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Adventure TRAVEL

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CYCLING STUART HIGHWAY

Maxwell Roche takes Australia up the centre by bike

“Is it wrong to pose for a photograph standing on a dead animal?” I asked my friend Craig as he hopped on top of a deceased bullock and into my viewfinder. “Just hurry up and take it,” he replied, leaning back in a surfer-like stance. This was a moral dilemma we faced on a number of occasions while cycling northward on central Australia’s shimmering Stuart Highway, road kill being ever present next to the asphalt.

We were backpackers, Craig and I, time-rich and cash-poor. We became friends working as farmhands on the vineyards in Western Australia’s southern quarter, and after months of toil we wanted something different. Fuelled by the desire to stray from the backpacker clique, I suggested we ditch our trusty old 4.0L Ford, along with our dreams of automotive exploration, and seek out an alternative mode of transport. This didn’t go down too well at first, Craig being an engineer and a lover of motoring. In fact, his immediate reply was too rude to be repeated.

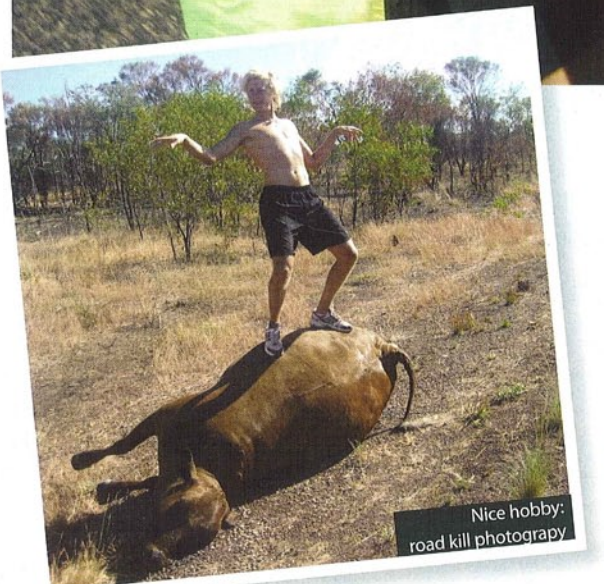
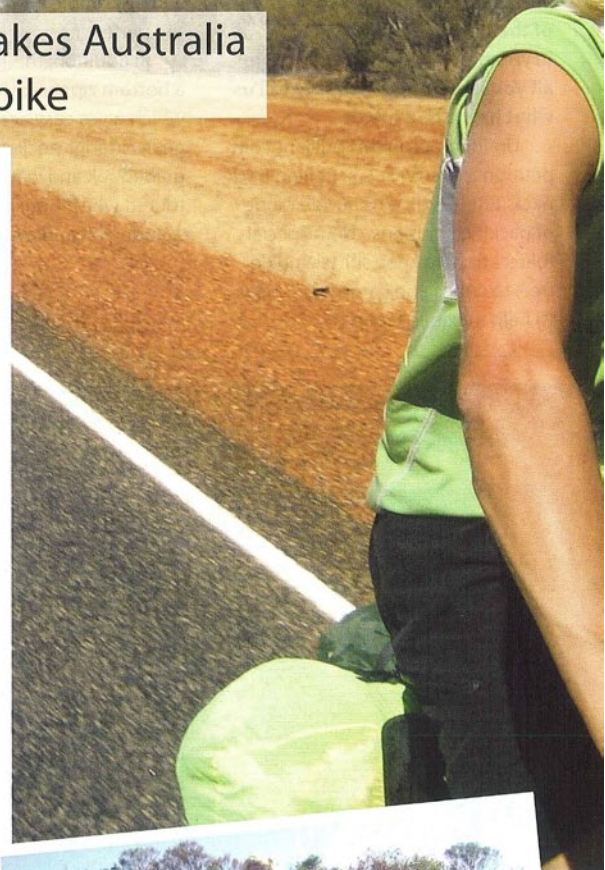
But it didn’t take nearly as much bribery as I had imagined to bring him round. By the time our last day of gainful employment arrived the route had been settled, and to prove it we had a handsome set of freshly laminated maps, punched and bound. During the concluding weeks of labour I had not only persuaded old Craig to cycle the entire length of

the continent, but to leave the safety of the crystal shore and tackle it right up the middle: 3,027km through the remote and deserted interior.

By the time we were ready to depart our humble lodgings, we were the proud owners of pretty much nothing. In fact most of our belongings, bar a pair of shorts, a few T-shirts and a toothbrush, had either been sold at dramatically reduced prices to friends, or sent at great expense to Darwin in Australia’s far north, where we hoped, God willing, our journey would meet its end in just over a month’s time.

“You know what they say about Adelaide mate?” asked Christina, a native Perthian friend of mine on the night before our departure. “No, what do they say?” I asked, intrigued. “It’s O-KAYYY,” she replied in a drawling, sarcastic fashion. That was all the information we had on South Australia’s capital city when we arrived there, ready to start our journey.

It took a few tumultuous days on the high street to acquire all the necessary gear, bikes included. Many of the folks we spoke to about our plans made a similar sort of gesticulation, which began with a slight tilt of the head and ended with a quizzical/concerned-looking contortion of the face and mouth. One particularly memorable conversation was with the chap who owned the bike shop. We’d been in



Nice hobby:
road kill photography



and out of his shop rather a lot while in Adelaide, choosing and comparing various bikes and accessories. During one of these countless visits, while in the middle of showing us a particularly jazzy-looking tyre pump, he looked up and said, "You boys remind me of the last little fella we kitted up for a crazy stunt like this – it took him bloody ages to choose his stuff too. Poor bugger never even made it."

"Really?" asked Craig. "Did he chicken out and get the bus?"

"Not quite," replied the shopkeeper. "He got run over by one."

This, as you can imagine, wasn't the best send-off we could have hoped for. The shopkeeper seemed to notice our faces whiten and tried to lighten the mood by promising to ring us once we were on the road and take the piss.

Two weeks after this disheartening conversation Adelaide lay far behind us. The horizon stretched out across our path, melting the northern sky into a haze of shimmering tarmac. The few approaching cars seemed to dangle like carrots in the distance, suspended in flight as they approached upon the mirrored road.

The route we had chosen... well I say chosen... the route which we pretty much had to choose because it's the only proper route up the continent, south to north, followed the aforementioned Stuart Highway, or 'The Track' as it is more endearingly referred to. It's a major highway that runs 2,834km connecting Port Augusta, an industrial town 300km north of Adelaide, to Darwin on the country's northern-most peninsular. It gets its name from John McDouall Stuart, the first European explorer to cross Australia from south to north in July 1862. Old Johnny Stuart completed the crossing after four failed attempts, and died soon after his success, so it would seem he deserves this dedication. The road is so long it forms the bridge between three climates: first the temperate wine-growing lands of the south, then the barren lunar desert of the centre and finally the balmy tropical rainforests of the north.

After about a week of pedaling we had traveled roughly 600km and visited a number of small towns and homesteads. But none so unusual as

the one we were about to visit. Just 10km ahead of us lay Coober Pedy, a opal mining town described quite accurately in the *Lonely Planet* as 'the end of the world'. The orange, fist-sized rocks that covered the lunar plains in the surrounding area seemed like bristles on a gargantuan carpet. The vastnesses of the landscape made me feel so small at times that I half expected a giant foot to plummet out of the heavens and squash me flat. We eventually rolled up the main drag, dirty, sweaty, burnt and dehydrated, looking for a shady spot to eat, sleep and recoup.

The place we tried first, like many of the residences in Coober

Five must-learn Aussie terms

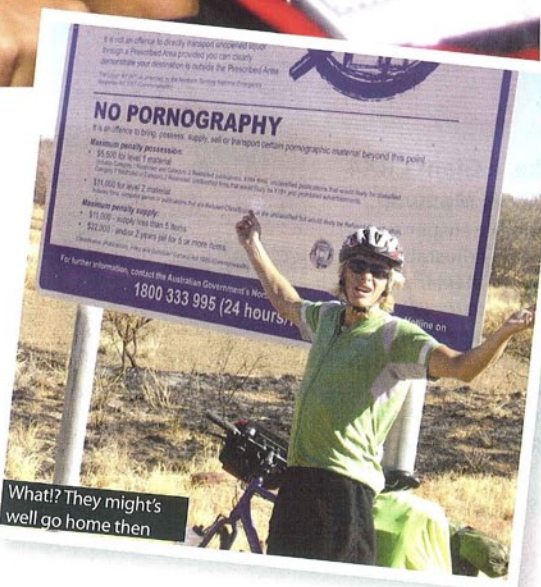
Smoko: Don't forget this, whatever you do. It's the word Australians use to describe a short break, usually around 15 minutes in length, taken about an hour before 'official lunch break'. You'll be having lots of these along the way.

Road train: Monstrous articulated lorries, often three carriages in length, carrying livestock. You'll smell them first, hear them second and swear at them third. A real danger to cyclists, they are worth watching out for. When one passes I suggest head down, deep breath and brace because the gust is often strong enough to strip you of your lycra.

Bottelo: Our equivalent of an off-licence, that magical establishment where you can buy booze.

Stubby: If it's beer you're after, this is the word for a squat, fist-sized bottle. Sometimes these come in little wetsuits for added insulation and Australian charm.

O: Stick this on the end of any word in Australia and you'll fit in just fine. 'Fisho' for example means fish-monger.



What!? They might's well go home then

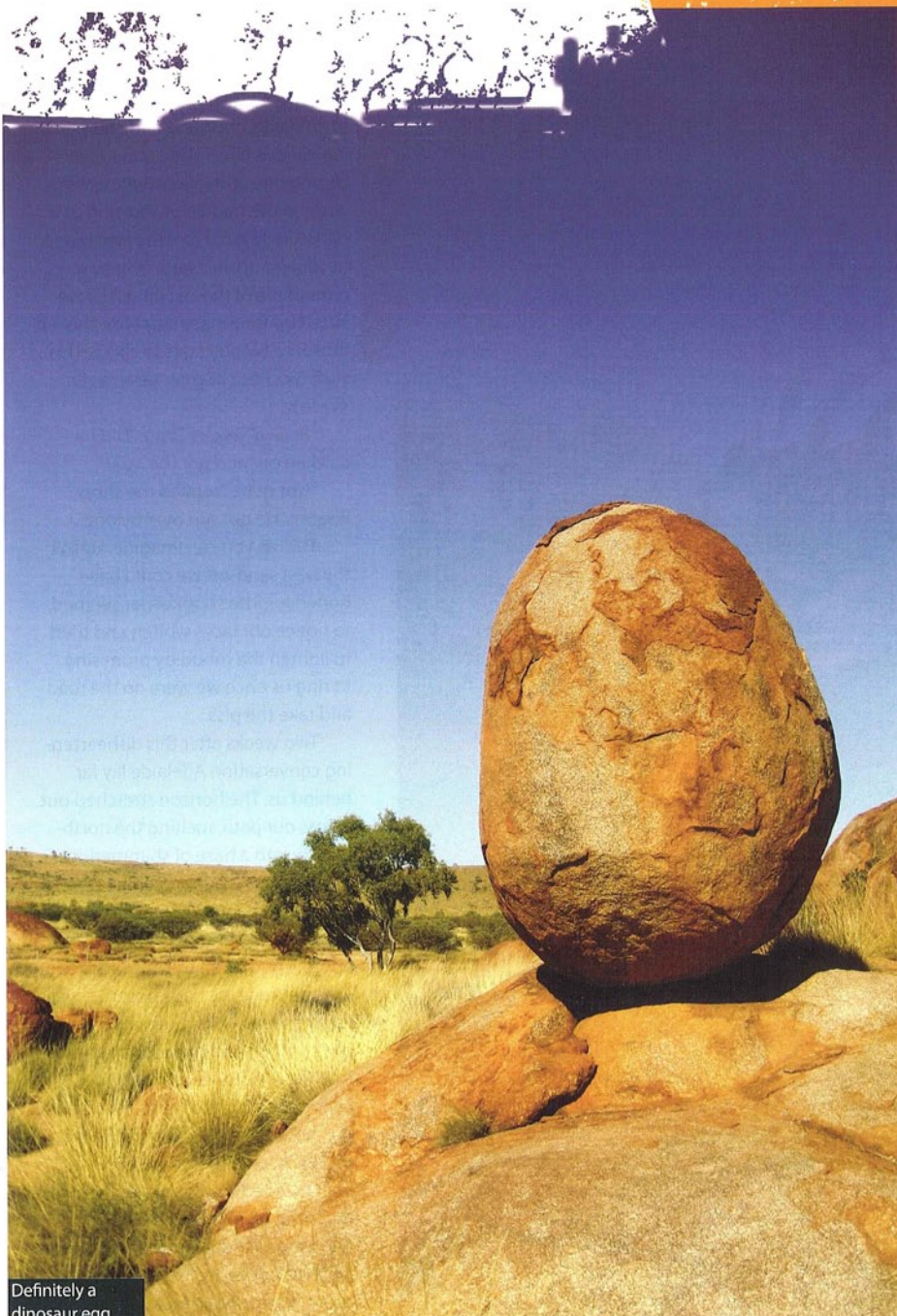
Bike it: Australia

Pedy, was made up of a series of underground tunnels. These tunnels are disused opal mines, opal being the gemstone that gave the town its birth in 1915. Wheeling our bikes into reception we instantly felt the cooling musk of the underground on our weathered skin. The man behind the desk, a jolly old miner with beady eyes and a bushy beard, accepted our plea for accommodation and drew us a little map of the premises. I gazed around in wonder. The wall nearest to me felt cold and solid, and as I looked closer I noticed the ancient banded layering of reds and oranges it bore, stretching out along the corridor. The journey down to our room gave me more time to admire my surroundings and explore the darkened corners of the labyrinth, untouched by the few fizzing light bulbs. Craig's voice echoed as he called to me from up ahead.

When we finally reached our little dug-out, we were surprised and delighted at the coziness of the place. The room looked as though it had been scooped like ice cream out of the corridor.

Both of us were pooped by this point, having spent the previous two nights camped by the roadside, so we jumped into the bunks, killed the lights and slept for a full 15 hours. When we eventually awoke at 2pm the next day, it was just as dark as the previous evening. Not a sound reached us from the world above, and the temperature was still a soothing 17°C. This, I can honestly say, was the best night's sleep of my life.

Out on the road, away from the sheltered subterranean sanctuaries of Coober Pedy, daily life for Craig and I struck a less tuneful chord. We began to hallucinate. Shimmering fresh water pools would appear out of the desert, surrounded by palm trees swaying lackadaisically on a gentle breeze. A faint hula beat could often be heard, while girls in grass skirts danced to the joyful twang of a ukulele. In order to combat these effects we invented a handful of attention-diverting activities, such as the road kill photography.



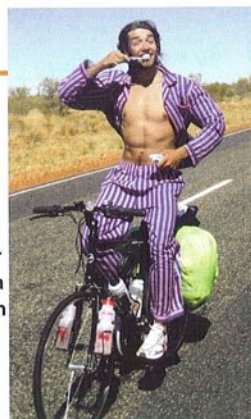
Definitely a dinosaur egg

The weapons of **CHOICE**

"We each had the same bike, a Giant CRX4 costing around AUS\$700," says Maxwell.

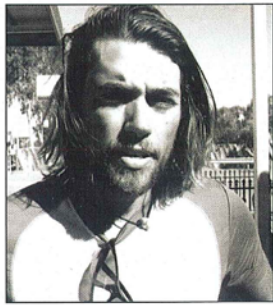
"They were just right for the job. No suspension so you don't lose any pedal power; an adjustable flat handle bar for a comfy ride position; a steel frame which is easy to weld should any problems occur; slick tyres for speed but not too skinny so they can cope with the extra weight; a squiddy saddle (more than necessary); bolts on the frame for panniers and that's it.

"We got the bikes from a shop in Adelaide called Super Elliots: good deals, good people, highly recommended."



Who's writing?

Maxwell Roche (like the chocolate but without the accent) is a literature graduate who spends time in antiquarian bookshops taking great long sniffs. He also hurls himself off, down or into anything for a story or a photograph, and travels, in search of a view, because it's all about the view. He's a desperate climber, addicted surfer and frivolous cyclist, horrified by the prospect of missing out and tormented by indecision regarding his future.

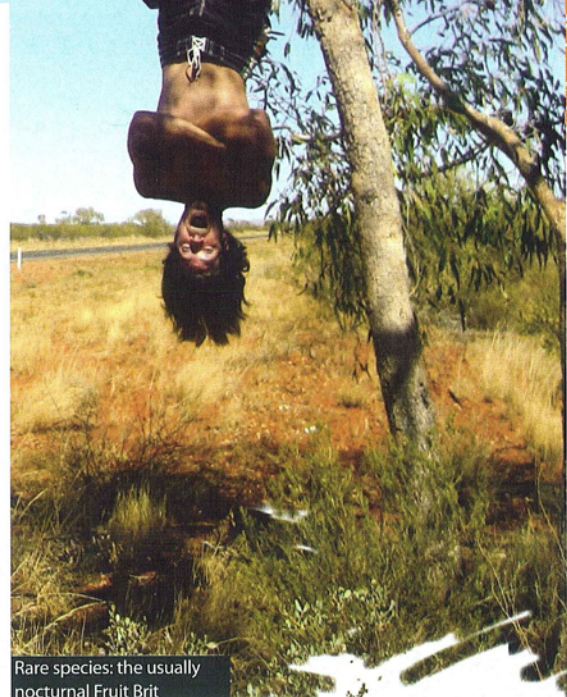


Another was impulsive and raucous road sign abuse. Quite often a sign would tell us that we had, say, 48km before we reached our destination. Then, in typical Australian fashion, a sign 6km further down the road would tell us exactly the same thing. Stuff like this really hurts your feelings and I could seldom resist the temptation to swerve melodramatically towards the offending sign, arms raised and shout, "**** off you lying piece of ****".

About 500km further up the road from Coober Pedy, just before you reach Alice Springs, is a tiny village called Stuarts Well. We arrived there early on a Wednesday afternoon, wishing as always only for some refreshment and a good night's sleep. Instead, we found ourselves little more than a minute after our arrival perched on stools in a small bar area, surrounded on all sides by

elderly citizens, some of whom had waved and beeped at us out on the road earlier in the day (the grey nomads, we called them, a relentlessly enthusiastic bunch of caravanners in search of adventure). The faint odour of eucalyptus filled the room and we sat in a semi-circle on an eclectic selection of chairs and stools around an old, un-manned piano. We'd been summoned to our seats by the owner of the establishment to witness a world-famous performance, a spectacle that apparently was known throughout the land for its incomparable appeal. And so we waited.

Soon, the muffled tones of anticipation turned to excited chatter following the appearance of two pointy ears in the audience. "Don't touch 'im," warned the owner as the dog snarled savagely and snapped his jaws at a old lady already two feet off her seat in fright. "He'll bite



Rare species: the usually nocturnal Fruit Brit



The basics: shelter, water, mozzie net

cha." It turned out the creature's name was Dinky, and he wasn't a dog, he was a wild dingo, a dog-like creature native to Australia's central bush land. On his owner's command the ferocious little animal sprang high in the air, landed all four paws on the piano keys, and proceeded to howl melodically to the clumsy rhythm.

It's just when you think you've seen it all that central Australia delves once more into its immense sack of bizarre surprises. As well as Stuarts Well and Coober Pedy, all the towns along the highway have a little something eccentric to offer. The landscape does nothing but complement these eccentricities, with the enormity and tranquillity of the desert interior making up for in splendour what it lacks in hotels, bars and nightlife. The southern sky comes alive at night with more stars than a Bob Geldof charity gig and the utter silence on the road will make your ears ring with confusion. And, since extraordinary things make for extraordinary adventures, why not make chase aboard an extraordinary machine, the bicycle. I can't guarantee that it won't hurt, or you won't cry, but I guarantee you'll never forget it. ■



Duck or grouse?
Answers on a postcard



Vibrant: Ozzie sunset

»» Central Australia

Want to do what Maxwell did? Here's how you can... **let's go**

»» GETTING THERE

Flights from London to Adelaide, that return from Darwin to London, start from around £700 with comparison companies like Expedia allowing you to use a 'multiple destinations' function. Major airlines such as BA and Qantas, who often offer the lowest fares, are also sports equipment friendly and will accept a well-packaged bicycle for little or no extra cost. My advice however would be to buy your bike, and any equipment you don't already own, when you get to Australia, as the prices are dramatically cheaper.

»» WHEN TO GO

Winter in South Australia begins at the end of April/early May. This is almost certainly the best time to begin your trip. Monsoon conditions in the tropical north will be drying up throughout May and early June, so as you move north the weather 'should' remain cool, and more importantly dry (nobody likes a soggy sleeping-bag). Attempting the trip during the summer months of Jan/Feb is not to be advised as temperatures rocket well into the hundreds and you will shrivel like a prune. If, by some miracle, you're made of ice and can drink sand, then go for it. Australian weather is notoriously savage though and not to be underestimated.

»» WHAT TO TAKE

Water. Litres and litres of it. This is without question the single most important accessory for a trip across the desert. Without enough of the stuff you're really in a pickle. The distance between watering holes can often be more than two days' ride so plenty of water and plenty of places to put it is essential. A couple of 2L platypus bags in the panniers plus four 1L bottles each, on the frame, served us fine.



Unfortunately the list of material necessities for a trip like this is fairly long, but that doesn't mean it has to be expensive. Equipment that only has to last you six weeks needn't be state-of-the-art. So, unless you plan to start a new life as a long distance bicycle tourist, forging a path into the darkest recesses of the earth, it's best to buy cheap. But tyres, padded shorts and sunglasses are worth spending a few bob extra on, as you don't want to end up blinded and blistered by the side of the road trying to fix yet another pesky puncture.

Oh, and one more absolute essential: a hat with a fly-net attachment. The old Aussie classic with the dangling corks just won't cut the custard. The flies in those parts are ruthless, steadfast and unyielding and they love more than anything to gorge themselves on the eye, nose and ear juice of sweaty cyclists, so be prepared. In conjunction with the fly-net a

sense of humour is also essential when dealing with the flies, and the Aussis.

»» MAPS

The first 500km of the crossing between Adelaide and Port Augusta are the most challenging with regards to navigation, although they're still not actually challenging. You might on occasion come up against a choice of direction, but nothing that can't be negotiated using a standard road map. These are cheap and easy to pick up in Adelaide. I recommend ripping out the pages that you need and laminating them for easy access (hello sailor!), practicality and weight saving.

Once you set off down the Stuart Highway at Port Augusta, that's it for 2,500km, same road, same direction, all the way to the finish. Your mental compass will more than suffice. One crucial thing though is a camping guide containing the details of, and distances between, towns and rest stops. Again, these can be easily purchased in Adelaide.

»» TOP TIP

Although we didn't encounter many dangerous beasts during our trip, they are out there, so my recommendation would be to slip a shoe lace through the zips in your tent each night, and knot it tight, just in case a curious critter comes sniffing around looking for a cosy place to kip.

