

Australia
Coasting
DOWN UNDER





The arid air of Western Australia tugs at the peaks of our enduro helmets, and we're about to change worlds. Behind us is red Martian dust, ancient history, and beautiful isolation. Easing off the throttle, we bounce from our sandy track onto the asphalt and enter the modern world of electric convenience, noise, and the Internet.

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Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas

It's 7:30 a.m., and we're cruising west on highway 94, clicking through the gears and skirting the northern edge of the Mundaring State Forest. We roll at a relaxed pace into the Swan Valley north-east of today's destination. Perth is Australia's most western capital and fourth most populous city.

An Air of Sophistication

The cool air is laden with a sweet mix of moist pine and grapes from the 40 boutique wineries that sit on either side of the Swan River and make up Western Australia's oldest wine region. Twenty minutes from Perth's historic center, the roadside is sprinkled with relaxed cafes, breweries, and alfresco restaurants where diners savor homegrown flavors and sip on locally produced Shiraz.

With Perth friends, Rob and Dianne, we ride to the world-renowned Kings Park and Botanic Garden. Below us, Perth looks resplendent. Gleaming steel and glass skyscrapers rise elegantly from the sandy and

flat Swan Coastal Plain, which lies between the Darling Scarp and the Indian Ocean. It's easy to see why 1.9 million Aussies have made this their home. Founded by Captain James Stirling in 1829, Perth is a free settlement as opposed to other metropolis whose origins trace back to housing and managing British convicts.

Seaside Towns

We're riding south of Perth. For 150 breathtaking miles, the Indian Ocean crashes relentlessly onto shore. Past the towns of Rockingham, Mandurah, and Bunbury, we make a slow right turn from the asphalt and onto Cape Naturaliste Road. Our tires skip over the loose gravel as we meander to the end of the peninsula. From the lone white-washed lighthouse, we're afforded a handsome view across Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park and down to the pristine white sand of Bunker Bay.

A detour off Caves Road is our springboard into one of Australia's most fertile wine growing regions, Margaret River. With

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more than 21 square miles of this area covered in vines, the industry is hard to escape; but at \$25 for just a single tasting, we choose to ride on.

Kangaroo Stalkers

A narrow, earthy, unsealed track leads us west toward the coast, and we spend two nights under canvas at Conto Campground being stalked by a family of curious kangaroos. With a warm breeze blowing in from the north, we enjoy a short one-half-mile stroll to the long sandy beach. Here, our shutters fly into a frenzy as we photograph local surfers enjoying one of the most celebrated surfing regions in the world.

The next day, we're left dizzy from the twists of a minor backroad that hugs the banks of the Blackwood River south through a mix of woods, farmland, and open, flood plains. By late afternoon, we're easing into the quaint town of Augusta on the farthest southwest corner of Australia. We quickly pitch our tent on a grassy spot under two large interlocking oak trees. Close by, the dark lapping water of the shallow Flinders Bay lulls our senses.

At the end of the long curved jetty, and as the cold waters are turned gold by the low setting sun, we watch pelicans feed and preen while we enjoy our own meal of delicious fish and chips at a nearby café.

Cakes, Quarters, and Pink Lakes

It's 9:00 a.m. and we pit stop for a brief breakfast in Western Australia's oldest



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continuous European settlement, Albany. The espresso and banana bread served in the city's dilapidated colonial quarter is the perfect way to start a long day's ride. It's been smooth sailing (or should I say riding) for the last two days; Route 10 has been gentle with us. Under blue skies and with a stiff breeze at our backs, we have pushed effortlessly on and saved a fortune in fuel.

We have watched 540 miles disappear in our rearview mirrors; the rugged Aussie southern coastline has been our constant companion. On the outskirts of the city of Esperance, Pink Lake lives up to its name and is our directional queue. We swing north to the town of Norseman to begin our Aussie pilgrimage.

The dull n' bored ...

The Nullarbor Plain is the world's largest limestone landscape (77,000 square miles of treeless arid terrain), which 18th century English explorer Edward John Eyre described as "a hideous anomaly, a blot on the face of Nature, the sort of place one gets into in bad dreams." In more recent times, crossing this eerie no-man's land is a right of passage for most Australians; a cultural stepping-stone and transcontinental journey to the great Outback. Plastered proudly on vehicles here are bumper stickers boldly stating, "I've crossed the Nullarbor!"

Down the Rabbit Hole

We're cruising the Eyre Highway 130 miles east of Norseman as we reach Balladonia, home to a lonely roadhouse. We speed past the brown sign, which announces the start of one of the strangest rides in the world. Ahead are 90 miles of insanely straight tar, undiluted by a single curve or kink. It stretches into infinity before being swallowed by the curvature of the Earth. The vacuum of the highway pulls us in; our throttle wrists turn, and fuel is injected; simultaneously our machines are propelled forward, and the resulting acceleration pushes us backward. It's an unsettling, but heady, rush. Without the usual visual references, we're approaching warp speed, but it feels as though we're standing still. We are lost in the experience, and it's only the vibrations of our knobby off-road tires being pulled apart that snaps us out of the spell and back to the world of

self-preservation. We back off, check our dials, and find a sensible speed.

Staring ahead, I blink hard. "It's real," I murmur before letting out a whoop of excitement and punching the air. OK, it's no hairpin, but I've never been so happy to see a gentle left-hander and the end of this mind-altering straight that has stolen an hour of our lives.

Bluebrush and Dingos

We are deep in the Nullarbor and have crossed from the state of Western Australia into South Australia. To our right, the edge of this country rolls in to meet us as we skirt the sheer and plummeting Bunda Cliffs. Four hundred feet below us, the Southern Ocean slams the coastline. To our north, only scattered patches of hardy bluebrush scrub break up the featureless earth. On the horizon, a solitary dingo is silhouetted. It stands motionless as we pass.

Pulling off the highway and to a solitary copse of eucalyptus trees, we pitch our tent. The sizzle of a fresh steak in the pan is a wonderful thing, and our small fire soon melts away the aches and pains of the day's weird ride. Lisa removes a glass bottle from a dusty pannier lid bag, pops the cork, and we're soon savoring mouthfuls of delicious Aussie cabernet sauvignon. In the distance, low clouds are painted in pink and orange as the sun disappears; swallowed, we presume, by the Nullarbor.

The Great Australian Bight

It has been a warm morning, and we're a little beaten up from having gone toe-to-toe with a punishing side wind for some time. At another desolate roadhouse, we hand over \$200 to fill our empty fuel tanks before buying two packs of sandwiches and two coffees for a startling \$29. Back on the Eyre Highway, we click quickly through the gears and push on to the eastern edge of the Great Australian Bight, a 720-mile open bay and favored breeding ground for hundreds of Southern Right Whales.

Past the town of Ceduna, we're skirting the southern edge of the Gawler Ranges, an ancient lava field created by enormous volcanic activity some 1.5 billion years ago. To the south 190 miles, the gloomily named Cape Catastrophe reminds modern day





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fishing vessels to round the Eyre Peninsula with caution. South Australia has more than 800 shipwrecks submerged off its coastline.

The Crossroads of Australia

At the head of the Spencer Gulf, we meet our first traffic in what feels like an age as we cruise through the small town of Port Augusta, the self-proclaimed “Crossroads of Australia.” From here, getting anywhere is possible; a major route leads to all four corners of this huge continent. Jump on the Stuart Highway and take it to Alice Springs or continue to Darwin on the North Australian coast. Our route lies east and will take us to Melbourne and on to Sydney. Down by the main docks, Lisa and I park the bikes and watch indigenous kids back flip off the jetties while we sip on iced coffee. Everyone around us seems to be on his or her way to somewhere else. East of town, a large sign points travelers north to the largest mountain range in Southern Australia, the Flinders.

The bikes feel smooth, and in sixth gear we’re heading southwest across the green and fertile Yorke Peninsula. Past the country town of Gawler, we increase our speed and merge with the traffic entering South Australia’s capital city, Adelaide. Surrounded by the low-lying Mount Lofty Ranges, and set close to the River Torrens, Adelaide oozes casual elegance. Its wide, tree lined boulevards are dotted with a cool mix of colonial architecture and newer steel and glass skyscrapers. In the city center, dozens of groomed grassy parks provide respite for the hundreds of corporate workers who spill out for lunch. With a place of worship marking almost every intersection, Adelaide is aptly dubbed the “City of Churches.” Residents are immensely proud of their history; the city was planned as a capital for a freely settled British province and founded in 1836 by Colonel William Light. We spend two nights here with our good friend Andrew, a fellow rider and GS enthusiast.

Melbourne Junkies

East of Adelaide 454 miles, we’re in New South Wales. In downtown Melbourne, the atmosphere is sophisticated, slick, pricey, and alluring. Although we normally shun large cities, we’d accepted an invitation from Miles Davis (BMW Motorrad Australia



Marketing Manager) to appear at the Australian Motorcycle Expo on BMW’s main exhibition stand. A week passed in a blitz of photographers’ flashes, high-octane two-wheeled toys, media, and interviews. Four nights at the 5-star Crown Metropolis hotel, three evenings of Melbourne’s pulsating music scene, and a deluge of Aussie cocktails has left us Melbourne junkies, sleep deprived, and wanting more.

It’s time to go cold turkey!

The Harbor City

The miles are rolling under our wheels, and we’ve resumed our normal lives of eat-ride-sleep-repeat. Along Australia’s east coast, the lifestyle is laid back but robust. We roll into and out of a mix of sleepy fishing ports, hippie villages, and bustling towns as we travel north. Riding across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, our view to the right is of the Sydney Opera House. Its six curved roofs resemble billowing sails; each glistens in the bright sun. From the north shore, this famous harbor city is laid out in all its glory. Parks and walkways cut their way through

the skyscrapers, and the Royal Botanical Gardens penetrate into the city’s heart. To Sydney’s east, Australia ends abruptly in cliffs of sandstone.

A Moment of Magic

We are half way up the Aussie coast and 705 miles north of Sydney. It’s 5:30 a.m. on a clear, but chilly, Tuesday morning. The warm air rising from the bikes is a welcome relief as we pull into the port town of Harvey Bay. Tickets in hand, we join six others across the jetty and board the boat “Whale Song.” The engines push us quickly out of the bay and two miles into the Tasman Sea. The scrubbed white deck of our vessel is pristine, the sun is quickly rising, and there is a hushed suspense as whales are thought to be in the area. Sixty feet from the hull, two humpback whales suddenly break the surface in unison. Their bodies arch high into the air before they both land with a thunderous splash and send cascades of water shooting high. During the course of the next hour, the scene is acted over and over again. Words fall short, and even our



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captain confesses to have never seen this display.

Lisa and I look back to shore and reflect. We are both touched by all that Australia has offered us—the rides, friendship, special moments, food, sights, and smells. We both feel humbled and privileged to have shared it together. Just feet away, a humpback calf gently comes to the surface as Lisa and I lean over the boat’s hull. With a deliberate breath, the calf clears his blowhole and fills the air with water vapor. Slowly, he tilts his body, and we’re now looking into a gentle dark eye. We stare back, smile, and savor the magical connection. **RR**

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Facts & Information

Australia

Total Mileage
Approximately 3,567 miles

Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

map to come

In General

Australia is the smallest continent, but it is the world's largest island at 2.96 million square miles. It is among the wealthiest countries. With more than 85 percent of its 23 million residents living within 30 miles of the coastline, Australia has a very low population density. It is an expensive country to visit. Fuel in the more populated areas is around \$6.50 per gallon. English is the main language, and the majority of the population is Christian. The Australian dollar is currently almost equivalent to the U.S. dollar.

Australia is a massive continent, so there's a lot of climatic variation. "The Dry" lasts roughly from April to September, and "The Wet" from October to March. The best time to travel in the Outback is during the winter, June to August.

How to Get There

U.S. citizens must pay \$20 to apply to the Electronic Travel Authority (www.eta.immi.gov.au). For visits longer than three months, you'll need a visa.

Most flights to Australia are from the west coast of the USA. A carnet de passage is required for your own vehicle, which will be subjected to a very strict quarantine inspection.

Food & Lodging

The cost of a hotel room in the main cities is expensive compared to the USA. The average rate for a double room is \$170 per night with motels in the smaller towns costing \$60 to \$80.

Food is of a very high standard in the cities with a huge range of available cuisine; there is an abundance of fresh produce. Make sure you experience dishes made with native meats such as kangaroo!

Roads & Biking

Traffic drives on the left side of well maintained, high quality roads. Be aware of kangaroos that suddenly bound in front of you! Check on route conditions and distances between fuel and water supplies before heading off.

Contact Information

- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice: www.travel.state.gov/travel
- General travel information www.australia.com

Books & Maps

- Lonely Planet Australia (Country Guide) by Meg Worby and Charles Rawlings, ISBN 978-1742204239, \$31.99
- Australia Motorcycle Atlas, Hema Maps, ISBN 978-1865006154, available new and used online
- Most tourist information centers have free books and detailed maps for their individual states.

Motorcycles & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GSA

2002 BMW F 650 GS

Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega Pro

Jacket and Pants: Touratech Companero

Helmets: Airoh Aviator

Boots: MX boots -Alpinestars

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