

The bike should have arrived the previous day and be waiting for us in a warehouse in the cargo area of the airport. We went into our now familiar routine of leaving our luggage and catching a taxi to take us there via a petrol station to get oil and a few litres of petrol. Warehouse fees paid we collected a customs officer from a nearby office and partially opened the crate containing the bike so she could verify it was what the carnet said it was. Had we cleaned the bike and especially the wheels? Yes, of course we had so no need to fumigate it. We were then left to get on with uncrating and setting up the bike.

Eventually everything was ready and after a well earned rest in a beautifully air conditioned McDonalds back at the airport we fitted the luggage on to the bike and headed off to Sydney. We rode right through the centre of the city over the harbour bridge with a view of the Opera House to our right. Fantastic! Here we were with our bike from the UK riding across Sydney Harbour Bridge looking at Sydney Opera House, two of the strongest visual images of not just Sydney but Australia which we had seen on tv or in photos dozens of times throughout our lives. Now we were part of that world famous image! That moment was stunning.

We had to spend a little time doing things on the bike. I checked the valve clearances - no adjustment was necessary which considering the purely touring riding we had been doing wasn't surprising. The engine had hardly been worked hard. A new back tyre was required and the carburettors needed balancing which was all sorted for a very reasonable sum. Australia is a good place to buy tyres with a wide choice at very low prices in comparison with the UK.

It wasn't all work in Sydney though. We did lots of touristy things like going on a harbour cruise, seeing the Opera House, the Botanical Gardens, The Rocks area and going for a fish and chip supper at Bondai Beach. Sydney has got to be our favourite City anywhere. It has a beautiful centre set around a magnificent harbour with little pollution and a comfortable to hot climate. There are first class beaches all along the city's long coastline and public transport isn't too bad. One of the downsides is that it has become such a popular place to live that prices for accommodation in the city centre have rocketed and the city is sprawling out in every direction where there is dry land. Of course, that didn't effect us at all and after being taken to some of the northern beaches I can understand why the beach lifestyle is so popular there.

There is one very important improvement which could be made to the centre of Sydney though. It badly needs more designated motorcycle parking places. Those that are provided are almost always full to overflowing and if you park anywhere else, including in a car parking space, you are very likely to be fined.

It was the wet season up north and we wanted to go to Melbourne, Uluru, Perth, Darwin and everywhere in between. We also had around 8-10 weeks, which we knew wasn't enough. We got lots of detailed information on where to go between Sydney and Melbourne and a few pointers for Melbourne to Adelaide so off we went following the coast south along the Princes Highway. We rode through the Royal National Park and got no further than about 120kms south of Sydney when we decided we'd found a good campsite by a beach to spend the night.

We continued southwards the next morning passing through small towns like Shellharbour and Ulladulla taking in lots of picturesque views out to sea and getting used to the Australian landscape. Out of town it was predominantly eucalyptus forest which seemed just wrong to my northern European eye. Forests are supposed to be full of oak, birch and plane trees and the trees themselves are supposed to shed their leaves not their

bark aren't they? The roads of course were very good.

Towns centres were full of new well kept two story crinkly steel clad buildings containing air conditioned shops and restaurants while the residential areas were made up of single story timber buildings with painted corrugated steel for roofs set in about half an acre of land. What made them typically Australian to me were the huge verandas all buildings seemed to have. There were very few people walking around the streets. Far too hot for that.

We camped at Merry Beach, half way between Ulladulla and Batemans Bay. This was a real find. A beautiful calm white sandy beach, perfect grass at the campsite and numerous kangeroos. It was the first time we'd seen any, other than on telly, and we were sharing our campsite with about 20 of them. They were wild animals but sufficiently used to people to eat out of your hand. I saw several campers feeding them bread. One of the 20 was clearly far larger than the rest and when you looked at him carefully you could see an incredibly muscular build. This must have been the top male kangaroo and you certainly wouldn't want to get wrong side of him.

At night you could hear the kangaroos eating the grass around the tent. Normally there would be a few of them in a line munching anything grass-like in their path. No need for lawn mowers here. A bit like having sheep to cut the grass but without quite so much poo as a by product. Only one ever crashed into the tent, knocking one of the poles out of place but not causing any damage. Fortunately none ran into the bike. The last morning there we saw the sun rise behind two young kangaroos boxing on the edge of the beach. Heads tilted right back, short arms flapping up and down and bellies nearly touching. I was surprised none of them decided to give the other a kick with one of their huge legs but that would probably have been lethal. I doubt their disagreement was that serious.

We passed through Batemans Bay, which seemed a pleasant place. The local bike shop was explored to see if they had a replacement visor for my by now ancient helmet. They only had tinted ones, which wouldn't do. I do sometimes ride at night and I have sunglasses for bright sunshine. The shop staff did take our old scratched visors and treat them to a coat of plastic polish for no charge. Very kind of them.

From there we had a very nice ride through hilly country for a few hours until we reached Canberra where we spent a couple of days, the first seeing the civic sights and the second lazing around the botanical gardens. We went up Telstra Tower perched on a hill at the edge of the city and when we saw the view it was hard to make out most of the city. There are so many trees around most of it seemed to disappear and we could just see the artificial lake at its centre, the parliament buildings, and the small commercial centre. Beyond, for as far as we could see, was eucalyptus forest. We went to the National Gallery to pick up some culture and amongst lots of interesting things there was a landscape painting of a view in the Blue Mountains which was about 150 years old. I recognised the location immediately. It was a view of a rock formation called The Three Sisters, and other than a safety fence by the cliff edge that view had not changed in any way since that painting was produced. I can't imagine many views in the UK remaining virtually unchanged in that length of time. Those of you who are interested modern buildings (yes, I am) would find the new Parliament building fascinating.

Canberra has a reputation for being extremely dull. Yup, we can understand that, but we liked it anyway. I reckon we've been boring old farts for a while now...

Canberra is close to the Snowy Mountains so we decided to cross them on the way down to the south coast. Unfortunately our plans were thwarted by some

very wet weather on the day we travelled. Experience has taught us that mountain ranges, even small ones, are not pleasant places when its tipping down so we stuck to the rolling cattle grazing land to the east which although wet had faster roads so we wouldn't have to be in the wet for quite as long. We had lunch at a milk bar/cafe in a village called Bombala. Of course, while Australia may be a big country, their towns are very small and anyone from Bombala would probably insist it is a town. We met a couple of bikers there who were part of a group of 30 from Canberra which had got split up. They were out for a weekend ride and two of their number had already crashed although the only damage was to the bikes. Despite that and the weather they were in good spirits describing their group's riding ability as variable - from bad all the way to awful.

Our route led us back to the Princes Highway where we stopped for a cup of tea at a petrol station. We met a Scot there who had emigrated to Australia. He'd been travelling in the same direction as us and noticed our UK number plate so decided to stop and have a chat. We also met another member of the group of 30 bikers. She was a new rider and had the same model bike as us. She'd slept in at the hotel that morning and the rest of the group decided to leave her behind so she wasn't all that happy. We didn't do much to improve her spirits by telling her it was raining much harder in the direction she was heading. Things were improving for us, however, and within 15 minutes we were riding in the dry again. We continued to a pleasant touristy place called Lakes Entrance and settled in at a very comfortable youth hostel.

Leaving Lakes Entrance in bright sunshine the next morning the road climbed to give a perfect view of the lagoons enclosed by sandbars which give the place its name. We could see a school of dolphins playing in one of the lagoons below. Another biker at the viewpoint asked us if we'd decided to emigrate or not yet. I'd never seriously considered it. Thinking about it later the answer would probably be no. It's a nice country but it's not home to us.

Our destination that day was Wilsons Promontory National Park and our route took us through some very empty and straight roads through the towns of Sale and Yarram. We camped at Normans Beach and spent the following day taking it very easy in the area. It is a very beautiful spot where you could easily loose yourself for a few days. The campsite is huge and does get a bit crowded but the amount of trees breaking it up creates the illusion that there are few others around. Watch out for the large red ants though. They have a fierce bite!

Continuing on the tourist trail, which is nearly impossible to be off in this part of the world, we took the back roads to Phillip Island via Inverloch. All these British place names! Phillip Island is one big tourist trap. There's Penguin Parade where tourists sit on the edge of a floodlit beach to watch very small penguins cross the beach to their nests just after sunset. A koala sanctuary. A famous race track used for the Australian round of the World Superbike Championship. And, of course - beaches. We didn't see the race track or go to the beach. It was nice to see alive Koalas. Previously we'd only ever seen them as roadkill.

On racing, that coming weekend the Formula 1 Grand Prix was to be held in Melbourne, our next stop on our Australian tour. This meant the chances of us finding sensible priced accommodation in the city was likely to be about the same as an ice cubes chances in hell. We decided to go in to the city to see for ourselves anyway and ended up travelling back out for about an hour to a distant suburb on the edge of a bay called Frankston where we had some luck. Frankston has a very nice beach.

An old school friend of my favourite Auntie lives in Melbourne so we decided

to look her up. Fryni immediately insisted on us staying with her and we spent a lovely 3 days being looked after like royalty. She is the first Greek we'd stayed with since we started our travels and being half Greek Cypriot we felt a bit like we'd returned home for a while. We got on very well and when we weren't exploring the centre of Melbourne, we were meeting her family and friends who continued with the hospitality. A really interesting visit was to an Alpaca farm owned by one of Fryni's daughters. Having eaten Alpaca steak several times in Peru I assumed the animals were kept for their meat but the thought of eating these animals in Australia is almost unheard of. Sold for meat they wouldn't earn even as much as a sheep but when sold for their fur they bring in 5 times as much. Breeding them to make sure you get just the right kind of fur and selling them as exotic pets is also good business.

On the biking front, I have never seen so many big bike dealers all in one place as I saw in Elizabeth Street in the centre of Melbourne. There must be over 10 within 500m. This must be one of the best places to buy a bike in Australia. Unfortunately none of them stocked a replacement visor for my helmet so I ordered one through a dealer in Frankston as we were going to pass through there on our way to the Great Ocean Road.

It was a little sad to leave Fryni after only 3 days but at least it had turned out sunny again. We picked up my visor in Frankston and continued south to catch a ferry from Portsea to Queenscliff which saved us riding through Melbourne. A short ride later we picked up the Great Ocean Road and continued, occasionally stopping to admire the view, as far as Lorne where we spent the night in a nice but pricy hostel. This is a really touristy area! The next day was more of the same and was pleasant enough but not so stunning as the name of the road had led me to expect. Perhaps I was getting too used to seeing clean unspoiled wilderness with whatever highlight we had stopped near being reached by a nicely kept path from a conveniently close car park. I'm not complaining - I like this sort of thing. Perhaps we were just travelling too quick as usual. Perhaps we'd seen too many sandstone cliffs dropping into the ocean in Chile and Peru, but I doubt that was it. This was prettier with CLEAN beaches. That night it was Warrnambool from where we continued to Adelaide via Gambier and Kingston.

The eucalyptus forest which had been an almost constant backdrop in rural areas since we arrived in Sydney thinned markedly after we crossed the state boundary to South Australia. The landscape was becoming a lot drier and flatter. The centre of Adelaide was lovely. Lots of well kept older buildings and greenery arranged on a grid pattern, a very old world looking university and a lovely botanical gardens dominate my memory of it although there are of course large commercial and shopping areas. It seems a very civilised and well to do place. It's hard to imagine that it, together with South Australia generally, has one of the highest levels of unemployment in Australia. Perhaps a big hope for the future of the State is the extension of the railway out of Adelaide from Alice Springs to Darwin whose financing the South Australian State Government agreed to underwrite. Much freight to and from Asia and perhaps even Europe could then use Darwin's port and Adelaide would conveniently find itself very close to the one junction of Australia's rail network which leads to Darwin. More cunning than a fox which has just graduated from the School of Cunning - if it works.

We spent two very lazy days in Adelaide staying at one of the many hostels there. We met 3 Germans at our hostel who had seen their first kangaroo about half a second before their hire car hit it at about 80kph. Not an ideal way to become acquainted with some of Australia's wildlife and this tale did remind us how vulnerable we were on a bike. At least they weren't hurt and we took some comfort from the fact their accident had happened around 8:30PM, a time when kangaroos are most active and one we never intended to

be riding at.

There are several important wine producing areas around Adelaide and we passed through the Clare Valley for its interesting roads and very tasty Chardoney on the way to Quorn. The landscape continued to get drier as we moved north and by now we were on the edge of the Flinders Ranges. We had to come back this way to ride to Perth after visiting our friend Barbara and her husband Andrew in Yulara so we decided to see the Flinders Ranges then. We'd need a few rest days before setting off on the long ride across the Nullarbor Plain.

Joining the Stuart Highway the landscape became much flatter and by now there were hardly any eucalyptus trees around having given way to smaller bushes and lots of spinifex grass. Road trains became a common sight, the longest being petrol tankers made up of 4 trailers. Immediately people in all vehicles started waving to us most of the time. This must have been the outback we'd heard so much about. It became overcast which was a welcome relief after some very hot days with temperatures around 40C. We weren't on the Nullarbor but got an idea of what it might be like with the road hardly changing direction and the almost imperceptibly changing landscape.

Our first rest stop was at the junction leading to Woomera, a town developed in the 1950s to test rockets. We decided to stop there on the way back as it was early in the day and we were keen to get to Coober Pedy. Not many people would say they are but we'd heard about this crazy place where people were addicted to opal mining and lived underground. That was about 250kms away and was also the next place we could buy petrol or anything for that matter. The last time we'd encountered that scenario was on the Pan American Highway in the much drier and desolate Atacama Desert.

The desert became drier around Coober Pedy which greeted us as a series of neat dirt mounds continuing for several kilometres. A large but motionless wind power generator then dominated our view for a while as we approached the turn off for the town. We saw a sign for an uninviting campsite and another underground campsite, neither of which attracted us. We'd gone off camping by now and wanted a comfy bed in one of those underground hotels we'd heard about and we found the perfect place at Radekas Down Under, Coober Pedy's underground hostel at the centre of town in an area which has plenty of buildings above ground.

To build an underground building or dugout you first tunnel into the side of a hill, put in a ventilation pipe, make sure that any rain can't run into your tunnel and then start digging in any direction you want but normally down creating several floors as you go. The idea was introduced by opal miners who had previously spent a lot of time digging trenches in Europe between 1914 and 1918. In the 1920s air conditioning was unheard of and the miners found that by building their homes underground they got themselves a place that maintained a near constant 25C regardless of the outside temperature. Groundwater is not an issue in Coober Pedy. Any opal found during construction is a bonus and as mining is not allowed within the town limits all dugouts are much bigger places than required by the owner with especially large rooms where a good vein of opal has been found. Modern dugouts like Radekas are nice quiet comfortable places where without a watch you have no sense of time. The walls are sprayed with a varnish to avoid any dust and the floors are tiles laid on concrete. The rock has a nice red/creamy white colour.

After we had settled in and heading out to look around we saw a man riding a Honda Africa Twin with a German number plate opposite the hostel so we went over to say hello. Gernot had just rode over 700kms from Kings Canyon so was pretty tired and looking forward to a shower so we agreed to meet up later and swap stories over dinner. He had come overland from Germany

through the Middle East and Asia finally getting to Australia via Indonesia. I'd heard it was really hard to get into Indonesia with your own vehicle but obviously times had changed. We were really worried about some bits of his route which we intended to cover ie Quetta to Taftan as there is no real overland alternative to the Pakistan - Iran corridor between India and Europe that we can take. He assured us that although a lot of it is rough we should be able to make it even on our bike. We'd just be really slow in some places. We'll see how it turns out when (if?) we get there.

We had an ok meal in one of the worst Greek restaurants I've ever been in - God knows what the taramasalata really was - and decided to go on a guided tour around Coober Pedy the next day. He just happened to have some K&N air filter cleaner solution and oil and offered to let me use some before we went off on the tour. The air filter hadn't been cleaned since I installed it just before we left the UK and I was noticing an increase in fuel consumption. Maybe the bike was running a little rich due to a dirty filter or maybe I was just riding faster. Either way, it was good to clean the filter. While we were sorting out the air filter the next morning we met a Swiss biker, Andy, who had brought his BMW GS1100 from Switzerland to tour around Oz for 6 months.

The tour was good fun taking in a well to do dugout estate, a mining area (there was little difference between the two) and the local golf course where putting greens are leveled areas of tarmac and you carried your own bit of grass in the form of a piece of astroturf around with you. Other highlights were the underground Serbian Orthodox Church, the dingo fence designed to protect the sheep industry and surprise kangaroos at night, a spot of noodling for opal and a visit to Crocodile Harry. He is an ancient alcoholic sex maniac who fancies himself as an artist and made a name for himself in the '50s hunting crocs in the Top End and Queensland. Apparently he was the inspiration for Crocodile Dundee but I'm not so sure. His dugout was certainly interesting with strange sculptures made out of not only the rock but old cars and bicycles. Harry isn't too healthy these days and like most opal miners does not seem to have struck it rich.

We were now only a couple of days from seeing Barbara and Andrew in Yulara and we were really excited. The ride north from Coober Pedy the next day was pretty uneventful although there was a lot of desert eagles about feeding off the remains of the multitude of run over kangaroos. We guessed there were probably more than normal as the unusually lush desert was bound to support more wildlife. We spent the night at Kulgera, no more than a fuel stop, pub and motel which had some backpacker accommodation. Continuing up the Stuart Highway we took the Lassiter highway to Yulara at Eridunda stopping at Curtain Springs where we met some Brits traveling around Australia in the ubiquitous VW combi van. I'm amazed these things are kept running after all these years! Mind you, you can still buy new ones in Mexico...

The last hour before we got to Yulara was really good with us being treated to alternating views of Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) between rises in the dunes. I never managed to be able to see both of them at the same time. These rock features are massive as we were seeing Uluru from about 50kms and Kata Tjuta from at least 70kms. Earlier on after Curtain Springs we had been enjoying a great view of Mount Conner, an Uluru sized feature but not as pretty, for at least 10 minutes before the road changed direction.

Arriving in Yulara and seeing friends was absolutely amazing! The last time we had seen anyone from back home was when we caught up with friends and family in Pretoria and Johannesburg 5 months previously and we hadn't seen Barbara for over a year. We had all changed a fair bit in the meantime and

Barbara had got herself a husband, Andrew, who we had yet to meet. We hadn't felt this excited in a long time.

We spent the next few days doing the usual tourist thing but also joining in some of the local social life which most visitors of course don't get drawn into. Barbara gave us a good tour of Uluru and although we didn't climb it we did walk around the rock. Our preconceived image of it was the much photographed long view but there is a lot of interest close up. Two large waterholes, aboriginal rock paintings, a strange feature which looks like a human skull and another like a laughing face. Lots of aboriginal stories have been built up around the various features of the rock which is of course a sacred site. We were in two minds about climbing but in the end our minds were made up for us. The climb was closed due to the weather forecast being for temperatures over 36C on the days we might have climbed.

Barbara took us to Kings Canyon, or something like Watarrka in the local aboriginal language, for a long weekend. There are continuing pressures to call these sites by their aboriginal names and what with Barbara working for Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park... It was rather convenient that Andrew worked for the Ayers Rock Resort (no pressures to change names there) because whenever we went somewhere the Resort had a hotel with either Barbara or Andrew we could stay in it at staff rates. Posh hotel rooms for a change!! Unfortunately it rained most of the time we were at Kings Canyon and then continued to rain right through to the following weekend. We did manage to get a dry walk around Kings Canyon under skies that belonged in northern Europe but when the rain really settled in back at Yulara an executive decision was made to fly to Perth and leave the bike for a while. Other factors which went into this decision were it's a really long and boring ride to Perth from Yulara involving travelling back down the Stuart Highway and then crossing the Nullarbor Plain. Of course it would mean missing a number of interesting places like The Flinders Ranges but the real bonus was we could spend another week with Barbara and Andrew.

Uluru is completely different in heavy rain. Instead of the usual red it becomes almost black with thunderous waterfalls as the rain water falls off it. A really interesting sight but not one that convenient to photograph with all that water flying about. Andrew let us use his car which was really nice. Every now and then I really just don't want to ride the bike and this was one of those weeks. That week was also a good opportunity to start the process of communicating with various people and organisations in the UK so we could renew our health insurance, carnet, and international driving licenses. Dead useful having friends in out of the way places with access to fax machines you know.

It was strange flying to Perth rather than riding. By bike it would have taken us over a week by the time you add in a bit of sight seeing. The flight lasted about two and a half hours. Most of the country we flew over was desert, usually red but becoming lighter coloured as we flew west. The occasional mine and tracks crossing the desert were the only sign of human life in what may as well have been some strange barren planet. Eventually the landscape took on a beige pathwork pattern as we left the desert behind and flew over the wheat belt. Most of the crop had recently been harvested so the area looked almost as barren as the desert. Approaching Perth the colour green returned. Eucalyptus forest again!

We were met by 'Chendas cousin Bill. It was good to see him and his wife Pam again. We were being treated like Kings again! Loads of good food and drink, the use of a car or, wait for it, a motorcycle! If I'd had known that Bill and Pam rode I may well have decided to ride Perth after all. It was too late by then so we just enjoyed cruising around on Bills Yamaha Virago 750 on perfect roads in brilliant sunshine. I may not be into cruiser style bikes but this was a lot of fun. While we were in Perth we

took the opportunity to replace our bike boots ('Chendas falling to bits with age and abuse and mine severely chewed by a 45kg puppy called Buddy) at half the price we would pay in the UK. Isn't it amazing that European companies can ship gear made in Europe halfway around the world, then sell it at between a third to half price and still make a profit? All you European bikers reading this - go to Australia and buy everything you want that is at all biking related including tyres and you may save most of the price of your air fare AND get a great holiday. Incidentally, I hear you can get similar bargains in the USA but I never checked that out.

Perth and Fremantle are lovely if remote cities. Perth is particularly pretty being set on the Swan River and we had a fun afternoon with Bill and Pam cruising on the river in Bills boat. We were also treated to a whistle stop tour of the south west corner of Australia by Bill - not being one of the blissfully unemployed like us he only had a couple of days. We may have only scratched the surface of that part of the world but I have to say that corner of Australia has got to be one of the prettiest places anywhere and would make a perfect place for spending a leisurly month during the summer. The coastline has a huge selection of good beaches and quite a few wild rocky areas. The inlets and rivers around Albany are beautiful and I hear it gets even better around Esperance but we didn't have enough time to go there.

Returning to Yulara was a bit like returning home for us. We set off for Alice Springs the next day and spent a day seeing the one or two sights we hadn't already seen. Barbara and Andrew had taken us there one weekend so we were already very familiar with the place. Like Coober Pedy and all the other towns we would visit further north Alice has a sizable Aboriginal population, something noticeably missing from all the major southern cities we had visited. Mind you, in these places perhaps as much as a third of the aboriginals we saw were groups of 10 or more passing their days in the shade under trees in parks drinking alcohol. They often had arguments amongst themselves and when we walked past them their body odour was incredibly strong. These groups of people were highly noticeable and in Europe would be considered alcoholic tramps. It was only in some of the smaller outback towns where I remember seeing aboriginals who appeared wealthy in the western sense ie. driving smart cars, wearing new clothes and simply being comfortable in the world most white Australians live in. I was told that alcoholism is rife amongst many aboriginals and in an effort to deal with this many of their communities are dry. I suppose this leads to those with drink problems to gravitate to the larger towns like Alice where booze is more readily available.

I couldn't find a satisfactory reason to explain why aboriginals have such a big drink problem. Perhaps I just don't understand addiction. Having a different culture based on a huge extended family sharing resources freely was put to me as a partial explanation by some of the people I spoke to about this but that doesn't do it for me and the loss of land rights doesn't either, especially in the out back and top end where there are huge areas of land to roam across. I can understand not wanting to be part of the modern western world but those who turned to drink seem to be embracing it more than those living in dry communities. If the Indians of Chiapas State in Mexico have not been absorbed by the rest of Mexican society where almost everyone has some Indian blood more than 400 years after the Spanish conquest it is unlikely that aboriginal society will be integrated, or more accurately, subsumed, into modern Australia. This is an issue shared by many countries and something Australia seems to be acknowledging and learning to live with even if it isn't comfortable doing so. Most white Australians we spoke to consider Aboriginals to be wasting their lives sponging off the State. We only ever spoke to about 5 Aboriginals during our two and a half months in Australia and only one for any length of time so these comments are not the result of any extensive study, but just a

brief impression.

Continuing our progress up the Stuart Highway we met a couple of foreign bikers on the way to Tennent Creek. A German couple on a BMW GS1100 they'd bought in Australia for a long trip around the country and an American on a hired Harley who was doing a high speed lap of half the country in about 3 weeks! We attempted to ride with the Germans for a while but I'm not comfortable travelling over 110kph and they felt frustrated at anything less than 120. We had no chance of keeping up with the guy on the Harley who claimed to spend most of his time at 140kph but we did meet up with him at Tennant Creek, a small town built up on supplying a now declining mining industry. We went out to dinner together and settled into a restaurant where we were served by a Portuguese woman who had immigrated to Australia a couple of years previously. Few people want to live in the out back and to be honest, I don't blame them. I wondered how the Portuguese woman coped with life at Tennant Creek.

Next Stop, several hundred kilometres up the road, was Daly Waters. By now the climate and landscape had become noticeably tropical and we were seeing clouds ahead of us for the first time since leaving Yulara. It was hot and humid and the desert had given way to forest, a large part of which was still under water as the Wet had only just come to an end. Large termite mounds began to become a common feature alongside the road. A couple of weeks from then, we were told, temperatures would fall and the area would become a pleasant place for about 4 months before the heat returned. Welcome to the Top End.

Daly Waters is little more than a pub and petrol station but it is a very long established one and has gained a sort of cult status since its heyday as an airforce base in WWII. It therefore attracts a lot of tourists of the independent variety and is a much more interesting place for it. We met another couple of Germans travelling in a green 4WD van which we had passed several times on the way from Tennant Creek. Amazingly, they preferred to travel even more slowly than us. By the end of the evening everyone who was staying there had ended up in the pub and I'd found out the word chook is Aussie for chicken. For half the evening I thought chook 'n chips was an exotic delicacy of the top end like barra (barramundi - a tasty fish) 'n chips. Still, there was nothing odd about the cold Guinness on tap not to mention the huge range of Aussie beers. I am continually surprised that 'Chenda hasn't learned to like beer yet.

The Germans told us about Mataranka, a thermal pool not much further up the Stuart Highway, about 100kms before Katherine so that became our next stop. The place is a low key resort with restaurant, hotel, youth hostel and campground. We chose the youth hostel which looked like no one had cleaned the rooms other than put some fresh sheets on the beds since the start of the wet season. I've never seen a place with so many spiders and their cobwebs. By chance someone had left a vacuum cleaner in the hall so my Swiss genes took over and 45 minutes later we had a place I was happy to stay in. I really hate it when people just milk places for money and don't seem to do anything to look after them. Fortunately the thermal pool was really special. It flows to a nearby river and not far from where the thermal water emerges from the ground the channel it makes was widened and a proper pool side complete with steps and hand rails has been constructed. It was originally constructed during WWII when it was strictly for officers only. I don't blame them. I'd have kept it for myself too and besides, it isn't all that big.

The water in the pool is brilliantly clear and kept at around 30C constantly. Surrounding the pool is a swamp with lots of tall palms although a convenient boardwalk has been constructed between the resort and river passing by the pool so there's no need to walk in the mud.

The pool had only been usable for about a week due to flooding and the water was still about 1m higher than during the dry. About 20 people were enjoying the water when we showed up and not all were tourists. A couple of women and their kids were from nearby cattle stations and this was their local pool. I guess there are some compensations for living in such a remote area.

We spent several hours there moving between the clear warm waters of the pool to the cool fast flowing muddy waters of the river. The river was too fast flowing to go too far from the bank but we enjoyed hanging on to an overhanging tree and letting the cool water flow around us. We were told there were no crocodiles and not even any alligators in the river but we kept a nervous eye out for them anyway. To be honest, the water was so muddy it would have been nearly impossible to spot any. We were also told that once the high waters of the wet season subsided the river would flow clear and slow. It must be really something then.

Later that night we decided to go down to the pool again and found quite a party going. We joined it. A full moon was lighting up the pool perfectly. Staring up at the moon through the palms and watching the clouds drift by was idyllic. By about 1:00am the party had left and we were left alone at what felt to be a strangely silent pool under that beautiful sky. Life doesn't get any better than it did just then. We were in paradise!

It was only a short hop to Katherine where we found a hostel which had better rooms than those of most hotels we've stayed in. We were in a reasonably large town now. It had a cinema and we indulged. Not that going to the cinema is a reason to visit Katherine. It's the Katherine Gorge, a series of gorges formed by a river and connected by rapids, which pulls in the visitors and we spent a great day there travelling up through the first 3 gorges and going on a trek to a large pool fed by a tall waterfall. Another bit of paradise to us and even though we were with a large tour there was plenty of space to enjoy it. You can kayak up the gorge but it is unlikely you'd be able to get as far as the waterhole even if you knew where it was. It would just be too difficult to get through the rapids although the water may slow down enough in the Dry.

Darwin, our gateway to South East Asia, was by now within a days ride but it was a few days before the Easter weekend and Litchfield National Park was only 50kms off the Stuart Highway. It was an easy decision and we found ourselves a room at a house share run by a man from Yorkshire in a small town called Batchelor. It is really strange to find a man with a strong Yorkshire accent running a house share/butterfly farm/restaurant in the tropical surrounds of the Northern Territory's Top End but there he was running everything on his own with a bit of help from a Dutch traveller called Gus who worked for room and food. The house share side of the business had only just started and to be honest the place still needed a bit of work but we agreed on an acceptable price far below anything else we could have got. It was the Easter weekend after all and we were within a few hours drive of Darwin while the more famous Kakadu National Park was still largely under water.

Litchfield National Park has several lovely waterholes and waterfalls, lots of good walks and some pretty spectacular termite mounds if you turn you on. We spent four days indulging ourselves at good swimming spots and taking a few walks in the bush. Not too long mind you. This is a very hot and humid part of the world. It seemed most of Darwin was at some of the waterholes on Good Friday but things did calm down a bit after that. It was odd to see so many people in one place again. We had a great time but nothing was going to top Mataranka in our minds.

On the Monday we got ourselves to Darwin and settled in. We typically find it takes around two weeks from starting to make arrangements to freight the bike to collecting it at our destination. On top of that, we needed to have the Australian AA make the necessary alterations to our carnet now that the AA in the UK had agreed to extend its validity and do a few jobs on the bike.

It took us a while to get into a hostel. They all seemed fully booked or really unwilling to let us stay for more than a few days. It seems hostels make much of their money selling tours to guests so want a high turnover of people. We needed somewhere for up to two weeks and didn't want to pay hotel prices. After trying 6 hostels the people at Elkes Backpackers came up trumps and provided us with what we wanted in rather nice landscaped grounds complete with the use of a swimming pool. At Elkes we were told about a really strange tour, if that's the right word for it, to segregated Australia. It seems some of the small towns in northern Queensland still have pubs where white fellas get served in one bar and black fellas in another and no one says a thing. Now, if that's true that would be very weird. A kind of Apartheid existing in out back Australia? I wouldn't be surprised.

Perkins Shipping could ship the bike to Singapore for us but the next sailing was leaving in a week and we needed to get the bike to them within the next 3 days. Suddenly things were moving too quickly! Over the next few days we changed both the bikes tyres even though the rear wasn't worn out as I wasn't confident we'd be able to find a tyre the correct size in Bangkok, the most logical place to change it. The battery was now 6 years old and although not giving any trouble I didn't want to take the chance it would die in a country where it would be really difficult to find a replacement like India or Iran. It was duly replaced as were the rear break pads which by now were nearly worn down to the metal. I arranged to meet a customs officer at Perkins office on Thursday morning when the bike was officially stamped out of Australia and left in the hands of Perkins.

We arranged to get ourselves to Singapore that afternoon and then found a pub. The next morning we went to the AA of the Northern Territory where we expected our carnet to be extended. Sorry, the woman dealing with us said, the AANT isn't authorised to do the extension, they would have to send it to the Australian AA head office in Canberra. How long would that take bearing in mind we were flying to Singapore the following Thursday? Oh, no problem, it'll be back by Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest but then someone else at the AANT would be dealing with us as she was going on leave. Hmmm. That didn't sound good but we were in their hands. The most important thing was that we have the carnet before we left the country. That piece of paper is far more valuable to us than the bike.

We had a fun weekend doing assorted touristy things and getting to know Darwin a bit better. It may be the Territory's capital and the only city for well over a thousand kilometers but its centre is no larger than that of a medium size European town and it has a really sleepy provincial feel to it. Still, if I had to live in the Territory, that's where I'd choose - I guess I'll always be a townie at heart. It is located within easy reach of some beautiful country and is a pleasant place with some nice beaches. The very harmful box jelly fishes brought in shore by the monsoon had almost all gone so I took a chance and went for a swim. It was fun and I wasn't alone. Life in Darwin like the rest of the Top End doesn't really start until the beginning of May when the last of the rains have been gone for a couple of weeks. It then apparently only stays pleasant until the end of August when it starts to get really hot. It was well over 30C when we were there!

Monday brought problems. Even though the UKAA who issued the carnet and agreed to its extension had requested the Aussie AA do the paperwork on

their behalf, the Aussie AA said they wouldn't do it. Why not? Because the bike had already left the country and customs needed to stamp a specific part of the carnet as part of extending its validity. They would only do this if they could see the bike. To my mind it seemed completely unnecessary to involve customs at all but as they had stamped the carnet to clear the bike out of the country only a few days ago and the bike was now on a ship sailing to Singapore I felt this shouldn't be a problem. Ah - but it was because the AAA wouldn't do their bit of stamping until customs had stamped their box and there wasn't enough time to send the carnet back and forth between Darwin and Canberra a couple of times before we left the country. If only someone had told me customs needed to stamp the carnet separately to extend its validity I could have had them do it when they cleared the bike out of the country! It seems that extending the validity of a carnet is one piece of paperwork that doesn't happen very often and the officials involved were finding out how to do it for the first time now that I needed it done. I would have to try and extend the carnet in Singapore. Bugger! Well, at least they could send the carnet to me overnight and I'd have it on Tuesday. Nope. Tuesday's ANZAC day. Office closed. Wednesday? Sorry, it can't be sent until then 'cos its too late in the day to send it now. Should be with you by Thursday. But that's when we go to Singapore!! Well, it should be with you on Thursday morning but if you've already gone we can send it to the AA in Singapore. It should get there before the bike does. We were not happy bunnies but as our flight was in the afternoon we just had to hope the carnet would be with us in time.

We did get the carnet on Thursday