

The Great AUSTRALIAN

by Stuart Ball

I've often pondered the age-old question, "What's really out there?" Then that day came... you know the one... where you question your own value and purpose in the world... when the pain of change is less than the pain of staying the same. For me it was like a light switch that I couldn't resist. So, I set out to escape this suburban chaos....





RIDE

The *KTM 990* was a solid choice for the job, and one I would set up for the trip of a lifetime. When the time came to tell family and friends about this solo charity ride across Australia, from east to west and back, there was a certain amount of concern for my well being. I wanted this ride to be more than just about me, so I approached *Children's Health Foundation* in Brisbane, Australia, who helped to build a detailed website that allowed anyone in the world to donate to the cause.

Next, the October 1st date was set to watch the sunrise at Cape Byron, the easternmost point of Australia, and then ride west through the Simpson and Gibson deserts to finally reach Steep Point, the westernmost point of Australia, to watch that sunset.

The planned route was carefully scripted to optimize fuel stops, roadhouses, camping, and phone coverage areas. I was now on my own and eager to get off the tarmac and onto the red dust. But, make no mistake, the *Australian Outback* is harsh, although the vast remote areas between towns and cattle stations are awe-inspiring. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to ride through.

Towns such as Windorah, Birdsville, Alice Springs and Laverton are true oases after riding hundreds of kilometers in the desert. What amazed me was the abundance

of wildlife close to any water sources: wedge-tailed eagles, pelicans, red kangaroos, emus, 80 kg hogs, cattle, deadly snakes and huge monitor lizards. It was a difficult enough job to keep the bike upright through the thick bull dust without having to dodge whatever decided to run across my path. Intense concentration was required. A broken limb or damaged bike out there could have been deadly. My only lifeline was a satellite phone that I carried in the backpack, which I would have needed to be conscious to use, of course.

The *Outback* forces you to think *survival*, there's no other way. October is the end of the dry season, where temperatures reach 35°C, and there is very little shade for shelter. In the wet season, between November and March, these areas are closed; dried-out creek beds become raging rivers impassable even with 4x4 vehicles. The animal carcasses that litter the tracks make one think about life and what's really important.

Water fuel and food are big issues out here. So is fuel. Low octane Opal fuel* is sold in remote outstations where it's wise to filter it in case of sediment.

Crossing vast and remote areas is a mind game; the heat is relentless and at times it can be difficult to motivate yourself. You have to push doubt and fear from your mind, fix your sight on a distant point and move on. Coming to the Queensland-Northern Territory border, the track was littered with shredded tires and dead animals, and taking extreme care made it slow progress to Alice Springs.

Riding past Uluru (Ayers Rock) marked the halfway point, and the sight was motivating. The more territory that I covered, the more confident I became. I was consumed by it all, and felt a certain “remote” sensation of becoming super-alert as the adrenaline flowed. My vision became intensely focused as I took in the awesome desert ranges where the colors were simply amazing: Beautiful white ghost gum trees, an orange desert floor, and a brilliant blue open sky... scenery I'll never forget!!

After two days of riding there was a sigh of pure relief when I pulled into the mining town of Laverton. The stars out there were breathtaking, like pinholes in the curtain of night. Totally exhausted, I slept the night in the tent, still wearing my leathers and using my jacket on the hard surface. Even the thought of blowing the air mattress up was just too much.

On Day 13, I made an early start towards Mt. Magnet. I thought I'd already managed near misses of every known animal in Australia—but just then, out of the bushes, sprang a huge emu on a mission of shock and awe. I'm not afraid to say this, but I almost laid an egg! And, if it weren't for ABS and lightning reflexes I'd be dead. I must have missed this thing within an inch of its feathered life.

My focus now was purely on the last push to Steep Point. But, fate had other plans. That's the beauty of adventure riding, anything can and probably will happen. Solo adventures really are about pushing one's own abilities and feeding from an inner strength. And, when given a tough situation, it's also about remaining calm and optimistic—allowing the opportunities to present themselves in order to decide on the right action or direction to take.



Times like this are rich with experiences to learn and grow from—to push the boundaries and believe in oneself.

I pulled into Geraldton at midnight, tired and looking for somewhere to pitch a tent. Today's 1,040 km had taken its toll. So when I saw a sign north of the city for Coronation Beach I decided to camp close enough to hear the waves of the Indian Ocean. The next morning no time was wasted as I eagerly set off—Steep Point was so close I could taste it!

Then, it happened, just 12 clicks north of the Billabong Roadhouse. That sickening, gut-wrenching feeling you get when there is something seriously wrong with the bike.

There I was... coasting to a halt in the hottest part of the day in the most fly-infested part of Australia. Luck had it that this was also a busy main road between Geraldton and Canarvan. So, after much consideration, tinkering and swearing, I pointed her to the south and began pushing the *KTM* in the hot sun. Within five kilometers a big white truck pulled up and offered to give me a lift back towards Perth. I couldn't believe my luck and thanked the driver, and the heavens, too. There I was, sweating like a bush pig, riding shotgun with the *KTM* strapped up in the back—heading the same way I'd come. Life can be extraordinary at times, and I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't still dreaming on Coronation Beach.

To put it into perspective, the detour was about the entire length of the United Kingdom. The driver was beginning to yawn, and his eyes were bloodshot, so I offered to take the



wheel, and he gladly accepted. Off we went, heading south 400 km to Perth. That's the beauty of Australian people, their trust and help is truly immeasurable, and I owed a lot to this guy.

My time in Perth was short, as *KTM Australia* and *KTM Wanneroo* responded quickly to the problem and fixed the bike under warranty. Thinking about it all now, I reckon it was a highlight of the adventure. I've met some great people along the road. "It's not what happens to you, it's how you react to it," I was once told. That statement blew me away and I found that afterwards I dealt with life's little dramas more easily.

Feeling relieved and refreshed, I rode north with vengeance—determined to finish this adventure for those who had so generously donated and believed in me.

The last stretch to Steep Point, a remote area of the peninsula covered in sand dunes, was undoubtedly the most difficult of the whole journey. If there was a time for real doubt that I could complete this journey it was there. I asked myself a lot of questions along that stretch, riding fully loaded with worn knobbies, and pushing things to the limit. But, with perseverance and careful map reading, the *990 Adventure* finally carried me over the last dune to see the end of Australia. I stopped on the brow and switched off the overheated engine—and took in this last sight. The satisfaction I felt at that moment was incredible and like nothing else I'd ever experienced. It's impossible to put into words. I can only encourage others who are considering an adventure like this to just do it. It'll change your life forever.

The most outstanding part of the entire journey was the people of Australia; they're the salt of the earth. Everyone was so positive and helpful. For years I felt that city life was draining my soul, that I was becoming an automated mortgage slave, and that others around me were losing sight of what this country is really about. Thankfully, my doubts have been vanquished, and I'm proud to say that the true blue Aussie spirit is strong and very much alive!

I believe that our freedom is priceless and invite other riders to come and join me on the next run, or a section of it, from east to west. There's no cost or fee to ride, this is a nonprofit cause and all donations raised go to *The Children's Health Foundation* (formally *The Royal Children's Foundation*). **ADV**

For more information outlining requirements, dates and maps, please go to Facebook page, "The Great Australian Ride."

*Opal fuel: A variety of low-aromatic 91 RON gasoline developed in 2005 by *BP Australia* to combat the rising use of petrol as an inhalant in remote indigenous Australian communities.

THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN RIDE 2012

The Great Australian Ride started as a chance dream for me, and a desire to explore the rich colors and challenging landscape of the *Outback*. But, as soon as I returned from my solo adventure and had a chance to let the dust settle, I knew I had to make this mean more than just a transformation for myself. Thanks to the power of the internet and the underlying faith in humanity, *The Great Australian Ride* grew into *Team GAR* as distinguished volunteers helped me build this idea into an annual charity event to raise money for *SIDS and Kids* (SIDSandKids.org).

SIDS and Kids works to find answers for parents by funding and supporting vital research into stillbirth, *SIDS* (sudden infant death), and safe sleeping practices. This year we found 12 riders just as crazy as me to travel the grueling 7,000 km journey from the most easterly point of Byron Bay to the most westerly point of Steep Point, with a medic in a well-equipped support vehicle that came all the way up from Melbourne. \$25,000 was raised this year. Thanks to all who contributed.

GreatAustralianRide.com.au

Or follow us on our Facebook page, "The Great Australian Ride."

