

## A Fair Dinkum Tour

Endless kilometres of blood-red single corrugated tracks, fine stemmed palms for as far as the eye can see, thick clouds of suffocating dust, hills, rocks, and mud. This was a trip on which I would soon discover that this is in fact an integral part of Trailbike riding in Outback Australia North Queensland.

Dave Williams came to greet me at the airport. A motor cross and enduro racer, he has finally been able to turn his life-long hobby into a job. Dave is the owner of **Fair Dinkum Bike Tours**, in Cairns, Far North Queensland, which specialises in off-road Trail Bike tours through the Australian outback and Cape York region.

Despite increasing closure of many tracks, Dave's intimate knowledge of the region guarantees tours through completely unpopulated territory. Often he follows tracks forged by the early pioneers, re-discovered by researching historical records, meeting with property owners or simply by word of mouth.

That these tracks are not just a simple 'ride in the park' is something I very quickly discovered on the first day of our tour. As we ride north of Cairns and onto the HoChi Min Track – the only way to Mt. Carbine for the early settlers – I begin to regret my earlier persistence of not being taken on any "old beginner's track"! Not only is the view across remote Savanna countryside truly spectacular, so too is the trail which leads you there. Weaving between cliff faces on a path, which is not much wider than the tyres of my bike, a true sense of accomplishment is felt when you finally get the chance to take your eyes off the hair-raising track. Dave can obviously see what I am thinking.

"You wanted something special Robert – you've got it", he smirks. "And be careful that your bike doesn't slip down the side there, we'll never get it out of there!"

I had greater concerns about my own well being let alone that of his bike. Particularly taking into consideration the track we had been following before this one. It seemed to be quite harmless but little did I know. By the time we arrived at Mt. Carbine around mid-day I had a number of decent falls behind me. While Dave attempted to straighten out the radiator on the bike and buy petrol from the locals, we had lunch as I attended to my left knee with an ice-block.

It dawns on me that traversing the Australian Outback is only very remotely related (if at all!) to riding our German Motor cross tracks which I had done so many times before. The afternoon confirms this for me. The next leg through Savanna country looks quite good to begin with, but I proceed with much caution as Dave throws me another helpful hint.

"Look out for those hidden Termite mounds in the grass; they will knock you off the bike."

I am remembering Dave's talk from that morning, "ride at your own pace, don't try to keep up with me, stay out of the dust." So I ride slowly, very slowly, in fact so slow that Dave begins to worry that he is going to lose me.

"You have to go a little faster than that" he urges. "Otherwise I really will lose you back here, and no one knows where we are! If you can't see me any more, then make sure you follow my dust trail."

The track leads up a steep hill now and the surface is made up of large chunks of sharp rocks. I am nervous and keep stalling the engine – not much fun on a kick-start bike! I am not unfit but I lose my breath pretty quickly. Dave shows me a way to use my clutch, which helps stabilise the motor and stop it from stalling.

"By the time this tour is over you'll get the hang of it", Dave grins.

We ride through hills and have some amazing views of the Australian wildlife.

Suddenly we arrive in front of an old tin shack. Only 50 years ago people were still panning for Gold in these parts. The track gets a bit easier – Dave starts doing wheelies to show how bored he is. As we arrive at Lakeland Downs in the late afternoon I am completely exhausted. Friday night is BBQ day at the roadhouse. Other than us there are about 25 other locals at the bar, I had my first beer and didn't know what it tasted like so I had another! This was only Day 1 I look forward to the rest of the tour with anticipation.

Summary of Day 1: 290km travelled in total; of this 240km off road, a bent radiator, a broken speedo, bent handle bars and plenty of scratches on the bike, a torn off boot buckle. Don't forget my bruised knee which probably saved the bike from major damage, but which would be relieved the next day by a sore shoulder. Dave's outlook for tomorrow: It will be about the same as today. Well then....

After breakfast Dave gives me a plastic bag which at a glance contains our lunch, "Where we are going today, there is absolutely nothing", he remarks to emphasise the importance of the bags' contents. We also fill the 3 litre water packs on our backs. Then we leave for May Town – a deserted gold town in the Palmer River Gold Fields. In its hay-day more gold was found in this area than in any other around the world. Today the only remnants of this town are a small section of the main road, the skeletal remains of the bakery & a tin shed. It is almost impossible to imagine that there was a time when as many as 60,000 people lived in the area.

Growing old, it seems however, was not a trend in those days. Judging by the grave stones, contemplation of the 'after life' already began at the age of 40. Particularly handicapped were the 40,000 or so Chinese who, on the account of their nutritious diets, became a popular meal for the Aborigines.

We stopped in the shade of the tin hut for lunch. Dave begins to tell me a story about a man who lived on a remote beach in Cape York. After living there for 5 or 6 years, he figures out the plane wreck breaking up in the surf on the beach is from WWII. Out of curiosity he begins to research the aircraft's final fate;

An Australian pilot had seen three stranded Americans on the beach during a routine flight. He flies to Cooktown and strips out the instruments in the aircraft to create enough space to pick up one man at a time. As he attempts to pick up the third and last man, the sand – which had become soft due to high tide – caused the landing gear to become bogged. The aircraft flips and remains upside down on the beach. The remaining American is unable to free the pilot. The pilot drowns as the tide rises again.

During his research this man from Cape York discovers the identity of that pilot: it was his own father who he had been told died in the Pacific war. He had lived next to this wreck for years in which his father had died, without a single clue!

Dave pre-warned me about our afternoon ride; "We will ride the original Coach Road, It will be very rocky and in parts there will be some really steep inclines. Keep a lookout for sharp rocks, the last thing we need out here is a flat tyre!" He was not joking. The steep ascending trail is deeply scarred by knee-deep erosion channels. I ask myself where to plant my feet in case the motor stalls but simply decide that it can't. Just moments later it happens, I get caught merely a metre away from the top of a climb.

Starting the engine and continuing is not an option here, I have to let the machine roll. And roll it does, but not alone! Another attempt and with great relief I make it. I am exhausted yet again. My head is thumping as I drain another litre out of my Camelbak. It feels crazy enough to be going on this track by motorbike, but it is even crazier to believe that early settlers travelled on these trails in Ox carts and pack horse. Dave tells me that ropes had to be used to pull the carts up the last section and logs wedged underneath every metre to prevent slippage.

Our decent is steep and thankfully smooth, but then comes the sand. At first there are only small spots but they get longer and deeper. "Just don't accelerate too suddenly", I remind myself. But it isn't long before I underestimate a corner and go down...another one bites the dust!! We ride on through two more creek beds and finally reach our destination.

Not another soul in sight at Jawolbinna Bush camp, but a cosy little camp fire greets us. Paul arrives in a 4WD just as the sun is setting. He is one of those Aussies who loves the bush for its remoteness, but definitely isn't shy of a good yarn. He offers to take us to see some Aboriginal Rock Paintings. Each armed with a beer we climb aboard the 4x4. The ride is comparable to that of a roller-coaster – only much slower.

We crawl through creek beds and weave through the scrub. My view varies quite dramatically from tree-trunks, to ground, to sky, until we finally arrive at the base of a hill and begin to climb on foot. It is worth every bump: These rock painting are the best I have ever seen in this region. Intense colours and crisp lines define these ancient shapes as though they had been painted yesterday.

We go back to the camp, Paul is cooking. We have a kind of Australian braised beef cooked in a camp oven in the open fire." Is the meat hopefully not some of the road kill which often lies on the side of the track" I ask. "Clean skins" says Paul. These are wild cattle that haven't been branded. I decided not to think about how it was killed.

The food was great and was surprised how good it tasted. After dinner we have a visit from a wild horse, Paul thinks it was a ex station horse, He gets his feed of white bread and then disappears. No flies on that horse. I look forward to a bed and a good sleep.

We cover 320 klm for the day and I understand why Dave advises to wear bike pants under the Nylons. As we are preparing to leave the next morning some wallabies are eating the grass. After an hour and a half ride we are in Laura. Petrol station, post office and super market are all in the one building. The original pub was burnt down last year and a temporary bar is operating.

We get petrol and ride to the old Laura homestead which was then the first cattle station in the area in 1875 which is not used anymore. There is the original big wooden homestead which is a museum, a butchers hut, a house for a blacksmith and some ringers huts. The floor of the house was made of a mixture of termite hills and cattle blood. In the butchers hut the salted pieces of meat were left hanging until they were dry there was no cooling. It is difficult to imagine how in the pioneer times they built a station in no mans land. To take the cattle thousands of kilometres to the station which was closed for months during the wet season.

We continue riding towards Cooktown, the cattle are crossing the track I am thankful to Dave that he told me the night before that there was once an aggressive bull which he had to chase away. Light rain starts which together with the red dust creates a glaze on my goggles, at midday we arrive at Cooktown. I am happy about a morning without a fall off the bike. We visit the "Croc Shop" Laura the owner lived for some years on the banks of the Wenlock River and the Jardine, in the middle of Cape York. She survived a bite of a king brown snake next to the Taipan it is one of the worlds most toxic snakes. Her book Paradise found is very good to read she describes how a python once tried to swallow the arm of a sleeping biker, when it reach the shoulder it couldn't go any further, in the meantime the biker wakes up and reacts with a panic attack.

We naturally want to talk to Laura to hear more stories about the region but she had left for a few days. The Jardine River got its name from the early settler, Frank Jardine who built with his sons "Somerset Station" on the tip of Cape York. The Aborigines called him "The White Ghost". They tried many times to kill him without success, he was too clever and escaped each time. In the afternoon we have our goal to ride to the Lions Den Pub which is one of Australia's oldest pubs. Will it still not be a day without a fall? These are questions that I should not ask myself.

Shortly after leaving Cooktown Dave finds a track running parallel to the road, it looks quite good. After a few kilometres he is stopped at a creek crossing, we have to ride into the creek and then up the other side. I ride into the creek but I fail to get up the other side and I stall the engine. For the first time in my life I am stuck in a ravine. The situation takes a difficult exit, Dave ends up having to ride my bike out. The next difficulty with the next creek is not far away. It is large and the slopes go slowly up but there are knee deep washouts, to ride there is only a wheel track.

Shortly before the top of the hill I slide into a washout and fall. I can't say whether the noise came from the clutch lever or from my shoulder. The thing is that the clutch lever is broken and my shoulder hurts me. Dave changes the clutch lever and tries to find out what happened with my shoulder. He says "a couple of Bundy's and you wont care". We continue on despite my pain. The Lions Den is an earthy pub without windows, it is on the Bloomfield track between Cape Tribulation and Cooktown. After a much needed shower and nursing my sore shoulder we enjoy a beer on the wooden balcony of the pub.

We meet a few riders with Cape York Motor Cycle Adventures and they say that three riders are still missing. As I heard later, one has a broken collar bone and one a broken wrist. They don't seem too concerned about the riders, only about drinking beer. I am a little shocked with the casual attitude. That night we have a visit from a bush rat which tries to get into Dave's backpack. It makes quite a lot of noise as Dave catches it and lets it go outside.

After breakfast we ride to a closed tin mine, it is reported that this was the richest tin mine in the world. Due to the fact that the tin prices in the world went down the demand to continue was not profitable. From the mine we ride a track up through the bushland where we have a wonderful view of both sides of the valley.

We ride the north side of the Creb track. I notice that my tyres are not good anymore, in the last days I could see that the tread had diminished. Dave's comments "that is normal the terrain wears the bikes out" I have a better understanding of the prices to rent motor cycles. The services are extreme but vital, each 1000 kilometre's would mean new tyres, each 3000 kilometres new chain and sprockets, every 500 kilometres an oil change, on top of that any parts that get broken. We have lunch in an unexpected road café, when we get off our body armour and shirts the seventy year old waitress applauds. She yells "you have to take more off".

It seems the life here keeps one young. We try once more to control ourselves. As a dessert we have some bush tucker, these are tamarind fruit, which tastes sour but in the heat is just fine. We ride the coast road to Cape Tribulation, Dave warns me to stay on the left hand side of the road. Ten years ago the late jungle

lodge could only be reached by 4wd, now it has become a small community.

The Daintree- romantic has gone, but the kilometre long beach ( one of the most beautiful in the world) is still there. In the evening we meet in the bar and have a cold beer and sit back and enjoy the rainforest. In the night it rained a bit, we want to try the Creb track, In the morning Dave warns me that it will be very slippery. We go via the zig zag track, after a long climb I take my time. First I don't want to risk anything and also I want to have a look at the views. I notice the back tyre has slowly reached its end. The fauna is rainforest, the view is again fantastic.

We arrive on the Creb track, it is drier than we expected, however it becomes serious on a steep hill, there is only red clay exactly what Dave warned me about and it is full of washouts, it doesn't look good. I remember that Dave suggested that I ride just off to the side of the real track which would give better grip. I try it and can immediately ride down the hill, on the other side is another hill, when I ride up Dave is waiting "here it is very steep and very slippery, ride slowly, use the front and back brake". I find it not so bad, a few hills further on there is no possibility to avoid the red mud.

On one of the tracks I decide to go for the left side of the track and I go into a washout the bike gets sideways and slides completely away it is too steep to start I then turn around and try once again, now it works. A few hills later Dave is waiting at a river crossing, I say to him " I met some friends and with talking I forgot the time". I feel better riding in the mud than with the rocks.

On another section Dave waits for me at a big mud hole. It is not possible to know how deep the pool is, he tries the track on the left and points for me to follow, he then has to cross to the right, how can he put the bike on the back wheel and ride to the right where it is dry is remarkable and myself? I have to do this as well. We arrive at the Daintree crossing and ride on to Mossman and then to Mount Molloy for lunch at Rudy's Café, we order two hamburgers Dave warns me of the size. When I see them arrive I understand what he means, they are so big one can hardly eat them.

After lunch all I want to do now is sleep however we have more trails to ride, We ride to Wetherby Station. The grass is very green and then once more into the rain forest. The vegetation is again tropical and the track narrow. I ride through a green tunnel, all the time bush branches touch me and get stuck now and then I get holes in my shirt, I think that it is a wait-a-while vine, Dave confirms it at the next stop. I don't want to think about what could happen if it got caught around your throat, one gets my left hand and damages my glove. We are now on a small river, Dave says " we are on the old road from Kuranda to Julatten, I try to imagine how it looked in the past, it is not an easy riding track.

We come to the road where everything started five days ago. When we arrive back in Cairns I have a sense of achievement, Dave has taught me a lot in regards to riding a motorcycle, I have visited places where very few people go, seen amazing wildlife, my helmet is now a bit scared, my shirt pants and gloves cannot be worn again, but already I am thinking of when I can do another adventure with Dave from **Fair Dinkum Bike Tours in Cairns.**

As the Australian term goes "he's a good bloke".

Story by  
Robert Baumert  
Frankfurt Germany.