

PART 5

Brisbane to Mackay via Darwin

SEPTEMBER 2016 | 15 DAYS

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ARRIVED IN BRISBANE ON ANOTHER PLANNED BIG ADVENTURE WITH MY BEST RIDING MATE, ROBIN COTTLE FROM LEVIN. THIS WILL BE MY SEVENTH TRIP TO AUSTRALIA.



Robin flew on to Emerald to pick up his Suzuki DR 650 which he hadn't seen before. He was excited but nervous at the same time. Robin had done Cape York but this was going to be more adventurous. (Blind leading the blind). I picked my bike up from Springwood Suzuki where it was stored since my last trip and fitted with new sprockets, brakes, rear tyre and serviced.

Couldn't wait to get out of the city and on to open roads towards the outback. I rode west to Dalby for the first night where I stayed at the camp ground. Meanwhile Robin was leaving from Emerald the next morning with another Aussie adventure rider, Andrew Akinson from Emerald.

On the 12th, I just did mostly sealed roads to Charleville where I met up with Andrew and Robin just on dark at Charleville camp ground, just out of town. Rain was looking likely so I quickly put up my

tent, and Robin for the first time put his up, although by the time he had finished it was nearly time to get up. Andrew only had a hammock so rather than get wet, he rode back to a pub for the night. Sure enough it poured down all night but we did stay nice and dry.

Next morning we packed our gear up under the shelter of the camp dining area and met Andrew in town. I think Robin woke up the whole camp as he talked to Steve on the phone.

For months I had planned this trip to Charleville, Innaminka, Lyndhurst, Ayers Rock, Alice Springs, Mt Isa and back to Mackay. I had fuel stops and distances all planned and marked on maps.

There is as much fun planning a trip as actually riding it. Unfortunately, due to an early wet season the locals had warned us against going inland as some roads were just impassable and too slippery.

Shit! All my forward planning and we didn't have a plan B so we made up a new route day by day. Andrew suggested heading north to Tambo and hopefully a dirt road on the way if things dried out a little. Robin had already tasted some dirt the previous day when he had his first crash in the slippery conditions.



At the small town of Tambo, Andrew left us for his home in Emerald and Robin and I headed towards Longreach. I couldn't believe the amount of grass in this region, compared to the same time last year when the place was in severe drought with no rain for eight years. Hard to imagine eh. Also fewer dead kangaroos on the roads. We were really getting into the Aussie outback now with less traffic on the roads and vast open spaces. Robin was grumpy as he forgot to cover his USB plug the night before and burnt out the plug so he couldn't charge anything. It was still raining so we thought we would do the 520km on sealed roads to Longreach where we found a cabin for \$115 so we could dry our gear out.

Woke up at 5 am with our gear dry and keen for some dirt roads ahead. We decided to head towards Darwin for now and see what the weather did. I was ready to go but Robin was still working out where things go and the easiest way to tie everything down. The previous night we charged up our GPS, Helmet intercoms, phones and GoPro camera. Big mistake with the helmet intercom as Robin wouldn't shut up. No wonder Sue (wife) sends him away.

Always listen to the advice from locals regarding road and weather conditions.

1. Robin Cottle. **2.** Robin's first night camping. **3.** Andrew Smith, Gordy and Robin Cottle.



The biggest issue on all the trips so far is the phones. I think an Aussie SIM card is the best way to go. Yes you have a new number but at least you know what it will cost. Telstra has the best coverage.



1. Queensland the year before. **2.** Longreach – rained after 8 years of drought.



We headed towards Winton for 177 km along the Landsborough Maitilda Highway where we fuelled up and had our photos taken by Slim Dusty's photographer for the Winton visitors' website. We were getting more excited now we were getting off the main roads. The Kennedy Development Road to Mt Isa looked like a good option. This road was mostly sealed and in places it was just a vehicle width of seal. We stopped at the Middleton Hotel which was an old building in the middle of nowhere with a real old character who had fuel in a drum for us. From there we carried on towards Boulia on flat boring roads until we came upon this hilly landscape and lookout called Cawnpore where the views were stunning. In the early Cretaceous Period (95 million years ago) an inland sea covered large parts of Queensland and the lookout we were standing on was once an Island in the middle of the Eromanga Sea with Crocodiles and Lchthyosaurs around looking for a meal.

We were going to turn off to the right onto some dirt roads, but two local road workers at the lookout said they were expecting 45 mm of rain later and this road would be flooded in places so don't hang around. More fuel and a cuppa at Boulia in this Aborigine settlement then continued on the Diamantina Development Road towards Mt Isa. Andrew had said we needed to do the Dajarra Duchess loop before Mt Isa and we are glad we did. Awesome dirt road with lots of crests and corners. Robin and I ended up racing each other and having a ball. This finished off 836 kms of a brilliant day's riding as we entered Mt Isa which is all about mining.

We fuelled up again and I got another two tins of Irish Stew for tea, along with our tea bags while Robin looked for a camp ground. At \$25 each we thought that we would just go out of town and camp in the trees. Thank goodness for headlamps.

Up at sparrow fart again, turned on our safety spot tracker beacon which gives Nick Budden and Steve Sparrow the opportunity to follow our progress. Robin was keen to get the USB plug fixed so we didn't leave Mt Isa until 10 am. I paced up and down waiting for RC again. Electrical systems all go, Robin smiling again and still talking to me on the intercom. Oh no, not again.

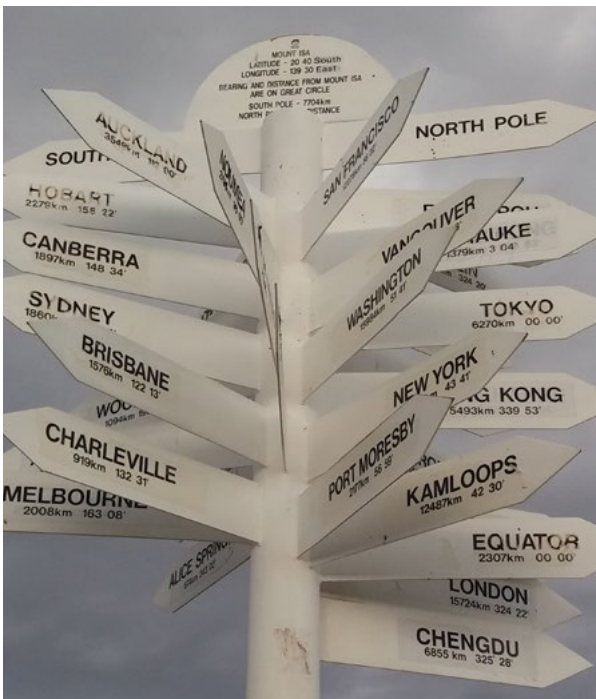


Along the Barkly Highway to the Barkly Homestead Roadhouse for more fuel and then 390 kms up the Tablelands Highway to Cape Crawford. This was going to be our longest stretch of dirt road so far. It was mostly straight and boring but we still had fun. We underestimated the time it would take so we found ourselves riding in the dark which is very dangerous, so we decided to find a spot to set up camp for the night. I boiled the billy, and had a cuppa tea but we only had a few biscuits to eat.



Up early as normal then off to Cape Crawford which was only 5 km away. More fuel in the bikes and fuel bladders and bacon and eggs for breakie. The 10 litre fuel bladder is needed every day as the distances between fuel stops are too far for my bike which does 265 km per tank and the bladder does 130 km. Travelled north up the Savannah Way towards Lorella Springs. This road was full of small corrugations that went for miles with lots of patches of bull dust which is like very soft sand that is extremely hard and can catch even the best riders out. Robin fell off in a heap and shouted "get the bike off me its burning my foot". I yelled, "don't move, I need a photo for Facebook", as his boot was melting on the exhaust pipe. This road had rocky patches that could easily puncture a tyre. Continuing on towards the Roper Highway and





Have an emergency number handy on your phone and/or a spot tracker or safety beacon in case of an accident.

getting very low on fuel we needed to turn right and go into an Aborigine settlement called Ngukurr. We both found this place very intimidating and everyone here spoke an Aborigine language called Kriol. Houses were rough and there was rubbish and dogs everywhere. Robin stayed with the bikes as he was swarmed with Aborigine kids, while I went into the shop to organise fuel. We were both pleased to be on our way back along the 30 km already ridden and headed towards Mataranka camp site. A pleasant surprise as we rode over a crest and suddenly we came across a concrete stretch of road going into a little tropical oasis of plants and large water way with crocodile warning signs. We stopped for photos and checked our load. The roads are so rough that one of my drink bottles burst and flooded my top pannier and broke my GPS. Now I know to keep water bottles out of panniers and make sure everything is wrapped well or in padded bags. You never stop improving on things. We arrived at Mataranka at 3.30 and we decided that we would have an early finish for a change. Tents up, washing done and now ready for a meal at the nice camp. I don't shave while riding around Aussie and my whiskers were bloody itchy and annoying. Lots of Aborigines walking around the camp site at night with their beer or cask of wine.





Day 6 on our big adventure and it seems like we have been away for weeks. We smell like we've been away for weeks too. Someone told us to turn right above Katherine and take the 40 km ride to the Edith Falls. Well worthwhile as it was a beautiful spot and a nice place for a swim. Darwin bound on sealed road to meet a cousin (Doug - family of mine) for the very first time. A very boring stretch of the Stuart Highway but it had to be done with very few dirt road options to Darwin. Robin caught up with someone from Levin and I stayed with family for the night at a place called Humpty Doo. Doug is a Ford fan, and I'm Holden. I suppose you can't choose your family. Poor bugger.

1. Mataranka Camp ground. **2.** Towing Robins DR again. **3.** Robin getting wet. **4.** Edith Falls.

I have so much
trouble with
New Zealand names
and I had no hope
of get my tongue
around some of these
Aussie names



I phoned Robin first thing to meet at Humpty Doo. Talk about shitty, he was swearing and cursing, bloody Aussies, bloody Optus. Someone at Brisbane Airport put Robin's SIM card under their name and Optus wouldn't let him top it up. I thought I'd better start riding and didn't stop for two hours. By then he had been on the phone to his daughter in Perth and she had sorted everything out. Robin has a habit in NZ to pull over for a nanna nap in the arvo, but he knew that I wouldn't wait for him here. I'm here to clock up some miles so reluctantly he had to keep going. We arrived at Daly Waters Road House at about 3.30 and decided that 590 km of boring roads was enough for one day. Put up our tents in the camping area at the back for \$7 for the night with hot showers and we enjoyed a nice roast meal at the Road House. Best hospitality and service so far.



Climbed out of my tent at 5.30 after a great night's sleep I found Robin nearly packed up ready to go. I couldn't believe it. Today we were heading for exciting dirt roads and interesting outback ahead. I headed off first and after about 1 km Robin wasn't in my mirrors. I stopped, waited for a while and then went back. There he was with a strop he had found on the front of his bike ready for a tow. We towed and nearly crashed up and down the road until we decided that we'd better check a few things. We were the two worst mechanics ever so this was going to be another challenge. Fuel seemed okay but there was no spark. Seat and tank off and checked plugs, then we had wires unplugged everywhere checking whatever. We had no idea really. We were just thankful that it happened on the main road and not in the back of nowhere. After lots of phone calls, including our reliable mate Nick who



said it would be most likely the pickup coil. It was going to take three days to get the parts here and we weren't 100% sure that it was that problem. By 3 pm we had arranged a truck to pick Robin's bike up and take it to Brisbane for \$250 with Neil Mansel Trucking. Robin was to take a bus to Darwin then fly to Brisbane and wait three days for the bike to arrive. There was nothing else here I could do so I loaded up, said goodbye to my mate and headed the 260 km east to Cape Crawford along the Carpentaria Highway. Arrived there just on dark and in time for a shower and a meal at the Road House. Went to bed and lay there watching the kangaroos walking by the tent.

Up again in the dark and packed up ready to go just on day break. Now riding alone in unknown territory I had to be a bit more careful. Borroloola was 109 km away and the road was wet and I was worried about wild life jumping out in front of me. I must have been going slow as a road train passed me as he wasn't worried about hitting Emu's, Cows or Kangaroos. Petrol at Borroloola and it had been raining here all night. The girl in the shop said that the road to Hells Gate is open to four wheel drives only as it is slippery and very rough. She said that the first river crossing was an hour away and if I got through that one the others would be okay. Well, here goes. 320 km of interesting challenges ahead. I started off being very careful and nearly fell off twice in the first 1km. Then I decided to ride properly by standing up, looking ahead and going harder which turned out to be a lot easier. The first river crossing was half way up the motor and my track record at river crossing wasn't too good so I was a little nervous. Stopped and looked out for crocodiles then went for it. Made it with wet feet so I was very relieved.





- 1. Another good sign.
- 2. Savannah Way.
- 3. Needed a photo here.
- 4. Lots of snakes.



This was a very lonely ride with an abundance of burnt out vehicles lining the very corrugated road, five creek crossings and bull dust holes. There wasn't another vehicle on this road so the Hells Gate Road House ahead was a big relief with a fuel pump and a cuppa tea. My next stretch was a mix of narrow sealed sections and more dirt roads along the Savannah Way towards Burketown with my aim to get to Normanton which was still about 400 km away. Decided to drive around a little aborigine settlement called Doomadgee before Burketown. The kids were throwing rocks at me and it was like driving through a rubbish tip with milk cartons, plastic and bottles lining the streets and I kept going down closed roads and couldn't find my way out. That was scary. Back on Savannah Way with a bit more seal, then 221 km of dirt road ahead before Normanton and lots more small corrugations. I never get sick of these dirt roads. I seem to ride faster on these than I do on the sealed roads. As dusk gets closer there are lots of little wee kangaroos and emus on the road and they are grey which blend in with the last 5 km of seal. Normanton Camp Ground was the friendliest and cleanest and the owner was so helpful.

Bitumen roads from Normanton and still lots of little roos on the road for the first hour. After 386 km, I turned off at Mt Surprise to the Atherton Tablelands to Almaden and then to Mareeba and over the hills past all the sugar cane fields to Mossman.

Found a few back roads to explore before riding into beautiful Port Douglas. I'd only ridden through Port Douglas in 2005 and 2007 and didn't really take in its beauty. I can see why people come here for holidays

as the beaches and the women here were stunning. Great to catch up with mates in Port Douglas and have a bed and a pillow for the night. Temperature was about 35 degrees and not much cooler at night so the fan above the bed was a necessity. Shirley got me up at 5.15 am for a walk. How ridiculous walking when there was a bike to ride. Nevertheless, it was a good walk even with all the bats flying around above your head.

At this stage we were still uncertain what was happening with Robins bike in Brisbane and if he was going to ride it to our departure date in Mackay or stay in Brisbane. I set off south along the picturesque Cook Highway which followed the coast to Cairns. Early morning traffic started building up so I made the right turn towards the hills and over the winding Kennedy Highway. Stopped at the same lookout that 14 of us took a photo from in 2007 when we rode DR 400's to Cape York. Next stop was the Ravenshoe Hotel to see a mate of Steve Sparrows'. This is the highest pub in Queensland. Back on the Kennedy Highway for 40 km then left towards Mieling Timber Mill and Wairuna Road. Nice gravel and dirt road and nice countryside. After 15 km, I reached Valley of Lagoons and realised that I had taken a wrong turn off. Most of the signage on main roads is okay, however, on some dirt roads I found that cattle had knocked some down. I would often stop and take a look at my map to study a few names like Valley of Lagoons which I shouldn't be near. Back on track heading towards the Mt Fox Road. Now what! This sign said left to Ingham 99 km or right to Gregory Highway 46 km. Low on gas I turned right for more nice dirt roads.



1. Port Douglas beach. 2. Ravenshoe Hotel.

Made it to Clarke River on the Gregory Highway and I had already emptied my fuel bladder so I only had about 100 km left in the tank and hadn't seen anyone for the past 300 km. Now on a sealed road heading towards Charters Towers looking for Bluewater Springs to fuel up. Well I missed Bluewater Springs as it was just a small place with a few caravans and I didn't notice a fuel pump and thought that it must still be coming up. I was expecting to see it after every corner or crest, but no, and I was very low on fuel and still no traffic in sight. After 420 km on the clock I had about a teaspoon of fuel left in the tank. Luckily I came across a few caravans parked in a paddock so I stopped and one gentleman gave me five litres to put in my bike. He needed that fuel for his generator so had to continue on to Charter Towers to fill his container and my bike up and then travel 40km back to him. He was very trusting as I could have not gone back. That is an example of people helping each other in the back country. Nick and Steve who were following my progress on the Spot Tracker would have been wondering what I was doing by back tracking. Finally arrived in the dark again at Charter Towers Holiday Park. Put up my tent by a tree and an opossum walked on by. I wanted to knock it on the head as we do in NZ but they are protected in Aussie. Another very warm night and hard to sleep.

Up again at 5.15 am and on the road by 5.45 am headed towards Mingela via the Flinders Highway then turned right towards Ravenwood and the Burdekin Falls Dam. 120 km on sealed roads with good healthy looking cattle grazing on the unfenced roads.



3. Not a land mark in site. **4.** Slippery wet dirt.
5. A good solid crossing. **6.** Names of Cattle stations.
7. Brahman watering hole.



Very nice rolling countryside here and I was having fun. From the dam the dirt roads became more narrow, corrugated and lots of real rolling country with sharp corners and some of the most interesting riding so far. Not one vehicle on the road since 8 am this morning.

Made it to the Bowen Development Road and then 51 km of more dirt to Belyands Crossing towards the Gregory Highway where I desperately needed fuel again, so back tracked 6 km to Belyando Crossing and had another cuppa and turned around and headed to Clearmont on sealed roads. A little bit of traffic including lots of road trains and four wheel drives towing camp trailers for a change and sitting on 125 km per hour quite comfortably. Once arriving at Clearmont, where I had been on a previous trip, I headed south to Capella looking for more dirt roads. I feel more at home on dirt roads as I think it seems like more of an adventure that way. Blackwater was my destination and bed for the night, however, I still had lots of kilometres to do before I put my tent up again. I got to the Bedford Weir which was another great photo opportunity of this water way. Shit! I couldn't find my phone as it wasn't in the pouch I have sitting under the front screen. I had obviously not learnt my lesson after losing a phone on the

Birdsville track last year. Probably why Carol calls me a 'dumb arse'. I just had this horrible gut wrenching feeling as that would mean all my photos gone and my entire trip ruined. There was only one option and that was to go back and look for it. The last 30 km was seal then 15km before that was dirt and I remembered that at the start of the dirt were a few decent size holes that shook me and the bike so I thought it might be on the ground there somewhere. There was no traffic on that road so I thought it would be worth spending two days looking for it. Back I went on the 30km of seal and on to the dirt. I was thinking that the phone maybe about 12 km down this road. I had just gone 1 km and this great big Kangaroo with two young ones ran out in front of me.

My heart was racing as I skidded to a stop just missing them. Looked down and there was my phone cover, battery further ahead and back cover. Put it together and it went. How lucky was that. I threw my little bag under the screen away, never to put my phone there again. Light was fading fast and I still had to get to Blackwater so back I went. As it was getting dark I found myself dodging kangaroos again. I kept thinking that all the lights in front of me was Blackwater but they were just different mines well lit up at night. My tinted sun visor on my helmet is no



good at night so I had that up and was wearing clear safety glasses as my lights are not that bright. One four wheel drive must have realised that my vision wasn't too good so he stayed behind me giving me more light. Finally entered Blackwater at 8 pm and a local said to camp at the sports ground with the stock car people setting up for stock cars the next day.



Still missing my riding buddy who still hadn't got his bike fixed in Brisbane. Robin asked one bike shop if they could fix the bike as soon as it arrived. Their reply was "We haven't got a magic wand you know". Robin just walked out looking for another bike shop. So frustrating for him. At least he had family in Brisbane to keep him sane.



- 1.** Start of Tableland National Park.
- 2.** Typical Aussie outback. **3.** Coal trains.

Visited Red Rooster very early as their Wi-Fi is the strongest and free, so I could update Facebook and check work emails. Good chance to get more Red Rooster hand wipes for cleaning the helmet visor. Steve Sparrow who lived at Emerald for a while knows this area well and said that I must ride up the Blackdown Tablelands National Park so I headed east towards Rockhampton. I stopped at a little town called Parrabal because I noticed the size of the coal trains passing me. I counted 129 wagons on one train with two engines in the front and two in the middle. Each wagon carries 109 tonne so that's 14061 tonne of coal heading to Gladstone. No wonder mining is big business here in Aussie.

Carried on until I got to the Blackdown Tablelands sign and turned right for 16km up the winding mountain roads to the most panoramic views so far. Unfortunately the day was a little cloudy but it was still breath-taking. At the top I found another 14 km of dirt roads and I found a four wheel drive loop track so I thought I would have some fun on that for a while.

After a good look around and some photos I went back down to the Capricorn Highway to Rockhampton. To me all towns are the same, so I bypassed Rockhampton and headed to Yeppoon and the Byfield National Park to Stockyard Point.

I was told about the Nine Mile beach ride which was recommended for high four wheel drive vehicles only and I felt like another challenge. Half way down I thought I had bitten off more than I could chew and I was struggling to stay upright in the deep soft sand. I met a couple of four wheel drives coming towards me







Carry a pump as you will need to deflate tyres on soft sand and pump back up on hard and rocky terrain.

and the sand was so soft that I couldn't lift my front wheel out of the ruts up the bank so they backed up for a while until I got out of their way. Six miles into it, I thought I should turn back as it was hot work for me and the Transalp. Started riding until suddenly the bike stopped moving. No drive whatsoever. Burnt out clutch in the back of nowhere and there was no way I would get towed out of this sand. Very lucky to have phone reception to phone my good mate Nick again but no reply. I flattened out a tent site as I thought I may be here for a long time. Lucky for me Nick phoned 10 minutes later and said try and give the clutch more free play and that may work but it was a long shot. Nick saved me again as it worked and I loaded my gear back onto the bike and struggled my way out. That was tough. Back on forestry roads and then onto the Byfield Road where I found a camp site on a side road called Redrock Road just on dark. All I had was cold water, no food. Put my tent up in the dark and when I got up in the morning there was a sign five metres away. 'Crocodiles inhabit this area. No camping'.

This epic event was drawing to an end and my final destination of Mackay was only 320 km away and I couldn't wait for a long hot shower. You know you need a shower when you can smell yourself and feel sticky even riding at 130km per hour. One more dirt road in my sights to end this 16 day ride to remember. This road was at a little settlement of Yamaba where I found 40 kms of gravel road to enjoy. My arrival at Nick Buddens house in Mackay was a day earlier than anticipated but with 9965 km covered I finished with enough time to enjoy a relaxing day around Mackay.

This was definitely the best trip so far, although a little disappointing for Robin but he still got 6000km done.

