

Letters Home

Across Australia Bike Trip 2008

By Jane Laws

www.nodrama.com.au

Esperance to Nullarbor

Our ride east really began when we pulled out of the Esperance Motor Hotel at 7am on Sunday 30th December. We thought we had found the two day break in the heat wave to make it to Nullarbor Road House. Wrong! 10kms after turning right at Norseman it was over 35deg. By noon we were eating our packed lunch in the shade at Balladonia. It was now 40deg. We took refuge in the friendly cafe for a while. It was still only 40deg when we were ready to leave so we were back on the road to Caiguna, with the promise of a good feed, as when we passed this way early in 2007 it was full of road trains. We were glad to take a motel room, peel off our draggin jeans, and sink a couple of coldies. It was still 43deg at 6pm. It certainly doesn't start cooling down until the sun dips below the horizon.



New Years Eve - breakfast at Madura Pass

Up and away at 6am on New Years Eve, determined to catch an hour on the sun. We rode in pleasant conditions all the way to Madura where the temperature was only 29deg at 8:30am. Then it got hot again. Within half an hour of leaving Madura we were riding in unpleasant conditions. It was with some relief when we were holed up in the air conditioned cafe at Border Village, eating lunch and talking to a fellow biker, who was also hiding from the heat, and the police! He was travelling in company with a German tourist on another bike. They got separated going in and out of the lookouts over the Great Aussie Bight and his mate had returned to Nullarbor Road House and called the cops thinking he was lost for dead. Now there is the reason for corner markers!



Last sunset of 2007

I was worried about leaving Border Village - Nullarbor two hours away and too far without stopping for water. Then while I was idly gazing out of the window I noticed the windmill that had been facing NE, stop, and swing to the SW. A change had come through. We rushed outside and sure enough the temperature had dropped at least 5deg. From our experience, these weather changes tend to be moving at 40 - 60kms per hour. So we thought, if we stayed another hour, we wouldn't catch up with the "front" for a good part of the way to Nullarbor. Wrong! 40kms down the road we were breathing hot air into our lungs again. 80kms from Border Village Steve

found a lay-by with a little shelter, just big enough for our bikes. We drank another gallon, and with my T-shirt dripping wet once more, we saddled up and were back on the road - Nullarbor still one hour away. I had ditched my draggin jeans at Border Village in favour of a pair of light cotton pants. It is all a calculated risk. There seemed much more chance of expiring from heat exhaustion than having a motorcycle accident.

It took every ounce of concentration to keep the bikes on the road. Just when we thought it couldn't get any hotter, the guy standing next to the thermostat cranked it up a couple more notches. WOW. The only way out is to keep going. No point stopping. No trees - not even one! Heaven help anyone who breaks down when the weather is like this. One by one the kilometres ticked by. When we pulled into Nullarbor Road House I nearly hopped over the counter and kissed the guy taking vast amounts of money for fuel and lodgings. We were very grateful to arrive. It was 5pm, the temperature 47deg. Out on the road it was at least 50.

There was something magic about watching the sunset on the last day in 2007 at Nullarbor. One of the most beautiful sunsets we have ever seen. The sky so red and the plain stretching as far as the eye could see. All was forgiven, but not forgotten. We had survived the ride.

Nullarbor to Bright

Up and away well before sunrise on the 1st January and we were in Ceduna by mid morning - the extreme heat behind us and the Eyre Peninsular (EP) waiting for us to enjoy. We did a one-nighter at Streaky Bay, in a motel, because the birds were pooping all over the tents in the caravan park. Unfortunately my speedo cable had come loose just after leaving Ceduna. With my ear plugs ensuring that I could "hear no evil", I didn't realise the cable was dragging on the ground. By the time we reached Streaky Bay the road had done a great job grinding down the cable until there was nothing left. The Yamaha spares department were closed until 7th January - ouch! That's what you get for travelling during the Christmas New Year break. Still there are worse places you can be holed up that EP. The scenery is splendid and if you enjoy good and cheap seafood and can cope with the occasional south easterly gale then you will be smiling all the while you are waiting for your spare parts to arrive!



Salty ferry crossing!

After much to-do, the new cable arrived and was fitted on Friday 11th January. On the 12th, we rode to Cowell but were not in time for the last ferry to Wallaroo and had to endure yet more seafood at the local pub - a 500g chunk of snapper covered in prawns this time. Such is life!

The gravel road to Lucky Bay was just tolerable on our bikes, the surface well churned up on the bends and if you've got milk in the eski, expect sour cream by the time you've covered the 12kms to Lucky Bay. Just one word of advice, go straight to the ferry terminal, don't be tempted to check out the beach shacks, because you could find yourself bogged and some large dogs coming to see what all the fuss is about!

Unfortunately they had overbooked the ferry and to create a little more room, they stuck our bikes in the stern, Steve's on the port side and mine on the starboard. They were safely tied down, but copped a little salt spray on the crossing. When we returned to the bikes to disembark I said to the guy "look at all this salt on my bike" to which he replied "that's the thing about salt water, it does tend to be salty!" Would we catch the ferry again? No.

As soon as we were off the ferry we just started riding - the Barossa still some two hours away. We picked Tanunda as our home base and how sweet it is to ride those roads, eat great food and drink great wine.

Timing is everything and we couldn't resist the temptation to take in a couple of stages of the Tour Down Under which was due to start on Sunday 20th January. But alas, if harbours rot good boats, then caravan parks rot good bikes and it sure felt time to do some serious miles. So we packed up camp and just started riding. Taking all the back roads, we headed south through the Coorong, then east. Just one great road after another, through the Grampians and on and on and on, stopping along the way for a cup of tea or a snack and resting our heads in a Budget Motel each night. On Saturday 25th, we stopped in some shade at the little town of Boonie Doon (no kidding), we made tea and were soon sharing our tree with a lone rider on a naked Ducatti. We chatted about roads near and far and Steve even popped the question "what size is yours?" I nearly said "now that's a leading question in front of a lady," instead I wandered off, with a smile on my face, looking for somewhere to deposit the spent tea bags!

Around lunch time, we stopped for fuel at a very ordinary looking garage in the small town of Whitfield. However inside was a delightful bakery and coffee shop, serving the most delicious baguettes and pies and cakes imaginable. We were asked to do the honour of being the first customer to road test the new beef and red wine pie. Of course we accepted and gave it the thumbs up. Real chunks of organic beef with a gravy like my mum makes. We couldn't resist a mug of great coffee and a cream brulee tart with fresh blackberries. We nearly set up camp right then and there, but less is more and we were soon back on the road with all the energy and power that pies and cakes can provide. Steve says he is going to get a T Shirt which reads "Powered by Pies." Next time you are passing through Whitfield, stop for a while at the Fuel Micro Bakery - you won't be disappointed.



High country riding

After riding for three days, we have set up camp here in Bright, where we hope to stay out of trouble and do some of the roads in the Alpine region. So that's about it from us. Soon it will be happy hour and we will be allowed a few beers and hot cashews, heated naturally while the afternoon sun beats down on our little tent. It all tastes pretty good and right now there is no place we would rather be.

Bright to Tathra

If Bright got its name because of the Bright and cheerful place that it is then it is well deserved. Warm balmy days and cool nights - get rid of the mossies and it would be perfect! We arrived at the start of the Australia Day long weekend. We left the bikes alone until the weekend was over as the population in Bright swells from 3,000 to 30,000 during holiday time and the roads are chaotic. Then we settled in to ride those mountain roads, Mt Buffalo, Falls Creek, Mt Hotham, even the valley run to Yackandanda, Beechworth and home again to Bright was fun too. There seems nothing more enjoyable than riding into the main street of an historic town, which we have never seen before and may never see again, parking up and walking up and down the main street, first one side and then the other - if only those walls could speak.

Quite often, while we are having breakfast, we will muse over the days ride, with *The Bears* book in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. Steve commented "apparently we need to watch out for cow pats on the Red Bank Road," to which I replied, without thinking, "s***, yes." We couldn't stay in Bright for ever and with our riding destinations complete we packed up our tent once more and headed east. A little rain on the hills around us but we stayed dry as we crossed the Snowies, through Thredbo to our next camp at Jindabyne. The road through the Snowies didn't seem quite as tight as some of The Alpine roads in Victoria and on the cruisers we had great fun.

And then it started to rain. Just a thunderstorm at first, then just steady consistent rain. Never stopping long enough to do the most menial of tasks - even a trip to the toilet required the rain jackets. 24 hours later and the tap still hadn't been turned off. We questioned many a local about the weather and they just said "we've had a lot of rain this year." When I posed the question at the information centre "when do you think we will get a suitable day to climb Mt Kosiosko?" the lady just smiled and said "next week" - it was only Monday! No riding out of Jindabyne for us - next time around.



Lunch break at Batemans Bay.

So we packed up a very wet tent on Tuesday 5th February, even though the weather bureau reported a low pressure system off the central NSW coast which could dump anything between 50 - 200mm, and rode out of town - destination Canberra. We stayed dry all the way to the McDonalds car park at Cooma and as soon as the horse had been fed and watered on a bacon and egg McMuffin meal deal, we were back on the road again - grey skies all around. And then the rain came - no wind, just drenching rain and a little hail for good measure. But we rode on. The road between Cooma and Canberra isn't that dangerous and quite honestly it didn't seem that bad. We took it easy, made it safely and got very, very wet. My boots literally filled with water and the rain found its way into places it had never found its way into before. I was so wet when we arrived in Canberra that I created a pool of water in the reception at the caravan park!

Not to worry, the air conditioner in our little cabin provided a great airing cupboard for jackets, bags, boots and tent and an afternoon in the laundromat solved the wet clothes problem. By the time we had a good nights sleep and a new day had begun we were ready to enjoy the Capital.

Parliament House and The War Memorial were the only things we could find the concentration for. Many people had said to us that The War Memorial is a must see and even with eager anticipation we weren't disappointed. But two days was enough of city life for us. We are now at the seaside town of Tathra. Some good roads to ride in this neck of the woods so we could be here a while!

Tathra to Phillip Island

The last thing we did when we set up camp in Tathra was to hammer our little sign into the ground which reads "a couple of mad dogs live here, enter at own risk." This has served us well, we get few people camping next door let alone coming to visit. This gives us the opportunity to practice our disgraceful habits in peace. When I say "this has served us well," I meant until we arrived in Tathra. On this occasion we had people camped close on either side and the bikes were being prodded and pointed at for the entire week we were there. Still it's nice to see there is such an interest in motorcycles and awareness is a good thing!

We took full advantage of two fine days to ride in the foot hills of the Snowies. The Mt Darragh Rd from Pambula to Bombala and then home again to Tathra via Imlay Rd was a great circuit run. Day two's loop saw us ascend Brown Mountain (with clean underpants), stop for tea in Bombala again and then home via Myrtle Mountain Road. Both runs about 250 - 300km.

And where to now? We could go back to Jindabyne and spend more time riding the Snowies, but we both agreed we would need an

outlook for fine weather cast in stone before we would head back in that direction, so we headed SW, and a little closer to home, to the small town of Bruthen, just in time for the blues festival weekend. A civilised bunch of punters enjoyed the overly loud music while our bikes were locked away in a very dusty shed without their covers!

With the blues fest behind us and the bikes cleaned up once more, we were riding some back roads again and heading for Yarram. It was a hot day and when we were selecting our camp site, we overlooked all the parameters which make a good site and went for 100% shade. A little thought to M for Mossies as they were out 24 hours a day and E for Elevation, because it started to rain and we were nearly afloat again, would have been well worth while.

We didn't let a little rain stop us from riding out to the Grand Ridge Brewery at Mirboo North via Port Albert and Port Welshpool and then home again on the C483 through the Tarra Bulga NP. That C483 is an amazing road, wouldn't call it a great bike road because it's only one lane wide for most of it, but the scenery was awesome - straight out of Jurassic Park.

The weather started to close in again - gales and rain forecast for 3 days, so on 22nd February we took the opportunity to escape from Yarram. We are now in Cowes on Phillip Island for the World Super Bikes race meet. It has been blowing a full gale for the last 48 hours but the tent is holding its own against the wind. Last night we found a great Chinese restaurant and while we listened to the nimble click - clack of the chop sticks and they smiled at the clumsy clonk of our fork and spoon, we knew for certain, that no sooner we are home, we will long for a night in our humble tent, with the two bikes parked outside - even if it's raining.



Inverloch, Victoria

Superbikes, F1 and home to Perth

The World Super Bikes race meet at Phillip Island is about as good as it gets. Such a unique environment, with the cars parked outside and the bikes allowed to roam around the track boundary, all day if you choose. It was so much fun we took both bikes to the track on all three days. The pit walk was excellent on Saturday, with some of the big names, eg Troy Bayliss and Max Biaggi available for a photo and autograph. Troy Bayliss getting the job done on Sunday capped off a thoroughly enjoyable weekend and we left the track thinking "when will we be able to get back here to do it all again!" The street party in Cowes on Saturday night was a tame affair. Gone are the days when some guy would climb a flag pole only to have someone on the ground trying to shoot him down with a rocket flare! The locals call that "the good old days."

And where to now? O' yes that's right, Healesville, to get the bikes serviced, new tyres on the Vulcan and ride Reefton and Black Spurs - maybe more than once! Be warned, contrary to some maps, Don Road, between Launching Place and Healesville is not all sealed. We made this little discovery with the trailer in tow the day we left Cowes. If there was a warning sign we didn't see it. I came out of a sharp left hander onto a narrow wooden paved bridge, to be greeted by a gravel road and Steve parked a few meters ahead. All I could come up with was "what the ****?" Did we turn back? Nope. We rode on, like you do and in four short kilometers we got as dirty and dusty as we have ever been.



Winners



Camp at Healesville.

With the Formula 1 our intention, from Healesville we went for a week of city life in a hotel in the middle of Melbournes St Kilda. Being F1 fans from the early 80's, a couple of grandstand tickets on pit straight and a hotel, walking distance to the track, is quite a treat. It was an entertaining week despite the relentless heat and our seats in full sun all day long. I took to wearing a wet T Shirt to stay cool. How anyone could sit there in Ferrari Red or McLaren Black God only knows. Fitzroy Street in St Kilda hummed all night long, our hotel windows double glazed to help keep out the noise. One waiter said "wait 'til Friday night, you'll even see purple poodles." We never did, in fact we didn't see a purple pooch at all. This left us wondering if purple poodle was code name for something far more erotic and interesting!



Bikes at Mount Baw Baw Alpine Resort

Checking out of our hotel and navigating out of Melbourne tested our tolerance to heat once more. Already 32° by 9am and several trips up and down a couple of flights of stairs required to load the bikes and trailer. Parked in a 10 minute zone didn't help. When we were finally ready to leave, I led the way, expecting to turn left at the 2nd set of traffic lights. But the sign said St Kilda Rd. I was expecting Kings Way or "To West Gate Bridge," so I rode on. Realising the error of our ways, we took the next left. At 9:30am on a weekday Melbourne is unforgiving if you get the navigation wrong. Somehow

we found our way back to Kings Way, our terms of phrase deteriorating with every wrong turn. "Get a GPS" I hear you say - but that would leave me nothing to write about! It was easy rolling after that, despite a half hour traffic jam just after crossing West Gate Bridge - pain is a relative thing! We were heading home now to Perth, the long way round, via The Great Ocean Road of course. It was Tuesday 18th March and Easter weekend only three days away. On long weekends, if you don't want to set up camp in sight of The Black Stump you have to make a booking, it's that simple. We picked The Grampians for our Easter sojourn, which left a two night stopover at Apollo Bay along the way.

The weather often trips us up when we have to keep to a time table and the ride from Apollo Bay to The Grampians was no exception. A cold front was forecast to arrive in Melbourne by Thursday afternoon. I must admit we didn't take too much notice of it as we were still recovering from 30+ temperatures during the Grand Prix. It looked a little hazy as we turned left at Lavers Hill, and then it came, the first of many squalls we were about to endure over the next couple of hours. My jacket seems to have lost all the water resistant properties it ever had and it wasn't long before we were wet, cold and feeling thoroughly miserable. Stopping for a hot chocolate or a coffee or soup and pies helped to strengthen our resolve. We were lucky it wasn't a really cold day. As we approached Halls Gap I noticed a noise coming from inside my helmet. "UUUrgh" it went! I knew I'd heard it somewhere before and then it came to me, it was the same noise that Lurch used to make on The Adams Family TV show all those years ago!



The drought is broken, Grampians.

We were wondering if we could help to break the drought in The Grampians too. Well actually we could and we did. We got a good drenching on Easter Sunday - 38mm. Could it happen again on Easter Monday? Yep. Like sitting ducks we waited for round two and in less than one hour another 50mm had fallen. At 6pm the tent was under water and we were using primitive implements to bail and dig drains around the tent - must remember to bring that little spade next time!

Come the 25th March, we couldn't wait to get out of the place. We were on the road by 9:30am and made it to McDonalds in Horsham for breakie, just before the 10:30 closing time. The weather was a little kinder for our ride to Tanunda in the Barossa.

We took a day off to dry out a little and then set off for home in a serious way. We rode by day and slept soundly in roadhouse motels by night. Calm, cool days made the Nullarbor crossing a delight this time around - this ride really is one of Australia's great road journeys. Four days after leaving Tanunda we were back home in Safety Bay.



Nearly home, but not many bends.

So here we are, home again after three months cruising around in this Great Country, mile after mile without a care in the world. I have given thanks many times for being granted "safe passage" and we hope it isn't too long before we are riding along a string of back roads again, looking for nothing more than the enjoyment of a good ride.

Safe riding everyone,

Steve and Jane