

Australia's Outback

# THE WORLD'S LONGEST SHORTCUT





**I'd commented to Lisa that I wanted a 'big' ride. "I need some dirt, sand, raw beauty, and a little danger. Well, just enough to shake me up a little," I'd continued naively. I should have known better.**

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Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas

**W**e are perched on the northeastern coast of the world's sixth largest nation and biggest island, as well as one of oldest landmasses on the planet—Australia. At a gas station in the town of Mackay, Lisa tops off the fuel tanks while I check the bikes over. Nearby, the Coral Sea pounds the beach as a stream of boats head out to the Great Barrier Reef. At \$250 per person, this excursion is out of our budget.

The air carries a salty tang. A warm dry breeze lulls our senses, but it does little to distract me from the building knot of anxious excitement that's growing in my stomach. Ahead is a long and unforgiving off-road route—the "World's Longest Shortcut." These 2,600 miles across Australia take in uninhabited desert and challenging terrain, and they will see us traverse this vast continent from coast to coast. We're here to motorcycle the real Australia, the primeval interior where walk-about legends take root in the blood-red earth, and the land whispers to those who listen. We're headed into the Outback.

We are southwest of Mackay, and Lisa's F 650 GS belts out a hefty "blat, blat, blat" as she eases off the gas, applies the brakes, and pulls to a stop. Six large kangaroos leap in unison across the Peak Downs Highway. The large male at the rear throws us a suspicious stare before disappearing into the tall grass on the other side. "We're going to have to be very careful of this particular hazard," I yell to Lisa.

We're looking at a straight piece of tar that stretches out of sight. Fields of sun-bleached brush grass stretch out under a cloudless sky. After heading west for five hours, we meet the Gregory Development Road and turn south, grateful for the interruption. In the small town of Clermont, we cruise the short main street and stop to refill our water packs; we're already parched. The little wooden-decked provisions store looks like it would have 50 years ago. Inside, the beaten 1950's Coca-Cola fridge is overflowing with chilled bottled water. Handing over our cash, we quickly fill our water-sacks.

Jim, a long-distance trucker sporting a thick dusty beard, ancient jeans, and a faded-orange safety shirt, is outside.

"Struth mate. You're ready for an adventure, eh?" asks the inquisitive truckie (truck driver) pointing to the motorcycles.

"We're riding down to Perth across the Outback," Lisa answers.

"You be careful out there. That place wants ya dead. Ah, heck, young fella, good on ya. Mind the roos. Ya'll be right," Jim adds with a dry chuckle.

"I think we've just met Crocodile Dundee's dad," Lisa comments to me with a smile.

**The Outback Has Teeth**

West of town, the tar ends abruptly. With a thump, we drop to the loose gravel track. With our tire pressures lowered, we pick up speed. On the pegs, I squeeze on the throttle, and my rear wheel drifts out before I straighten for the next long left.

Two hours of glass (shiny ball-bearing) gravel later, the air is pungent as we speed through a grove of silver-barked eucalyptus trees. Clearing the trees, I plow into a deep wash of dust and rocks and instantly shift my weight to compensate. In my mirror, I can see Lisa's bike is sideways, her rear wheel sliding out violently. In a split sec-

ond, she's thrown forward as her 650GS high sides before smacking the ground hard and flipping. Lisa's pinned under the front left fuel tank. Adrenaline pumps as I spin around and rush back to her.

Lisa's yelling as fuel erupts from a split line, drowning her helmet, goggles, and eyes in burning gasoline. She kicks herself free, yanks off her helmet, and pours our recently bought water over her face and into her bloodshot eyes. We lift the bike upright and instantly spot that the punctured rear tire is partially peeled off the rim. While Lisa continues to flush out her eyes, I straighten her bent gear shifter and re-attach her broken handguard with a zip tie. She's shaken but otherwise OK. It's another 50 minutes before we're clicking through the gears and once again cruising west.

Later, camped near the tiny Outback settlement of Alpha, the embers from our small campfire glow red, and we're witnessing one of the most brilliant star-filled skies we can remember. The Aussie Outback has given us fair warning of what's to come.

**Patches, Potholes, and Parks**

We joined the Landsborough Highway, a long, worn stretch of asphalt, three hours ago. As we cruise northwest, we form a new plan—we'll aim to reach the Central West Queensland town of Winton where we can get a new tire for Lisa. We only



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hope the three heavy patches will hold until then. On the north of town, we set up camp at the Matilda Country Tourist Park. Across the road, Steve, the local tire guy, pulls out a very used, but rideable Conti TKC 80. Lisa's grin is a sure sign of her approval, and Steve jokes about my repair as he mounts the new rubber to the rim.

**"Good on ya, Young Fella"**

For two days, we've rubbed shoulders with Winton's locals. The rustic wooden bar in the Mens Room (yep, men only) at the Tatt (Tattersalls Hotel), has made an exception for Lisa and we enjoy easy conversation with the regulars. Bill and Murray, two weather-beaten cattlemen, nightly sip on cold amber beer after a 12-hour shift of sun-baked ranching. We learn that Winton has a rich history as the birthplace of both the folklore tune Waltzing Matilda, and QANTAS, the world's second oldest airline.

**Highways of Blood and Fur**

By 6 a.m., we're loading the bikes in a swarm of black flies. Back on the dry, flat Kennedy Development Road, our day is long and hot. Roadkill is a sad fact of Outback life, but the carnage is shocking. We've also been warned about the road-

trains, the trucks that pull up to five trailers behind them. Someone should have warned the roos. East of Middleton, we slow and carefully skirt the carcasses of 12 kangaroos killed "domino style" when a train tore through the group.

Slowing, we peel off the tar, and our wheels spin on the rocky dirt tracks. We negotiate a steep incline to the top of Cawnpore Lookout where we set up camp near a tin-roofed sun shelter. Our rocky vista glows orange as the sun sets, and we prepare our evening meal. Tomorrow, the real dirt begins.

**Unwelcome Neighbors**

At sunrise in the hamlet of Boulia, we fill our fuel tanks to the brim. The jolt of handing over \$205 for gas wakes us both up. The fuel here in Australia has been some of the most expensive we found in the world; the remoteness of the Outback pushes that cost up even further. With our gas tanks full, we need to take care of our other fluid necessity, water, and pack a whopping 13.5 gallons. We're going to feel that extra weight.

We pass the metal sign for Fence Creek, and 4.5 miles outside Boulia we stop by the large faded wooden sign that reads "Wel-

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come to the Donohue Highway." The motorcycles squirm in the soft, plowed sand track that is the Donohue. Pulling over, we deflate the tires and rush to get moving again before we roast. My bike's thermometer reads 123 degrees. We're keeping a good speed in fourth and fifth gear but dehydrating fast, and we're struggling to ride and drink simultaneously. "I'm done," I yell to Lisa. Amid a shrub-strewn landscape, a copse of trees to my right will provide some shade and a good spot for the night. Within 20 minutes, we've unloaded and set up camp. Lisa's cutting vegetables for dinner, and we place collected rocks in a circle

to retain the small fire we cook on. We've been rehydrating since we stopped and are feeling more alert. Suddenly, I blurt out an obscenity as I stare beyond Lisa to the 10-foot snake slithering its way through the grass toward us. A few pokes with a stick chase it away. Back at our campfire, we are both now keeping our eyes peeled for other unwanted visitors.

**The Plenty**

Refreshed from a great night's sleep, a full breakfast, and a pot of strong coffee, we are back on the Donohue and instantly on the pegs to deal with long washes of very

deep sand. Lisa's controlled application of the throttle keeps her straight and upright as her bike's back end snakes and weaves. It's two hours before we cross the border from Queensland into the Northern Territory and start our leg on one of Australia's most notorious routes, the Plenty Highway. The guidebooks list the Plenty as 4x4 only. We've learned not to become complacent; the track tugs on our concentration as it transitions from rock and bulldust (a super fine red dust) to formed earth. We've only passed two vehicles in the last three days, but we're forced to swerve into the verge to avoid a truck now steaming toward us. We barrel into the dense cloud created by our recent road-hogging visitor. With zero visibility, we hope that there is nothing in our path. Twenty seconds later, we emerge safely.

This country is mind-boggling; the federal Australian Territory of the Northern Territory (NT) is a staggering 520,902 square miles but is still only the third largest territory in Australia. NT is, however, home to some of the most iconic locations in Australia: Alice Springs, Ayers Rock or Uluru (indigenous name), and the Olgas to name but a few. The first sign for fuel since we left Boulia (280 miles ago) has us detouring right. We hand over \$170, and we're not even empty. This route is as much a test of mental fortitude as it is a test of riding skill. By late afternoon, we've been motoring eight hours on a wide-cut corrugated and sandy track through a relatively featureless landscape.

Exhausted, we stop near the dry Arthur Creek bed to camp, eat, sleep, and dream of green pastures.

**Alice, Alice, who in the world is Alice?**

It's been two days of the same since Arthur Creek. The tar began abruptly ten minutes ago, and we are now cruising into the geographical middle of Australia, better known as the Red Center. On the Stuart Highway north of Alice Springs, we pit-stop for a quick photo at the Tropic of Capricorn.

Straddling the Todd River and cozying up to the MacDonnell ranges, Alice Springs has passed into folklore legend. This region has been home to Aboriginal communities for thousands of years and home to the Arrernte people long before European explorers founded a settlement here in 1871. At 25,186 today, the population makes up 12 percent of NT's entirety!

**Rainbow Valley**

Three days of Alice's malls, aboriginal galleries, and air-conditioned cafés were a nice interlude but not what we're here for. Restocked, we are again on the move. South of Alice, we pull over and gulp water; my thermometer reads 128 degrees. This has been the longest time that Alice has ever gone without rainfall, not a drop

for 157 days. Mark, the owner of the Stuart Caravan & Cabin Tourist Park, where we'd stayed in Alice, suggests we camp at Rainbow Valley. Some 46 miles south we turn off the Stuart Highway, and within seconds we're battling to negotiate the very deep sand of this narrow track down to the valley. As we reach a clearing at the valley entrance, our mouths drop. Rising from the cracked and salt-encrusted claypan, the multi-colored sandstone bluffs rise like ancient battlements in shades of ochre, orange, and purple. We set up camp as dark low clouds eerily form. The natural color-and-light show we're privy to for the next two hours is glorious. To our delight, a gentle shower creates a rainbow over the valley; and in the distance, bolts of lightning crackle through the air.

**Monoliths in the Desert**

We skirt the southerly flanks of the West MacDonnell National Park before we pick the smaller Outback tracks south and again join the Stuart Highway. Orange, Maloney, and Five Mile Creek are in our rearview mirrors. With more than 1,300 miles to Perth, we have to pick up speed. We scoff a couple of burgers and cold cokes at the

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# Facts & Information

Mount Ebenezer Roadhouse before throwing our tired bodies back on the bikes. Flying through 140 miles, we're cruising easily mid afternoon. Our fatigue is replaced with a childlike excitement. In the distance, the formidable hulking shape of Australia's best-known landmark begins to dominate the horizon.

among the Kata Tjuta (the indigenous name for The Olgas). The domes, a set of 36 gigantic formations, are believed to have originated from a similar time as Uluru. Cruising among these incredible and ancient orange rocks, we feel but tiny specks passing through time.

### A Blanket of Stars

We have pushed hard through four days of long, sandy washboard roads, and it is our last night in the Outback. Camping near the Malcolm Dam Nature Reserve, we prepare our meal as a family of pelicans breeze in and set about their evening chores. A cool breeze gives us a few hours of respite from the punishing arid heat of the last few weeks. As daylight disappears, we marvel silently at one of the most spectacular night skies either of us has ever seen--the Outback's swan song. We listened for the real Australia; now and then we heard the land whisper. We'll see you again, Outback.

Tomorrow we'll be in Perth.

GPS files are available for download in each digital issue purchased or included in your subscription. Log in at [www.roadrunner.travel](http://www.roadrunner.travel).

Ayers Rock, or Uluru, rises 1,141 feet into the sky from the flat desert surface. It also pushes down approximately 1.9 miles below the surface. We spend two days walking and exploring this colossal UNESCO World Heritage site. For the past 10,000 years, Aborigines have considered themselves protectors of this ancient, sacred, coarse orange sandstone monolith. On the eastern corner of Uluru, we rest in the shade of trees close by and photograph the ancient aboriginal hand paintings that adorn the rock. At 2.2 miles long and 1.2 miles wide, Uluru emits an otherworldly charm. We fall easily under the spell of serenity and timelessness here.

Pushing on toward Perth, we spend an afternoon on the new asphalt that snakes

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Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

### In General

The land down under (aka Oz) is the smallest continent and one of the world's wealthiest countries. Its population density is among the lowest on Earth. Most Australians live along the southeastern coastline as desert (the Outback) covers most of the land. An expensive country to visit, fuel costs range from \$6.50 in the cities to \$10 per gallon in the Outback. The Outback is home to venomous snakes, poisonous spiders, and hungry crocs. English is the main language, and the majority of the population is Christian. The Australian dollar is relatively equivalent to the U.S. dollar. When traveling in the Outback, cash is king. Many roadhouses (which also provide fuel) do not have ATMs and cannot accept credit cards. Despite a lot of climatic variation, "The Dry" lasts roughly from April to September and "The Wet" from October to March. The best time to travel in the Outback is during the winter, June to August.

### How to Get There

U.S. citizens must pay \$20 to apply to the Electronic Travel Authority ([www.eta.immi.gov.au](http://www.eta.immi.gov.au)). For visits longer than three months,

you'll need a visa. Most flights to Australia are from the west coast of the USA. A carnet de passage is required for your own vehicle, which will be subjected to a very strict quarantine inspection.

### Food & Lodging

No need to eat "bush tucker" during your time in the Outback! Roadhouses providing fuel, rooms, basic food, water, and camping are found (albeit infrequently) along the routes. Costs are generally higher in the Outback. A basic double room is \$100 to \$150, a meal is \$15 to \$20, and camping is \$25. There are many places to wild camp.

### Roads & Biking

Traffic drives on the left side of well-maintained, high-quality pavement near population centers. Outback routes are dirt, gravel, and sand. They are not regularly maintained. Be aware of kangaroos that suddenly bound in front of you! Check on route conditions and distances between fuel and water supplies before heading off. Permits are required to travel through Aboriginal land.

### Contact Information

- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice: [www.travel.state.gov/travel](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel)
- General travel information for the Outback: [www.australia.com/outback](http://www.australia.com/outback)
- Information on the Outback route "The Worlds Longest Short-cut" [www.outbackway.org.au](http://www.outbackway.org.au)

### Books & Maps

- *Lonely Planet Central Australia* by Meg Worby and Charles Rawlings-Way, ISBN 978-1741797732, \$24.99
- Hema Maps, Australia's Outback Adventure Map 2012, ISBN 978-1865005959, \$14.95

### Motorcycles & Gear

- 1999 BMW R 1150 GSA
- 2002 BMW F 650 GS
- Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega Pro Jacket and Pants: Touratech Companero
- Helmets: Airoh Aviator
- Boots: MX boots -Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10

