

COOBER PEDY

There was a sense of relief as I finally set off for Coober Pedy. Coronavirus restrictions seemed a distant memory, state borders were open, state premiers had put their egos away, and city dwellers were again welcome in country towns.

David from Canberra (Triumph Rocket 111) and myself (Triumph Tiger Sport) met at Trappers Goulburn Bakery for the first day's ride to Orange, appreciating the excellent road between Crookwell and Blayney, and visits to the National Trust listed towns of Carcoar and Millthorpe. Both are interesting places to visit, and another good reason to seek out the back roads when touring.

We reached our accommodation in Orange around 5:15pm, found most cafes and restaurants closed Easter Thursday evening and had dinner in the motel's Indian restaurant. Although expecting to go hungry Good Friday morning, we did find one cafe open before setting off towards Cobar.



The Dish at Parkes Observatory

There was no hippy hippy shake from the bikes as we passed the Elvis statue in Parkes, nor was cricket being played in the Parkes Observatory "Dish". We called in for a look, and had a chat with a couple on Triumph Tigers doing a bit of off-road riding around the country.

A slight detour at Peak Hill gave us a view of the old gold mine from the observation platform, but a closer inspection along several walking trails was thwarted by their Good Friday closure.



Peak Hill open cut gold mine

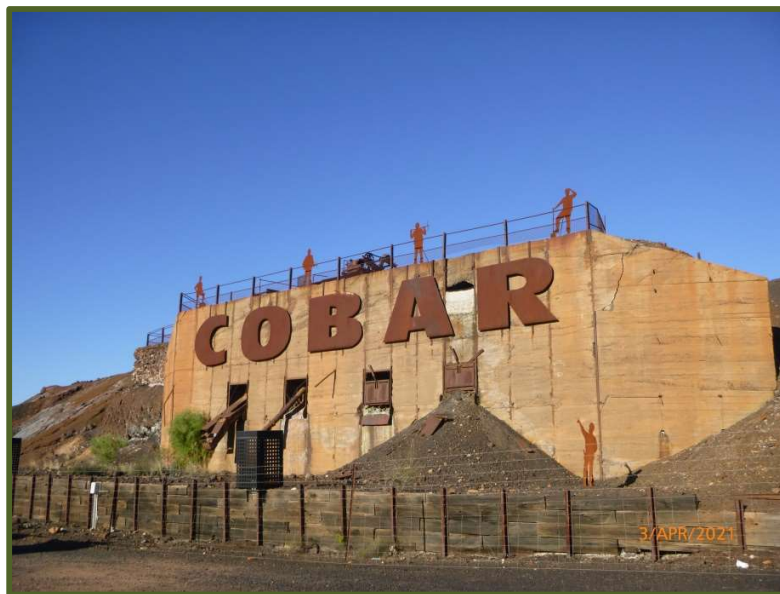
The road to Narromine was reasonable, with fields of sheep, some crops and some cattle, and we even managed to find a café open for lunch. Narromine boasts a number of sporting heroes including Melinda Gainsford-Taylor, Glenn McGrath and David Gillespie, but Banjo Paterson extolled another Narromine hero in his poem “The City of the Dreadful Thirst”. Unfortunately we had more riding in front of us that day so didn’t seek him out.



the Big Bogan at Nyngan

After recent rains, the Big Bogan at Nyngan was waiting patiently for the fish to start biting as we passed through. We were less patient in our unsuccessful attempt to find a café open. Many fields still had pools of water, and many tarpaulins covering the harvests.

Clear skies meant Australia's largest Solar Farm outside Nyngan was doing its best to bring climate change under control, but our intended visit was put off when we saw several clods of sticky red clay dragged out from the 3km unsealed track leading to the viewing platform.



hard to miss this sign

Climate change wasn't an issue over a century ago when the Great Cobar Mine was the largest copper mine in Australia, providing ore to 14 smelters. I had planned to visit the Great Cobar Heritage Centre located in the magnificent old mine administration building, which was closed for renovations when we passed through Cobar on our way to Lightning Ridge last year. Needless to say it was still closed.

We caught up with Archer and Philippa for drinks and dinner in the classic Great Western Hotel, they having made their way from the Central Coast on their BMW R1200GS. The hotel's 100m cast iron verandah balustrade and lacework is reputedly the longest in Australia, but access to the verandah was closed. I was starting to think "OPEN" had been declared a four letter word.

Next morning I walked back to take a photo of the COBAR sign in a better light and found the Flamingos club from Sydney, wearing their brightly coloured pyjama shirts, had their 4WDs parked in front waiting for another member to arrive for the regulation photo. Discretion being the greater part of valour, I was able to get a reasonable photo without asking them to move.



Emmdale Roadhouse between Cobar and Wilcannia

Heading further west along the Barrier Highway, the country appeared more barren, the uninterrupted 160km stretch to Emmdale Roadhouse adding to the desolation. There wasn't as much road kill as I expected, although we did see plenty of wild goats grazing in the bushes. Apparently recent rains had provided sufficient feed for wildlife and they didn't need to seek sustenance along the roadside. We did, and had lunch in the roadhouse.



Wilcannia Post Office

Wilcannia is an historic port town on the Darling River, servicing numerous paddle steamers before road transport prevailed. It must have taken the paddle steamers an eternity to travel the meandering Darling River. At 1,472km, it is the third longest river in Australia, and its course is three times longer than the “as the crow flies” distance. Have a look on Google Maps.

Wilcannia also claims the first brewery built by Edmund Resch in Australia in 1879. In its booming heyday, the town boasted 13 hotels as well as many imposing buildings. Unfortunately its better days seem well in the past. We refueled, had a cold drink in the servo, and moved on.

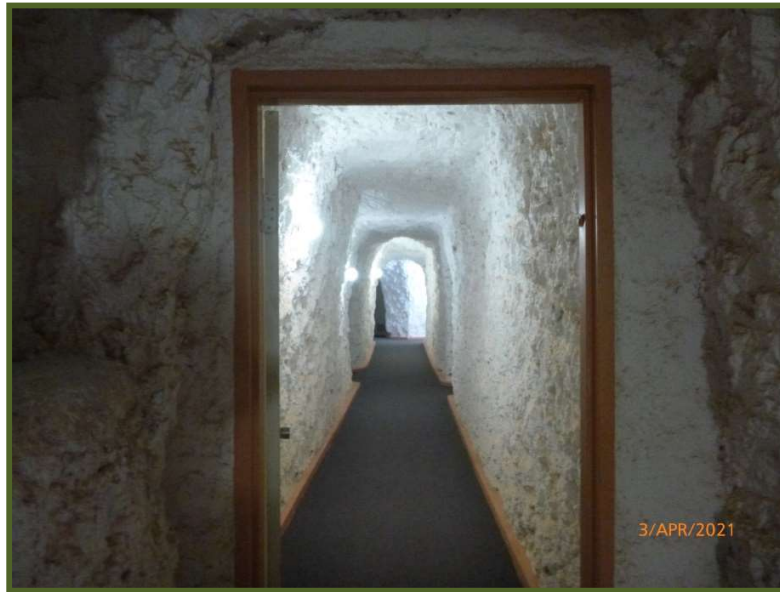


Welcome to White Cliffs

Just out of town we turned north towards White Cliffs. The road surface was good but the unfenced road and stray black cattle kept us wary. We arrived around 4:30pm and safely negotiated the 2 km of gravel road and the more challenging access driveway up to the Underground Motel.

The motel was originally an opal mine, and the site is referred to as “Poor Man’s Hill” because few opals were found there. The mine was converted to the 30 room motel complex in the 1980’s, dug almost entirely using hand held jack-picks. Despite initially resembling a maze, it includes several common rooms for socializing and we soon found our way around. An internal stairway leads to the flattish top of the hill, revealing many light/ventilation shafts and an area for star-gazing.

Daunted by the driveway and the darkness, we were more than happy to mingle with the other guests and have drinks and dinner in the motel bar and dining area.



the maze at White Cliffs Underground Motel

Heading off next morning, we stopped to have a look at the town's Solar Power Station. Constructed in 1981, the modest 25kW steam driven generator supplied electricity to some White Cliff residents as well as providing research facilities, giving claim to being the first commercial solar power station in the world. The plant was decommissioned in 1994 when the electricity grid arrived. A visit to the "Stubbie House" opal showroom was on my to-do list, but we respected the "CLOSED" sign hanging from its front porch.



informal meeting of fellow travelers at Wilcannia

We stopped at the Wilcannia servo again en route to Broken Hill. Two bikes were stopped approx. 200m from the servo, the Indian having run out of fuel. The rider managed to push his bike to the servo and while having a chat another rider appeared. We hadn't encountered many other bikes on this trip prior to this mass rally. It was a good decision to refuel there as the next anticipated fuel stop at Little Topar was closed except for an unattended diesel set-up. Nor were any cool drinks available in the 35°C heat.



Welcome to Silvertown



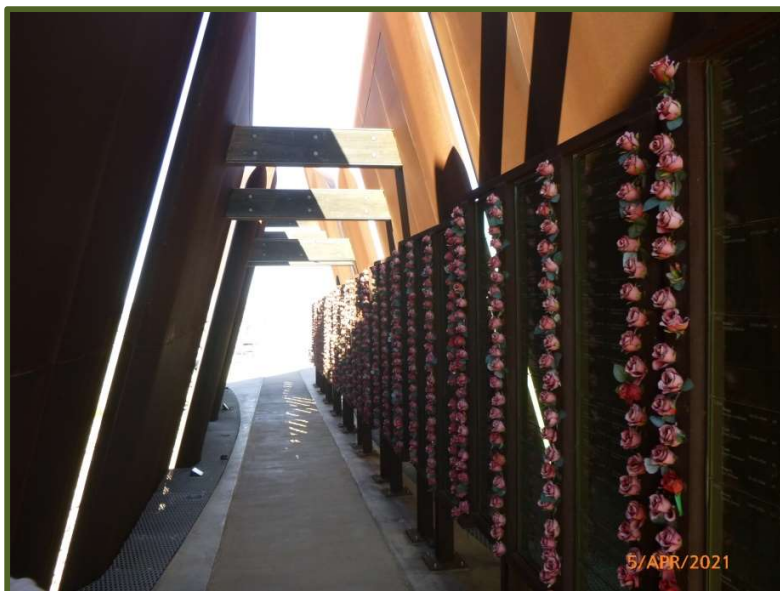
Mad Max Museum

We detoured via Silverton to see the Mad Max Museum and have a cold drink at the iconic Silverton Pub, where I made an ass of myself thinking some local ponies were wearing rabbit ears for Easter. Obviously the heat was getting to me, certainly not the non-alcoholic lemon squash.



standing in for the Easter Bunny

Broken Hill appeared around 5:00pm. Although still hot, we walked the 500m into town but it seemed deserted. Apparently the good citizens are prone to go to Adelaide at Easter. As one would expect in Broken Hill, we did find a Barrier Social Democratic Club, open for dinner and with a good crowd.



Line of Lode Miners Memorial at Broken Hill

On our first rest day we walked into town for brekky, then to the Visitors Centre (also closed), and faced the daunting task of walking 3km up a very steep and circuitous access road to the Line of Lode Miners Memorial. Fortunately a savvy taxi was strategically parked along the route. We walked back unassisted.



Living Desert Sculptures at Broken Hill

In the afternoon we rode out to see the Living Desert Sculptures. I accept we were in the home town of Pro Hart, I accept art is subjective, and I accept I am a member of the great unwashed, and I will say no more. Except to say I'm glad we didn't have to pay a lot to get in. And the road there wasn't much fun. Although still very hot, we again walked into town and dinner in the Musician's Club.



checking passports are in order

The ride to Peterborough was more pleasant, not too hot and clear blue skies. The countryside was very sparse with no wild life. We'd completed our South Australia coronavirus entry permits on-line and although bemused by a large sign just before the border stating the Quarantine Bin was 212km away, expected a check-point at the NSW/SA border. Not so.

The Border Gate Roadhouse was closed, Mingary appeared on the map but not in reality, and the Olary Hotel further on was also closed. We carried on to Manna Hill Hotel for a cold drink and an interesting time chatting with publican Di about the pub, the isolation, and her classic Mini Cooper parked outside. Next stop was Yunta for food and fuel, finally encountering a check-point at Oodla Wirra, 212km past the quarantine sign. Now I understand.



the quirky Manna Hill Pub

The Barrier Highway route appears to be defined by the railway, or maybe vice versa, with tracks running parallel to the road for long distances, and apparently abandoned railway stations at all the road stops and several locations in between. There was no sign of trains for the full day's ride.

Entering Peterborough, we called into the Motorcycle Museum to see an interesting collection of less common bikes, including several Italian brands I'd never heard of. Owner Ian feels like he's in biker's heaven, probably because the museum is housed in an old church building.

After checking in to our motel we walked into town, found a hotel open for dinner (doubling the patronage), then walked to the Steamtown Rail Museum for the evening "Sound & Light" show, which was more a documentary film about Peterborough's significant rail history. By the time the show ended I'd hit the wall and we caught a taxi back to the motel.



Peterborough Motorcycle Museum



Peterborough Steamtown Sound & Light Show

We had a browse through the Peterborough Visitors Centre/Railway Carriage next morning, re-visited many topics from the previous night's documentary, and saw a large sign highlighting the days and times the Indian Pacific passes through town. I think this explains the absence of trains the previous day.



Horrocks Pass Memorial Cairn

First coffee stop en route to Woomera next morning was Orroroo, including a short detour to see the Big Gum Tree, as you do. In compensation, the route after Wilmington included a fabulous 23km hilly section called Horrocks Pass, the best section of road since Crookwell to Blayney on the first day.

We stopped half way to see the Memorial Cairn erected in honour of John Ainsworth Horrocks, a pastoralist and explorer after whom the pass and Horrocks Highway are named, who died from gangrene several weeks after a tragic accident. Please, dear readers, if your children are in the habit of carrying a loaded shotgun while riding their camel, warn them to be very careful. Adding to the tragedy, the chronicles report that, on Horrocks command, his recalcitrant camel also met a premature demise.

The remaining countryside to Port Augusta was very green and included lots of crop fields and some sheep, overall a very pleasant ride.

Port Augusta gave the opportunity to lunch and refuel, then seemingly off into the wilderness towards Woomera. We stopped at Ranges View Rest Area because it was there, marveled at the scrubby bush, waved at the flies, marveled at some stunted trees, waved at the flies, and caught a shimmering glimpse of what may have been the Flinders Ranges in the distance. After some practice, we also mastered the art of putting on our helmets without trapping flies inside.

Dinner was taken in the Eldo Hotel at Woomera because it was good, and there were no other options.

A wander around the Woomera Rocket Park and Visitors Centre display next morning was interesting. I imagine one really would need the intellect of a rocket scientist to test ship-to-ship missiles in the middle of a desert. We refueled at the sole petrol bowser at Pimba near the Woomera turn-off, and were chastised for parking the bikes on the concrete driveway. I didn't hang around to find out why.



scale model display of rockets tested at Woomera



David's Rocket gets acquainted with some long lost cousins

Glendambo was the only fuel stop between Pimba and Coober Pedy, and on arrival we found the servo closed for renovations. After some heart palpitations, we saw another servo hidden behind some trees. The 254km leg from Glendambo to Coober Pedy would be the biggest test for David's Rocket.

At Bon Bon Rest Area we were admiring a well travelled FJ Holden when an immaculate Statesman Caprice pulled in. It would be unusual to chance upon two vehicles like these in a busy setting, let alone out here in the middle of nowhere. We also had a chat with another biker returning the long way round from Western Australia, and showed off our new-found helmet/fly evacuation skills.



still going strong



finally made it

We arrived in Coober Pedy around 4:00pm feeling rather exhausted from the heat, but also feeling a sense of elation after last year's trip had to be cancelled due to coronavirus and state border closures.

We later celebrated with a couple of beers in the Desert Cave Hotel underground bar, followed by dinner in the Cave Café. I couldn't go past the Cave Burger, building on the tradition set by my Miner's Meal in Cobar and my Muso's Burger in the Broken Hill Musician's Club.



still looking for that elusive opal



The Breakaways outside Coober Pedy

We'd planned the second rest day of the trip in Coober Pedy, and had booked a 4 hour bus tour for the afternoon. Fortunately I had a hard copy confirmation of the booking, as there was some consternation when we presented at the hotel reception. After a short delay guide Edi turned up, then a mini-bus, and our 4 hour tour evolved into a 6 hour odyssey including a 32km drive to the Breakaways, a champagne and cheese platter at sunset, and a visit in darkness to the famous dingo fence.

The weather was down to 22°C and gusty cross winds prevailed for the return ride to Woomera. Another refuel and lunch at Glendambo provided the opportunity to fit my jacket liner, and a call into Lake Hart Rest Area revealed at least 20 caravans free camping there, far more than we'd seen in one spot so far. Sunrise over the expansive salt lake surface must be quite spectacular.

We arrived at Woomera's Eldo Hotel around 5:00pm, ideal timing for a pre-dinner drink or three. Next morning the barman from dinner was multi-skilling in the breakfast café at the Visitor's Centre and commented on our wine consumption the previous evening. I'm sure he knew we'd snuck in a bottle they don't normally stock but he didn't accuse us directly.



Island Lagoon

We planned to visit the Rocket Park Museum before leaving that morning but it was closed. A call into Island Lagoon Tracking Station gave a photo opportunity, rueing the fact we hadn't stopped on the way up when the weather was clearer and the view was more impressive.

Woomera to Port Augusta had more cool weather and gusty cross winds, with the roads becoming more appealing after turning off towards the charming Crystal Brook, where we had coffee at the excellent Vault 35 café located in a grand old bank building.



Midnight Oil House, Burra

The clouds cleared somewhat but it was still cool as we approached Burra, taking the photo opportunity of the “Midnight Oil” house 6km before town. Kit Kat Cottage was our accommodation, dinner in Bon Accord Hotel was convivial with locals and tourists, followed by an interesting chat with the publican about the pub, the town and its history. Not for the first time we were last to leave a licensed premises.



Burra open cut copper mine

Mine View lookout and Town View lookout gave expansive views on the way out next morning. Burra was the site for filming Breaker Morant and I felt one would need to spend several days there to fully appreciate the town and its history. The same could be said for several other towns we stopped in or passed through, but unfortunately didn't make the time to do so.



Bugatti Veyron, Birdwood National Motor Museum



how to set up your bike for long distance touring

More good roads followed, a cool 18°C, field after field of wheat, and tractor sale yards in each town. I'm assuming it was wheat because it looked like that little twig on the Weet-Bix box. Though not quite as mind-numbing as the Hay plains, I had the feeling Flat Earth Society members would be at home here.

Several detours gave good riding through the Adelaide Hills en route to lunch at Birdwood, a visit to the National Motor Museum, a coffee stop in the busy German-Prussian town of Hahndorf, and a late arrival in McLaren Vale under threatening clouds, ready for another rest day on the morrow.

By some good fortune we'd picked the only rainy day all trip to have a rest day, hire a car and experience the McLaren Vale wineries. In the morning we drove to Victor Harbor, then lunch at the popular Victory Hotel overlooking Sellick's Beach. It was drizzle more than rain, but still cool and very windy.

Archer and Philippa are members of several wineries including Chapel Hill, Samuel's Gorge and Molly Dooker, so there was no shortage of venues to visit in the afternoon.



the heavenly tasting room at Chapel Hill Winery

Heavy rain persisted overnight but stopped by morning, although I still donned rain pants for protection from the wet roads. And the cold. There was more good riding through the Adelaide Hills including the delightful Clarendon, the roads had dried by a coffee stop at the equally pleasant Strathalbyn, more wheat fields after wheat fields, and every small town seemed to have concrete storage silos.

The on-line application for the Victorian entry permit was obviously designed by an eclectic committee of bureaucrats. After all our efforts to complete and download, it was almost a disappointment we were never asked to show them.

Clouds and gusty winds persisted all day, but the weather forecast proved overly pessimistic and the rain held off. We passed through Mallee Scrub country en route to our overnight stop at Patchewollock, our first stop along the Silo Art Trail (www.siloarttrail.com).



Patchewollock Hotel

As expected, Patchewollock Hotel was rather basic but publican Bryce was the perfect host, the atmosphere was good, as was the meal, and the beds were comfortable. Judging by the stage props, I'm sure this would be a fun place to be during the annual Patchewollock Music Festival in late October.

Delving into my limited knowledge of all things viticultural, I had earlier joked we would be lucky to get a Jacob's Creek Claret at the "Patche Pub". In fact they had several bottles of Jacob's Creek Shiraz in stock! I've no doubt Bryce has restocked by now.

When we walked down the road to see the Silo Art next morning, we were sure the farmer depicted was drinking in the pub last night. Then followed the Silo Art Trail to view more painted silos at Lascelles, Rosebery, Brim, Sheep Hills and Rupanyup. Most silo sites had other tourists in attendance so the paintings are certainly attracting interest, and tourist dollars.

I felt less unwashed admiring this Art, and have consciously spelled Art with a capital A. I also felt for the various silo artists. It's obviously not a lucrative career as most could only afford a single name.



Silo Art, Patchewollock



Silo Art, Lascelles

We stopped at Beulah for a drink and refuel but the only indication of a coffee shop was a modest and dilapidated sign hanging from a street corner post. After a fruitless search, I presume this particular “Internet Café” has gone to the appropriate section of the Great Video Shop Graveyard.



Silo Art, Brim



Silo Art, Sheep Hills

There are many more painted silos in Australia (www.australiansiloarttrail.com/map) but one would probably need several months to criss-cross the country to view them. We would only stop at one more for the remainder of this trip.



paddle steamer PS EmmyLou, in background

The countryside was mainly agricultural, replete with more wheat fields, more silos, more wheat under tarpaulins, lots of sheep, some cattle, and the occasional farmer working his fields.

Arrival in Echuca was around 5:15pm and the traffic volume was almost overwhelming. Next day was our final rest day, with plenty of tourists in town for the school holidays. We enjoyed a 2 hour cruise on PS EmmyLou, checked out the old steam driven equipment at the impressive Visitor's Centre display, and had a visit to the National Holden Motor Museum.



Echuca Wharf, now only one fifth of its original length



sheer horsepower outmuscled by overwhelming cow power

Leaving Echuca, we crossed into Moama and NSW, back to Victoria, stopped to see the silo art at Picola, into NSW again at Barooga, a pleasant little town on the Murray River, passing many more broadacre fields, irrigation canals, sheep, cattle and an alpaca.

A lone café/general store was open for lunch at Urana, then on to Lockhart and the respectful Pioneer Memorial Gates before passing through this “Town of Verandahs”. It was Saturday afternoon and the main street was virtually deserted.

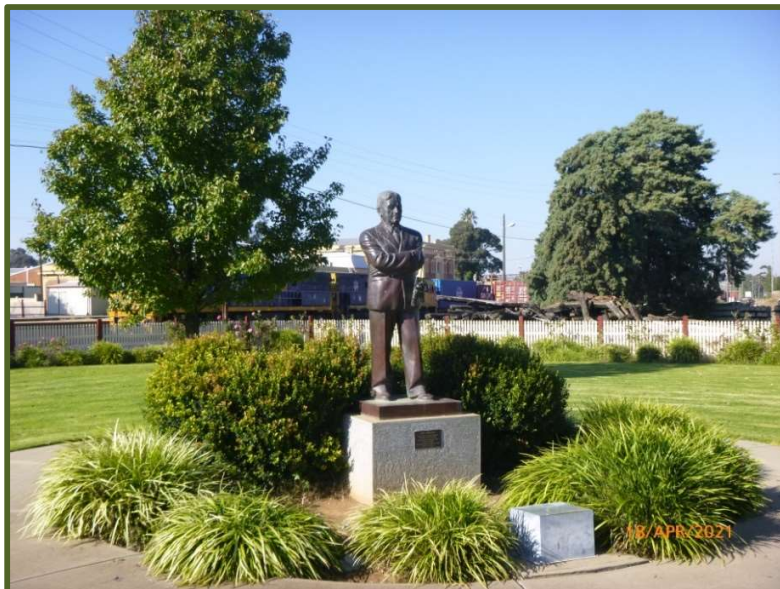


Silo Art, Picola



Pioneer Memorial Gates, Lockhart

The terrain started to get a bit hilly before Wagga Wagga, otherwise flattish all day, and most land was cultivated plus sheep and cattle. We arrived in Junee approx. 4:00pm and celebrated our “last supper” in the fundamental but friendly Junee Hotel.



Ray Warren statue, Junee

Last day's ride was mainly about getting home, although the road from Junee to Gundagai was good. Snake Gully was the morning coffee stop, and the obligatory photo of the Dog on the Tuckerbox.

The dog was back in his rightful position after the widely reported vandalism of a couple of years ago. Less widely reported is the rumour the pesky dog did more than just "sat" on Bill the Bullocky's tuckerbox, with an offending "h" deleted to make the original poem suitable for a wider and more conservative audience.



re-united with his tuckerbox

After that it was basically a transport stage along the Hume and Illawarra Highways, although I did have an uninterrupted run down Macquarie Pass, most welcome on an otherwise busy Sunday afternoon. Total distance travelled was 5,078km.

This was another enjoyable and interesting trip into Australian country regions. It's sad to see some small towns struggling to survive, but uplifting to see other towns working together to attract business and tourism to maintain the lifestyle they love. Hopefully we again made a welcome contribution to their efforts.

Geoff Roberts

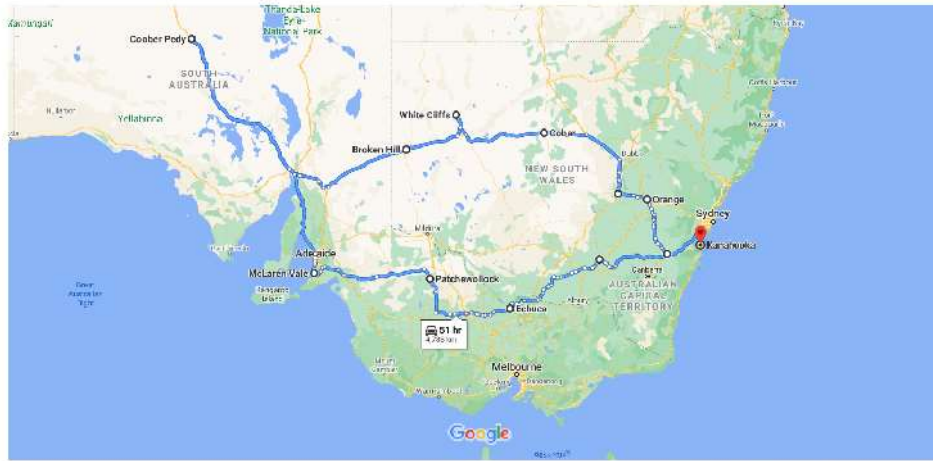
4/21/2021

Kanahooka NSW to Kanahooka NSW - Google Maps

Google Maps

Kanahooka NSW to Kanahooka NSW

Drive 4,783 km, 51 hr



Map data ©2021 Google 200 km

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/dir/Kanahooka+NSW/Orange+NSW/Cobar+White+Cliffs+Broken+Hill/Cober+Pedy/McLaren+Vale/Patchewollock+VIC/Echuca+VIC/Kanahooka+NSW/@-34.163651,1...> 1/1

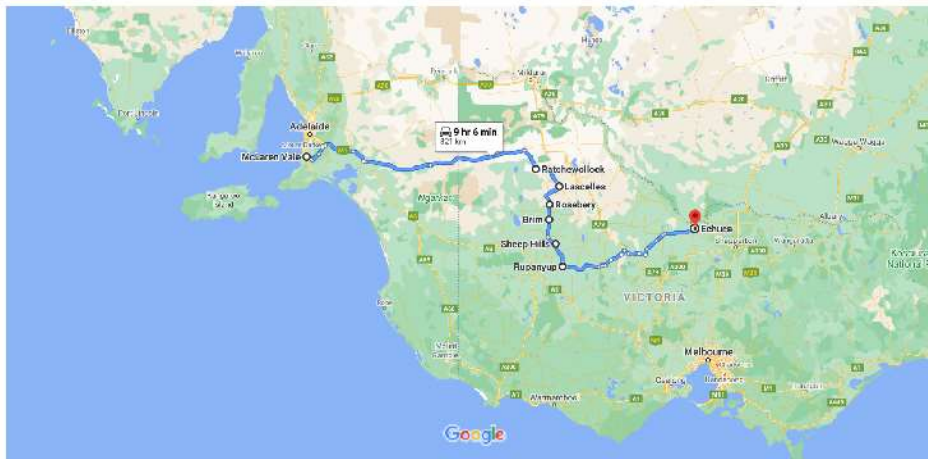
4/23/2021

McLaren Vale SA to Echuca - Google Maps

Google Maps

McLaren Vale SA to Echuca

Drive 821 km, 9 hr 6 min



Map data ©2021 Google 100 km

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/dir/McLaren+Vale+SA/Patchewollock+VIC/Laacellie+VIC/Rosebery+VIC/Brim+VIC/Sheep+Hills+VIC/Rupanyup+VIC/Echuca/@-36.212121,141.1666282,7z/data=!4m...> 1/1