

The Waterless

A year ago **Jordan Hanssen '04** peddled a bike 3,300 miles from west to east across Australia. Here, his words and photos from a day in the life on an outback road.



CAMEL CROSSING *On the Eyre Highway, the author—and a warning peculiar to the region.*

It was about 105 degrees, and Anthony and I were running out of water. I looked around. From horizon to horizon, nothing but flat dirt and scattered saltbush.

The landscape suggested we were in the middle of nowhere, but pavement existed a mere 50 feet away. My Australian friend and I were bicycling one of his country's most foreboding paved roads—the Eyre Highway—in February, the height of Australian summer, and against prevailing winds. Traveling this 746.7-mile stretch of hot asphalt (“bitumen” in Aussie) is often referred to as “crossing the Nullarbor” and just to drive it is considered a right of passage for Australians.

The Nullarbor Plain (“no trees” in Latin) is a desert wilderness of knee-high, wizened twigs in south central Australia. The Aborigines call this region “Oondiri,” “the waterless.” Roughly four-fifths the size of England, it is slightly north of the Eyre Highway, coming down to cross the road in a 10-mile-wide swath at the coast.

We were 60 miles away from that particular section but well into the Nullarbor National Park. What vegetation existed was a remarkable, dark green. The leaves of the aptly named saltbush were small, reminding me of the creosote bushes of the southwestern United States where I grew up. Unlike the creosote, though, their branches were too low and dense to crawl under, precluding use as shade.

Not good.

In heat this intense, the sun's rays don't strike your skin so much as they microwave it to the depth of a few millimeters. We tried erecting a makeshift awning, but the north

wind that had appeared with the sun, dry and hot from its journey across the desert, was too strong to suffer our attempt at shade.

Normally we wouldn't be in this predicament—mostly we rode at night, even though every tourist guide, outback cop, and trucker will tell you this is a bad idea. Last night's ride began at midnight, and now, at 10 a.m., we were broiling, dreaming of the shady gum trees that were allegedly 70 miles away. The unappealing saltbush was all we had. Exhausted and hungry, we threw on light clothing as our sole protection from the sun and ate an uncomfortably warm mix of rice and tuna washed down with water hot enough to brew coffee.

We had slept four hours in the bush the night before, 10 miles west of Eucla, the closest thing to a town on the Eyre Highway. With the exception of Eucla, the seven other stops on the road between the actual towns of Norseman and Ceduna are “roadhouses.” These are glorified gas stations with an outpost vibe. Most are equipped with an overpriced restaurant, an overpriced bar, and meager accommodations. At one roadhouse, Border Village, a sign on the front door read: “Do not ask for water as refusal may offend.” In Eucla we had filled up our full complement of water in the bathroom, 44 liters (97 lbs.) between us, to cover the 125-mile stretch to the Nullarbor Roadhouse.

The night's ride into this heat had cost us a third of that water at a frustrating six miles an hour. The east wind had been strong, but the main source of our sluggish pace was the road trains. These are huge, two to four trailer semi-trucks that ply the roads of Australia



RELENTLESS SUN *Aborigines call the Nullarbor Plain “Oondiri,” “the waterless.” In February, the height of the Australian summer, the sun’s rays are so intense they don’t strike your skin so much as they microwave it to the depth of a few millimeters.*

24 hours a day. With such great distances between towns, these behemoths are the most cost-effective way to run goods. On the Eyre Highway their maximum length is 120 feet, or one third of a football field. The masses of steel and rubber, sometimes weighing 200 tons, passing at 60 miles an hour on a road with a dirt shoulder, were intimidating in the daylight and terrifying at night. Fortunately their high-beam headlights illuminated the dark highway from several miles away, giving

us ample time to scamper a healthy distance from the blast of wind and stinging road grit that came with their passing.

This plan of getting off the road as a truck approached had worked three days ago, and we'd ridden more than 100 miles. But that evening was, we later discovered, the mid-week lull of road-train traffic on the highway, when most trucks were close to their starting or ending points in the 3,000-mile journey between Sydney and

Perth. Last night we had caught the equivalent of rush-hour traffic. As truck lights appeared on the horizon we dutifully moved to the side of the road and waited. Ten hours of this frustrating game had killed our speed, leaving us 60 miles from our intended destination, in the heat of the day, with two thirds of our water gone.

Cars periodically passed us; their occupants waved, as is the custom on all out-back roads. Some smiled, took pictures, and





NO TURNS *Speeding cars and trucks on this long, curveless section of the Eyre Highway resulted in prodigious roadkill.*

honked their horns at the fools on bikes. I like to think most would have stopped to give us water had we flagged them down.

Our maps and guidebook described one of the few alleged government-maintained water holes, 30 miles away. The wells are marked by bright blue signs with a white outline of a spigot and a few drops of water. Until now we had not needed the water holes, as we had filled our bottles at the roadhouses.

Death on the 90 Mile Straight

The liquid horizon solidified in front of us as we peddled along in a landscape that was, as Anthony put it, “a few melting clocks away from being a Salvador Dali painting.” The asphalt line we followed here did not curve for 90 miles—the longest straight road in Australia.

This section’s unbending nature gave a Sisyphean disposition to our ride that was complemented by the charnel house of kangaroo bits in various states of decomposition littering the side of the road. Every 30 feet we passed either fresh kills, smelly corpses, bleached bones, or the occasional viscera so sunbaked that the flies ignored it. I was told later that this carnage was the sign of a healthy kangaroo population.

It began to rain. Little black and brown furry bodies hopped eagerly to the road to lick the water collecting on it. They sprung away as we approached, unaccustomed to bikes. However, the familiar cars and road trains were forced to slow down and lay on their horns to motivate the ambivalent animals out of the way, often unsuccessfully.

Crows and wedge tail eagles came for the fresh meat and often lingered over the meal too long. When they took off, their swollen stomachs slowed them down for a few crucial seconds, and they ended up joining what they were eating.

With rain and dew, the road became a cistern for hundreds of miles and sustained more kangaroos than desert alone. Thus the road both gave and took life, and death by car became as frequent with these animals as death by dingo or drought.



STEER CLEAR *“Road trains,” two to four trailers long, passed at 60 miles an hour with a concussive shock wave that could knock a rider off his bike.*



There were other blue and white signs on the road—for emergency phones, rest stops, pullouts for road trains, and the occasional airstrip for the Royal Flying Doctors. As we approached the signs from a distance, each gave us hope of water until the white icon could be discerned and we saw that it was not the much-desired spigot.

I cranked along, feeling depressed at the sagging shape of my water bladder and fantasizing about chugging the remainder of its hot, barely palatable contents before passing out in the afternoon heat.

The road worked its way toward the edge

of the Great Australian Bight, a long stretch of 200-foot-high limestone cliffs that drop abruptly to the Southern Ocean. Beside the abyss, camper vans were parked, circled up like a modern-day wagon train.

We pedaled past the RVs, praying for salvation at the water hole predicted in the guidebook. A structure with an antenna miraged into existence, the only permanent construction we had seen on this stretch. This, we assumed, would have our water, but to our consternation no spigot appeared on the blue signs leading up to it. The small, cinder block building had its emergency

phone torn out, completing a Mad Maxian appearance. No sign of water. It was time to make a decision. Either we could go on into the late afternoon and night with roughly four hours of sleep, a half-liter of water each, and 30 miles to travel, or we could go back to the vans. Choosing water over pride, we reversed our direction and rode with the wind, barely peddling to keep a brisk 15 m.p.h., a far cry from the 6 to 8 we managed while fighting it. It would have been enjoyable if not for the flies. They landed in the lee of our faces, probing eyes, nose, and mouth for moisture.

There were five camper vans. I told Anthony we should probably go to the biggest one first and work our way down from there. Our exhaustion was visible in our gait. A matronly, fresh-faced woman answered the door, looked at our dusty carcasses, and promptly deduced our needs. We paused briefly, embarrassed by the situation of our own creation. She preempted us.

“You boys need some water? Let me see your bottles.” She strung her sentences together without waiting for an answer.

Her name was Kay, and today she was our angel. We introduced ourselves and stood there bewildered, silently overwhelmed by her ready kindness as the water flowed from a faucet in the huge, silver motor home. I rubbed my cheek and looked at my hand expecting to see pink-brown dust and was alarmed to see nothing but salt.

“Yeah. We just got caught in the heat today,” I offered lamely. I felt like I was 6 years old and had done something bad. “Do you have other bottles to fill?” She asked, showing no sign of judgment.



OASIS The roadhouses were glorified gas stations with an outpost vibe: an overpriced restaurant, an overpriced bar, and meager accommodations.

We handed her our two six-liter bladders, which would keep us till Nullarbor Roadhouse.

It takes a while to fill 12 liters of water. We made small talk until the reassuring weight of water was back in our hands. Thanking Kay once more we walked back to our bikes.

As places to run out of water go, this was not bad. The saltbush had been decreasing in height as we approached the 10-mile strip of Nullarbor Plain proper that ran down to the Bight. It was now waist high and scattered in dense clumps toward the cliff that stood between desert and ocean. We drank the almost-cool water, refreshing in the waning but still substantial heat of early evening. The threat of more rice and tuna was enough to delay our hunger in favor of wandering the few dozen yards to the cliffs of the Bight.

As a child I had stared at this spot on the map and wondered what a “bight” was. More specifically, what was this section that could span so much of the coastline of a continent?

The cliffs were sheer limestone, with layers shaded brown and tan like an upside down tiramisu. The dark blue ocean pummeled tirelessly at the base, slowly eroding Australia. Looking out to the horizon, the land disappeared, and I felt the impression of flying above the water.

We stumbled, clutching our water, taking obligatory pictures with labored smiles beneath the film of salt on our cheeks. Between the saltbush, penny-sized white flowers with yellow centers poked bravely through the sandy soil, hoping to avoid detection in this harsh landscape.

Our sightseeing surge wound down near a pair of cement picnic tables that had cooled down enough to sit on. We stared blankly at each other.

I confess I hoped Kay would offer us dinner. In the past month the bike had garnered a fair bit of attention and a free meal now and again. Not that I ever expected it, but if Anthony and I were ever going to be offered a meal on the Nullarbor, this would be a very good time.

ANOTHER WORLD *A landscape that was “a few melting clocks shy of being a Salvador Dali painting.”*

In answer to this selfish prayer, Kay approached and modestly asked if we would join her for dinner. Had she offered table scraps I would have been grateful. Anthony and I looked at each other with disbelief at the magnanimous offer.

“You’re sure?” asked Anthony.

“There’ll be too much for the four of us, we can’t let it go to waste.”

Sweeter words have not been spoken.

“Come on over in about five minutes, and we’ll have it ready.”

I have seen, in the outback, mailboxes made out of old refrigerators, stacks of nested swimming pools on the back of trucks, singing dingoes, wild camels, and prodigious amounts of road kill. While strange, they did not compare to chowing down on Kay’s fresh fried grouper in the desert.

Our dinner companions comprised two couples: Kay and Trevor, and Diane and Keith. Diane and Trevor were siblings. Kay and Trevor traveled in what might be classified as the “escalade” of motor homes,



complete with chrome, kitchen, flat-screen TV, washing machine, and a 1,000-liter water reservoir that made showers and washing possible—farcical activities given our recent situation. Diane and Trevor were in a more modest moving accommodation, a 1980s Volvo-type motor home.

Humble but obviously proud of his rig (the biggest private vehicle I saw the entire trip), Trevor stated simply that their kids rented their house and that Kay and he were quite comfortable in this home on wheels while they made loops around the country. So comfortable in fact that they were happy to stay in their van when visiting their children back home.

Talk turned to the obvious difference in transportation that had brought us to this point, as well as the factors that contributed to our need of charity.

Keith, with the leathery brown skin of a true-blue Aussie, and incidentally the man responsible for spearing the grouper two days before outside of Esperance (roughly 600 miles away), enlightened us with a booming voice about our missing water hole.

“Before the roadhouses were fully established, the government sunk wells to provide

water along the road. Now there are enough roadhouses that the government stopped maintaining them.”

That was information I would like to have had a few days earlier.

“It’s a cruel stretch of road.”

He spoke with a healthy dose of irony over his flaky, breaded fish and fresh vegetables.

The group’s generosity, appreciated but unanticipated, was typical of the many caravaners around Australia. Food and kindness were given without hesitation. In return all that was requested was a story.

Dinner concluded with apple crumble and ice cream. Kay and Diane refused our offer to help clean up. We bid them a final thank you and goodbye. The sun had set an hour earlier, and the temperature slowly dropped from comfortable to cool as the Southern Ocean made its presence known.

Anthony and I wandered off to a patch of saltbush by the Bight, looking for a decent windbreak to sleep next to. Back at the RVs the blue light of the TV came on. We put our sleeping pads in the dirt and our eyes in the sky, and we fell asleep in a waterless desert, with an ocean of water close enough to pitch stones into.



BROTHERS IN ADVENTURE *Jordan Hanssen, left, and his cycling companion, Anthony Emmett, had coached rowing together in Seattle.*

We rose well before sunup, when the road trains were reasonable in their frequency and the wind no longer came directly from the east. After 23 miles of riding through the dark, dawn revealed an apocalyptic landscape, harshly beautiful in the rapidly changing light. Nearly seven miles away, like a ship on the horizon, Nullarbor Roadhouse revealed itself in the flat dirt and knee-high scrub. A large, brown sign acknowledged our location: “Nullarbor Plain, Western Edge of Treeless Plain.” Down the road was a hole in the limestone, the remnant of an attempt to find water for a homestead at the turn of the century. A plaque commemorating the effort stood next to it. The well had never produced water.

Outside Nullarbor Roadhouse a mangy dingo dug in the trash near a concrete statue of a Southern Right Whale. Inside, the air conditioning was firing up for the day. Showers were a dollar for five minutes. A man was pawning his wife’s jewelry for gas.

The dry landscape was a convergence of want. But want itself was indicative of life at all costs. This was the Nullarbor. 📍



REST STOP *“You bike across Australia with the bikes you have, not the bikes you should,” said Jordan. He traversed the continent riding a fast but spindly and fragile road bike. “In hindsight,” he said, “a cyclocross bike would have been more appropriate.”*

CONVERGENCE *Desert meets ocean at the Great Australian Bight, a 720-mile-long bay on the continent’s south central coast.*

