

# ***Summer, Sun, Sand and Mud:***

## **Mountainbike Tour through the Australian Desert (2001)**

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### **Heat and thirst**

It is amazing to feel how the human body is able to compensate various physical stresses and suffers. Soon after a thorough drink and an hours rest in the shadow of a tree, we are ready for new adventures. However, it is still too hot outside – outside the shadow. Today again it is a very hot day. We have to adjust our daily schedule: at temperatures over 40°C every movement is too much, so we get up before sunrise and have a long break over noon. At temperatures over 50°C our body does not seem to be able to cool down to 37°C, even though we are drinking regularly. Today we measure 52°C in the shade.. Luckily we have shade...

Again it is above 50°C – but today is a resting day. We have already used the cooler hours in the morning to explore the rugged landscape and gorges. Now it is noon time. These high temperatures appear unreal, the body moves in slow motion, the mind seems blurred. The cypress pine trees (*Callitris glaucophylla*) only give very small shadows, under which we try to cover ourselves in moist towels. We spend hours like this sleeping, eating, trying to write. Luckily there is enough water in the tank at the campground. However, at noon the water is hot, good enough to wet the towels, but already too hot to drink. We start dreaming of a cool mountain creek.

### **Farms ad fields all the way to the horizon**

Luckily we started our bicycle tour in Adelaide at cool 20°C and were then able to gradually adapt to the increasing heat – especially since we came from winter in Germany. We then had two days with friends in the Barossa Valley, where we went food shopping, packed our gear, and planned our trip with the advice of our friends. However, at our departure, the worrisome advice was clearly dominating: "you are crazy – no Australian would do this".

It is mid January, fields are harvested, and grass is yellow. The landscape north of Adelaide is formed through agriculture. Not too long ago, this was Eucalyptus forest – not too much is left. Kangaroos have become more and more of a pest and are often run over by cars. We can tell the smell a long time ahead. Sheep are grazing on the fields. A lot of farms and even whole towns seem abandoned, and decay with time. Smaller towns like Burra, Petersborough, Ororoo, and Hawker are not worthwhile to stop. Besides a gas station, a supermarket, and some sort of "historic site" (usually an old rotten building or an old technical device), there is not much to see. We are only interested in cold drinks... Despite the heat and the occasional hot winds from northern directions, we make good progress about 120 km a day.

### **Wallabies and strange lizards**

Since we are on the road with the first glimpse of dawn, we see and hear nature wake up. This intensive experience makes us forget, that we have to get up at about 4:15h. The cool morning air keeps our skin dry, no sweat runs down the cheeks and crystallizes into salt... We are delighted by the different birds we hear and often also see. There are kangaroos, wallabies, even dingos, lizards, and flocks of galahs, and other birds. We are most impressed by a small lizard, which looks like a pinecone an has a bright blue tongue. Snakes we see only as dead ones run over by cars.

### **Another bloody village**

Did you ever hear of Carrieton? No? No wonder. It seems like the end of the world... The sealed road stops here, and then there is a chapel, a hotel with bar, a mailbox, and a small gas station, clean public toilets, and a swimming pool (we think) with nice and tidy lawn around it. We only need water to fill our supplies. But nobody seems to live here. Not a single human sound. Only a dog barking in the distance. We are in the center of the village and wonder how we could get some water. The swimming pool is locked and secured with a high fence, the taps in the public toilet are too small to fill our water bags efficiently, and there seems to be no free standing water tap. There

we are – a bit puzzled. A flock of zebra birds makes some noise, and we are already wondering if we ended up in a museum.

Zebra birds find water – this is important to know in the Outback. We find a dripping tap behind a fence and see the zebra birds get water there. They have to get water every day and transport it even several kilometers to feed their young. With the help of our pliers we can open the tap and refill our water supplies, and the zebra birds will be able to take a bath.

### **Noon rest at the Wilpena Pound**

From Hawkeron we are on paved road again. But the terrain is now a lot more up and down, we approach the flinders ranges. At nine o'clock in the morning it was already too warm, at eleven it is hot, and the hills make us sweat even more. Not only the terrain changed since Hawker, also the vegetation is now bushland in transition to a Eucalyptus-Callitris forest, typical for the Flinders Ranges. We reach the visitor center of the Flinders Ranges Nationalpark just before noon.

We are not the only visitors here, it is a popular place to visit. However, we are the only cyclists at this time of year. After a cold drink we go for a small hike in the forest. Large River Red Gum trees and tall shrubs as undergrowth produce a cool microclimate. We even pass a few water holes and hear many birds in the trees and shrubs surrounding the water. Soon we reach a viewpoint from which we can overlook the rugged panorama of the hills and valleys. After having traveled through the monotonous landscape of the farmland, we now feel having arrived in Australia.

### **Another hot day**

The lush green colors of the Flinders Ranges soon are forgotten. After a nice resting day in the forest, we now fight our way on an old fire management road through a gorge. The dried out river bed has its special challenges. The rocks make cycling almost impossible. But we are impressed by the gorge with its water holes and old Eucalyptus trees and the many colorful birds. The mountain range abruptly is over. The country now is flat, without trees. We have reached the desert – we think. But at a closer look, there still is plenty of vegetation. The annual rainfall still is higher than what it would be for deserts. Only in summer, many plants are already dried out, giving the desert-like impression.

In the distance we see a RoadTrain, one of those large trucks with up to three trailers. That's where the paved road is leading to Marree. That's where we need to go. Since hours we fight against the wind on a totally corrugated gravel road. We want to reach Parachilna today, a roadhouse – that's where we can refill water and have a cold drink. But it takes us two hours to cover the 22 km. The wind is increasing, so that we have to protect ourselves against the dust, by covering our faces, but this is highly unpleasant at 40°C. We reach Parachilna totally exhausted at eleven o'clock, and we wait until six o'clock in the afternoon before we decide to continue. We have not waited so long on the days before. Even now, as we are back on the road, we still measure 35°C and the heat is reflected by the asphalt.

### **Storm and dust**

It did not seem to cool down at night. In the morning, half an hour before sunrise we measure 29°C. We wake up sweating wet, even though we are already naked. How should it be possible to regenerate?

Today we reach the end of the paved road in Lyndhurst. We passed Leigh Creek and Coperey, two towns in which there is big time coal mining. The mines seem huge, covering the landscape to the horizon. We feel the dust in our faces blown there by the strong headwind. During the morning, the wind turns into a storm, and there is a pile of clouds approaching from the north. We are already only using the lightest gear of our Speedhub gearing system. Twice we have the chance to wet our shirts and hats in a water hole, but the water was already too salty for drinking. And the wind is hot... It seems that we cannot make good progress today. Somehow we manage to arrive in Lyndhurst before noon where we find a resting spot under a roof of a public building. We spend the rest of the day there, it is impossible to continue. We now experience a monsoon storm, pushing huge amounts of dust and sand into the small village. Even car drivers take a break in the gas station or the bar.

### **Sunglasses and a cotton towel: covered like terrorists**

The next morning seems without wind, cockatoos are screaming, and temperatures are at decent 25°C. We are back on the road – full of excitement. No more paved road for the next three weeks... Farina, an abandoned town is 30km north of Lyndhurst. It is now National Historic Site, as almost everything in Australia that is older than 50 years. Since there are too many broken bottles scattered around the site, we prefer to return to the main track.

From today on we are in the desert, dominated by the colors brown, grey, red and white amplified by the glaring sun. We protect ourselves against the sun by wearing a wet cotton towel over the head and shoulders, held in place by the traditional Australian hat, the Akubra. Good sunglasses are also absolutely required, not only to protect against the UV-radiation, and the strong light reflections, but also against the increasing wind. Only a few hours after sunrise we are fighting the storm again.

The 50 km from Farina to Marree are becoming a challenge. The wind is still increasing, although we thought it was over since yesterday. And at eleven o'clock we measure already 35°C. Luckily we carry enough water. Every 15 minutes we have a 5 minute rest, every 30 km we have an energy bar. The last few kilometers are eased by the fact that we see the roofs of Marree, but our bodies are at their limits. Our first goal in Marree is the supermarket where we have a liter of cool milk each. We are watched by a group of French tourists, who don't understand that someone can cycle such distances in this weather – at the same time we don't understand how you can travel being squeezed into a 4WD, without actually being in touch with the country you travel through...

### **On the famous Birdsville Track**

The famous Birdsville Track has its starting point in Marree. Why famous? In former times the railroad had reached Marree from the South (today it is replaced by RoadTrains), and it was used to transport life stock to the cities at the coast line. However, cattle had to reach Marree from the farms inland. Since cattle has to drink regularly, a track had to be established, on which water was available in regular intervals. This is how the Birdsville Track was established, as a cattle route leading from Birdsville in Queensland to Marree in South Australia crossing the Sturt's Stony Desert, and parts of the Simpson Desert. Despite the bores with artesian water, which ensured survival of cattle and men, the track remained a dangerous route for men and animals. Later it was the first Australian cattle track on which a regular mail delivery service was established. The first men to cover this track in motorized vehicles, as well as the first mailman, are kept in honorable memory.

In the year 2001, the Birdsville Track was a well maintained gravel track leading to Birdsville and from there to other towns in the Outback - If everything is o.k. And there are many reasons in the desert for things not being o.k... We want to spend the night on the campground in Marree in order to be able to start into the desert with full water supplies. But we don't even get to build up our tent: We experience a thunderstorm which is the most scary one in our lives (so far). The air is tense, the wind is a storm, the rain comes in horizontally, and lightnings are bright and in seconds intervals. There is no other dry spot on the whole campground except for the toilet building. Since we are the only guests, we spend the night in the toilet booth, while outside our bikes are drowning.

### **Clouds of cotatoos, and clouds of flies**

On the crack of dawn we look outside the toilet house and see a landscape of small lakes. Nothing is like it was yesterday. Water everywhere... Maree is without electricity. The track luckily is not under water. One hour after sunrise the track is dry and it rides like concrete. We can make good progress. No headwind today. Also not from behind. No wind – that indicates temperatures above 40°C... The heat makes us suffer. Until noon temperatures have already reached the 50s. We rest under a tree in a dry river bed near the farm Clayton.

It is not the only tree in the surrounding, and this attracts a number of birds. The most common bird we see is the Little Corella, a cocatoo. They come in large flocks so that the blue sky looks white, like clouds. But they are very loud.

The worst enemies however, are flies. They travel on our back, or on the hat, or on the panniers. As soon as we stop they are everywhere, especially in our faces trying to absorb liquid from our eyes, nose, and mouth. The only advantage of headwind is that it blows away those flies...

### **Hard work and a shower with 80°C**

Despite the desert landscape the whole region is inhabited by man. It's only that farms are a bit larger than what we have seen in the South. No problem for a farm to cover an area of 6 000 km<sup>2</sup> (600 000 ha). The large areas are necessary for the life stock to find enough food. It is hard work out here – farmers in the Outback are busy all year. It is also hard work for us, to make our way in the heat and fight the track.

There are several bores along the track which were established as water supplies for the cattle. Most of the time, water is boiling hot and a bit sulfuric. Not ideal for drinking, but it is suitable. Most of the bores these days are closed with steel tubes which lead to a far away farm. Most of the time there are no taps directly at the bore. At one of the bores, however, we not only found the desired tap, but also a shower – water of 80°C at temperatures of 50°C! No problem, it's good to wet the clothes, but ten minutes later things were dry again. The cooling effect works also with hot water...

### **It's not a desert, it's a swamp!**

We are building up camp at the dry river bed of the Cooper Creek. There's a few trees giving shade, but unfortunately we are also welcomed by a number of mosquitoes. We were not prepared for this. Long sleeves protect a bit, and we soon disappear into our tent. Why are there mosquitoes in the desert? They require water... From now mosquitoes will be our daily companions dawn and dusk. That night we see a thunderstorm with rain north of us – the direction we are heading for. Luckily we stay dry that night.

We soon see and feel the result of that nightly rainstorm. The track is muddy, mud is on the bike, mud is on the panniers, mud is in our face. The further we go north, the more the desert looks like a swamp. It is virtually lakes that have accumulated in the lower elevations, and the track runs right through them. We need a new technique to pass these water holes. The first rule is to never leave the track made by a car, the second rule is to go through with as high speed as possible even though one can't see how deep it is, and the third rule is to try to hold the front wheel in straight. We are grateful to be using the Speedhub gearing system which allows immediate shifting in all situation. Sometimes we can't make it through and have to get off the bike in the middle of the water stretch. Often riding is made difficult by the deep tracks of a truck. Once riding inside these tracks, it is impossible to change position.

We were prepared for drought, heat, lack of water, loneliness. But not for rain and flooding. How can you know...

### **Mungerannie by the sea**

No more worries about drinking water, we are riding through it. We can also take baths, and wet our shirts and head bands. However, heat, flies, and mosquitoes are still there. And the mud. In the meanwhile we and our bikes look like we'd been on some sort of off-road trip. We find mud even on top of our hat.

The wind is pushing us today, so that we reach our goal already shortly after noon: Mungerannie. Before we reach the farm with hotel and gas station, we have to cross the Mungerannie River – not an easy task at the current level of flooding. We first carry the panniers across, then the trailers, then the bikes, then we reward ourselves with a cold drink at the bar.

The other guest as well as the barman are seriously worried that two "bloody Germans" want to ride the Birdsville Track at this time of year. After having told them about our previous adventures, they were convinced that we are "full time crazy" and we were somewhat accepted in their world.

Mungerannie is located next to a bore which was opened about 80 years ago. Since then, large amount of water is running out of the bore, which has created a river of a few kilometers and an island of green in the desert. Mungerannie is famous for its bird life. With the rain, the river has additionally swollen. The water has a nice temperature of 30°C – ideal to wash off the dust of the last two weeks.

## **Fresh bread and cold beer**

Nightlife in Mungerannie is short but intense. We are not alone in the pub, not only because it is Friday. Besides the two RoadTrains standing in front of the hotel, four more 4WD vehicles have arrived. The road North is closed. The track is more than 1 m under water over several kilometers. Some have tried it anyway and returned with a car muddy up to the roof. The Australians take it easy – have a cold beer and wait. We are among them and seem to be entertaining with our "full time crazy" stories from other continents.

After that night, we begin the new day with a refreshing swim in the river. Today is bread baking day. We bake fresh bread every three or four days to supply us during lunch breaks of the following days. Soon everyone knew about there being fresh bread, and we donated two loafs for dinner. Most people in the Outback know "fresh bread" only as sliced toast from the freezer. Therefore, everyone was delighted about real bread made on a camping stove. Suddenly we were not anymore the "crazy" and "stupid" tourists who "don't know what they are doing". From now on the rough cowboys of the Outback treated us with respect.

## **"Simpson Wetland District"**

After two-and-a-half days of waiting at Mungrannie, a 4WD truck wanted to make its way through the northern "wetlands". This was a good chance for us to hitchhike across. We had to make up for the time we lost through waiting, since our tour was limited to six weeks, and there is still a long way to go. By chaining the truck together with another 4WD truck, we managed to cross the floodings. We would not have been able to cross on bikes for a long time – even pushing would have been impossible. 100 km later, we were dropped off on solid and dry ground. From here on its 200 km to Birdsville, but without bores along the road. We can only hope for, but not be sure of rain water puddles. We are prepared: with 60 liters of water we can survive for at least four days. We are prepared to have no help, since only very few vehicles can pass from the south.

Finally we experience a cool day. It's only about 30°C, and the sky is cloudy. The wind gently blows from south-east, pushing us ahead. However, the track surface is more difficult today. Red stones cover the ground widely. We are now in the Sturt's Stony Desert, a stone desert with usually very little vegetation. It must have already rained here a few days ago, since lush green grass covers the red stony plains. We are even more surprised to find frogs and even crabs in the small water holes. The little frogs soon became our friends, since they climbed the sides of our tent to eat mosquitoes. It is amazing to see how the desert comes alive after a rain event.

A new day with new adventures. There's not much change in the landscape. Flat stony plains are interrupted by orange sand dunes. In the dips we find water of the last rain events, which has turned the track into sticky mud. This mud is now everywhere on our bikes, especially clogging the brakes, and even blocking the wheels. Removing a sticky crust from in between the tire and the fork has become a routine now.

Suddenly a snake crosses the track from left to right. We are delighted to finally see a life snake, and have our cameras ready. From a safe distance we watch the snake, which has the patterning and color of a Western Taipan. Supposedly this is a "two-minute" snake, indicating two minutes of survival after a bite.

## **Wet from inside and outside**

Another day later we reach the Diamantina River and Birdsville. The Diamantina River is supplied only by rain water from the surrounding desert. No crocodiles in the river, no diseases, and the water is nicely cool. Now, after the rain events, the current is quite high. Therefore, a concrete bridge was built across which connects the track to Birdsville. Our fist visit in Birdsville is to the local gas station where we buy a cold drink. Immediately we are surrounded by a bunch of people and a guy already gives us the address of a German artist who is living in Birdsville. Seems like we have been waited for – as often, the news about us has arrived before us.

After a refreshing swim in the Diamantina River we wet ourselves from the inside in the Birdsville Hotel with conversation with the locals ("I heard you can bake bread in the desert?"). Then we already make plans about how to spend the next few days here. The German artist Wolfgang John who chose this place to live because of the unique colors of the desert, invited us for a trip to the

sand dunes of the Simpson Desert. We would not have reached these by bike, since our time frame was too tight.

### **A cool Coopers at the top of Big Red**

Remembering our experiences in Mungerannie, we decide not to spend the first day in the pub, but relax in our tent at the Diamantina River. In the morning we are awakened by a galah singing in the tree above our tent. The town is 2 km away, and there are no other sounds, except the birds. After a relaxing breakfast we pack our gear for a day's trip in a car and cycle to meet Wolfgang.

The dunes of the Simpson Desert are oriented northwest to southeast and are all in parallel. We are driving east to west and thus have to make our way over one of the high dunes every few kilometers. The dunes are of fine red sand. The highest sand dune – Big Red – is the second attraction of the Birdsville region, besides the famous Birdsville horse races. So what will the Australians do to enjoy the scenery? With the words "the sun is over the yard", open a cool beer and enjoy. We are having Coopers, an Australian beer brewed to the rules of the German "Reinheitsgebot".

### **A swim in the green desert**

We are surprised about how green the desert is. The valleys between the dunes seem like meadows with fresh grass, trees with fresh leaves, and many flowers in bloom. We also can see many big red kangaroos, and cockatoos. In the distance we can make out a few "lakes". Even on the dunes themselves, flowers are blooming – we are overwhelmed by the variety of colors and forms. During the last few days we mainly saw red stones, so that this is in perfect contrast to what we have already seen. Supposedly not only the rain has contributed to the greening of the desert, but also the success over the last few years in significantly reducing the number of rabbits. For years this rodent has eaten up all plants, and only since a virus was introduced, their number reduced significantly. Nature seems to be regenerating fast.

Eyre-Creek is a river system that feeds into the worlds largest salt lake, Lake Eyre in South Australia. Only every few decades the river actually reaches Lake Eyre, reviving it from its drought. This then attracts thousands of pelicans and other sea birds. This year is one of those rare occasions. We are approaching a side arm of Eyre Creek which completely blocks the track. No way to go on, the water is about 3 m deep and 500m wide. We can see the crowns of the trees only just about above the water surface. After a refreshing swim, we have another beer. Today, we are ready for the third attraction of Birdsville, the Birdsville Hotel.

### **A seven-course menu?**

As soon as we enter the pub, we are surrounded by old friends. The cars and trucks from Birdsville have arrived. And with them their stories. Soon we are asked to bake bread again, and we are invited for a barbecue the next day.

What to eat in an Outback pub? A view on the menu makes us recognize the usual stuff (french-fries with steak), or the more unusual stuff (french-fries with kangaroo steak). Since we as cyclists do not deny calories, we ask about the announced seven-course meal. The answer is typical Australian: "A hamburger and a sixpack". We then rather decide for the kangaroo steak.

### **Riding in the storm**

From Birdsville on, we now head into a new direction. The last three weeks, our main direction was North. Now we head Northeast, in direction of Windorah. From Windorah, where the sealed road starts, we will cycle directly East to the Pacific Ocean. But that's still a long way.

From Birdsville on the track has recently been serviced. This is good for cars, but not for cyclists. A new layer of gravel has been put on, but it was left to the traffic to compress it. We are fighting our way through, remembering that sand and mud is far worse. And it should become worse...

During our rest under a small tree at noon, we hear thunder. The small clouds compacted into high clouds indicating a thunderstorm. Again we have the wind against us, and see the clouds and storm approaching. It is like a black wall that comes closer with high speed. It is unbelievable how suddenly and how intense the rain hits us. Within seconds, temperatures fall to 15°C and the track

is soft and muddy. No way to continue. After half an hour, the storm is over, and within minutes temperatures reach 35°C again, and the sun is shining. We have to wait another two hours, before the track is dry enough to allow cycling. Although our gear is not anymore as heavy as it was at the start of the tour, the tires still cut in quite a bit on the still soft track. After 18km fighting the soft track, we build up camp. We have to be quick, since the next thunderstorm is approaching. After that, the track will not be able to dry again today...

It seems that the frequency of rainstorms dictates our rhythm and the distance we can make. Today it was 75 km.

### **The wettest summer since 50 years**

On the next day we manage to reach a roof before the rain starts. With the onset of rain we reach the little village Betoota (a farm and a former hotel/pub). We spend two boring hours under that roof of the hotel which has been closed years ago. The owner (85 years old) tells us in his barely understandable dialect, that this year was the rainiest year since 50 years. The monsoon cyclones were coming unusually far south this year, leading to the unusual rain events in Central Australia. The farmers are very pleased, but we start to worry how we can get out of this desert when the tracks are unpassable...

Five kilometers after Betoota one of the tires bursts with a loud bang. The side was damaged. Was it the dried out hard mud constantly clogging the space between brakes, frame, and tire? Who knows, it was a prototype tire we had for testing. The tire replacement takes half an hour, mainly because we have to clean the rim and tire from the solidified mud, not to introduce any mud clumps between the tire and the inner tube. After another kilometer of hard work on the soft track, we reach a river running in a river bed which had been dried out for years. The river is one meter deep and about 300 m wide and has a very strong current. It takes an hour for us to carry gear and bikes across. But we do take the chances to wash the mud off the bikes. After about ten crossings each, we are exhausted and decide to build up camp, keeping in mind that we would have a source of water for cooking. As we were about to refill our water supplies after cooking about three hours later, the river has totally disappeared. Only small puddles of water are left. This is how fast rivers appear and disappear in the desert – I would not have believed it.

The distance we can cover is decreasing, today we made only 58 km.

### **One rainstorm after the other**

Rain, rain, rain – but we are in the desert! It was raining this night and this morning. We cannot yet start, and have to wait until 9 o'clock for the track to be somewhat dry. Even the riding is hard for the first few hours, since the tires still cut in deep. Two cars pass us, and in their track we can ride easier. The terrain is now more hilly, not anymore only flat plains. We then reach a flat high plateau. As the track has about completely dried around 11 o'clock, we can already see the next rainstorm approach. One rainstorm comes so suddenly we can only put a plastic foil over our bikes. This midday storm only lasts for 30 minutes, and we can continue after two hours. It is now 2 o'clock in the afternoon and temperatures reach the 30s again. The track has not dried everywhere, often we have short stretches of mud which is so sticky it blocks the wheels. Only ten meters of such mud are strenuous work. Pushing is almost impossible, since there is nothing to push against, and the mud allows no proper grip for the feet. After a few kilometers of struggle we are virtually stuck. We have to wait for the mud to dry... We build up the tent and wait. All books we took along, are read already... Then we hear the rain. It's the third time its raining today, this time only for 10 minutes. But the track is wet again. Then we notice that our tent was not in a safe spot in case of a stronger rain event. We dig a ditch. Also we struggle to move the bikes off the track where they were stuck since a few hours, and we try to free them of the mud between brake, frame, and tire. Some of it has dried already requiring a chisel to get it off.

After three more hours – it is now 6 o'clock in the afternoon and nicely warm – we decide to move on. We want to cycle until it is dark to make up for the time we spent waiting during the day. We are hoping that if we could make a few more kilometers today, we could reach the paved road tomorrow. Only five kilometers later the track leads through a wide dip in which the track is still muddy. That's it for today.

The tent is quickly built up again, and the fourth rain event is pouring down on us around 10 o'clock. It's not only rain but a major thunderstorm with lightnings in intervals of a few seconds. We know that we our tent is the highest point over a few kilometers...

Today we made a total of 20 km.

### **Escaping the desert**

The next morning welcomes us with cloudless sky and warm temperatures. This is giving us good hope. However, we have to wait until noon for the track to be rideable. Silently we wish for a truck to give us a ride to the sealed road... But the three cars we saw the last two days came from the direction we are heading to.

The terrain is now dominated by sandstone cliffs and table mountains. Occasionally we see trees, and everything is in lush green. The track now is absolutely dry, and is nice to ride – we are having fun again. Ideal weather to cover the 72 km to the sealed road.

The road to Windorah is only single track sealed, since there is not much traffic anyway, except for RoadTrains transporting oil from the oil fields in the desert to the coast. We have to leave the road if one of these giant trucks is passing by. They will not brake for us – and we have to be careful not to be hit by stones when they pass. Now that we are on paved road, we do not anymore need to worry about wet tracks... It seems paradox that we will not experience a single day of rain until we reach the coast, although we are now entering more tropic climate.

### **The Australian bush**

100 km later the small paved road reaches the village Windorah allowing us to take a cold drink. The best camping spot then is 10 kilometers outside at the Coopers Creek. This is the same river we crossed already on the Birdsville Track between Maree and Mungerannie – there it was dry. Here it is now a big river, and maybe now even the desert part of this river is flooded. We take the opportunity for a refreshing swim.

From now on we can speed ahead: The days will be alike, getting up at 4:30 h, departure at 6 h, breakfast at 8 h. We make good use of the cool morning air as much as possible, and often we already cycled 80 to 90 kilometers until noon. Then we rest for three or four hours under a tree (there is plenty of them now) and ride another two or three hours in the late afternoon. Thus we can almost every day travel around 140 km. Thereby we gradually see the transition of the desert to grassland to bushland and forest. We are fascinated by the different colors of green and discover "new" plants every day.

### **Farmland, villages, and the first towns**

On our way East we have to cross a few small mountain ranges. Soon we see the forest and bushland being interrupted by large pastures and also fields. More and more villages we pass have dense traffic and even traffic lights, and we have to get used to the increasing traffic also on the road between the villages. It is no longer a car a day, now it's more like a car an hour. But we see the positive sides as well: we can get cold drinks in every village, and we have to carry far less water supply, allowing us to ride easier. These transitions of course are slowly and gradually for us cyclists. In Charleville we enter a big shopping center – the first one since we left Adelaide.

The further we travel East, the more we have to adapt our daily schedule to the actual sunrise and sunset – we have to start earlier. Temperatures during the day again reach the 40s, and with it comes the tropical humidity. We feel uncomfortable and sweaty. Luckily we find enough trees to rest during noon, and also the millions of flies, that gave us a hard time in the desert, have disappeared.

### **Bottle trees, pythons, and echidnas**

In Roma we turn North again. We want to visit the Carnarvon National Park. It is going to be the steepest stretch of our whole tour, but also one of the most scenic. We ride through dense Eucalyptus forests, interspersed with pasture farms. Everywhere we find bottle trees, a tree species with a bottle shaped trunk, which serves as water storage tissue. These trees are left standing even on fields and in pastures, possibly due to their positive effects on regulation of the



ground water level. The undergrowth in the Eucalyptus forests is a dense mixture of grass trees, cycads, and vines. In between these, we discover huge spider webs made of golden thread! Colorful butterflies cross the road and at the road side we find run-over pythons – the longest was 2.30 m long.

Then we discover an echidna, crossing the street in front of us. As soon as it discovered us, it rolled into a ball, and even though we waited several minutes, it did not want to show us its face. Echidnas are strange animals, they are somewhat like mammals, since they milk their young, but then they lay eggs, similar to birds.

### **The Expedition Range**

We reach the Dawson Highway and now have to get used to even more increased traffic. There is not much choice in roads to the Pacific. Once more we are fighting the wind over one hill after the next. Due to the humidity our shirts don't dry again. In the distance we see a higher mountain range – we want to reach it today. It seemed like 20 km, but ended up being 60 km of ups and downs. The forest through which we are passing is full of plant species unknown to us. Giant Eucalypt trees with pink bark, yellow flowering acacias, lianas, grass trees, bottle trees, etc. Unfortunately the forest areas have tremendously shrunk over the last decades. Now forest is limited to small patches at the mountains, where farming is not worthwhile. We like the name of this mountain range: Expedition Range. The pass we are crossing is 455m above sea level, which is really not much for a mountain range. Since Australia is a very old continent, also the mountains have suffered a lot more erosion than young mountain ranges like the Alps or the Himalaya. We spend the night on the pass to be enjoying a long downhill the next morning, and also it is a lot easier for us to find a secret camping spot than it would be in the farming area.

### **The Great Dividing Range almost at the coast**

Until Moura the road is pretty boring: straight ahead, small hills, and fields on both sides. An abrupt change in landscape happens about 20 km before Moura, as we pass through a State Forest: many grass trees, and a nice Eucalypt forest. Ideal for the lunch break, although we no longer need to spend four hours in the shade. Temperatures now only reach 35°C maximum, so that we have a two hour break only. Moura welcomed us with advertisements for golf course, camping, barbecue and other activities. However, we did not need any "activities", and were looking for a cheap and quiet place to put our tent. Thus, we decided to look for something suitable behind the town. Moura has big coal mines, and also a fertilizer plant. The surrounding did not invite for camping, so that we ended up putting our tent up in immediate vicinity to the railroad track – the only place we could find before sunset. At night the coal trains kept us awake passing directly next to us at low speed. We will probably remember his monotonous deep sound and the vibrating soil for a long time...

Now there is one more mountain range to cross, before we reach the Pacific – the Great Dividing Range. We are looking forward to be cycling to forest again and to leave the boring farm country behind. Some of the ascends are quite steep, but luckily the truck traffic was sent on another road to pass the mountain range. So we basically have the street to ourselves. Our effort was rewarded by fascinating rugged mountain landscape and a wonderful road through Eucalypt forest. And effort we have: our shirts are sticky, sweat is running down our cheeks. The road seems to take the hills in a straight line. In the afternoon we pass the sign "Gladstone 100 km", and decide to take it easy and spend the night under grass trees, cycads, and Eucalypts and have a nice panorama view.

### **"No swimming" in the Pacific Ocean**

We had spent our last night in the wilderness and now have a long downhill stretch from 450 m to sea level. The morning welcomes us with a spectacular sight almost to the ocean. After 70 km we reach Calliope and we are still at 100 m above sea level. Downhill to be continued... An then, after about 3000 km on the road, we reach the Pacific Ocean. The last 10 km we cycled through the city of Gladstone – amazing dimensions, if one considers that this town only has 30 000 inhabitants.

At the beach we are welcomed by stinger alarm signs – no swimming for us. What a disappointment. We then head for the house of Maria and Dieter who had invited us to spend a few days before returning to Germany.

Such a trip can not be summed up in one sentence. The impressions and adventures were too diverse, and too many different challenges had to be met during the trip. However, there is one sentence which came up in the planning phase of the trip, when we were discussing also with local Australians:

"The impossible becomes possible by doing it!"

For more information: <http://www.mountainbike-expedition-team.de>