

The longest ride

Cycling the Nullarbor takes courage and endurance but 24-year-old English adventurer Krista Bernard finds the rewards are unequalled

THEY said, "You must be keen!". And we were. With our push-bikes loaded to the helm we were about to set off across the Nullarbor Plain.

There were four of us, Julie, Dave, Ness and I, seeking out the solace of the desert and hoping to experience the freedom of complete self-sufficiency, venturing as far as possible into a world lost in a timelessness of its own.

For me, the decision to cycle across the Nullarbor had been spontaneous. My friends had been planning the trip for months and I had occasionally tossed around the idea of leaving my Hobart home to join them in their venture. A week before they were due to leave, I decided I had to go too. Winter had set in and there was nothing to keep me in that chilly place.

So a frantic week of preparation began and before I knew it, we were on the plane to Perth.

The plan was to cycle from Kalgoorlie to Adelaide on rough dirt tracks. We realised water would be a problem, as would food, because people and towns are few and far

between. However, we met two wonderful road-train drivers in Kalgoorlie who offered to do food drops for us as they drove their freight across the desert. We were also given a map which showed us where we could get water:

an Aboriginal community, a sheep station, a cattle station, a few small scattered railway towns and an old man Ziggy, who lived out in the sandhills. Even so, we still had to carry between eight and 16 litres of water each, making our loads heavy.

With our organising complete we were ready to leave. It was late and the sky was lit by a full moon. We felt as wild as werewolves. Adrenaline pumped through our bodies.

Unused to the bulk and weight of our bulging pannier bags, we must have looked a funny sight as we wobbled along, to the sound of Kalgoorlie's 24-hour gold mining operations echoing in the distance.

Desert nights are cool and clear. Stars look as if they are falling out of the sky because you can see them touch the horizon. And when the moon rises it is so



On track: Krista Bernard

park ranger who took a look at my arm and advised him to go to hospital. So he was driven 200 metres back to the nearest hospital at Cook. Julie and I stayed at the hospital for a few more days then drove back to Cook to see how the doctor King was.

When we arrived, Dave was gone. The hospital staff had sent him by train to Port Augusta, 850 kilometres to have his arm set.

Julie and I pedalled on. Hot, consistent northerly winds were blowing, fraying our tempers and dehydrating our frazzled bodies. The old abandoned railway sidings slipped past us, O'Malley. By the time we reached Port Augusta, we realised our water supply was running low.

Cursing ourselves for not being more careful with this precious commodity, we sat in the shade of stacked railway sleepers and ate lunch, trying to think of a solution to our situation.

Julie spotted it first – a dust cloud on the horizon, moving closer to us every breathless minute. We couldn't take our eyes off it. As it came closer we realised it was a truck hurtling towards us along the rough track. Being too stunned to register that this might be the answer to all our

so majestic you can do nothing but breathe its beauty

problems we continued to sit there motionless, mouths agape.

The truck stopped and out stepped our savior, Smithy, an Aboriginal storekeeper who was transporting supplies from Ceduna all the way to a tribe near Maralinga.

Smithy didn't bat an eyelid at seeing two crest-fallen cyclists stranded in the middle of the desert under the blazing sun. Instead, he reached into the truck's cabin, pulled out two fat ice-creams which he promptly handed to us, as we stared in disbelief. Smithy's gesture revived our flagging spirits and we were able to continue towards Ooldea.

Past Ooldea the landscape quickly began to change. We had left behind the flat, treeless plains of the Nullarbor and had reached the dreaded sandhills our railway friends had warned us about. Picturesque indeed, with large luscious trees of bluey-green set against a backdrop

of red rolling hills. There were birds, insects and flowers – but there were also flies that swiftly began their incessant attack, crawling into the corners of our eyes, up our noses and into the sides of our mouths. No amount of swatting or swearing would make them go away.

But this was a minor problem. The red sand we had thought so beautiful soon became so thick it made pedalling impossible. We were forced to push our bikes up and down relentless hills. "The only thing that will get you there is time," I repeated to myself endlessly as we trudged on.

Sand, flies, hills ... Hills, rocks, sand ... Flies, hills, sand, sore knees ... We finally

reached Barton, our next water stop, where we had a well-earned rest.

Barton is an abandoned railway town. A few empty buildings stand in memory of a time when thriving communities lived and worked up and down the track. Now the only person left in Barton is 76-year-old Ziggy, who would never dream of leaving his ramshackle home constructed from old pieces of corrugated tin.

Ziggy had been living there in solitude for 25 years. He nevertheless seemed to enjoy this brief interlude with us and when it was time for us to leave he handed us gifts of money, old coins and tins of Milo. We politely tried to refuse such generosity, but he would not hear of it, insisting we could not do without it. "Ziggy knows best," he cried in his thick Polish accent.

And Ziggy did know best, for it was

those tins of Milo that saved the day. With our food supplies running low, we took to eating "Milo paste" (Milo mixed with water) which boosted our energy and kept us pushing through the sandhills until we reached Wynbrigg where the ground became hard and flat once more.

At Wynbrigg we slept solidly for 14 hours. The sandhills had come to an end and so had our patience, so we decided that when we reached the small town of Tarcoola where trains branch off and head north, we'd try to hitch to Alice to rest before pedalling down to Adelaide.

As Julie and I rode into Tarcoola a couple of days later, who should we see walking along the street but Dave with his arm plastered from the elbow down. A fine reunion once again as we shared stories over cups of tea and slices of cake.

The next day the three well-fed wanderers hitched a ride on a freight train to Alice Springs.

Julie and I returned to Tarcoola a month later to continue our pedalling. Dave went back to Tasmania maintaining that "one should only cycle 50 kilometres a day, and even then only three days a week!" We didn't believe such nonsense and carried on pedalling to Glendambo, Pimba, Port Augusta, Adelaide ... And then, well we couldn't resist it – we rode onwards along the coast to Coorong, Nelson, Warrambool and Port Campbell until we finally reached Melbourne, a journey of 3000 kilometres. We had traversed the sunburnt land with a sense of humor, a sense of adventure and a tale or two to tell.

Krista currently is in the first stages of her next journey, cycling from Indonesia to England, via Malaysia, India and Turkey.



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The track was rocky. Dark red dust took to the wind, clogging our nostrils and plugging our ears – this was to be a hallmark of our trip.

Our first water stop was Coonana, an Aboriginal community about 200 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie, where we rested for a couple of days.

In the evening the school band played for us – drum kits and electric guitars twanged out country and western favorites against the desert backdrop. There were kids everywhere gyrating Michael Jackson-style. Our moves were obviously not as cool as theirs and we became the centre of much hilarity as we danced into the night.

It was at Coonana that Dave, the Slumber King we dubbed him, first decided to bail out. We'd only been averaging about 70 kilometres a day, but he decided it was all too much – that he really wasn't a cyclist and that we were driving him to an early death! We respected his decision to hitch a ride and meet us at our next water stop, the tiny railway town of Rawlinna, where just nine families lived.

Cycling without Dave was strange. We'd been an inseparable team, so we raced to Rawlinna to catch up with the Slumber King and found him a few days later cooking damper and dahl in the old

schoolhouse. A fine reunion of food and friends.

We battled out of Rawlinna facing unrelenting headwinds. Ness sped ahead, a streamlined streak in the distance. Jules and I cranked along steadily and Dave once again lagged behind, regretting his decision to rejoin our crazy caper.

"Gunadorah" was our first experience of life on an Outback station. It was a hubbub of activity with jillaroos, jackaroos, children, their governess (who taught through the School of the Air) and our hosts who were as generous and hospitable as all Outback folk seem to be. We'd stopped there for water and were given food, home-made liquor and a bed for the night. The next morning we woke up with terrible hangovers and we've never drunk again. It became clear that eating meat and drinking is a fundamental part of Outback life. Our hosts were puzzled by our vegetarianism, especially in a land so parched and dry.

We journeyed on to Kybo, a massive sheep station run by Jill and Rod who, upon our arrival, grilled us ferociously about our non-meat-eating habits, reasons very dicey to explain to a sheep farmer at the best of times. We changed the topic of conversation to Jill's large collection of tec-tites: pieces of meteorites that have fallen through the atmosphere and hit Earth, apparently common on the Nullarbor. These space rocks became my obsession and, as we continued to pedal, I fervently watched the track hoping to find such treasures. Unfortunately, all I found was "roo poo", which looked similar.

As we continued our journey, days were getting longer and the sun hotter. Just as we feared death from heat stroke, we found a set of caves in which cool air rushed up from below in such a gust it gave us goose-pimples. Descending into the depths, we found fossils of ancient sea-life, dating to when the desert was the floor of the ocean, around 40 million years ago.

We left the caves and pedalled to Forrest, a meteorological station, where Dave, complaining of a sore backside, left us again, preferring to hitch a ride on a freight train to Cook to wait for us.

Poor Dave always missed out on the tailwinds and on this particular day we had a westerly like no other. It pushed us along at record speeds, racing the tumbleweeds across the plain, and spurring us forward.

We zoomed across the Western Australian border. Upon arrival at Cook we were greeted by Dave, who took us for a swim at a nearby dam. SPLASH! The water was murky and smelt stagnant but we dived in regardless, enjoying the coolness and wildlife that gathered here.

The next day we found out this oasis was part of the town's sewerage system. Thankfully none of us became sick.

We'd been together 24 hours a day for more than a month (apart from Dave's escapades) and it was inevitable the team would split up. Ness decided to quit. She'd had enough and wanted to go to Alice Springs to work. We felt a sense of loss as we'd come so far together, but on this journey we had learned to expect the unexpected and to embrace change, a lesson we'd surely remember.

Ness caught a train north while Dave, Julie and I took a break from cycling to detour south to see the whales of the South Australian coast. We hitched with our bikes to the Eyre Highway, where thundering trucks rushed on dusty wheels

When the moon rises it is

and grimy cars sped along the flat bitumen in an endless stream of noise.

A taste of civilisation at the Nullarbor Roadhouse. Two cappuccinos and hot chips and we were running around in circles, our eyes popping out of our heads. Dave, showing off, went to jump over a fence but fell, landing hard on the ground.

He rolled around groaning and cradling his arm, which he insisted was broken. Julie and I ignored him.

We stood at the head of the Great Australian Bight, ocean on three sides, sea spray casting rainbows into the air while buffeting winds washed waves on to the shore. Whales tail-slapped and crashed their flukes against the ocean while calves swam alongside, the sea dancing with life. Our lungs filled with fresh air and our spirits soared. Dave, however, was still complaining about his arm.

That night we were invited to dinner

