a small room provided upstairs in the *Gordon Hotel*. Portland, obscure and almost as distant from Melbourne as one can get in Victoria, has indeed some sense of importance about it. Apart from being the location for the state's energy-hungry aluminium smelters, there is more to the town than that. Portland is the oldest permanent European settlement in the state, founded by Edward Henty in 1834.

After nine consecutive days of cycling, two rest days were spent at the South Australian town of Mt Gambier. These two nights in Mt Gambier were spent at the old town prison, now a hostel, and appropriately called *The Gaol*. I was the only traveller staying there, other than three dodgy looking guys, who claimed to be doing work on the place. I found myself a cell with double bed and toilet, locking the heavy steel door behind me. It was incredibly cold and damp in my cell: this place indeed was once a prison. One of the

three possible ex-convicts in residence was reasonable talking material, and he had done a bit of travelling around Australia.

Walking down the drizzly main street and outside the imposing italianate Town Hall, I spotted two ginger-bearded cyclists. They looked like virtuous brothers on a spiritual pilgrimage. It turned out that one, Nigel, was from the UK, while his cycling companion Nathan, was a Canadian. The two had crossed the Nullarbor Plain in under five weeks from Perth. With the tailwinds in their favour, they were setting off for Victoria, accompanying me to a nearby café beforehand.

Mt Gambier is set on a flat limestone plain and is famous for its lofty crater lakes, which lie above the town centre. My second day was completed with a long walk around the biggest, the Blue Lake. Its mean level has dropped two metres over the past thirty years, since the water table is gradually being overexploited for irrigation. The bottom south-eastern corner of South Australia is by far the wettest region of the state, however it has no significant rivers south of the Murray.

On 16<sup>th</sup> June I coasted into sleepy Kingston South East. In the late afternoon, the old Cape Jaffa Lighthouse came into full view. It had been moved into town in the late 1970s, the historic navigational beacon worth saving from the scrap metal dealer. Located a little further north of Kingston SE is one example of Australia's fascination with "Big things". The *Big Lobster*, a giant fibreglass and mesh monument to that sea crustacean, in all its abominable splendour, had seen better days.

However beyond the Big Lobster begins a far more worthy place. It is the Coorong, a place of windswept beaches and flocks of pelicans. In 1977 a timeless film called *Storm Boy* was set in this wilderness, my first insight into the Coorong. Here a emu darted across the road on a number of occasions, the *Intrepid Duck* presenting no menace to this flightless bird, taller than a man. Later on, walking through the teatree forest, I spotted two wandering emus. One was an old bird judging from its crest.

One of the great enjoyments of solo travel is the opportunity to meet other people. At Margrath Flat stood a large stone homestead built in the 1850s, just off the highway. Although not completely run down, there was an air of abandonment. However I spotted somebody approaching through a space between two of the outbuildings.

I must have spent a good half-hour being shown around Margrath Flat homestead by its caretaker Gary, who though friendly enough was a real rough diamond. I came to discover that this place was not only a sheep station in its heyday, but also had been a *Cobb and Co* stagecoach resting house. In the mid-19th century Adelaide was over a day's journey by road. This establishment therefore had had its own bakery, the ovens still standing, as well as a saddlery and of course the shearing shed. Numbers chalked onto the walls were remnants of the last days of shearing here. Lastly, Gary took me on a tour of his workshop, so that I could get a glimpse into his life. Not only was he caretaker, he made a living from assembling timber beehives. Stacks of completed hives were ready for the apiarist to collect and the bees to set up home.

In the village of Wellington on the west bank of the Murray River, the following day began at the historic *Courthouse Café*. It was run by two “seachangers” from Adelaide. They bought the place only seven weeks before. Tony prepared a drip-coffee, while his wife served it to me accompanied by three delicious scones. Later the new proprietor asked me for an honest opinion on the quality of his coffee making. I told him the frank truth of what I thought about drip-coffee. He lamented the lack of use of his two group espresso machine, shoved at the end of the counter. He complained that his customers, all too frequently tour groups, were herded from their bus for a swift break before catching the next river ferry. This was a shame, since the place had a restful atmosphere.

Nearer to Adelaide the coastal town of Port Elliot proved a good spot for a couple of nights. Here the friendly *Royal Family Hotel* had given me a room gratis, along with another unexpectedly set aside for the *Intrepid Duck*! I made my way to the bar, where it didn’t take long to mingle with the friendly locals. I had a good yakka with one character who revealed his darker past, as he had done time at Her Majesty’s Prison Pentridge in Victoria. Going straight now, he had made South Australia his adopted home, and what better place to come to than Port Elliot.

However another wonderful evening was spent at the bar of the *Royal Family*, my briefly adapted home away from home. Here I met an artist from the nearby town of Strathalbyn, who worked down on the coast during the day. The pub was his regular haunt. He couldn’t stand Victor Harbour, like the rest of them here. Port Elliot had charm and quiet dignity. The Strathalbyn man bought me a few beers, I’d already had several. At the same table I also met a retired Englishman, from the city of Layland, who had made South Australia his home for the past 35 years. He swore he wouldn’t live anywhere other than Elliot, although his tone of voice gave a hint that he did miss the old country. Hearing of and learning about the lives of other people, the country over, was an important aspect to my travels.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> June and a day out from Port Elliot, at the Windy Ridge Lookout, I had Adelaide in sight. There I met a young doctor from Scotland, who had been living and working on exchange in Adelaide for the past year. He was a keen photographer, having his camera and tripod set up for a late afternoon shot of the city skyline. Adelaide, with its one modest skyscraper and sprawling plain looked a humble place compared to Melbourne. In a matter of minutes I was racing down hill, and at my sister’s flat in no time. There, Liz’s highly spirited young daughter Emily, greeted me at the door, the *Intrepid Duck* being much at the center of her attention. Liz allow me the luxury of a few nights at her flat, before the journey northwards would begin.

That evening a small dinner party had been arranged, to celebrate my safe arrival, at her old friend Lenny’s. Some other acquaintances were our cook, a Fijian-Indian woman named Anita, along with her Australian-born husband. The fiery lamb curry really put my sister to work with drinking vast quantities of cold water. Yoghurt would have been a better coolant, but there was none in the house. However I enjoyed it a lot, after a full day on the road.



## Chapter Two: Romping Emus

The three days I had in Adelaide were not purely for relaxation. Nonetheless Liz drove me about town in her old VW Beetle, visiting various places on her errands. Some of my errands were to sort out films shot on the trek so far. I had shot neg film on the trusty old *Pentax K1000*, while on the modern *Voigtländer Bessa* camera I had clocked over seven rolls of slide films to be posted back home to Melbourne for later processing. At the cusp of mass digitalisation I was a hardy 35mm film user still. My neg films were left at a Hindley Street min-lab to be collected the next day. On the following day when I went to pick them up, they had bad news. One of my films, the first one shot in fact, was a “blank”. It was so obvious that they were not telling me the truth, since as an experienced photographer I’d never heard of such a thing as a “blank” film.

On 26<sup>th</sup> June, I took the train out of Adelaide to avoid traffic. This trip took me to the satellite town of Gawler. From there I would resume my cycling and travel up through the Barossa Valley.

On the second morning out of Adelaide I was walking around wet and windy Tanunda and by early afternoon I was walking around wet, windy Kupunda. I had only made a short cycling distance of 28KM this day, the weather had been so extreme.

In Greenock a cold squall of icy rain had caught up with me. However, I saw a welcome symbol. This was an espresso coffee cup, stylishly silk-screened onto a sandwich board at

the roadside. As I was soaked from head to toe it looked most inviting, so I pulled over, taking off those wet gloves, and took out the new book to start on. Inside was a long room with a high counter. Nobody was about other than one customer at the far table. I asked him if there was anybody around. He didn't know! A short while later a young woman came. Seeing the machine obscured by a draped tea towel, I ordered a strong coffee. She looked a little startled, standing in front of yet another giant coffee cup sign, perched high up on the wall behind her. "We don't do coffee", she said. Very odd and quite outrageous! I asked about food, such as hot pasties or something of the sort to warm my wet self. In a false squeaky tone she said they had "potato chips in the bag and cold soft drinks". I couldn't think of anything worse, especially on such a cold winter's day. I was also busting to go to the toilet, and dared ask if they had one. No, they didn't have one of them either. I got up to leave and noticed that the thing under the tea towel was a decoy. It was simply a cardboard box with some, dare I say, coffee cups placed on top.

On the road to Kapunda I was caught in yet another squall, almost enough to be blown off the bicycle. I raced under a huge eucalyptus tree, but at that point the rain was horizontal and lightning was striking in the near distance. I noticed nailed to "my" tree a little red arrow, pointing to where passed the Heysen Walking Trail. This long distance path crossed the road, on its journey north towards drier places such as the Parachilna Gorge in the Flinders Ranges. I would cross its path on a number of occasions and eventually its terminus many days later fording a river bed above the so called Goyder Line. This is the imaginary boundary where the cultivated south meets the Outback.

I got into Kapunda eventually passing *Map the Miner*, a figure several meters high erected as a tribute to the archetypal 19th century Cornish miner. Looking very much like Joseph Stalin, with pick axe over shoulder. "Map" in the Cornish language means son. Kapunda was a beautiful little town, away from Adelaide with its well preserved mining heritage intact. In the clearing weather I wandered down to the old pits, meeting two dear old ladies out on an afternoon stroll. One had a funny old dog on a leash, a corgi-blueheeler cross, which resembled a pouffe with tiny feet. These kindly ladies were a fount of local knowlegde, and gossip at that.

In 1984, returning from a school camping trip by bus to Central Australia, I passed through Clare for the first time. Since then I'd always wanted to return. This time round my visit was more substantial. Here I checked into one of the old hotels on Main North Road. Afterwards I visited an old brewery building, towering in its 19th century industrial splendour. However since the early 1970s the *Knappstein Winery* had moved in. Feeling a bit restless, I wandered in to try their range of Clare Valley wines on offer. I had made my pilgrimage to a good South Australia wine producer. The 1998 *Enterprise Shiraz* was particularly good.

Arriving in Burra the following day, I felt a bit weather beaten. Nevertheless, it was only midday and my place for accommodation was the best so far. It was a self-contained house in the historic *Paxton Square Cottages* precinct. This entire block of some 33 stone miners' cottages, including a chapel, were built between 1849 – 1852. They were named after William Paxton (1818 - 1893), later director of the South Australian Mining

Association. Only a couple of years after the establishment of Kapunda, the state's first mining town, copper was discovered in the district of Burra in 1845. The cottage set aside for me came with an open fireplace and a ready supply of firewood. In the hills of the North Mt Lofty Ranges, Burra is exposed to the elements. In fact the town is located in one of the coldest regions of the state, frequently subject to cold nights. The following morning the whole town was white in a thick frosty mantle.

I took a walk up into the surrounding bald hills of Burra to get a good view over the town. Burra is separated into two sections, north and south, while the area in between them is a large horse paddock and the site of the old Burra Copper Mine. Three high brick chimneys remain, each in a different architectural style and as a testimony to the days when ore was smelted here. These industrial buildings were a legacy to early German engineering in this country. Although the early colony of South Australia had a large percentage of German-born settlers, it was an influx of mostly Cornish who worked down in the mines.

Cycling through the small town of Mount Bryan, something caught my eye at a disused general store. Inside the open doorway were standing three plaster American Indians, most unusual. Soon I was greeted by a man in his 50s, along with a straggling bunch of grandchildren. They were all quite fascinated with the bike and me: where was I going, and where had I come from etc? We chatted a bit and then he brought out the Chief, allowing me to get a photo with him and the grandchildren at his side. Hospitably he made me an offer of two roast pigeons that he was cooking in his oven out the back. He ducked in, returning five minutes later with a length of aluminium foil containing two small roast birds and some home baked bread. Up the road later on I feasted on his pigeons, a new culinary delight.

Heading on to Carrieton, an old Ute came up slowly from behind and started to overtake. The driver, an old farmer, cried out that he would offer me a lift since "it was a whole 17KM to go until I would reach Carrieton". He obviously hadn't any clue to how far I'd already come. I told him that I was OK. About seven kilometres on he passed me for the second time, quietly cruised up from behind, and then called "10KM to go, do you want a ride into town now?" Once again I said I was OK and would have no trouble getting there, although it was late in the day and a headwind was still blowing. I kept on pedalling, thinking of getting to my destination when yet again this character came cruising slowly from behind. "Seven kilometres to go. You could just jump on the back if you want". No. I wasn't interested, ignored him and kept on pedalling. After a minute he must have got the message, and took a gravel road disappearing in a cloud of dust. In a short while I was in Carrieton, spending the night in a disused school.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July, after some gruelling hours on the road, I arrived at the small hamlet of Cradock, a one-pub locality. I stopped at this pub to have a well-deserved break and was pleasantly surprised by its unusual interior. Sitting at a table near the raging iron firebox, was David Frost, the publican, who had put a lot of work into transforming it into a most welcoming establishment. He had a great display of old objects found in the local area. Curiosities included coloured glass bottles, a 19<sup>th</sup> century cowshit shovel and even a

mumified dragonfly! The most striking collectables were however two stuffed goat heads, mounted high above the bar. David told me that they were given to him only on loan some eighteen months earlier from a taxidermist who lived in Quorn. The deal was that an Emu would be prepared for the pub (it was pre-paid), and the goats would be returned with the installation of the stuffed bird. This didn't eventuate, so the goats had remained ever since. During that day on the road I had spotted over twelve Emus. At one stage there were half a dozen romping Emus in a parched paddock. Co-incidentally on a radio programme that evening, I heard a science report that Emu numbers had dropped by up to 50% over the past ten years. What was causing this - the taxidermist?

On the following day a strong south westerly tailwind blew me out of Hawker. This was a blessing. I entered the Flinders Ranges National Park in next to no time. However for the first time in nearly 1670KM I had a puncture! This was bound to happen at some point on the trek, so I was in quite good spirits and got over this little mishap. A fragment of glass was embedded in the rear tyre wall. Earlier on I'd reached a speed of over 50KM per hour at one point, probably running over the glass unnoticed.

Before reaching the *Wilpena Chalet* I passed through an expanse of she-oaks, a variety of native casuarina closely resembling fir trees. The craggy rim of Wilpena Pound and oaks in the foreground gave an almost alpine appearance, a truly spectacular landscape. Point Bonnie with its lofty summit of 1132m, was the highest peak in sight. The icy wind howled through the trees as I continued north on my final approach towards the chalet, located at the narrow opening of the famous Wilpena Pound.

The *Wilpena Chalet* is an old-fashioned 1960s motel with a backpackers' dorm. By late afternoon I'd met the people from my room, one a young Irish woman who didn't drink *Guinness*, but *VB*! I found this a comical surprise. The bar filled up fairly quickly at around 5PM, mostly with the retired people and the odd backpacker or two. Around the heater I met two cheery young guys from Canberra, camping nearby. One of these guests I would meet again two years later, on the Trans-Siberian Railway and in the cabin next to mine!

Wilpena Pound is a natural amphitheatre several kilometres across. I encountered some real nature-lovers and serious birdwatchers, a breed of enthusiast even more slowed down to nature than the touring cyclist. Some distance beyond the escarpment of the Bunbinyunna Range were marvellous views, despite cloud. I sat for some time at the base of an ancient she-oak it twisted by countless centuries of gale force winds, on the windy precipice. Somewhere in the distance the screeching of a kestrel could be heard, an eerie sound like a child's cry. There wasn't one other person in sight, and removed from the rest of humanity I felt a fraction closer to nature. The centre of Wilpena Pound also boasts a she-oak forest and around these trees are small shrubs with tiny yellow flowers, looking and smelling like chamomile tea. They gave off a sweet fragrance, along with the fresh pine scent of the oaks. Weeks of out door travel had in fact heightened my sense of smell.



## Chapter Three: The Other Cyclist

Leaving Wilpena Pound I visited the famous Cazneaux tree. In the late 1930s, the ancient river red gum, hollow and partially burnt out, had been photographed by Harold Cazneaux. It is a symbol of survival in a harsh semi-arid environment.

Beyond Upalinna Outstation a carload of people from Melbourne pulled up just ahead of me. A young man got out to take a photograph, the orange / purple mass of St Mary's Peak (1168m), visible under a blue sky. He asked me if I was travelling with the "other" cyclist. He'd passed a woman cyclist, only minutes before. I could make out the tyre tracks on the gravel road surface. I followed these trails for some kilometres, believing that this cyclist would be travelling at about the same speed as myself. If I didn't catch up soon I would be certain to by the end of the day, assuming that she would stop at Blinman.

For a couple of hours I pedalled over an open high plain nearing the old mining settlement of Blinman, South Australia's highest town at 600m. Suddenly around the turn off road to Brachilna Gorge the tyre tracks vanished. However after several kilometres I sighted up the road a distant figure. The cyclist! It became clear that it wasn't a woman. He simply had long blond hair and had misled the motorists I'd met earlier.

Carsten was also quite surprised to meet another cyclist, one travelling in the same direction as he. In fact he'd travelled all the way from Sydney, on his cross-Australia

bicycling tour and was headed also for Blinman that day. His hometown was near Weimar, home of Goethe in the former East Germany.

With the road much to ourselves we cycled into Blinman, where a cosy room awaited me at the North Blinman Hotel. That evening, the hotel management gave us dinner on the house. Carsten and I thus began a long conversation about food, a subject to dominate for the days ahead. Cycling had not only turned me into a food-fanatic, but somebody else. There and then we agreed to accompany one another across the South Australian desert, taking part of the Oodnadatta Track and William Creek Road to Coober Pedy, before the ride up the Stuart Highway towards Alice Springs.

From Blinman we took the Parachilna Gorge Road. It was littered with stones and ruts, with hazardous loose edges. The country changed dramatically, taking on an almost sub-alpine appearance at one stretch. We passed an altered kangaroo warning sign, that wore a woollen beanie and rode on skis. However we were rapidly leaving this mountain landscape and headed for the flat plains of the desert. This descent took over 3 hours.

On recommendations from the Beltana Roadhouse, we found our way “off the beaten track” to the Old Beltana Telegraph Station. Beltana, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was established as a “repeater” station for the Overland Telegraph. As well as the regular flow of itinerant workers, this settlement had a resident population of Afghans. They’d worked the camel caravan, linking the remote north of Australia with the populated south.

In the dimming light, we met Marian, the historic Telegraph Station’s caretaker. Full of charm and local knowledge, she had lived in the area for some years. Marian took us in for the night, giving Carsten and me a rambling old room with two iron beds. In another room we met a couple of WWOOFers (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) from the UK, Natasha and Simon. They were spending several weeks here assisting Marian prepare Beltana for its country-fair. Marian invited us inside her cosy kitchen for an old-fashioned English dinner. She and Natasha had prepared “toad in the hole”, a kind of Yorkshire pudding with sausages alongside huge helpings of steamed garden vegetables. For sweets we were treated to delicious Quondong slice, made from a native Australian bush fruit. This sweet, tasting something between cherry and poppy seed cake.

During dinner there was a loud knock at the kitchen door. There stood a ragged elderly man, under an old tattered hat, with a big bushy beard. I had the great pleasure of sharing bush billy tea with this Aussie legend, Drew Kettle the following morning. At the remarkable age of 82 years he had walked some 33,000KM over the past two decades in aid of charity. The Australian Outback attracts this kind of person, shaping them at times into something extraordinary.

Carsten and I were taken on a tour of Marian’s abundant herb garden the following morning, then it was goodbyes to our host. We diverted to Leigh Creek, a coal-mining town, where we had to buy additional food supplies. To our delight we discovered a well-stocked health food store. However, with little cash in hand, we were horrified to discover that key card services were unavailable. What could two hungry bicycle tourists

do when surrounded by so much food? I had a bit of a brainstorm and asked the proprietor Theresa if she would “sponsor” us, with the gift of food for our cycling trek. Thinking this a little too much to ask for I was surprised, and Carsten quite flabbergasted, when she said “no problem”. Theresa gave us an extra treat, it the best home-made apple-crumble I’d ever had, with a mountain of double cream on top. That afternoon, with our stomachs filled with a second helping of apple-crumble, we pedalled on north. An emu raced along side us and just off the road our long shadows dipped over the salt bush.

Famously the Birdsville Track begins at Marree, but it is also where the southern end of the infamous Oodnadatta Track begins its 339KM journey through the desert wastes of Outback South Australia. It had been my original plan to cycle via the town of Oodnadatta to Marla on the Stuart Hwy, but instead we were going to travel via the William Creek Road to Coober Pedy.

It was at Alberrie Creek where we sighted a most peculiar transformation of railway relics, left overs from the *Ghan* line which had been re-routed in 1978. Several strange features were visible ahead, silhouetted against the orange setting sun. What looked like an oil derrick soon became evident. Beyond it an old elevated railway cistern, looking like a giant dog was on the horizon! The so-called oil derrick was actually two small aircraft in crucifix formation, side by side with wings touching in embrace. Painted onto these planes were the emblems of a flying serpent, one black and the other white. A large painted spiral, with pointilist dots in Central Australian tradition, was placed at the centre, where the serpents’ wing tips met. Above this installation fluttered the flag of the *Mutoid Waste Company*, a post-apocalyptic rendition of the *Jolly Roger*. Surrounding this set up were several cars, each cut neatly in two. A floral windmill loomed over an area of dusty ground, clearly an abandoned dance floor from some rave party long gone by.

We pushed our bikes past the two aircraft and towards a small gathering of the tribes, an urban-activist-freaky-raver crew sitting around a fire drinking chai! Carsten and I introduced ourselves, spooking some level of curiosity. Soon we met the installation’s creator him self - the *Mutoid Waste Company’s* founder Robyn Cooke.

Robyn, Carsten and I prepared a group dinner that evening and later he invited us to a little compound area, where he had been set up for months. Here a small fire pit was sheltered by a windbreak of salt bush. Under the glow of the Milky Way and Southern Cross we sat around the warming embers of old railway sleepers for hours, there was so much to talk about.

A beautiful morning was welcomed by swarms of galahs (native parrots) screeching overhead. It turned out that I knew another crew member at the site - *Star Power*. He had done some wacky and fun things. One controversial incident had him in court, over the bearing of arms. The alleged weapon was in fact a toy ray gun, which he wore at all times during his *Captain Star Power* phase. He had been booked on the streets of Melbourne armed as a member of the *Intergalactic Insurgence*. Nonetheless he was quite capable of making an excellent mocha espresso, the best coffee I’d had since Adelaide! It was a shame we were to leave these people that morning.

We made a lunch stop at a special little spot at the base of a red sand dune that commanded views out towards the expansive salt pan of Lake Eyre South. One of the activists at Alberrie Creek had told me, as I drank my coffee that morning, that the lake was presently filled with water. However its deceptive glare had given the impression of a rippling inland sea: in fact it was a vast dry salty plain. Lake Eyre, at 12 metres below sea level, is the largest natural lake in Australia. It fills rarely.

Close to Coward Springs can be found an intriguing natural feature known as “the Bubble”, on top a sulphurous mound and inside the unique Wamba Kadarbu Mound Springs Conservation Park. Apart from a retired Dutch couple we greeted on our way into the fenced-off area, we were the only people present. With its inviting waters Carsten insisted on having a dip, ignoring the warning signs. I was a little wary about swimming, wading or whatever in this small pool of Artesian water. Every minute or two it would spew huge surfacing bubbles, emerging mysteriously from the sandy bottom.

At dusk we arrived at the nearby Coward Springs camping ground. To our surprise, right next door to us in this very busy compound, were the Dutch couple we’d seen at the Bubble. They kindly invited us over to join them for dinner and a very wholesome one it was! Irna and Frans were an interesting pair, who had sold their southern France home of the past twenty-five years. They were on tour in Australia for about four years, spending it mostly in the Outback. They had a four-wheel drive, fitted out with an innovative camping trailer. Irna made the best fruit / beer damper (Australian bush bread) imaginable, giving Carsten the secret recipe. Dinner was once again served under the Southern Cross. What a life we were having. I had the good fortune, in 2004 to be the guest of these two once more, on my way to Spain’s Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

Just short of William Creek, at the roadside, is the so-called “Pussy Willow”. I almost threw up my lunch from the stench of those strung-up feral cats, dozens displayed on this lone tree. A passing truck hooted to me. I refused the offer of a ride, and then Carsten stuck his guilty head out the window saying that he would see me in town! In striking distance of William Creek I was welcomed by a small sign, which read “Cappuccino 3KM on Left”, below a picture of a silhouetted Dingo (Australian wild dog).

The following day and a couple of kilometres beyond William Creek, we began our route along the William Creek Road, heading toward Coober Pedy. We were travelling right across the Woomera Prohibited Area, where nuclear testing had been carried out by the British in the 1950s. This near wilderness was crossed by numerous low sand dunes and countless dry lake beds. Only half a dozen cars would pass each day.

On our last day, before arrival at Coober Pedy, we were up at 6:30AM. By 8:30AM, a reasonable starting time, strong headwinds were already blowing against us. We were travelling at the slow pace of only about 6kmph. With an estimated 60 kilometres of gravel road ahead, things were looking bleaker still. Not only had we run out of bread and vegetables, but our water supply was critically low. The brackish tap water in William Creek had been undrinkable.

After several hours of rest at the roadside, lumbering over the horizon a large 4X4 pulling an enormous caravan came to our anticipated rescue. The driver stopped and asked how we were going. "Terribly" I quite honestly told him, asking if he would be able to take us and our bikes into Coober Pedy. Fortunately he didn't hesitate and luck was back on our side. We loaded the bicycles into the caravan and were introduced to his family. Carsten and I squashed onto the backseat with two of the kids. Safely now in this cocoon we were transported without effort towards Coober Pedy, chocolate muffins being handed around by the man's wife.

Dropped off in Coober Pedy, we made our way to the *Bedrock* hostel. It is underground, as are many of the dwellings in the town. This a good remedy for the extremes in temperatures experienced here, where a comfortable 23°C is maintained all the year round.

A few kilometres outside of Coober Pedy is Crocodile Harry's. Harry was a Latvian migrant to Australia in the early 1950s. His vast underground dugout is more eclectic than the usual, and a bit of a shrine to the female sex. Here there are no shortages of "tits and arse", nonetheless all in the name of art! When I arrived at the *Crocodile's Nest*, as it's locally known, the man himself was sleeping in the winter sunshine on an old tramways bus seat. He awoke as I approached, but was not at all surprised to see another visitor as his home has become quite an attraction.

Harry took me on a tour of his abode, allowing me to photograph freely about the place. He showed me some wonderful colour photographs from the 1950s, when he gained his fame as "Crocodile Harry". In fact Harry is the "original" *Crocodile Dundee*. In the Northern Territory Top End he spent 13 years in the wilderness as a crocodile hunter. It was hard to believe that the wild man in the photos, pigeon breasted and armed with bowie knife, was now frail in his eighties. He had lived a hard life, away from the bright lights of the big city, before settling down to Opal mining, at rough-as-guts Coober Pedy.

On Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July, some seven weeks after I'd left Melbourne, we were heading north out of Coober Pedy, destination unknown. A few hours later we were beyond the giant "praire dog" mounds of freehold mine tailings, and at the Dog Proof Fence. At this Outback curiosity, we met an odd character. Carsten took great interest in talking with him, while a gut feeling at first gave me a darker opinion of him. One year before on the Stuart Highway, north of Alice Springs, there had been the well-publicised Peter Falconio murder and the attempted abduction of his British girlfriend. In mid 2002 the unknown killer was still at large. However here I was surely mistaken in my anxieties, for this character turned out to be quite likeable, and especially his almost pure Dingo. He jokingly called it "the kangaroo", while she was urinating at the roadside. We could see the resemblance from the dogs posture, up on its hind legs.

Inching our way towards the Northern Territory border, I had travelled well over the halfway point, some 2665KM from Melbourne. By the 19<sup>th</sup> July we reached it. It was a bonus to reach the border. From here it is still some 1700KM to Darwin, but a mere 298KM to Alice Springs, the nearest town.

The *Kulgera Roadhouse* was an anticipated welcome rest stop, but that was about it. I was approached twice that afternoon by a poor Aboriginal fellow. Later he pushed a tiny bundle of folded \$10 notes into my hand, requesting that I “be a gentleman and go into the pub and buy us some beer”. He said he wasn’t allowed to go into the pub, because he was Aboriginal. I knew that alcohol was indeed strictly forbidden on all Aboriginal reservations, but what about here? As long as it was consumed peacefully within the vicinity of the Roadhouse grounds, I guess it wasn’t unlawful.

Reluctantly I went into the pub to make the purchase, since I knew only a small quantity of beer could be bought. However I wasn’t expecting the ordeal of this “white fella’s” world of the Roadhouse pub. Here truck drivers and cattle station workers migrated to drown their hard day’s work. I ordered a certain amount of light strength beer. One bloke at the bar leaned across and asked me if I were buying that beer for any of the Aborigines outside. “Gotta-watch-em-young-fella-those-Aboriginals-they-don’t-know-when-ta-stop”, he said in a tipsy slur. Unexpectedly, came out the quasi-legal declaration book, clearly signed by countless suckers from the southern states like myself. I had to state that I was not supplying Aboriginal “communities” with liquor. Hesitantly I signed, bought the beer and went back outside. Carsten was waiting with the bicycles, a little nervous as to why it had taken so long for me to buy the beer which neither he nor I were to consume. I supplied the thirsty-looking man, warning him of what I’d had to sign. However I think he’d heard it all. Clearly it wasn’t being sent off to any community, it was simply to be handed around amongst his friends in the roadhouse grounds. Nevertheless, I’d learned a bit of a lesson on my first day in the Northern Territory.

Minutes later and under cool moonlight, we were racing along the highway. We travelled some 40KM north until we were dead tired, making a bush camp in a thorny paddock. A very thorny evening indeed: by morning there was no longer a thorn in my side, but instead one in my self-inflating mattress. Now self-deflating.

The following day, concerning cycling, was short lived. I ended up taking the bus into Alice Springs, as my right knee was giving me so much trouble. After 15 consecutive days together, we went our own ways once we reached the *Erlunda Roadhouse*. Carsten had plans for heading west to Uluru (Ayers Rock), as originally planned. I had plans to travel there after a rest stop, in the Alice, so we agreed to catch up at the *Yalara Resort*.

Once in civilization again I pushed my bicycle through the leafy Todd Mall, to the Alice Springs Hospital to have my knee examined. There I had little time waiting, and saw a young fluent English-speaking Nigerian doctor who’d only been in the country for six weeks. My problem wasn’t too serious, but rest was highly recommended for me.

I made my way over the almost permanently dry Todd River to the eastern side of town. Here I was to stay for four days at the *Alice Lodge Backpackers*, run by the hospitable John Argust, who had a staff caravan set aside for me. I made myself a nourishing dinner in the hostel kitchen, met some of the other travellers, and received a letter from my parents which had been posted to the hostel. They informed me that they would be in town to see me on the following Monday.



**Twelve Apostles, Victoria**



**Cape Jaffa Lighthouse,  
Kingston SE, South Australia**

**Caznough Tree. SA Outback**



**Road into the Flinders Ranges. SA**





**Carsten at Alberrie Creek, SA**



**Ruin at Beltana, SA**



**Skiing Kangaroo, Parachilna Gorge, SA**

**Opal Separator, Coober Pedy, SA**





**Camel Handler, NT**

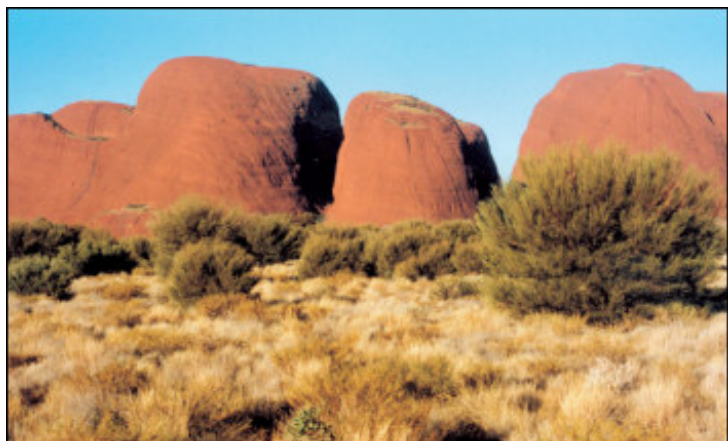


**The Author Cycling at Uluru, NT**

**Junction Hotel,  
Newcastle Waters, NT**

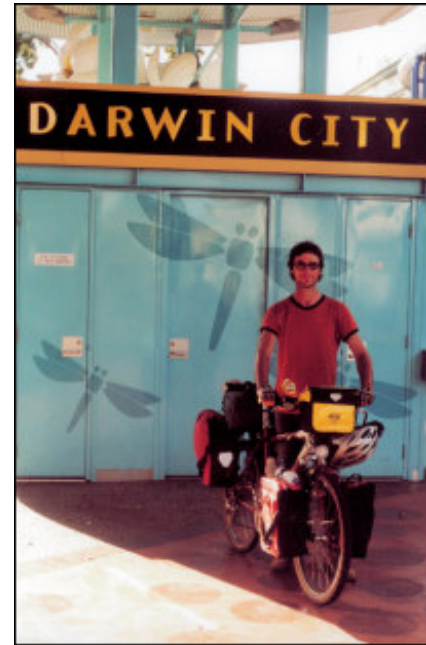


**Kata Tjuta (The Olgas), NT**





**Magnetic Termite Mound, NT**



**Darwin at Last, 30 August 2002**

**Simon on Trandem**



**Mataranka, NT**





## Chapter Four: Songlines

One day walking across the Todd, I spotted a small mob of Aboriginal women who'd probably made the dry river bed their home. Many lived in the Todd, under the stars. It had also become quite unsafe for homeless Aboriginal people, since drunkenness and violence had become a fact of life. A few hundred metres away I saw a dorky tourist, in khaki shorts and Akubra hat, attempting to throw a boomerang - looking like a real fool.

In town I soon discovered a wonderful café, *Bar Doppio*, just off the Todd Mall in a little finger lane, where the caffeine-addicted and transplanted Southerners spent their free time enjoying a good espresso coffee. One of the waitresses, Naomi, had ridden her bicycle from Melbourne and got as far as the Alice and decided to stay. Having the opportunity to work at the best café for 1500KM on either side would have been a good incentive for almost anyone to stop here.

My last day in Alice Springs was spent with my parents, before their train journey back to Melbourne. We took a walk along Todd Mall visiting the historic Adelaide House, the former Alice Springs Hospital, now a museum. It had been established in the 1920s by the remarkable John Flynn, founder of the Royal Flying Doctors Service. The building boasted a unique water and air cooling system. Another pioneer, at the same time as Flynn, had been the radio technician Traeger. Here he had developed a pre-computer

device for sending and decoding text messages sent via wireless Morse code. Sending texted messages was not such a new thing after all!

On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> July, a five-and-a-half hour's bus trip from Alice Springs to Yalara was made. The first stop was at Stuarts Well, where we had the opportunity to take a five minutes ride on a camel, at a fee. I vouched to take some pictures and search out a coffee instead. The first shot of caffeine for the day, much required, came tepid and in a stylofoam cup. There was more taste of cup than coffee. No more *Bar Doppio*.

Pleasure at last came when at the *Yalara Resort* I could once and for all relieve myself from bus travel. Here at the *YHA* reception I was given a key, to a 4-bed dorm, complete with a fridge, which I was to share for the four nights stay. The first night there was a woman from Sydney and a giant toddler of a bankteller from Melbourne.

On my first morning at Yalara I was up early to view the sunrise. From a hillock overlooking the resort there was the distant rock - Uluru (Ayers Rock), bathed in a morning glow. My only company, a young Polish traveller from Zakopané.

After five days rest, I was back on my bike for some semi-serious cycling, although without panniers. I made my way out to Uluru. It had been over 18 years since my last vist to the "rock". Then like many people it had been my objective to climb it, however this time around I was not at all interested. These days many travellers and tourists alike are starting to listen to the advice from the local Anangu people, to show a sign of respect by not climbing the rock. And, quite franky it is better to stand back, contemplate a little and observe this wonderous monolith from some viewable distance. Nonetheless like honey ants could be seen a slow line of people, which the Anangu refer to as the "Mingka Mob", making their way up the steep face of Uluru to its summit.

A short distance from the base of Uluru is the harmoniously designed Anangu Cultural Centre. Here I picked up a little folding brochure with superb diagrams illustrating and explaining the *Mala* and *Mutitjula* walks. Easily accessible to anyone, they are on different sides of the Rock, which has a base radius of approximately 9KM. Taking these leisurely walks, the Rock's enormous size became evident, while something of the spiritual significance of place and country could be experienced. I'd travelled across this land, making my own particular *songline* to appreciate a deeply special place.

The 10KM ride back to *Yalara Resort* was soon joined by a "Mingka Motor Mob" hurrying back for their evening meal. When I returned to my room, the Sydney woman had left and been replaced with a young American traveller named Jill, from Connecticut. Although she lived in Washington DC she spent much of her time on the Caribbean island of St Martin. A year before I'd read Patrick Leigh Fermor's classic *The Travellers Tree*, and been intrigued by a little-known island called Saba, which he'd visited in 1949. I mentioned this to Jill and asked if she'd been there. Her eyes lit up and a big smile swept across her face. "As you happen to know..." she went on in her high New England accent, "I've got a little present for you". She dug into her rucksack. Out came an orange T-shirt all neatly folded, which she flapped and before me were the words displayed "Hike Saba – Netherlands Antilles". Wow! This really made my day. Although a size too

small, I squeezed into it and was proud that I'd met somebody who had been to this faraway place. A couple of songlines had been crossed this day!

The next day I was up at 8.45AM sharp for the Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) shuttle bus. As it's a 100KM round trip, on a bicycle there wouldn't have been much of a chance to do any walking trails, unless one spent the night there. Prohibited by the park management.

At the Olga Gorge itself, a brief walk was made into this other worldly place. The path ended abruptly and between the towering boulders of the 1066m high Mt Olga, and another stone of great height. In fact the Olgas are higher and more expansive than Uluru. On the steep sides of the Olga Gorge many caves are visible. The traditional owners advise people not to enter the caves found throughout Kata Tjuta. Due to their height, these caves were well out of reach to all but Wedge Tail Eagles and spirits.

After my morning wander through Olga Gorge, I walked the sealed road to the start of the Valley of the Winds circuit trail. Under shade from a thatch shelter was Carsten! It was a surprise to see him here, although I was expecting to run into him sooner or later. He was chatting to an eccentric rotund Swiss man who produced cheese on the NSW south coast. It was good to see Carsten again and catch up on the past six days of his adventuring. Budget-minded, he had avoided Yalara Resort and had been bush camping discreetly. We agreed to accompany each other once more, where we would bicycle to Kings Canyon and also attempt the infamous Mereenie Loop Road on to Alice Springs.

Taking the shuttle bus back to Yalara, I had a second chance to view the sunset on Uluru. It was equally as spectacular as the evening before. On the bus I met an interesting Frenchman named Daniel, who was briefly holidaying in Australia; it wasn't his first visit either. One of his choices for coming to Australia was to partake in the most popular French activity of snorkling. Breaking the trip on the coast, he'd made a spur of the moment decision to see Central Australia. He had an interesting occupation, where he worked for the French Government's solar and high energy combustion research facility, located high up in the Pyrénées. It happened that he was also staying at the *Yalara YHA*. Later on that evening Carsten arrived, we'd seen him pedalling frantically along the Kata Tjuta Road a few hours before. Daniel offered the spare bed in his twin room to the wary German cyclist. Travellers deserve some creature comforts once in a while.

The final "rest" day was spent at *Yalara Resort*, with Jill. At the *Geko Café*, we sat out on the terrace reading and writing postcards. In the resort's bookshop were a beautiful range of Aboriginal art and post cards, but only one was local and it was on the "Honey Ant" theme. Since I was spending the morning with the woman who'd opened my eyes again onto Saba, I decided to write a card to Patrick Leigh Fermor. I was fortunate enough to meet this writer, then aged 89, at his home a couple of years later in 2004. Another card went out to an American acquaintance met in 1998 in Budapest who goes under the alias of *Espresso Police*. A Honey Ant Dreaming card for my parents, back in Melbourne; *Bicycle Victoria*, who had endorsed my trek as voluntary work; a card to *Christie Bicycles*, where I'd had my mountain bike modified for touring, and finally one of the "pointilist" styled post cards to an old friend Michael, who refuses to use the internet and had originally got me into reading Patrick Leigh Fermor's *A Time of Gifts*.

The Lasseter Highway leading from Yalara to Curtin Springs traverses a rather ordinary desertscape. However, it has interesting subtleties. One such phenomenon is the ashen remains of small bushes left over from a scrub fire. Here one could see beautiful circular scatterings of ash, a metre or so wide, deposited onto the surface of the red soil. Is their occurrence perhaps the inspirational origin of aerial pointillist painting?

For some hours the monolith of Uluru could be seen behind us, just above the low dunes. However it was the high distant massiff of 859m Mt Connor which intrigued me most. This is the peak which the tourist often confuses with Uluru on approaching the area. I can clearly remember this happening when I first visited in 1984. However, consulting road maps beforehand, I'd known what to expect. When the first cry of "There's Ayers Rock" set the cat amongst the pigeons, I had smart-arsedly corrected my fellow students that it was not Ayers Rock, but in fact a certain Mt Connor. Of course I had to be backed up by our adult guide to this fact. This time around I and my travelling companion, Carsten, had no time to reach Mt Connor on bicycles.

We arrived at the dusty camping ground of Curtin Springs in the early evening. By a bonfire, an enthusiastic man who had made the Dromedary camel his life's work, gave us and other travellers a bit of an insight. It was fascinating to listen to his stories about the history of the camel in Australia, from the early days of its introduction, through to today's Alice Springs Camel Cup. Camels had in fact been first introduced to Tasmania in 1842. I learnt of this after telling the Dromedier that on Bruny Island I'd heard there was a camel safari company. Since then, there has been a steadily growing population of some half a million Dromedary camels on the Australian continent. The largest surviving wild herds in the world are here, while the native habitat of Central Asia has been largely decimated. With soft hoofs the Dromedary is less damaging to the soil than cattle or sheep, and certainly is far more adjusted to a harsh desert climate. Asked if he ate camel, the man said he did. Indeed camel meat is just like beef. In fact, one wouldn't be able to tell the difference! Perhaps second to the farming of kangaroos, a far better alternative to this country's addiction to beef.

I was happy to be travelling with Carsten once again. Our conversations would revert to the topics of food and adventurous travel. While I had ambitions for realising my *Cape to Cape Trek*, Carsten's dream was to traverse Asia via Tibet. Another more immediate issue was our daily starting schedule. Carsten was quite keen on a very early "get up" time of 5AM! He said that he had recently met a couple of German cyclists, who evidently "automatically" got up at this hour to avoid the headwinds, and "enjoy" the last hours of day light. In theory this was a good scenario, but could it be done? I thought that out here it would be too cold for such an early start, as spending more than an hour getting ready in the dark wasn't so attractive. We agreed on making an effort into getting up at 6AM, set off time by 7.30AM, so to beat a couple of hours of potential headwinds.

Further up the road along the dry bed of the Yaua Creek, there was a beautiful roadside stop, complete with water tank. Here and in amongst the forest of giant sheoaks, Carsten ran into an Austrian couple for the fifth time so far on his travels. They came from the

Tyrol region, and were “doing” Australia by camper van. They each produced their pride and joy from their Australian experience, two beautifully designed and well resonating didgeridoos. The couple both had mastered the circular breathing technique through deep devotion to this most ancient of instruments. Here we also met an Australian / Irish couple, who kindly made Carsten and me delicious toasted cheese and tomato sandwiches. Drinking water, toasted cheese sandwiches and earlier on in the day carob-coated ginger, impossible to refuse, were just some of the little rewards we received on our way.

On reaching the *Kings Canyon Resort* a rest day was required. Nonetheless this was to be by making the “Rim Walk” around the canyon itself, at Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park. After breakfast, I made my way over to the bar for a real coffee. When I got there I was staggered to see that the place wasn’t open until 10 AM! What was this late coffee business all about at these resorts! Fortunately a number of plastic dining tables were left outside, so I prepared my own coffee and read in the morning sun. A few guests came staggering by, looking more in need of a coffee than I. Routinely they bumped into the glass doors, caffeine withdrawn and expecting a miraculous *open sesame*. “What the...Goddam, it’s clo-s-ed”, came from a middle aged North American tourist, bulging camera around his sunburnt neck. “You mean they-are clo-s-ed...Whart?” Said his wife.

I didn’t see Carsten, so made my own way out to complete the Rim Walk alone, and in the opposite direction to what the signs were directing. The woman who “manned” the little tuck shop in Kings Canyon said “ya cairn only go one way-i, not the direction you’re go’n in young man, ya go’in the wrong way-i”. I asked her why this was so, but only got the reply “because the signs say ya cairn only go the other way-i”. I wasn’t in the mood for argument in such a wonderful location, but did explain my reasons for capturing the afternoon light on the South Cliff Face. I was also interested in not being stuck behind the tour groups who constantly lingered and chatted along the way.

The four hour walk was wonderful and once beyond the canyon floor I was up on to the lofty heights of a plateau. There I found a stunning ghost gum with three ancient trunks, rich red syrupy sap seeping from one of them. White native cypress pines and prehistoric cycad palms were found amongst the well watered ravines. The landscape was beautiful, ever-changing. I made my way down into the so-called “Garden of Eden”, where I ran across Carsten, who had also been told to go the other “way-i”. In a deep water hole, beneath a high sandstone overhang, two ducks paddled about making ripples in the water. A small lizard sat sunning itself, while a young couple lazed on the largest pool’s sandy embankment – this place was indeed a “Garden of Eden”.

Progressing further along, beyond the spectacular South Cliff Face, I met a sensible Dutch couple who must have had that anarchic streak in them. They were also going the “wrong” way! I joined them for a while, and it turned out that they were geologists. We were also entering a fascinating area. At a place called “The Lost City” we found the fossil remnants of an ancient lake bed, the corrugated ripples of its sandy floor frozen in time.

Leaving Watarrka National Park by bicycle presented a bit of a problem for Carsten and me. This turned into a bit of a spontaneous journey, involving a good deal of luck. The distance covered was actually about 215KM, however just under thirty kilometres was made by mostly pushing the bicycle along the Palm Valley road, my destination.

Carsten was eager to attempt to cycle the Mereenie Loop Road, which started outside the *Kings Canyon Resort*. On the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> August the two of us set off. After only 8KM down the road it was clear we wouldn't ever be able to bicycle this road. Carsten fortunately had spoken to some German travellers the night before about his prospects of a lift. A cloud of orange dust appeared, and soon fellow country men pulled up, their vehicle almost completely full. Efforts were made to fit his bicycle onto the packed roof rack and he squeezed in. This left me out. However roaring towards us there came an old style Coaster mini-bus. It contained a retired couple from Victoria. I didn't hesitate to beg the driver Ray for a lift beyond this hell road. They didn't generally pick up hitch-hikers, but they were easily persuaded, in fact Ray's jolly wife Carol was most intrigued by this intrepid traveller. After putting my bicycle into their van which had the name - "Got Away", I said goodbye to Carsten. Our bicycling together was over. He was heading to Ormiston Gorge. My crew were going to exactly where I wanted to go - Hermannsburg.

The Mereenie Loop Road looked interesting from the perspective of the van, which filled with a cloud of red dust. Further along the road we passed by the ancient comet impact crater of Gosse's Bluff. Easily by mid afternoon, we were at the Aboriginal settlement of Hermannsburg. I'd wanted to visit this former Lutheran mission station for a long time. Established in 1871, it was one of the first permanent settlements in Central Australia, and later the home of prominent Aboriginal landscape artist Albert Namatjira. Here also was where Professor Ted Strehlow grew up as a boy amongst the Aranda people. For over 40 years he studied their ways, earlier on learning the native language. He was to publish a number of important books concerning the Arrernte people's traditional customs and spiritual totems, one such work being *Songs of Central Australia*. This was to greatly influence Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*.

After dusting off my panniers and reloading the *Intrepid Duck*, Ray and Carole joined me at the *Kata-Anga Tearooms* for a delicious apple strudel, made by the wife of the establishment's German caretaker. Afterwards I took a good look around the original Hermannsburg village, with its humble whitewashed church centrally standing. Still in place was the church bell, it held high by a single ghost gum and a testament to time.

From Hermannsburg I made my own way into Palm Valley. This was by taking a rough sandy track, along the actual course of the Finke River, it just a sandy bed. It had not altered its main course for millions of years, making it one of the world's oldest.

At Palm Valley two full rest days from cycling were made. Here I met two friendly couples on the evening of my arrival. Malcolm and his partner, with their young daughter, were up from Western Victoria, while Haig and Laurie had come all the way

from Tasmania. The two couples were all keen rock climbers, and were on a trip to visit some of the better climbing spots in the Western MacDonnell Ranges.

Before heading on my day's walk up the primeval Palm River valley I sat on a large rock, cup of tea in hand and completed Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*. An interesting coincidence was that he'd ended his journey through Central Australia right here.

Walking along the Palm creek track, the warm sun was contrasted by a chill in the shadows from an impressive dark chocolate-coloured rock wall. The valley floor, at 600m above sea level, remains an ancient refuge for tall Red Cabbage Palms, the trees which have made this valley world famous.

On my last day spent at Palm Valley I was woken up at around 5.30AM by a woman's voice nearby, repeating several times - "where's jar pann"? A most unusual question indeed and followed by some faint grunts in the background, evidently from her husband. Why would somebody be asking "Where's Japan?". Or was she perhaps trying to find the kitchen pan to cook up her husband's breakfast? Then it hit me, after the fifth time, what she'd been asking under her Aussie accent. She'd in fact had been asking the whereabouts of his pants! "Where's your pants"? After this disturbance I couldn't sleep.

A friend of the Tasmanians, Lance, arrived later in his ute, and kindly offered to take me out later that day. He was a resident of Alice Springs, but came from Texas. I certainly wasn't keen on cycling that sandy road again, and since it was fast becoming night, I was taken to the gates of Standley Chasm, where I bush camped.

The last day, before returning to Alice Springs, was "Picnic Day" a public holiday in the Northern Territory. On foot I made my way into Standley Chasm, where the Larapinta Trail snakes its way through. This recently established walking path makes its way for half the entire length of the Western MacDonnell Ranges. Something to do next time! It was reasonably people-free – from the perspective of taking pictures. But already two coaches had arrived by 9AM. In spite of this, Standley Chasm was an unspoilt place, with its narrow vertical rock walls and small natural pool at its northern end. I'd once heard that stars actually could be visible during daylight hours from Standley Chasm. However I couldn't see any to prove this theory.

I was back on the bicycle and by late morning heading into Alice Springs, where I was planning on a few days' break. Bypassing Simpson's Gap, I focused my attention on the historically significant Twin Ghost Gums. These trees were made famous in the 1950s through the landscape paintings of the late Albert Namatjira. In 1984 I'd photographed these naturally cloned trees, from a particular angle where they merge into one. However the trees had now become a depressing sight of neglect. A recent fire had completely destroyed one of the trees, and the remaining one had piles of broken bottles strewn around its base.

At the memorial grave to the aviation pioneer John Flynn, I met some cyclists, also from Germany. This couple had their son towed in a trailer, and had travelled down from Darwin to Alice. They were making a round trip through the Western MacDonnell

Ranges. A brief bit of cyclist chatter followed. In no time at all I was back in Alice Springs and once again at the hospitable *Alice Lodge Backpackers*.



## Chapter Five: The Cursed Highway

Giving the *Intrepid Duck* a rest back in town, my agenda was getting in touch with the local culture and splurged on a beautiful coffee table book titled *Papunya Tula – Genesis and Genius*. First I visited a leading Aboriginal art gallery in Todd Street. Due to the book's size I posted it back to Melbourne. Then the Araluen Centre for the Arts where they were running a retrospective exhibition of Albert Namatjira, truly a remarkable landscape artist. I'd only ever seen a few watercolours of his, so this gave a broader insight into his career. Located in this complex is the Strehlow Research Centre, which contains some interesting anthropological and natural history exhibits. They also have a repository of significant and ceremonial artefacts, particularly of the Aranda people, of the Central Australian desert. Many of these sacred objects are not to be seen by the general public, as their purpose is for initiation and other ceremonies. So they are locked away.

Walking back along Larapinta Drive towards the town centre, I was thinking about where Carsten might be. Then as if my thoughts had some powers, he came cycling up beside me and stopped for a brief hello! He was staying with some German travellers, at a caravan park just out of town, and was planning to head up the Stuart Highway the following day. Carsten had made an excellent travelling companion, but like myself needed some independence for a while. We agreed to catch up at the *Bar Doppio*, for our

final farewell, the following morning. He turned up at 10:30AM, two hours late, and wasn't so sure about his travel plans.

Cycling out of the Alice on the 8<sup>th</sup> August, some 100KM was covered. Important progress was made that day by crossing of the Tropic of Capricorn. Here stands a recent erection celebrating this imaginary line. Actually imaginary it is not quite, for in fact the appearance of small termite mounds are first noticeable here. The landscape was quite undramatic, with the MacDonnell Ranges well behind me.

As well as the Tropic of Capricorn, there is another little marker which is some 15KM or so back towards Alice Springs. This unusual hat-shaped cairn, placed there in 1962 to mark the highest point of the Stuart Highway. The height is given in feet above sea level, translating to about 725m. The Australian continent in general is a very flat place, but rises ever so gently from the coastline to its centre.

At Ti-Tree there was an added little luxury, a demountable cabin to sleep in for the night. The *Ti-Tree Roadhouse*, which boasted a half-decent bar called *Flo's*, was complete with a TV set showing SBS! Most people only stopped for petrol and snacks, en route north or south. Arriving here I met an interesting Aboriginal gentleman wearing an Akubra hat, giving him the classic Outback drover's appearance - which in fact he was.

That day and before passing the Pmara Jutunta community, I made a stop at the *Ti-Tree Mango Farm*, which I was not expecting so far south. I made my way along a gravel road, past a vast plantation of fruit trees, to the establishment's store. A carload of young Aboriginal lads in African-American inspired street wear passed me on their way out. I greeted a large and heavily tattooed middleaged man, possibly the farm owner. He replied with "Don't scratch my building", before I was to lean my bike up against the little shop. I took a close look inside to see what they sold. Naturally mango produce, even though the picking season had long passed. For \$20 one could get mango wine - interesting to know what that would be like, the usual dried mango, mango jam and chutney were also on offer. I bought a mango ice cream, since I had no room for bottles and jars. I inquired about the jams and chutneys. The woman running the store said in a grumpy tone that these were in fact bottled in Adelaide, while actually being grown and processed here. This was due to the health regulations imposed by the federal government. It all sounded so absurd - more like a helping hand towards the road transport business, and very much unsustainable.

That evening was spent drinking beers sent up from Adelaide and watching Global Village on SBS television. I nourished myself with a counter meal, which no doubt had been prepared from ingredients sent up from God knows where. Above me a copper pressed relief hung, featuring illustrated motifs of the Northern Territory. The following morning I was woken up to bird sounds. Outside *Flo's* there was a turkey and a peacock, three big black crows watching menacingly over the yard from a tree branch, while a graceful Wedged Tailed Eagle atop a power pole had his back to us all.

On the road I experienced my first hot day, where the temperature was perhaps at about 25°C. By mid afternoon I approached Barrow Creek. This hamlet sat under two flat

topped hills, evidently remnants of the last ice age. The settlement is more or less just a water tower, the pub, as well as being one of only five surviving Overland Telegraph Stations. I was given an adequate room, sponsored by the owner of the character-filled *Barrow Creek Hotel*.

Barrow Creek had a few claims to fame, but had also become infamous. It was near here only one year before my visit, where a violent incident took place concerning two English travellers. During the night while driving up from Alice Springs, a young couple on their way north were told to pull off the road by a passing motorist. This turned out to be a cruel trap: when the young driver, Peter Falconio, got out of his VW Combie van to investigate, he was shot dead. An attempt to abduct his girlfriend was made unsuccessfully. Fortunately she escaped, and managed to flag down a passing truck some hours later. In 2002 the alleged murderer, a certain Bradley Murdoch was traced and later put on trial. The remains of Peter Falconio have never been found, nor has the vehicle used by the killer. All this made world headlines, and was unfortunate for poor Barrow Creek concerned with being a pleasant stop along the highway, as it remained for me.

I had a stroll around the place. The plain, but well-looked after Telegraph Station building (c1871) stood empty and locked, but in front of it was a small burial plot. There were two graves: in 1874, Station master James L Stapleton and his assistant John Franks were “killed by natives”, so a memorial stone said.

My cycling took me only about twelve kilometres north of Barrow Creek when the inevitable happened, what I'd been fearing for weeks. My rear rack broke at the main support, it more or less impossible to repair. I pulled the bike off the road and leaned it up against a lone-standing dwarfed tree. Although I had a go at fixing my rack, the main support was badly rubbing onto the tyre. No zip ties, of which there were already a multitude patching it up, could repair the damage now.

The only choice was to hitch a ride with the bicycle into Tennant Creek, where I might buy a new rear rack. This must have been the Cursed Highway since several months later I saw footage on TV, of this exact same spot: it was where the British backpacker Peter Falconio had been murdered one year before. There was that same lone tree, 12KM north of Barrow Creek.

I flagged down an approaching car pulling an enormous caravan. The elderly driver stopped hesitantly, claiming that he had no room for a hitch-hiker. This was clearly not true, but I was in no position to argue. As he drove off, another car was approaching and stopped. It was a large four-wheel drive with only one spare tyre on its roof rack. The woman driver got out, and in a slightly rushed manner asked me what was the problem. I explained my predicament as briefly as possible and that it would be necessary to get a lift to Tennant Creek. “OK” was her only response as I apologised for causing her any delay. In no time I had the bike on the roof rack and strapped down firmly. The woman told me to get into the front passenger seat, after assisting me with putting my bags in the back of the vehicle.

When I got in and looked behind I saw two small boys, identical twins, who seemed happy enough that Mummy had picked up a hitch-hiker. She introduced me to them and we drove off. They were highly intelligent eight-year olds, and we conversed on the subjects of science and “personed” exploration of the solar system. By this time and a few tens of kilometres up the highway, my driver opened up a little more. She realised that there was a chance I wasn’t a highway killer, but simply a cyclist who had been stranded in the middle of nowhere.

On approaching the Devil’s Marbles we experienced a minor disaster, but fortunately this wasn’t concerning my interruption to her day. She ran out of petrol! The car pulling that caravan, with the old man who disliked hitch-hikers, pulled up. We’d overpassed him earlier. He looked a bit puzzled to see me, and was of course of no assistance to my driver, and drove on. However there was a satellite phone, stowed in the back, which she pulled out from a large aluminium briefcase. Calling up a friend in Alice, we got advice on what to do. Evidently, even though the car had exhausted both of its two fuel tanks, there was a small amount of petrol in a third compartment near the engine, which had to be primed to get the car started. This supply would allow about 20 kilometres of travel at the most. I suggested that she go back down the highway to the Wauchope Homestead, where there was a service station. After filling up I shouted her a cappuccino to ease the nerves and hot chocolates for the patient boys for their good company.

We were soon back on the road again and my rescuer decided to give me a little rest stop at the Devil’s Marbles. This would have been my anticipated lunch stop on the following day en route to Tennant Creek, however I had gained a couple of days. We slowly drove around these bizarre large boulders, where I got out to make some pictures. Sitting under the shade of a tree was a young man with all the world to himself, playing a guitar. He tolerated my minor interruption to “free spirited” placement for me to take a photo of him. Then I left him alone, and we drove to Tennant Creek, an hour or so later. My driver dropped me off at the *Safari Lodge*, where I had a room all to myself for two nights. It had been a good encounter with this helpful woman, since my advance arrival gave a bonus for my journey over the coming weeks.



## Chapter Six: The Top End

It was a bit early for the Italian Club café to open its doors, so Turkish coffee at the hostel helped to remove some of my morning grumpiness. I checked out the shabby main street for a place which would sell coffee. A building façade shaped like a shark, which must have been one of the few establishments where coffee was once sold, had closed down long ago. A ramble on main street convinced me of the Lonely Planet Guide’s comment on Tennant Creek - “the local tourist authority works hard to promote the town’s few attractions, but it’s a scruffy place and not worth more than an overnight stop”.

Importantly I had to buy a functional rear rack for my disabled bicycle. At a mechanics-come-hardware store I was in luck. I bought a generic steel rear rack for only \$36. Fitting it to the *Intrepid Duck* I took no risks, and strengthened it with zip ties where it was most likely to break! Fortunately it didn’t fail me.

Returning to the hostel, I passed the supermarket to purchase supplies for the days of cycling ahead. Near the entrance I saw a peculiar-looking character all dressed from head to toe in white overalls, covered in grease and dirt. This was my first encounter with Simon, originally from Perth and now a passionate “recumbant” cyclist, touring around Australia. We instantly hit it off. I was able to convince him to spend one night at the hostel, so that we could accompany each other for the days ahead. He was planning on a

possible visit to Darwin, before going through the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was a remarkable crossing of two paths, since I was in Tennant Creek earlier than expected, and he had only planned on this detour, of 23KM from the Barkly Highway, to stock up on food at the supermarket.

I took Simon to the hostel. There he could have a good hot shower and wash his clothes. Afterwards he put on his pride and joy – a somehow clean T-shirt featuring the Goodies, riding their famous “trandem”.

On 13<sup>th</sup> August we set off from Tennant Creek. Not far north, up the highway, Simon spotted a lone Japanese cyclist whom he’d met on the Barkly Highway in western Queensland. This young man wore a red baseball helmet and rollerblade hand protectors! Shu was on his way around the continent, although he had only one fully functional leg.

The famous *Three Ways Roadhouse* was our next rest stop. This place was an infamous trap for many hitch-hikers, better known to them as “Hitch-Hikers-Hell”. Here we met a young woman from Germany, Gunda, who had been left stranded after a promised lift had fallen through. She reminded me of that woman Lola, from the film *Run Lola Run*.

A great distance was covered the following day. This was assisted by a strong tailbreeze blowing from the SE. We even had two extended breaks of an hour each. Shortly after beginning we took the course of the old Stuart Highway, which was sealed in 1942. It runs through undulating country for about 15KM before rejoining the main trunk road.

At *Renner Springs Roadhouse* Simon ran into a Parisian named Thierry. He was also bicycle-touring Australia. Thierry was working for one week here to make a little extra cash to help him on his way. Simon had met him a couple of weeks before on the Far North Queensland coast. Coincidentally I also ran into someone I’d met in Alice Springs, and also French. He was working alongside Thierry as one of the roadhouse’s cleaners. They gave us the key to the hot shower block, and later on I made a photoshoot of the French pair with mops and rubber gloves, fooling about on the job.

The first town since Tennant Creek was the village of Elliott. From Elliott it was only 27KM to the pastoral settlement of Newcastle Waters, just off the highway. This turned out to be an excellent stop. The resident school teacher allowed us to pitch our tents, on green lawn, next to a little c1900s iron lock up.

In Newcastle Waters I wandered about the old settlement. Here there was once a church, store, and of course a pub, *The Junction Hotel*. This was a large and well-kept corrugated iron building constructed in 1932, its doors long since closed to the beer deserving drover. Newcastle Waters was once a booming township, at the crossroads of the famous Barkly and Murranjii stock routes. In the Drovers Memorial Park, a bronze statue of a drover had been erected to commemorate the settlement’s history. Newcastle Waters wasn’t dead yet. In fact it is still the hub of a vast and highly prosperous cattle station. But nowadays helicopters and trucks have replaced the humble drover on horseback.

In the fading light of late afternoon some children arrived, curious about the two cyclists, and proceeded to play baseball on the settlement's only green. Simon sat down to stitch up his torn shirt, while in a nearby house somebody was playing a guitar. It was a tranquil evening, and I felt good to have found this place.

Heading out of Newcastle Waters, up the Stuart Highway there was very little of interest to see or distract us, but of course noticeably more vegetation and higher termite mounds. At the *Dunmarra Roadhouse* camping ground we met a young Japanese cyclist, travelling from Darwin to Adelaide. With no camping equipment he seemed a little unprepared.

Just as we had set up and were thinking about another beer, another cyclist arrived. He, a well travelled Dutchman, named Cor, who was in Australia for his fourth trip. While he loved Australia, it was India where he really felt at home, as he had been there 15 times so far! On one trip to the sub-continent, he used an Indian built *Atlas* bicycle, bought new for only \$50, and rode it from Calcutta to Kerala. In Australia he had once made a bike ride from Perth to Sydney during the summer months. Cor was spending much of his life as a minimalist traveller, since selling his Amsterdam home two years before. He expected to live off the money until his mid 60s, when he would be entitled to an aged pension. Cor also didn't carry any cooking gear and was dependent on roadhouse muck, while being able to cover greater distances each day of approximately 150KM or more. With the experiences of travel, Cor had become a most philosophical person.

When the curry dinner was well underway, Simon discovered a cane toad in the parking area. It was alive, so he danced like a mad man high into the air on the pest, shouting at the top of his voice, "Cane toad fucker, die!". This turned heads and raised eyebrows in the restaurant. Simon would occasionally put on these turns. The cane toad, introduced to Australia in the 1930s, has become a growing environmental problem concerning natural habitats, as well as crops. Therefore stamping them out is certainly on the agenda.

On the following day a celebration was made with real beer on tap at the archetypal *Daly Waters Hotel*. I had clocked over 4000KM since leaving Melbourne. Daly Waters is another historic pastoral settlement, a few kilometres off the main highway. On the way along this dog-leg road can be found the old Daly Waters Aerodrome (c1920s). It is now an informal outdoor museum. In the 1940s the aerodrome was expanded as it was strategically most crucial during the Second World War. Here fighter bombers would be re-fuelled for their long raids into SE Asia, fighting the Japanese. Being safely inland, it had become one of the most important air bases for northern Australia at the time. A large iron hanger, with a few relics, remained. The sealed airstrip is still in use for the Royal Flying Doctors Service.

The famous *Daly Waters Hotel* is an iconic celebration of Outback pub culture. In spite of this, the beer standards were far more sophisticated than many other Outback establishments, where often a cold beer only comes in the can or occasionally in a stubbie (375ml bottle). Sipping imported beer, while the pool balls went clack, I sat in the beer garden writing my journal. Simon had a camping spot and plenty of company as the

camping grounds were filled to capacity. Today Daly Waters is well “On the Beaten Track”.

Across the dusty street from the pub, with its claim to fame as having the “remotest” traffic light in Australia, there were two antiquated petrol pumps. Suddenly an old glossy red VW Beetle pulled up, not a speck of dust on its body, and out stepped two funky young Japanese - the boy with a thick mohawk and his female partner, under a cute mousey bob. A photo of the couple, Noriko and Yokio, was not resisted beside their pride and joy.

On the following day I was really exhausted by the time we reached the *Larrimah Roadhouse*, complete with it’s own stuffed crocodile. Almost one hundred kilometres were covered from Daly Waters and the comforts of another pub awaited us. The accommodation option was located several hundred metres away, along a back street. Being handed the keys by the manager we were told us where to find our “donga”! A “donga” was simply a demountable building. Ours did come with a couple of beds and a fridge. This so-called “donga” was really more appropriately a hot-box, but fortunately something could be done about this. A noisy air-conditioning unit cooled the place down.

During the ride, we had seen a lot of road signs indicating historically significant sites related to WWII. However one place which interested me, was a little spot on the map called Birdum. This ghost town had once been a busy railway siding and pub. In the early 1950s, when Birdum was in its death throes, the pub had been dismantled and relocated to Larrimah. Inside our “donga” I found a little tourist brochure titled - *Discovery Trails*, which gave some insight into the area’s history. To my pleasant surprise, and more of interest to Simon, a small photo featured an old “trandem” (three person bicycle), outside the *Larrimah Hotel*.

Before evening struck we went to the former Birdum pub, now the *Larrimah Hotel*, to quench our thirst. This place had probably seen better days. Our priority was to find out if they still possessed the “thri-cycle”. We were in luck. It a little neglected, but more or less rideable. I had Simon out of his greasy overalls and into his Goodies T-shirt for a photoshoot. This unusual trandem had some resemblance to the infamous *Goodloid*, the “trandem” from the BBC TV comedy series *The Goodies*. In 1989 a young man by the name of Rory Spowers, accompanied by some mad mates, managed to cross much of the African continent on the *Goodloid*. This journey is comically recounted in Spower’s book, *Three Men On A Bike*. It’s encouraging reading material for anybody serious about cycling through Africa.

In Mataranka I had my first and last cross words with Simon, where I accused him of being a Dither Queen. This was good humoured, after all he had called him self “King of the Ditherers”! Nonetheless that morning, in Larrimah, we were both dithering about even though we were up early and had our cycles packed ready to roll. However only a few hundred metres up the highway, at the edge of town, we were approached by two cyclists. Michael and Jodie were returning to Melbourne from a long journey of some three years on the road. They had travelled all the way from London, via the Middle East and India. We spent a good half hour chatting with them. They still had some 4000KM to

do, and for this day's ride, a strong headwind. Nonetheless, they had come a long way indeed. As Michael said, "the world's a small place, actually".

Many gritty hours later, we were at the comfortable *Mataranka Homestead Resort* hostel, located about seven kilometres off the Stuart Highway. Mataranka was made famous in the true account, written by Jeannie Gunn *We of the Never Never*, published in 1908. This was an account of her time spent and hardships endured on the Elsey Station.

Mataranka is these days a popular stopover for tourists. One young English traveller was wearing a most peculiar T-shirt of an apparent Che Cuevara, which had been modified to look more like one of the apes from the film *Planet of the Apes*! I commented on this strange disfiguration, and he laughed, knowing the movie well. Disturbingly he had not a clue as to who the renowned revolutionary was. How the world has been dumbed down!

The main attractions for visiting Mataranka are its hot springs. Here a large pool has been constructed and landscaped with palms. Later in the evening, when the crowds had dispersed, I made my way under the moonlight for a splash in the tepid waters. The pool's temperature is only 34°C, but after a days ride most relaxing.

A mighty distance was covered once more by the two intrepid travellers and a mighty lot of farting by Simon in the 9-person dorm at the *Katherine YHA*. This was damned embarrassing for him. It must have been triggered by a combination of poor snack food and, his seated cycling posture all day, his bike being a recumbent. We had completed the days cycling distance of 120KM in just under 6 hours, quite a feat really.

During those hours I spotted an approaching cyclist, and as he came closer I realised I'd seen this one before. It was Carsten and travelling south! He came to a halt and was not so surprised to see me, but it was of course the first time he'd met Simon. This was a rare moment to get a photograph of the pair. Evidently Carsten had ended up bussing it from Alice Springs to Darwin, and was now engaged on a venture to take him into Queensland via the Roper River Road, Borroloola and the Gulf Country. We made our farewells and then he was on his way. I would not see him again until summer back in Melbourne.

A little further on up the Stuart we saw another character approaching us. However, this one was on foot making his way to Alice Springs. Gary was hitching from Katherine and had been given a lift, so far by an Aboriginal mob from Arnhem Land. He was most unprepared for an anticipated one day's hitch down the highway. He possessed no bag, no water and just a baseball cap as protection from the sun. In fact he was in quite a daze, fanning his face with a small tree limb and staggering about almost oblivious to us. I had a spare water bottle to give away, and Simon ample supplies in the large water bladders stored under his bike chair. We wished him all the best and sent him on his way.

A pleasant surprise in the morning was the free for all, DIY pancake mixture in the *Katherine YHA*'s kitchen. Sitting down at one of the dining tables, I met a charming French woman, who said that I reminded her of one of the guys from *Radiohead*. A little flattering, even though I couldn't recall ever seeing a photo of the band. However, coincidentally, only a week before Simon had told me a bizarre and true story of a certain

Frenchman from the 1950s. He had believed that he was hearing voices, consulted a doctor, and after some extensive investigation and tests, was sent back to his dentist. It was soon discovered that he wasn't mad, but in fact was really tuning into radio broadcasts – complete with romantic ballads and commercial breaks! An old metal / quartz filling had worked its way loose, and, combining with his jaw bone, was acting as a crude crystal radio set. He was indeed the world's first recorded "Radiohead".

One of the main reasons for coming to Katherine and spending at least a full day here was to visit its famous gorge at Nitmiluk National Park, located some 30KM to the north east of the town. Unfortunately the park was officially closed due to forest fires, and in fact had to be evacuated on the day of our arrival to Katherine. It would be closed for at least another day or two. Bad timing, and no time to hang about another full day.

Our arrival at Pine Creek, after a difficult day of cycling, was rewarded by a couple of cold ones on the busy hotel terrace. I wasn't particularly keen on hanging about in the bar area, while waiting for Simon to arrive, from which I could hear "yer-fuckin this yer-fuckin that..." Pine Creek it appeared was experiencing a mini-boom, with the new railway line from Alice Springs to Darwin being laid that year. There were construction site workers coming and going, as village had grown into a kind of "Donga City".

The next day, out from Pine Creek, we made a short lunch stop near the top of an escarpment. There we had some company, as a car pulling a small caravan shortly arrived and out stepped an elderly couple. The man's wife had a little black poodle which she took for a bit of a stroll. Suddenly I heard Simon yell out: "Take a look at that!" After a moments silence there was an enormous draft, and out of nowhere appeared a demonic looking willy-willy (twister), tearing its way toward the caravan, in spite of all the tree coverage. Menacing and swirling, it was sucking up a dense cloud of ash and red dust from the dry forest floor. I raced for my camera since I'd never seen anything like this before, but in a matter of seconds it had gone. Relieved, the woman sat her little dog back to the ground. I said to her that she was lucky that her little doggie wasn't like poor Toto in the *Wizard of Oz* and swept out of her arms.

After cycling 32KM north of Pine Creek, with a hot headwind and hot drinking water, we made a well deserved break at the *Emerald Springs Roadhouse*. Here the definitive symbol of the Northern Territory's Top End - the Water Buffalo were ever present. In an enclosure, a few of the beasts were roaming about, swaying their huge head of horns. These wild cattle were introduced in the early years of white settlement and had become a big environmental menace. However wild herd numbers have been successfully culled in recent decades and are restricted to the Cobourg Peninsula. Above the bar a set of massive horns were mounted on the wall. On another wall a series of Rodeo action photographs portrayed a scene with a man flying through the air, while his poor horse seemed to be falling like a sack of potatoes!

At Hayes Creek we had another break. Shortly behind us a convoy of sheepish four-wheel drives appeared and very quickly filled the parking area. I spoke to one of the drivers, a small blonde woman in a seat of power, curious to know where they were all

going. She was in a group of 150 four-wheel drive vehicles, mostly enthusiasts, and fortunately they had that morning left the Douglas Hot Springs area, our day's destination. However more of a curiosity here was an interesting pick-up truck, owned by a road painting contractor. On the vehicle's tray he had two tanks containing the road paint: each one had been carefully designed to appear as a giant VB and Fosters Lager beer can. His business logo featured a grinning crocodile, poised with paint brush. This fellow certainly had a sense of humour, and was a good example of the kind of characters found in the Top End.

Fortunately Hayes Creek meant leaving the Stuart Highway; we rejoined it a couple of days later. Now we were to take the quieter back roads, away from traffic to a remote camping ground. By the time we reached the Douglas Hot Springs camping area I was exhausted. Sunset rapidly approached and with it, an awe-inspiring display of fruit bats, perhaps in their hundreds of thousands. For a few minutes the dusky sky was almost completely obscured to become black, as this flapping cloud migrated to the west.

Before setting off the next day I took a wonderful outdoor hot bath at Douglas Hot Springs, removing most of the muck and sun lotion from the previous day. Unlike Mataranka, here a small and virtually boiling stream rushes from an underground thermal source into the main river. I met a young family from Tasmania's east coast, along with an audience of tepid ducks.

About eight kilometres before turning onto the old Stuart Highway, we took a look at what was once a major airstrip during the Second World War. Taking a broader view, on my regional 1:250000 map, there were abandoned airstrips all over the place. The skies over the Top End must have once been filled with war planes, not only fruit bats, during the first half of the 1940s. At this lonely airstrip, the jungle had mostly taken over, with entire trees and termite mounds protruding out of the old tarmac.

At a place called Mount Shoobridge, where the old highway winds below a scrubby flat-top escarpment, a rough track leads to an informal picnic area. Here stand many of what would be amongst the largest of the so-called Cathedral termite mounds. At almost 8m in height, and several in width, the grandest dwarfed my bicycle. While termites are only a few millimetres in size, they are monumental nest builders. The termite numbers of this colony must have been in their millions, and each individual structure would have to be at least one hundred years old. There are several species of termite found in northern Australia. The most industrious and useful to human kind has been the *Coptotermes acinaciformis* variety. This ant eats through tree limbs creating a hollow tube, which has for millennia been fashioned by the Aboriginal people into the "didgeridoo" or *Yidaki*, as this woodwind instrument was traditionally called. Buildings through-out northern Australia must be termite proofed, with concrete stumps and steel frames to protect them from the ravenous appetite of the termite ant.

The day of the 24<sup>th</sup> August was completed at what was perhaps the best camping site for the entire trek, alongside the cool bubbling brook of Robin Falls Stream. Our neighbours

were a semi-retired pair whom we quickly befriended. They kindly handed out cold beers.

The Robin Falls camping ground would make a wonderful place to set up a dry seasonal camp, sit down and write a book. Here there is a good supply of permanent drinking water and no crowds to deal with. However the two intrepid cyclists only spent a night here. Although we had some 68KM of cycling ahead of us, we decided to spend the entire morning here. We began with a short walk up to Robin Falls. Here the small, but impressive cascade plunged into a suspended rock pool, it accessed by a series of steps. On our arrival a long line of green ants was marching across some mossy rocks, with the fine spray from the falls swirling about them unabated. In a more sheltered spot a couple of odd spiders sat dormant. These arachnids, with large mustard yellow abdomens, sat patiently on their webs in the cool shadows of the rocky overhang.

By late morning we had to pull ourselves away from this tranquil spot and get moving. In just under an hour we joined the main Stuart Highway once more, and at Adelaide River took a good look at its well kept WWII cemetery. In town we took a coffee break and met one cyclist, a New Zealander of Hong Kong Chinese origin. He had travelled up from Sydney, on his way to Darwin, from where he expected to take a flight to Bali and then continue onwards through SE Asia all the way to Hong Kong.

Batchelor is a leafy town set around a green, where the Aboriginal Teachers Training College is located. It was a hive of activity on the day of our arrival – unusually – as there was a training operation in progress by the Australian Army, preparing soldiers for East Timor. We travelled a further 12KM west of the town towards the Litchfield National Park. On our way we passed an unexpected creation. This a scaled down replica of Karlstein castle in the Czech Republic, very kitsch, painted blue and made out of concrete. It had been constructed in the early 1970s by a homesick Czech migrant.

At day's end, Simon and I were at an organic mango farm run by a most hospitable couple - Steve and Elizabeth, with their two children. I had been put onto them by a friend back in Melbourne. They were happy to have us spend a couple of nights in their open plan home, since destroyed by a forest fire. Although they had some WWOOFers staying, we were all spared from work on the farm, as it was no longer the season for fruit picking. The drawback was that there was no supply of mangos around to be eaten.

Simon and I had just missed out on the Batchelor Festival. No, not a drunken orgy for single men, but one spanning a couple of days for traditional Aboriginal dance, theatre and electronic music. This event drew crowds from all over the country. During the course of my bicycle trek I'd just missed a couple of events that would have been worth stopping for. One being the Marree Camel Festival down in South Australia.

Following Batchelor, our next destination was to the near by Buley Rockhole in Litchfield National Park. There was one extremely steep section of roadway, with a gradient of 10° incline, called Aida Creek Jumpup! This was straight after a short lunch break at the intriguing Magnetic Termite Mounds. The *Amitermes meridionalis* species

construct their teeming colonies, according to the climate, and build these tall narrow structures aligned north / south. This enables an even temperature to be maintained. It is believed that the residents, in the process of construction, contain in their gut iron particles which are naturally magnetised, and so act as a kind of geo-positioning system. The mounds appear as surreal tombstone-like structures.

At the viewing area for the Magnetic Termite Mounds, Simon and I experienced several tour groups passing through. We were confronted by one group of drunken four-wheel drivers, all asking the same silly questions. One asked Simon, "Are you riding a bike?". "Yes they are bicycles, only because we couldn't get helium for our Hindenburg!" There was only deadly silence, unable to deal with such a crazy answer. Simon clearly didn't want to be bothered by such mundane questioning, but it was the offensive last group which got to him the most. A woman spouted in a nasty tone, "I hope you don't get run over by a car". Simon yelled back, as they kept trudging to the carpark, "I hope you don't get run over by a car, either!" She looked deeply shocked by this unexpected reply.

Between Buley Rockhole and Wangi Falls a pleasant rest stop was made at the secluded Blyth Falls, our half-way mark. Only a couple of days later a woman and her daughter were abducted by a psychotic gunman here. It had made the TV news. However the only oddity we encountered was a lone Swiss cyclist touring the country. He had a serious mountain bicycle, with multiple suspension that made him bob up and down while pedalling. He also had a GPS Navigation system. Simon extracted some useful information concerning cycling in the NW of Western Australia. He was thinking of taking the infamous Gibb River Road, where at one point a crocodile-infested river had to be forded.

The fine spray of the beautiful Wangi Falls plunged from a lofty escarpment down into a natural deep pond. This was a popular swimming spot where two grotty and tired cyclists were able to make a strenuous, but refreshing swim out to below the waterfalls. Evidently during the wet season the odd freshwater crocodile makes its way in here, when this natural pond is affected by flooding. On our way in and at the roadside we spotted numerous signs for motorists, warning of dangerous reptilians crossing the roadway. Fortunately for us none were encountered.

My second-last cycling day, nearing Darwin, was perhaps one of the more difficult. This was mainly along the Litchfield Park Road, with its 42KM of rough corrugations. Simon mostly kept a lead of a couple of kilometres, but while racing down an incline destroyed his derailleurs on a protruding rock. Fortunately he had a spare, and with good mechanical knowledge was able to swap it over and begin riding again in under an hour.

Friday 30<sup>th</sup> August 2002 started like almost any other day, with a late start prompted by the need for a decent shot of caffeine. However at last it was the big day of my cycling tour, where I would finally reach Darwin. Although a swim at Berry Springs Nature Park was firstly on our agenda. Here for the third time I ran into the Tasmanian family, first met at Douglas Hot Springs. They were on a tour of Australia's hot springs! While this wouldn't take half a lifetime to achieve, hot springs in this country are far and wide. We

counted on both our hands the total of hot and tepid waters to be found across Australia. These number to about 12 known sites. Tasmania has two, the most famous being near the Hastings Caves, while the other hot spot isn't accessible to the tourist, as it's in a remote corner. In Victoria one had recently been discovered, but this was only by drilling deep into the earth for pipe access, so didn't really rate as a "natural" hot spring. The Top End, however has about five such places where hot water came to the earth's surface through its own propulsion, two alone near Mataranka. The hottest natural springs found on the Australian continent are at Douglas Hot Springs, which are at about 60°C near its outflow. Generally all of Australia's natural hot springs are only in the late 30°C range, a pretty tepid place at that!

The landscaped surroundings of Berry Springs and its warm waters were a pleasant enough bathing spot. A decent coffee brew wasn't to be found, so I was forced to DIY Turkish-style. However we sought real boiling water at a little kiosk named the *Rainbow Café*, which was run by an eccentric middle-aged Swedish man.

The final day's ride was hot. The traffic became more frequent as we were approaching Darwin. Since my previous visit in 1993, Darwin had changed almost beyond recognition. Then half a dozen multi-level buildings made up the city skyline. Since then, a seemingly endless chain of new apartments and major hotel chains had taken shape. Darwin actually hosts several million visitors a year and while its permanent population is only about 130,000, there are increasing numbers living and working here on a seasonal basis. We first passed through Darwin's sprawling satellite town of Palmerston, which is made up of inappropriately placed "McMansions", complete with those energy hungry air-con units mounted on the rooftops.

We copped the peak hour traffic while coming into the inner city, but were rewarded with a room, gratis at a busy hostel called *Fawlty Towers*. This establishment, located on bustling Mitchell Street, was where we would base ourselves for the next few days. By the end of the day Simon and I were sitting on the terrace drinking champagne, as a little celebration of our achievement. Simon was only at the half way mark of his Australian tour, while mine was at its end.

Over the following days I took in some of this tropical city's best attractions, like the Mindil Beach Markets. Importantly, I was able to purchase a cheap one-way flight back to Melbourne. In Darwin I had gone back to my old ways, spending each morning at the *Roma Bar*, it a little bit of transplanted Italian culture in the Top End. Above this establishment was a second-hand bookstore, where I made a wonderful find. It was an original edition of Walter Stolle's *The World Beneath My Bicycle Wheels*, an account of this man's 18 year, 640,000KM journey, on the same three-speed bicycle and through 159 countries! Some most encouraging travel literature to keep me going.

My bicycle trek had taken me some 4915KM from Melbourne: I had now realised my dream of bicycling across Australia, and done it in 89 days. Crossing the smallest of the world's continents, set a good benchmark for future endeavours, such as my planned *Cape to Cape Trek*.

# Bicycle Touring for Sustainability: Cape to Cape Trek

## The Event:

The Cape to Cape Trek is an unassisted and solo journey taking 18 months and travelling over 20,000KM by bicycle from North Cape in Norway to Cape Town in South Africa. In Europe I will be following the historic St James pilgrimage paths. While my route through Africa will run through the Great Rift Valley, with both sources of the Nile River visited during my intrepid journeying. During the course of this ambitious expedition I will be actively supporting sustainable and environmentally responsible travel, while promoting long distance bicycle touring through public presentations – featuring my 2002 Melbourne to Darwin: Outback Australian Tour. Most importantly, I am carrying out the Cape to Cape Trek to promote the NGO WaterAid Australia.

## The Bicycle:

My key objectives are to promote bicycle touring as a means of transport, which has a low impact on the natural environment. A purpose built touring bicycle has been built for this endeavour.

## Who's it For:

There are a number of reasons why I intend to make my Cape to Cape Trek – apart from a spirit of adventure. It is my deepest desire to assist others to share in an activity I enjoy and feel can be of greater benefit. In 2006 I was endorsed by the NGO WaterAid Australia, for who I will raise awareness and funds through my proposed activity the Cape to Cape Trek.

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For more information and up dates on the Cape to Cape Trek please go to:  
[www.cape2cape.info](http://www.cape2cape.info)