

Our favourite world travelling Brits regale an epic story of the vastness of our Wide Brown Land.

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The World's Longest Shortcut



We are perched on the northeastern coast of the world's sixth largest nation and biggest island, as well as one of oldest landmasses on the planet – Australia. At a petrol station in the small town of Mackay, QLD, Lisa tops off the fuel tanks while I check the bikes over. Nearby, the Coral Sea pounds the beach as a stream of boats head out to the Great Barrier Reef. At \$250 per person, this excursion is out of our budget.

The air carries a salty tang. A warm dry breeze lulls our senses, but it does little to distract me from the building knot of anxious excitement that's growing in my stomach. Ahead is a long and unforgiving off-road route – the World's Longest Shortcut. >

Left Deep into the Outback – it couldn't be anywhere else, could it?



In line with the Tropic of Capricorn.

These 4180 kilometres across Australia take in uninhabited desert and challenging terrain, and they will see us traverse this vast continent from coast-to-coast. We're here to motorcycle the real Australia, the primeval interior where walk-about legends take root in the blood-red earth, and the land whispers to those who listen.

We're headed into the Outback. We are southwest of Mackay, and Lisa's F650 GS belts out a hefty "blat, blat, blat" as she eases off the gas, applies the brakes, and pulls to a stop. Six large kangaroos leap in unison across the Peak Downs Highway. The large male at the rear throws us a suspicious stare before disappearing into the tall grass on the other side.



Winton to Boulia offers some amazing views.

"We're going to have to be very careful of this particular hazard," I yell to Lisa.

We're looking at a straight piece of tar that stretches out of sight. Fields of sun-bleached brush grass stretch out under a cloudless sky. After heading west for five hours, we meet the Gregory Development Rd and turn south, grateful for the interruption. In the small town of Clermont, we cruise the short main street and stop to refill our water packs; we're already parched. The small wooden-decked provisions store looks like it would have 50 years ago. Inside, the beaten 1950s Coca-Cola fridge is overflowing with chilled bottled water.

Jim, a long-distance trucker sporting a thick dusty beard, ancient jeans, and a faded-orange safety shirt, is outside.

"Struth, mate. You're ready for an adventure, eh?" asks the inquisitive truckie, pointing to the motorcycles.

"We're riding down to Perth across the Outback," Lisa answers.

"You be careful out there. That place wants ya dead. Ah, heck, young fella, good on ya. Mind the roos. Ya'll be right," Jim adds with a dry chuckle.

"I think we've just met Crocodile Dundee's dad," Lisa comments to me with a smile.

The Outback Has Teeth

West of town, the tar ends abruptly. With a thump, we drop to the loose gravel track. With our tyre pressures lowered, we pick up speed. Two hours of ball-bearing gravel later, the air is pungent as we speed through a grove of silver-barked eucalyptus trees. Clearing the trees, I plow into a deep wash of dust and rocks and instantly shift my weight to compensate. In my mirror, I can see Lisa's bike is sideways, her rear wheel sliding out violently. In a split second, she's thrown forward as her 650 GS highsides before smacking the ground hard and flipping. Lisa's pinned under the front left fuel tank. Adrenaline pumps as I spin around and rush back to her.

Lisa's yelling as fuel erupts from a split line, drowning her helmet, goggles, and eyes in burning gasoline. She kicks herself free, yanks off her helmet, and pours our recently bought water over her face and into her bloodshot eyes. We lift the bike upright and instantly spot that the punctured rear tyre is partially peeled off the rim. While Lisa continues to flush out her eyes, I straighten her bent gear shifter and re-attach her broken hand-guard with a zip tie. She's shaken but otherwise OK. It's another 50 minutes before we're clicking through the gears and once again cruising west.



Later, camped near the tiny Outback settlement of Alpha, the embers from our small campfire glow red, and we're witnessing one of the most brilliant star-filled skies we can remember.

The Aussie Outback has given us fair warning of what's to come.

Patches, Potholes, and Parks

We joined the Landsborough Highway, a long, worn stretch of asphalt, three hours ago. As we cruise northwest, we form a new plan - we'll aim to reach the Central West Queensland town of Winton where we can get a new tyre for Lisa. We only hope the three heavy patches will hold until then. On the north of town, we set up camp at the Matilda Country Tourist Park. Across the road, Steve, the local tyre guy, pulls out a very used, but rideable Conti TKC 80. Lisa's grin is a sure sign of her approval, and Steve jokes about my repair as he mounts the new rubber to the rim.

"Good on ya, 'Young Fella,'" he belts out.

For two days, we've rubbed shoulders with Winton's locals. Sitting at the rustic wooden bar in the Men's Room (yep, men only, but they've made an exception for Lisa) at the Tatt (Tattersalls Hotel), we enjoy easy conversation with the regulars. Bill and Murray, two weather-beaten cattlemen, nightly sip on cold beer after a 12-hour shift of sun-baked ranching. We learn that Winton has a rich history as the birthplace of both the folklore tune *Waltzing Matilda*, and QANTAS, the world's second oldest airline.

By 6:00am, we're loading the bikes in a swarm of black flies. Back on the dry, flat Kennedy Development Rd, our day is long and hot. Roadkill is a sad fact of Outback life, but the carnage is shocking. We've also been warned about the road trains, the trucks that pull up to five trailers behind them. Someone should have warned the



roos. East of Middleton, we slow and carefully skirt the carcasses of 12 kangaroos killed "domino style" when a road train tore through the group.

Slowing, we peel off the tar, and negotiate a steep incline to the top of Cawnpore Lookout where we set up camp near a tin-roofed sun shelter. Our rocky vista glows orange as the sun sets, and we prepare our evening meal. Tomorrow, the real dirt begins.

Unwelcome Neighbors

At sunrise in the small hamlet of Boulia, we fill our fuel tanks to the brim - the jolt of handing over \$205 for fuel wakes us both up. The fuel here in Australia has been some of the most expensive we found in the world, and the remoteness of the Outback pushes that cost up even further. With our gas tanks full, we need to take care of our other fluid necessity, water, and pack a whopping 51L. We're going to feel that extra weight.

We pass the metal sign for Fence Creek, and 7.2km outside Boulia we stop by the large faded



Above left Crash damage to Lisa's GS - it took a battering. **Above centre** Outback wildlife at its prettiest. **Above** Camping is a fact of life in the Outback - no Hilton here! **Below** The Middleton Hotel is one of the most isolated in Qld.

wooden sign that reads "Welcome to the Donohue Highway." The motorcycles squirm in the soft, plowed sand track that is the Donohue. Pulling over, we deflate the tyres and rush to get moving again before we roast. My bike's thermometer reads 123 degrees. We're keeping a good speed in fourth and fifth gear but dehydrating fast, and we're struggling to ride and drink simultaneously. "I'm done," I yell to Lisa. Amid a shrub-strewn landscape, a small copse of trees to my right will





Left Lisa and Simon chase the sun with a few grey nomad mates in the Outback.
Above Rainbow Valley is located in Hugh, a few hours south of Alice Springs.

provide some shade and a good camp spot for the night. Within 20 minutes, we've unloaded and set up camp. Lisa's cutting vegetables for dinner, and we place collected rocks in a circle to retain the small fire we cook on. We've been rehydrating since we stopped and are feeling more alert. Suddenly, I blurt out an obscenity as I stare beyond Lisa to the 10-foot snake slithering its way through the grass toward us. A few pokes with a stick chase it away. Back at our campfire, we are both now keeping our eyes peeled for other unwanted visitors.

The Plenty

Refreshed from a great night's sleep, a full breakfast, and a pot of strong coffee, we are back on the Donohue and instantly on the 'pegs to deal with long washes of very deep sand. It's two hours before we cross the border from Queensland into

the Northern Territory and start our leg on one of Australia's most notorious routes, the Plenty Highway. The guidebooks list the Plenty as 4x4 only. We've learned not to become complacent; the track tugs on our concentration as it transitions from rock and bulldust to formed earth. We've only passed two vehicles in the last three days, but we're forced to swerve into the verge to avoid a truck now steaming toward us. We barrel into the dense cloud created by our recent road-hogging visitor. With zero visibility, we hope that there is nothing in our path. Twenty seconds later, we emerge safely.

This place is mind-boggling. The Northern Territory is a staggering 838,310 square kilometres but it is still only the third largest territory in Australia. The NT is, however, home to some of the most iconic locations in Australia: Alice Springs, Ayers Rock or Uluru, and the Olgas to name but a few.

The first sign for fuel since we left Boulia (450km ago) has us detouring right. We hand over \$170, and we're not even empty. This route is as much a test of mental fortitude as it is a test of riding skill. By late afternoon, we've been motoring eight hours on a wide-cut corrugated and sandy track through a relatively featureless landscape.

Exhausted, we pull over near the dry Arthur Creek bed to camp, eat, sleep, and dream of green pastures.

It's been two days of the same since Arthur Creek. The tar began abruptly 10 minutes ago, and we are now cruising into the geographical middle of Australia, better known as the Red Center. On the Stuart Highway north of Alice Springs, we pit-stop for a quick photo at the Tropic of Capricorn.

Straddling the Todd River and cozying up to the MacDonnell ranges, Alice Springs has passed into folklore legend. This region has been home to Aboriginal communities for thousands of years and home to the Arrernte people long before European explorers founded a settlement here in 1871. At 25,186 today, the population makes up 12 percent of NT's entirety!

Rainbow Valley

Three days of Alice's malls, aboriginal galleries, and air-conditioned café's were a nice interlude but not what we're here for. Restocked, we are again on the move. South of Alice, we pull over and gulp water; my bike's temp gauge reads 128 degrees. This has been the longest time that Alice has ever



Above You can imagine Simon and Lisa's thoughts when this guy rocked up to camp. **Right** Outback night skies – masterful.

gone without rainfall, not a drop for 157 days. Mark, the owner of the Stuart Caravan & Cabin Tourist Park, where we'd stayed in Alice, suggests we camp at Rainbow Valley. Some 74km south we turn off the Stuart Highway, and within seconds we're battling to negotiate the very deep sand of this narrow track down to the valley. As we reach a clearing at the valley entrance, our mouths drop. Rising from the cracked and salt-encrusted clay-pan, the multi-colored sandstone bluffs rise like ancient battlements in shades of ochre, orange, and purple. We set up camp as dark low clouds eerily form. The natural colour-and-light show we're privy to for the next two hours is glorious. To our delight, a gentle shower creates a rainbow over the valley; and in the distance, bolts of lightning crackle through the air.

We skirt the southerly flanks of the West MacDonnell National Park before we pick the smaller Outback tracks south and again join the Stuart Highway. Orange, Maloney, and Five Mile Creek are in our rearview mirrors. With more than 2000km to Perth, we have to pick up speed. We scoff a couple of burgers and cold cokes at the Mount Ebenezer Roadhouse before throwing our tired bodies back on the bikes. Flying through 225km, we're cruising easily mid afternoon. Our fatigue is replaced with a childlike excitement. In the distance, the formidable hulking shape of Australia's best-known landmark begins to dominate the horizon.



Ayers Rock, or Uluru, rises 347m into the sky from the flat desert surface. It also pushes down approximately 3km below the surface. We spend two days walking and exploring this colossal UNESCO World Heritage site. For the past 10,000 years, Aborigines have considered themselves protectors of this ancient, sacred, coarse orange sandstone monolith. On the eastern corner of Uluru, we rest in the shade of trees close by and photograph the ancient aboriginal hand paintings that adorn the rock. At 3.5km long and 1.9km wide, Uluru emits an otherworldly charm. We fall easily under the spell of serenity and timelessness here.

Pushing on toward Perth, we spend an afternoon on the new asphalt that snakes among the Kata Tjuta (the indigenous name for The Olgas). The domes, a set of 36 gigantic formations, are believed to have originated from a similar time as

Uluru. Cruising among these incredible and ancient orange rocks, we feel but tiny specks passing through time.

A Blanket of Stars

We have pushed hard through four days of long, sandy washboard roads, and it is our last night in the Outback. Camping near the Malcolm Dam Nature Reserve, we prepare our meal as a family of pelicans breeze in and set about their evening chores. A cool breeze gives us a few hours of respite from the punishing arid heat of the last few weeks. As daylight disappears, we marvel silently at one of the most spectacular night skies either of us has ever seen – the Outback's swan song. We listened for the real Australia; now and then we heard the land whisper. We'll see you again, Outback. Tomorrow we'll be in Perth.



The standard tourist shot! Bet the rock hasn't seen travellers like these two before!