

Outback Odyssey - Cairns to Darwin

18 June to 21 August 2017



Stuart, Christine and Bruce at start of Cairns to Darwin Tour

Stuart Crombie thought that he needed another challenge in his life. Looking at the map, the last two big unsealed, isolated Outback roads in Australia are the Gibb River road in the Kimberley region of WA and the Savannah Way across the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria from Normanton in Queensland to Mataranka in the Northern Territory. The Savannah Way is the least known, so that was it.

He was joined on this adventure from Cairns to Darwin by Christine Liddiard, Bruce Robinson and Brian McAuliffe.

The tour started in Cairns on the morning of June 18th 2017 with a relatively short run of 28 km to Kuranda. However this entailed a 12 kilometre climb rising 450 metres up the Kuranda Range on the first day, in the heat and with a full pannier load. This was a nasty introduction to the tour for three of us, but Christine “Queen of the Mountain” showed the boys how it was done, leading them all the way to the top.

Kuranda is situated in beautiful wet tropical rainforest and has quite a few attractions. The Sky Rail cable car, the old Forsythe-Chillagoe railway and the Kuranda street market are very popular with both tourists and Cairns locals.

From Kuranda we headed through sugar cane and orchards to Mareeba for lunch and supplies at the supermarket. Then it was on to the tobacco town of Dimbulah, once famous for its 'longest wooden bar' in Queensland but since cut in half when the pub was remodelled. On the way we summited the Great Dividing Range at 527 metres where Christine raided a plantation to save some lemons from a rotten end while we paused for a photo. The third day saw rising temperatures and drier country as we made our way to a midday stop for a cold lemon squash at the railway town of Almaden (main population a few cows). Then on to Chillago with its limestone caves, marble quarries and gold and copper mines.

After a restful day of cave tours organised by Bruce we retraced our steps almost to Almaden before hitting our first real taste of rough, sandy and corrugated unsealed roads while heading south toward Mount Garnet and Undara. First, Stuart stayed upright having learnt to ride these roads on the way around Lake Eyre the year before. He felt quite the old hand.

Just after crossing the old Forsythe rail line, Christine had the first of the four punctures the adventurers had on the trip. The time taken to fix the puncture and the exertion of the soft dirt were good enough excuses to set up our first bush camp soon afterwards on the banks of a stock dam.

After more corrugations the next day, we rejoined the bitumen south-west of Mount Garnet for a scorching downwind run to camp overnight near the Sugarbag tick-inspection stockyards; many signs on the yards threatening dire consequences for trespassing. We woke next morning to the sound of light rain on our tents, the only rain of the trip. Thankfully the rain didn't last and we set out through the dry eucalypt woodland to the island of monsoonal rainforest in the Forty Mile Scrub National Park.

Turning west off the Kennedy Highway on to the Normanton road we had a bit of a feeling of 'this is the start of the real Outback' as we headed due west into the dry and sparsely occupied station country.

Soon we were at the Undara Lava Tubes resort for a late lunch of lovely corned beef and cheese sandwiches as we marvelled that a luxury resort could be built out of old rail carriages parked in the bush. The next day was a rest day starting with a visit to the Kalkani Crater rim walk for most before we all went on a guided tour of the famous lava tubes. These were formed some 190,000 years ago when a volcano erupted producing an outpouring of lava flow covering hundreds of kilometres. While the top of the flow cooled, the lava continued to flow underneath in the cave-like lava tubes. Bruce was able to give some scientific explanation as he has a real interest in volcanoes.

Leaving Undara, we travelled to Mount Surprise and on past the Einasleigh River. This was good cycling with flat roads and a good tailwind, with temperatures in the mid 20's. The sealed road went from single lane to dual lane and back again periodically, which is a feature of some Queensland roads. The landscape was mainly dry savannah used for grazing with the odd cleared area being used to test broad acre cropping or mango orchards. The future of the wild north is taking shape.

The highlight of this section was meeting up with the annual bicycle tour from Cairns to Karumba. The tour organiser gathered all his participants together at their lunch stop and introduced us to the group. He then invited us to join them in Georgetown for dinner and breakfast next morning which was greatly appreciated by us.

Leaving Georgetown we cycled on to the old gold mining town of Croydon. The tour group had left Croydon earlier that morning to race The GulfLander train from Croydon to Normanton. The cyclists generously gave the train 20 minutes start to even up the competition.

We camped overnight at an old rail siding called Black Bull where Brian did a bit of bush plumbing in fixing the flush pump on the toilet. Next morning it was on to Normanton. When crossing the Norman River, we scared a "saltie" croc just below the bridge. The heat got to Stu on the last

20km run in to Normanton so he took a rest under a tree. Bruce magnanimously offered Stu his camping pillow while he recovered. Dinner at the famous 'Purple Pub' in Normanton that evening featured enormous slabs of beautifully grilled barramundi which were much appreciated. A short day of riding in warming conditions got us to the sea at the commercial fishing town of Karumba at the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria the next day. We were lucky enough to arrive at the caravan park in time for their Friday free fish BBQ and we were very quick when 'seconds' were called.

We had a day off on Saturday and took a tour guided by the enthusiastic operator of the barramundi research centre. The centre incorporates a hatchery which provides barramundi fingerlings for restocking the rivers and dams in the gulf country.

Karumba is known for the cloud phenomenon called 'The Morning Glory'. This unique cylindrical cloud develops over The Gulf of Carpentaria before rolling inland. The cloud can be up to 1000 km long and can move at speeds of up to 60kms per hour. It is popular with gliders who 'surf' the cloud.

Leaving Karumba on Sunday, we passed back through Normanton where we went for a morning tourist ride on the Gulf Lander train to Critters Camp.



Bruce, Brian and Stuart aboard the Gulf Lander

The afternoon was taken up with what was becoming the habit when in caravan parks - more laundry and a check on the bikes in preparation for leaving the next day with the next two or three days of bush roads and camping before reaching the next town, and another chance for a shower and clean up.

A quick run west on the bitumen got us to Burke and Will's Camp 119 for lunch. This was the most northerly camp of their ill-fated expedition from Melbourne to the Gulf. They then walked 1400 km back to the Cooper Creek where three expeditioners died, leaving John King who lived with the aborigines, as the only survivor.

After lunch it was hard going on unsealed road. By late afternoon we were running low on water with no good prospects in sight. Stuart in particular was feeling the strain.

Just before sunset we were lucky enough, thanks to Bruce 'brass neck', to be invited into a main roads workers camp. The foreman kindly offered us showers and refills to our water supplies while we set up camp far enough away not to be run over by heavy machinery but close enough not to risk snake bite.

Next morning we continued west on rough gravel. CTAWA members will be pleased that out here in the middle of nowhere we obeyed a stop light directing traffic around a bridge construction site. Brian's pannier rack mount broke soon after 15kms into the day. We put this down to the weight of the 16 litres of water Brian was carrying in addition to all his camping and personal gear. The broken mount was repaired using a radiator pipe clamp, a process that would be repeated another four times on different bikes during the rest of the ride. A bit later Christine added some meaning to 'bird in a tree' by climbing a coolabah while we had lunch.

We arrived above the picturesque river pools at the Leichardt Falls by mid-afternoon. As we didn't know if crocs were present we took a long time discussing whether to have a wash and cleanup. After a departure slowed by much photography, we set off on the Augustus Downs dirt road to rejoin the bitumen on the Wills Development road linking Julia Creek and Burketown.

On the way we got some water from a station dam. Being new to this bush water thing we cautiously treated the water with both sterilising tablets and by boiling. The day temperatures were warming up to around the early 30's. From here it was on across mostly treeless, black soil plains to Gregory Downs. A couple of stockmen from the cattle station tried to scare pub patrons by draping a dead snake over the menu board. Christine is from dugite country in SW WA and was not at all impressed (by the snake).

Here the Gregory River is a fast flowing and shallow, making it a very popular camping spot for 'Grey Nomads'. 'The thing' to do here is to be let the current carry you downstream for several hundred metres using thongs as 'floaties'.

The biggest event in Gregory River is the annual Canoe Marathon (held in May). Apparently the marathon crosses a few big holes occupied by large saltwater crocodiles but the crocs have, so far, chosen to hide on the bottom as the raucous canoes go overhead rather than treat the canoe marathon as a smorgasbord.

Next morning we left Gregory to ride to Lawn Hill National Park. After the bitumen ran out, the road was so sandy and so badly corrugated that Stuart declared all riders to have qualified as 'corrugation' ready. Shortly afterwards Stuart fell off in the sand.

With the temperature around 32c we finally reached Adel's Grove at the edge of the Lawn Hill National Park. We were pleasantly surprised with the beautiful shady campsite made even more welcoming when Vicki, a 'kiwi' lady tourist presented us with a cold beer.

(A few weeks later Stuart got a message from his niece announcing that her beau had just proposed to her at the same campground - 'it's a small world'.)

Early the next morning it was off to the gorge for some canoeing and swimming. No worries about being eaten by crocodiles as only small 'freshies' inhabit the gorges. This would have to be one of the nicest places we discovered on this tour.

The following morning, we headed north on a 4WD track towards the aboriginal community of Doomadgee on the Savannah Way.

The next day we headed on to Hells Gate roadhouse near the Queensland-Northern Territory border.

This was much more pleasant than the name would suggest. The entire town consists of the caravan park with its green lawns and new cafe, an all-weather airstrip and several signs reminding travellers that it is 320 km to the next fuel stop at Borroloola. While here we

encountered more kindness with strangers insisting that they give us some tins of fruit to supplement our pasta and tuna diet.

We also met up with 'High Blade Stan, the Grader Man', a nickname given to the grader operator by the locals. He regaled us with hair raising stories about crocodiles in the area. This was timely as when riding up from Lawn Hill, Stuart and Brian had been eyeing off some water filled gravel pits with a view to swimming to cool off. High Blade said 'don't do that as we often find crocodiles in the pits when we pump water out of them for road building'.

A theme about water and crocodiles seemed to be developing!

Borrooloola was the next town but it was five days away along a dirt road. We passed Wollogorang Station just over the NT and QLD border. Wollogorang is mentioned by Banjo Patterson in one of his ballads as being famous for its wild bullocks. It is now owned by Chinese interests who are building a seaside resort on the property's frontage to the Gulf of Carpentaria as well as running cattle. More evidence that the north of Australia is developing rapidly.



Photo from left to right: Stuart, Brian, Christine and Bruce at the Northern Territory Border.

From here to Borrooloola we encountered very bad gravel roads, with the heavy corrugations and loose sand making it unrideable in many sections. This was five days of cycling hell. Most of the riders were bucked off on this section due to the heavy loads and sandy road.

A passing traveller told us there were seven major river crossings in this section, which meant no problem getting water along the route. The river crossings were beautiful and often with swift flowing clean fresh water. We managed to have a wash on the shallow river crossings themselves while keeping a close watch for crocs in the deeper pools on each side of the road. Brian and Stuart managed to get caught 'au naturale' by a couple of female drivers while washing off the dust at the Robinson River crossing. Bruce kindly offered to keep a croc watch while Christine bathed but she thought she would be safe enough on her own.

Further on at the Surprise Creek crossing, Stuart left his glasses on a rock while taking pictures. On discovering this some kilometres of rough road later he, in desperation, stopped a passing

motorist and asked would he mind having a look for his glasses. A couple of days later another young couple stopped and presented Stuart with his glasses. The bush telegraph was working well. Finally after five days of tough riding we passed over the very impressive McArthur River and into Borroloola where we had a well earned rest day and got some supplies. The caravan owner also reported that Chris O'Brien had arrived on the 'Bodhi Bus' which serves communities over the 400 km from Katherine to Borroloola. Chris had already ridden out to our next stop at King Ash Bay, a fishing club near the mouth of the McArthur River.



Stu and Chris O'Brien going fishing at King Ash Bay with some 'locals'.

King Ash Bay has a bar that serves good meals, a shop (very busy when the supply truck with the fresh milk arrives, very quiet at other times) and camping facilities. Another rest day was taken here with Stuart keen to catch a "barra", unfortunately without luck.

We retraced our steps to Borroloola and provisioned up for what was going to be a 6 to 7 day ride to the next shop at Roper Bar.

While in Borroloola, Bruce rang through to 'Macca on Sunday' telling him what we were up to. He also decided after discussion with Stu to take the bitumen option on the Carpentaria Highway to Daly Waters and then Darwin as he felt that he had seen enough of the unsealed roads.

The group left Borroloola on the Savannah Way to the turnoff at Bauhinia Downs station where we never did find 'Poppys Pool'.

On the second night we saw the first buffalo of the trip (cows fortunately as the bulls have a bad reputation for being aggressive). The next day we called in at The Southern Lost City to view the striking sandstone formations in the Limmen National Park.



Southern Lost City

The next stop was Butterfly Springs, where Stuart and Brian had to swim across the pool and climb the rock face in order to fill the water containers with fresh water. The day temperatures were around 32c and the road was horrendous, corrugated, sandy and just not fun at all. Christine's pannier rack came loose, necessitating a repair with a pipe clamp.

We called in at the Limmen Ranger Station for water and met a very friendly ranger of French origin called Dianna. Stu nick-named her 'Goddess of the hunt'. Dianna gave Stu some lures she had found in the mouth of a big barramundi and some bait to help him in his "Barra" quest.

We then pushed on to Towns River, another very impressive stretch of water with good camping facilities. At the camp turnoff, a passing motorist stopped and gave us each a mandarin, just for being out here doing it hard. There are some very nice people about.

After another couple of very hard days we camped overnight just east of Ngukurr on the Roper River at Mountain Creek, another very good water source. Just after leaving camp, in heavy fog the next morning, we were surprised to see cyclists coming our way. They were taking part in a supported cycle tour from Darwin to Cairns.

Chris O'B had decided not to bush camp with us at Mountain Creek and had cycled on to the Tomato Island Caravan Park. Although Ngukurr is just on the other side of the Roper River, it is a closed aboriginal community so we couldn't get over to get supplies.

We finally made it to Roper Bar, exhausted after fighting more rocks, corrugations and sand and in need of another rest day after 324 km's of horrendous road. Bruce in an act of kindness, had phoned the Roper Bar store, given them his credit card number and instructed them to give us a cold drink, this was very much appreciated.

Leaving Roper Bar, we cycled for a couple of hours and were at last back on the bitumen. A tail wind helped lift our spirits and we managed 82 km's for the day.

That night did not pass without incident though as at 3 am we were woken by a very upset donkey protesting that we were camped on his patch. Brian managed to convince him to go away. Later that day we passed two roadside lay-byes with water tanks. A tail wind and reasonably flat road enabled us to cycle 108 km's, one of our best days. Next stop was Mataranka. We had a day here to rest our aching bodies, swimming in the warm flowing water and several hundred metres of large pools of the Bitter Springs Thermal Springs.



Stu with his brother Peter and his Scottish friend Rob at Katherine

We were joined that evening for dinner by Stuart's younger brother Peter, who had travelled up from his Longreach Station to see us. He brought with him his Scottish mate Rob who just loves the Outback experience.

After leaving early next morning we got to Katherine where we met up with Bruce. Bruce and Chris O'Brien had already had been on the Nitmiluk Gorge cruise and canoe trip here. Peter, Rob and Christine did the gorge trip the next day while Stuart and Brian relaxed in Katherine.

Bruce left early to go to Edith Falls, while the rest of us decided to cycle straight through to Pine Creek. Cycling up the Stuart Highway with a speed limit of 130 kph and road trains passing quite close was not pleasant. Bruce and Chris O'Brien rejoined the group in Pine Creek that night.

At the Pine Creek shop, we met a German cyclist who was just starting his central Australian bicycle adventure. We tried very hard to persuade him not to cycle wearing black, at dusk, without lights while mixing with 100 ton road trains at high speed on the Stuart Highway but couldn't persuade him to make efforts to be more visible. We had a very similar experience several weeks later in Batchelor, that time with a French rider who also preferred to be fashionable in black, rather than safe.

From Pine Creek, Bruce parted company from us and headed straight up to Darwin and the rest of us headed east into Kakadu National Park. We stopped for lunch at the Mary River Roadhouse for a break as we had been battling hills, headwinds and heat with the temperature hovering around 34c. We camped at the little known swimming and camping spot of Moline Hole 6 km's north of the roadhouse. This small waterfall and pool had no crocs, so we could have a very pleasant swim. Next day we cycled to Maguk (Barramundi Gorge) for another pleasant camping and swimming place. On the way to the falls Stuart's pannier clip got caught in his front wheel disc brake rotor bringing him to an abrupt stop on a rocky creek crossing. While this could have been a catastrophe for Stuart, Brian just thought he was showing off in front of the female backpackers.

Stu, Christine and Brian climbed a rough track up to swim in the rock pools above the falls, which was very nice. Stu just 'had to' show off his 'Inner Child', or risk taking gene, by joining the kids jumping off a rock 6m above the pool. Chris O'B decided to go to the lower plunge pool and said it was also very good for a swim.

We made it to Cooinda Lodge in the centre of Kakadu the next day after seeing crocodiles in the river and lots of small bushfires set by the aboriginal managers to maintain the bush on the way. During the rest day at Cooinda, Christine and Stuart took the Yellow Water boat cruise where they saw yet more crocodiles and lots of birdlife. Chris O'B headed off early to Jabiru as he thought he would like to do a different boat cruise at the Aurora Resort on the Arnhem Highway north of Jabiru.

The remaining three then cycled north to Jabiru for a long lunch at the Kakadu Visitor Centre, before restocking the panniers and camping at the caravan park. The visitor centre is an impressive building with good displays explaining the local ecology and videos of Kakadu in the 'wet' and a lot of other information on the wildlife, rock art and the Indigenous culture.

Leaving Jabiru we met up with Chris O'B again at the Corroboree Park tavern. From here we took the Marrakai Track shortcut to Batchelor. On the way we camped at the pretty Marrakai Crossing on the Adelaide River. Next day we passed through Batchelor, and then it was into Litchfield National Park on the following day.



Wangi Falls Litchfield National Park

We saw many beautiful swimming places here, such as Buley Rockhole, Florence Falls and Wangi Falls - can thoroughly recommend all of these for swimming.

Stuart and Chris O'B decided to cycle the Western and Southern side of Litchfield, but Christine and Brian had had enough of rough gravel tracks and thought the first creek crossing looked too 'croccy' to risk and decided to do the Northern part of Litchfield instead. A couple of National Park rangers (including Helga who Stuart had worked out of the same office with twenty years earlier) saw Stuart and Chris crossing the creek, confirmed that it was full of crocodiles and that Chris and Stuart were idiots and warned against risking such foolishness again.



Chris O'Brien, Christine and Stuart at Tolmer Falls Litchfield

Leaving Litchfield we travelled to Berry Springs with another thermal pool which again was a great place to stop for a swim. From here it was onto Coolalinga Caravan Park, where Stuart rejoined Christine and Brian.

Chris O'B cycled into Darwin to catch the plane back to Perth, having pre-booked the flight.

The last day was a short ride of 39 km's into Darwin to finish the tour, with some 25 km on what used to be a train line but is now a fantastic bike path.



Stu, Brian and Christine at Darwin Waterfront

Statistics

Total Km's for tour 3844

Total days for tour 65

Gravel component 1422 km's

Breakages

Four punctures

Three broken pannier racks

One stripped rack stud

Broken tent poles

Highs

Beautiful scenery

Great travelling companions

Met some great people

Good camp spots

Campfires

Scientific discussions with Bruce and Stuart

Achieving a difficult personal challenge

Lows

Some very bad gravel roads