

# A LAP 4 PAWS



*Farewelling the “team”*

On April 18<sup>th</sup> 2021 I departed Sydney for a clockwise around Australia ride. It has taken a while to get around to putting this report in but better late than never.

Two years earlier I had ridden to Perth. Before that I had ridden to Port Douglas and back - twice. And in 2014 I had ridden to Alice Springs, Barkly Tablelands, Mt Isa and through Queensland.

But I'd always wanted to do the whole thing at once so at 70 my time was up - now or never.

The bike is a BMW R 1200RT. It was new in 2018 and had low ks on it. My daily ride is a K1300 S - but that beloved beast was not the one for this undertaking.

So why would I want to do this - and solo? Firstly, apart from the challenge, an objective was to raise funds for PAWS Pet Therapy. PAWS is a NSW based charity that I have been involved with for some years that provides volunteer “teams” of owners and their dogs to visit those who are doing it a bit tough. Aged care, hospitals, private and public mental health clinics and anywhere there is stress. The charity is very grass roots and does an outstanding job.

Secondly, I can cope with my own company, and an ageing body indicates that one never knows when you need to take a break or comfort stop. Also, all my previous long rides were solo so I knew no better. Besides, all former riding friends have either stopped riding, eased off or taken “the final ride”.

Finally, I have a deep love of our country and the wide-open spaces – which I have never found boring. And travelling solo these emotions are heightened. One truly feels connected.

But conservatism has a role so I equipped myself with a SpotX satellite tracker. A handy piece of kit that logs one's position every 2 ½ minutes. This allowed family and friends to monitor progress real time. It had an emergency switch feature and texting capability. This allowed the iPhone to be a back up and not first port of call.

But the only problem with any tracker is that it requires consciousness to activate the safety switch if one has an off.

Overseas touring BMWs are equipped with a safety tether that in the event of an off triggers an emergency signal. A good idea which I hope makes it here. My best hope in the event of something serious happening was for those following me to see that the 2 ½ minute plotter had stopped when it should have been moving!

For me it was not about sightseeing per se – but the journey – every part of it. From the detailed preparation of bike and gear in the couple of months leading up to departure to making sure everything “worked” on a daily basis.

As it turned out, some bits of kit didn't work when required – like the electric compressor which could not inflate to sufficient pressure. Just let's say that compressed CO2 bottles are the best option. Each gives about 10lb psi of pressure whereas compressors seem to max out around 30 lb psi. I had plenty of these as back up – just as well on a day when I needed air. (This occurred because the pump I used at a servo was defective and worked in “reverse” and I lost pressure when only trying to top up the front tyre).

Getting under way, the first stop was down the Hume to Tarcutta to visit a farmer mate of the same vintage who has “the rust”. But he is doing well. In remission.

Then off to central Victoria - Castlemaine - to visit an old friend - widowed and heartbroken.

A really good mate lives in Melbourne so I detoured there for a night.

Then up central Victoria to Sea Lake then on to Burra SA.

At this point you are entitled to ask what happened to the South Coast of NSW and the Great Ocean Rd. Well, I've travelled them before and with 14,000 ks in front of me didn't feel like doing them again. Soft - I know!

From Burra I went to Port Augusta. Then to Streaky Bay. A favourite place. Very laid back, quiet and clean. If visiting, a must to see is a unique exhibition of a range of industrial 4 stroke motors used for all kinds of plant in years gone by. Only opens a few days of the week and admission is by donation.

South Australia is one of Australia's best kept secret for motor cyclists. Good touring roads, great scenery, interesting towns and a stunning coastline.

After Streaky Bay the coast road to Ceduna then stops at Nullarbor Roadhouse and Cocklebiddy. Detours to see the Great Australian Bight and magnificent desert country. The photo below was around 9.00 am – looking east – at one of the points where the highway gets close to the ocean. Pretty special.



*Great Australian Bight*

The RT performed magnificently but is very much a black top bike - I learned this the hard way when I pulled into a free camping area for a break mid-morning, about 50k west of Eucla near Mundrabilla. The side road had recently been “improved” by a load of gravel being put down – but not compacted. The RT hit the stuff, dug in and down we went – at very slow speed. No damage apart to ego. Stripped everything off – panniers, soft top bag, camping gear, tank bag and with the bike “naked” was able to get her upright.



*Near Mundrabilla – just off Eyre Highway in the background*

Cocklebiddy to Norseman- a 470 km day with about 20 bends. It has the famous 146km straight stretch which is not too boring – the desert scenery is constantly changing. Cruise control on the RT very handy. In fact, I used it a lot on the trip.

Left at Norseman down to Esperance and then to Perth. I had plans to stay at both Esperance and Albany where I had holidays as a kid - a mere 60 years ago!

But Esperance was shrouded in sea mist, so I pushed on to Ravensthorpe and had dinner with a bicyclist and a retired couple who were touring. The cyclist was a uni student who had decided uni was not for him so decided to solo pushbike ride from Sydney to Perth to have a think about things! Unescorted and with bravery that only the youth can muster!

Then came the worst day of the trip. After leaving Ravensthorpe and being disillusioned with Albany I decided to push on to Denmark. Sadly, I forgot to check the weather outlook. Things can change quickly in this corner of the country and shortly after leaving Albany a vicious front came through and conditions were most unpleasant. Full wet gear. Pounding rain and what seemed like cyclonic winds. No matter how gently I held the bars we were pushed all over the road.

Should have stopped but not many accessible run offs, so with about 20k to Denmark I pushed and on arriving there late afternoon was thoroughly soaked – and a little shaken by the experience. I had no pre booked accommodation. A mistake - but finally got a room at the Denmark Hotel. A shower, dry clothes, a wine or three, an excellent pizza and all was good. Stayed 2 nights to get gear dry and recover. At this point in the trip I'd had two lay days – spent an extra day at Streaky Bay also.

After a stop at Mandurah and with COVID active in Perth I headed straight through my childhood city to commence the long trip north. It is further to Darwin from Perth than Perth is from Sydney. In fact, it later turned out that the halfway point of my lap was after Broome.

Seeing the west coast was a bucket list item and it didn't disappoint. Wild ocean breaking on offshore reefs. Good roads and most trucks on the inland highway. Geraldton a thriving town.

The picture below is on the foreshore at Geraldton where I came across a couple touring with their Husky. The same breed of dog is the mascot of PAWS charity. I had one strapped on my top box at this time but later in the trip it was retired to the panniers when I "dumped" my camping gear.



*Geraldton foreshore*

Carnarvon past its best but scenic. Then a series of stops to get to Broome. A pub in Port Headland but roadhouse accommodation elsewhere. The Pilbara is impressive. Everything is red from iron oxide. Port Hedland amazing. The Port wharf can accommodate 15 ore carriers. It is not accessible to the public, but I understand it is several kms long. I counted 19 ships queued offshore waiting to dock for iron ore.

At Vinnies Port Hedland I parted company with my camping gear. It was only ever going to be used for emergency purposes, and with the temperature now consistently in the 30's I decided that camping would not happen and I'd be sure to book road houses, on site cabins or motels in advance. And in the north where all the grey nomads seem to congregate this was a good and necessary call.

Broome disappointed. With Bali out because of COVID it was full of southern tourists. I came away thinking the East Coast's holiday spots were well ahead of it.

From here the real adventure started. The Kimberlies are a must see and I'll be going back. Stops at Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Kununurra, Katherine then Darwin for bike service, new tyres and my first COVID shot. Stayed at Ridges Hotel Palmerston for 5 nights. Everything else in central Darwin booked out. But this was a gem. Sensibly priced, new and great facilities whilst the body adjusted to the vaccine.

I should mention the War Graves at Adelaide River – about 150k out of Darwin which I had visited on the way in to Darwin. Worth a visit. Really well maintained and quite moving to read the inscriptions on the head stones from those who perished in the air raid attacks on Darwin.



With bike and body in good order, started south. Travelled down to Three Ways just north of Tennant Creek after stops at Mataranka Springs and Renner Springs. Then onto the Barkly Highway to stay at Barkly Homestead. It is a must stop place. An absolute oasis. Had stayed there once before on a bike trip. Good pub food and lots of activity – campers, caravaners and motel dwellers.



### *Barkly Homestead*

The Barkly Highway is one lonely, remote road. Good condition, little traffic and big distances between civilisation. I remember the previous time I rode it. I was coming from Alice and was planning a stop at Tennant Creek. But this is a town that is not noted for luxe accommodation - or anything close to it. So latish in the day I decided to push on to Barkly Homestead. About 200k away on top of the 500k odd I had done from Alice. As I turned right into the Barkly Highway with nothing in sight except kilometres of straight road and big vistas I felt truly alone! (That trip was on a Kawasaki 1400 GTR. Handling not as good as the RT but a very strong, reliable bike).

From Barkly Homestead to Mt Isa is a great ride providing there are not too many road trains. Pavement in good condition and very scenic. Lots of cattle – dead and alive - close to the road so moderate speed.



Then pretty much down the middle of Queensland. Have seen the East Coast from rides to Port Douglas a lot and took a slightly different route this time through Queensland. Also the coastal Bruce Highway is very truck heavy.

Notable in Central Queensland was the deterioration in the pavement caused by flooding. On several occasions I felt quite seasick from the constant up and down movement. Full face helmet accentuated this I suspect. I met another rider at Warialda NSW who had done the same route and experienced the same motion sickness type feelings.

With COVID in full flight there were countless grey nomads at large - plague proportions. Often travelling in convoy. A race to the next free camping spot. At this point it is worthwhile talking about these - and truck stops. It is an utter disgrace that people defecate on the roadside and free camp areas. I suspect it is just a minority who spoil it - but truckers deserve better facilities. There are only so many places they can pull off the road.

As ever, road trains provided challenging overtakes. At 56m long and always doing the full speed limit, overtaking requires planning from well back. Often shedding cow excrement I've learned they must be overtaken with confidence and quickly. I accelerate all the way past to stabilise the bike over back wheel and when well past back off. With adrenalin rushing it was not difficult to be up around 150 kph when well clear. These trucks take all of one lane and the three trailers are prone to "snake" about a bit. So to maintain lateral separation one is well to the right hand side of the overtaking lane!

Many with caravans etc simply do not overtake road trains – preferring to pull over and wait for them to be well clear. And as vans rarely do the full speed limit I've seen road trains overtake them!

The only other exciting 'moment' was at a flooded causeway just north of Carnarvon where traffic in both directions was taking it in turn to cross. When I thought it was my turn a truck coming in the other direction didn't.

We crossed in about 20 cm of water. A wave of water drenched me and I expected to hit the pavement but somehow I stayed upright. But drenched.

As ever, Emu's are a pest – encountered them a couple of times roadside and, as well reported, they are brainless and unpredictable. Take care with these unique Australian "birds".

And whilst talking about wildlife, riding in the morning in treed areas when shadows were still on the road had special challenges – road kills not always visible – particularly wombats!

Got home 47 days after departure. Total ride days was 39 which averaged out at about 350 ks per day riding. Not as much as in earlier years. Longest days were about 500k. Had a couple of short days.

The trip was deeply satisfying, made more so by the fund-raising effort for PAWS Pet Therapy which totalled just on \$40 k.

The only other significant highlight was that having started out with full camping gear - new tent, mattress, sleeping bag, cooking gear etc I realised there was no way I was going to camp. This was always a fall back but this aging body just didn't want to do it. So at Port Hedland off to Vinnies it went. As I dropped it off I got chatting to a young British teacher working at a community. She was at Vinnie's to get some camping gear! Well her ship had truly come in. All new and unused at a bargain price.

Met lots of interesting people along the way including Christine and Bob of Kyogle. We first met somewhere on the Nullarbor then kept bumping into each other enroute - Manjimup, Carnarvon, Darwin. They were a couple in their 60's on a Kawasaki Versys 1000 doing their lap. We got on well and have kept in touch.

A year down the track I've got the appetite to do it again – and would thoroughly recommend the undertaking to all riders.

Enjoy the journey!

John Southwood