




MAIN: Roaring Meg River varies between wheel-deep and waist-deep, so it's a three-man carry to get the bikes across. Slippery rocks on the bottom and a long distance across will have you working up a sweat in no time.

1. 25km from Cairns and it's time to leave the tar behind and hit the dirt at Black Mountain.

2. Geoff and Steve get down and dirty for a puncture repair.

3. Pay attention to the Warning signs – the crocs up north are hungry!





THE THERMOMETER showed nine degrees as I climbed into the **TRAIL ZONE** Traffic transporter and steered my way into Sydney's peak-hour grind for the commute across town to the airport. The rain was thumping down and the news on the radio of recessions, bikie wars and plummeting car sales was equally gloomy: if ever there was a time to be getting away from it all, this was it.

Three hours later the Captain's announcement that we had commenced our descent into Cairns woke me from a restful slumber. I gazed out the window of the Qantas silver bird and there below were the clear blue waters and pristine white sandy beaches of the Barrier Reef. Instantly the late-autumn misery of downtown Sydney was but a distant memory.

After a textbook landing we rumbled up to the gate to de-plane, where the warm 29 degree air of the Queensland tropics bathed you the instant you set foot on the tarmac.

It had been over two years since I'd been to Cairns for a dirt bike ride but right away the memories came flooding back. The heat, the humidity, the rainforest, the swollen creeks, the raging rivers, the greasy bog holes, the wait-a-while vines, the crocs and the Cape.

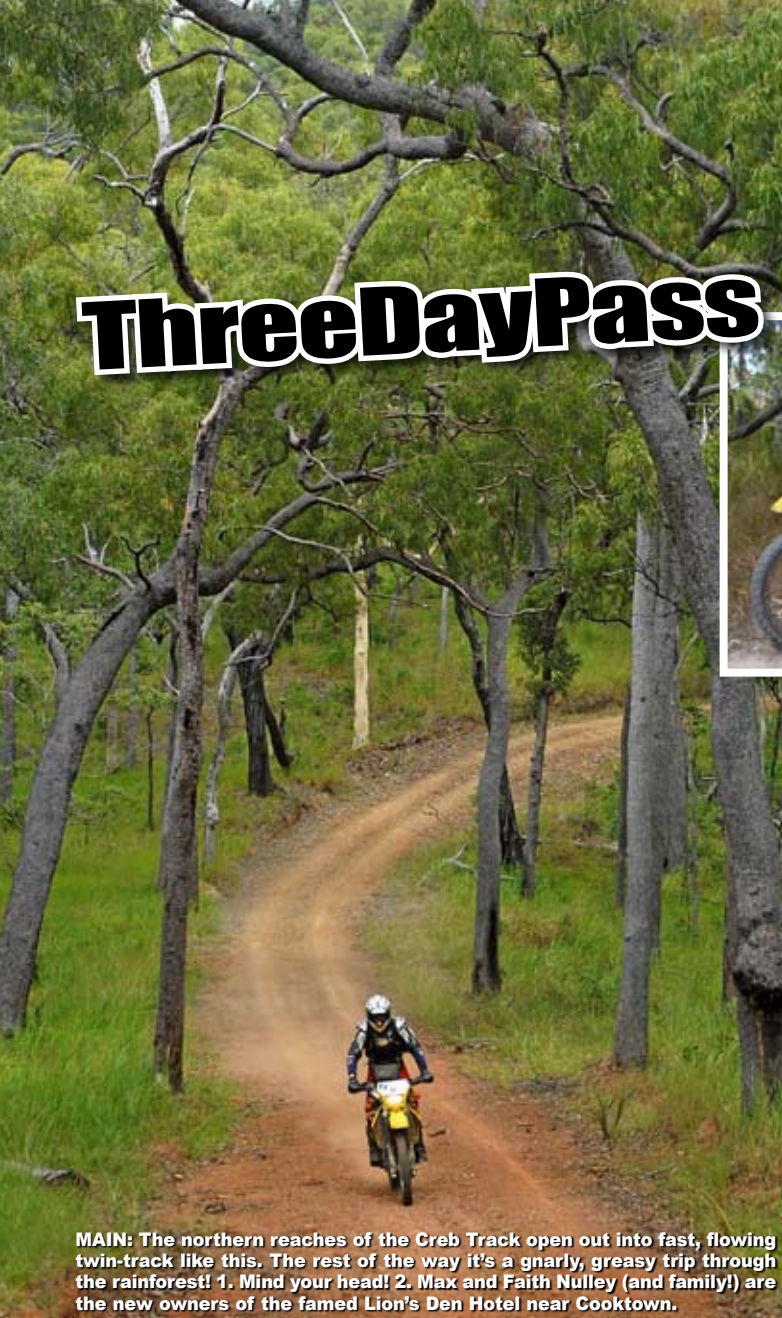
I grabbed my gearbag and wandered outside to await my lift. With a three-day pass from TZ HQ, I knew this trip was gonna be good!

ThreeDayPass

When your heart and soul is crying out for a break from the big smoke, negotiate a three-day pass from the missus and jet north to Cairns with the boys for a Fair Dinkum adventure. Before you know it you'll be wheel-deep in the ride of a lifetime!

Story & Photography: Clubby

ThreeDayPass



MAIN: The northern reaches of the Creb Track open out into fast, flowing twin-track like this. The rest of the way it's a gnarly, greasy trip through the rainforest! 1. Mind your head! 2. Max and Faith Nulley (and family!) are the new owners of the famed Lion's Den Hotel near Cooktown.

▶ THE CREB TRACK: WHAT'S THE FUTURE HOLD?

LIKE many iconic riding areas, the Creb Track between the Daintree River and the Bloomfield River is under threat of lock-out. In fact, the current status of the track is closed due to Ergon Energy (formerly the Cairns Regional Electricity Board) decommissioning the power line that runs the length of the track. The power line and poles are to be removed and the track closure is indefinite until the work is completed. Ergon Energy has had responsibility for upkeep and maintenance of the track, at a claimed cost of around \$250,000 per year. The track allowed access for Ergon maintenance vehicles to service the power lines that supplied electricity to Cooktown. However the track was seasonally closed to traffic during the wet season and when the track was deemed a hazard due to wet weather. When open, the Creb Track is also used by motorcycles, 4WDs and the general public for recreational activities, along with approved tour operators. A new power supply to Cooktown following the inland highway has now been installed, resulting in the Daintree line being made redundant. Ergon Energy has thus elected to remove the old power lines/poles and the track is then to be handed back to the Cairns Regional Council and the Wet Tropics management authority. The Regional council is now considering whether to fund upkeep of the track for continued vehicular access, or to close the track to all vehicles and make it a dedicated walking track. If you're serious about keeping the Creb Track open, view the www.fairdinkumbiketours.com.au web site for advice on how you can voice your concerns to the Cairns Regional Council and Wet Tropics. Do it!

HAPPY HOUR STARTS NOW

A few cool brews and a slap-up feed on the waterfront Esplanade in Cairns was my first point of order, as I hooked up with my host for the next three days, Dave Williams from Fair Dinkum Bike Tours Cairns. Dave is one of two trailbike tour operators in Cairns running a fleet of hire bikes and guided rides up and down the famed Cape York peninsula to the north-east tip of Australia.

A ride to the Tip is still very much on the wish-list of dirt bike riders not only in Australia, but from all corners of the world, and Dave admits the past few years



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have been good for business, as his 15-strong fleet of DR-Z400E hire bikes constantly shuttle riders up and down the Cape on the big-daddy eight-day Cairns to the Tip ride. But with the eight-dayer now priced at \$4,900 and the global economic situation starting to bite, Dave's seeing a shift in business this year.

"There's definitely more interest in the shorter rides now," Dave explains. "They're more affordable and people need less time away from work – a lot of people worry there will still be a job for them to come back to if they're away too long. So this year we're seeing a boom in popularity of the three-day and five-day rides. The shorter rides don't go all the way up to the Tip, but we can still pack in plenty of value for money and deliver a ride you won't soon forget."

That was music to my ears. I wanted a ride I wouldn't forget – bring it on!

OKAY BOYS, FOLLOW ME!

The Fair Dinkum HQ is just five minutes from downtown Cairns, and it's the kick-off point for Dave's rides. After signing-up, a safety briefing and meeting my fellow riders, I climbed aboard one of Dave's well maintained DR-Zs and followed the boys out into the traffic and onto the main highway north for the climb up and over

Watch out for horses, cows, dogs and pigs jumping out on the trail in front of you

the ranges to Kuranda, just 25km away. We made one right turn off the highway and instantly hit the dirt on the edge of Black Mountain forest, where Dave pulled us up for the first regroup.

To avoid any untoward consequences from bouts of 'first day fever', Dave warns us to look out for oncoming traffic – everywhere! – and then suggests the other thing that will stop us in our tracks is the dreaded 'wait-a-while' vine. We walk over into the edge of the rainforest and Dave carefully grasps a delicate vine, which on the underside is edged with razor-sharp teeth along its entire length.

"When this stuff grabs you, you'll know all about it!" Dave proclaims.

"And speaking of things to look out for, watch out for horses, cows, dogs and pigs jumping out on the trail – they'll come right out of the bush in front of you. And there's the cassowary birds – they're bigger than emus and if they've got chicks around, they'll attack if you get too close!"

Struth, I thought crocs were the only man-eaters up in the tropical north.

INTO THE RAINFOREST WE GO

Riding like a man who clearly knows the place like the back of his hand, Dave entertained us for the next three hours with a myriad of top-shelf trails and single-track through an assortment of lush green rainforest and moist savannah farmlands that included mud holes, wheel-deep ruts, creek crossings, hillclimbs and rickety log bridges.

With sweat pouring out of us and our stomachs crying for sustenance, we finally emerged out into huge fields of sugar cane and cruised into Mount Molloy

▶ WHEN YOU WANT TO GET FAIR DINKUM

TO VIEW the full range of Fair Dinkum Bike Tours Cairns rides, check out www.fairdinkumbiketours.com.au or call Dave Williams on (07) 4031 0540 or (0412) 950 192. The three-day ride featured in this story is priced at \$1,250, which includes bike hire, fuel, guide/sweep rider, accommodation and meals (however the helicopter flight at the Lion's Den Hotel is extra). All Dave's tours and prices are detailed on his web site, so check it out!



ThreeDayPass



▲ CHOPPER ZONE!

TO ADD an even bigger adrenaline rush to his dirt bike tours, Fair Dinkum's Dave Williams has teamed up with Bungie Scott Helicopters to offer helicopter flights during his overnight stops at the Lion's Den Hotel near Cooktown. Chopper pilot Bungie is a local legend with a massive 18,500 hours flight-time to his credit and will give you a flight you will never forget. I was pooping like a big black dog before the flight, but once you get up and get into it, it is an absolutely awesome experience that gives you an entirely different perspective of the surrounding country. Do yourself a favour and take the chopper flight – you won't regret it! – Clubby

for lunch, where steak sambos, cold drinks and friendly bar staff awaited our arrival. Kicking back on the pub verandah, watching the world go by – except there was pretty much nothing going by! – the cares and woes of the work-a-day world back in Sydney were a million miles away.

But then the tranquility was interrupted: "Okay you blokes, let's go!"

If there's one thing Fair Dinkum Dave is good at, it's keeping the pack moving. So before we could bid a proper farewell to the British backpacker bar maid, we saddled up and kept powering north to Mossman where we refuelled, then carried on to the Daintree River ferry crossing, then past Cape Tribulation and all the way north up the Bloomfield Track to the famed Lion's Den Hotel just short of Cooktown. Established in 1875, the Lion's Den is a step back in time, with its weathered timber walls, floor and bar and classic memorabilia.

New owners Max and Faith Nulley are the latest custodians of the Lion's Den's rich heritage and it is clearly in good hands. From Geelong, they started a round-Australia trip with the kids last year, got to the Lion's Den and promptly bought the place in a classic example of the ultimate lifestyle seachange. Max is a dirt bike rider and all-round top bloke, so rest assured you'll be well looked after.

LOOK, UP IN THE SKY!

Day two started off with a ride of a different kind: a chopper flight with local helicopter operator, Bungie Scott Helicopters (see panel at left). Bungie casually signalled his arrival by plonking his chopper straight down on the lawn at the side of the Lion's Den and before we knew it we were climbing aboard for a flight over the surrounding countryside. It was an absolute hoot and well worth the price of admission. If the chopper flight option is available on your Fair Dinkum tour, don't fret over the bucks – just pony up and do it!

Back on terra firma we geared up and climbed on the bikes for the ride back down to Cape Tribulation and our second overnight stop. After racking up 277km



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MAIN: The ruts in the rainforest are deep enough to swallow DR-Zs whole! 1. Are we having fun yet? Trail boss Dave clearly is; Geoff and Steve don't seem quite so sure! 2. Every now and then the ride opens out in lush green fields of sugar cane and farmland. 3. This was one sketchy river crossing where you had to carefully watch your every step. 4. The Bloomfield Track north of Cape Tribulation is littered with gorgeous creek crossings like this under the canopy of the rainforest.



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the first day, day two would be shorter at just 155km, but no less eventful.

First up came a trip to the tip of Mount Misery and back again, which is just south of the Lion's Den. It's a little-used access track to a communications tower at the top of the peak and the track packs everything from mud holes, swamp bogs, creek crossings, clay-tops, rainforest, wait-a-while and greasy red clay hillclimbs where the traction is dished out by the tea-spoon! By the time we'd made it to Mt Misery and back, every one of us had either been bogged, flogged, binned it or drawn blood from an attack of the man-eater wait-a-while vine!

Regrouping back on the Bloomfield Track, Dave pointed us south to Ayton for lunch, and then onto Bloomfield for fuel. We crossed the mighty concrete Bloomfield Causeway then soon turned into the bush again for a run up into the ranges toward China Camp and the Roaring Meg River. Dave wanted to check the depth of the river crossing, which we would have to make the next morning.

Located below Roaring Meg Falls, the river crossing at China Camp can be a tricky one. Fed by months of wet season tropical rains, it's always flowing fast and ranges from wheel-deep to waist-deep at the crossing.

"Hmm, we're going to get a little wet tomorrow morning," Dave offered with a sinister smile, before turning around and leading us back down to the Bloomfield Track and then down to Cape Tribulation and the famed PK's backpacker resort for our next overnight stop.

After two days of riding, the beers and the kangaroo schnitzel sure tasted good at PK's, as we kicked back and took in the sights and sounds of well-travelled backpackers at play – and play they do!

EARLY MORNING WAKE-UP CALL

Dave wanted an early start for our third and final day, so we were on the road by 8am and looping north back to Bloomfield, where we picked up the northern end of the revered Creb Track, which we followed south to China Camp, before having

to peel off and cross Roaring Meg River and then make our way back to Bloomfield. The Creb Track is a legendary piece of trail, but access to the gnarliest section between China Camp and the Daintree River is now more restricted than ever before (see panel page 52).

Still, the Roaring Meg River crossing gave us more than we bargained for, and even with three men to a bike and the rear wheel lifted high by a fence post under the swingarm, it was always touch-and-go as the slippery football-sized rocks on the river bottom did their best to send you tits-up. Carrying the bikes across was hot, humid and sweaty work, but when it was all done, there was nothing better than simply dumping yourself in the river and cooling off – and yes, we did check with Dave there were no crocs this high in the ranges.

Every one of us had drawn blood from an attack of the man-eater wait-a-while vine

THE LONG ROAD HOME TO REALITY

After drying off we geared up again and Dave set a course south back down the Bloomfield Track, retracing our steps to the Daintree River and Mossman, where we refueled and ate lunch before taking another sweet line-up of near endless single-track through Black Mountain forest and onto Kuranda. We made our final regroup where we had our first two days earlier, then cruised the 25km down the mountains on the black-top to Cairns.

Some 660km had rolled under our wheels in three days of dirt bike riding good times that had gone a long way to recharging this city slicker's batteries. Taking in the lush green sights, sounds and smells of the tropical north is a world away from Sydney's peak hour grind. So when you can wrangle yourself a three-day pass, go north to FNQ for a ride you won't soon forget.