

**An
Interrupted
Motorbike
Trip**

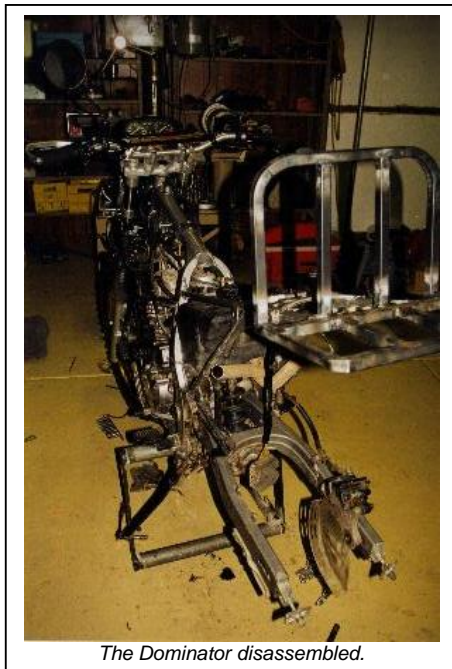
September
1999

The journal of a motorbike trip from Perth to a bulldust hole on a track somewhere in the Northern Territory

(and return)

“The best laid schemes o' mice an' men Gang aft a-gley.”

After catching up as a result of a power dinghy expeditions' reunion, Kim asked George about his planned “trip across the desert”. Fleshed out further it became a “trip to Cape York, via the desert”. Kim had been talking to Tony for some years about a motorbike trip. Further discussion with George and the trip was on. Simon very quickly was included. In January 1999 Tony had to pull out. In March Simon changed jobs and also had to pull out.



The Dominator disassembled.

In February Kim bought a 95 Dominator with 10,000 km on the clock and George dusted off his Tenere. The plan was to work on the bikes in George's as-yet-unbuilt shed. The shed went up in May and many long nights and weekends were spent preparing the bikes.



The Dominator being converted to a Tanami.



The Tenere being refurbished.



The Tenere and Dominator in George's workshop.

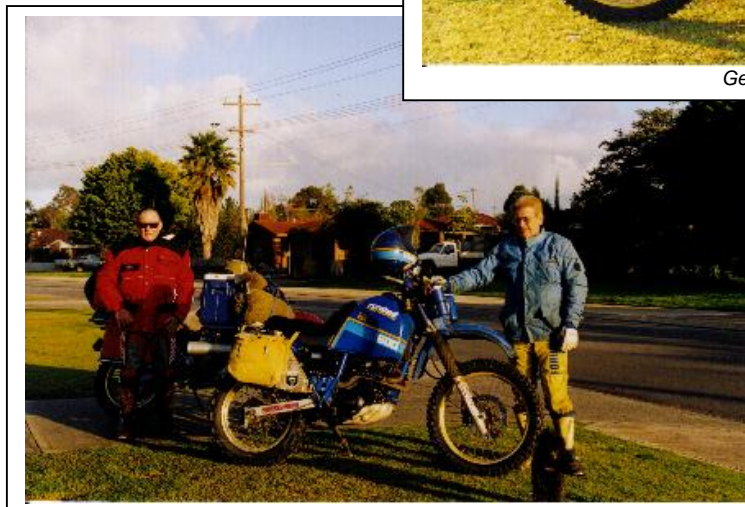


Kim and his Tanami.

As the day of departure approached we realised that the time available to finish preparation of the bikes was too short. And although the day of departure was postponed from Thursday to Friday to Sunday there were still jobs left undone.



George and his Tenere.



Nothing critical, nothing important but just tasks that would provide comfort in the knowledge that they had been completed.

As events transpired nothing that had been left undone had any adverse effect on the trip. Finally, Monday was the day.....

Changeable spring skies threatened as we left Perth on the trip of a lifetime – an off road motorbike journey across the continent to the most northern point of the country, Cape York, and back.

George was on a Yamaha Tenere and I was riding a radically altered Honda Dominator – rebadged as a “Tanami”. Both bikes were big bore thumpers modified to carry a huge load – we intended to be self sufficient with regards to food, fuel, water, spares, camping gear



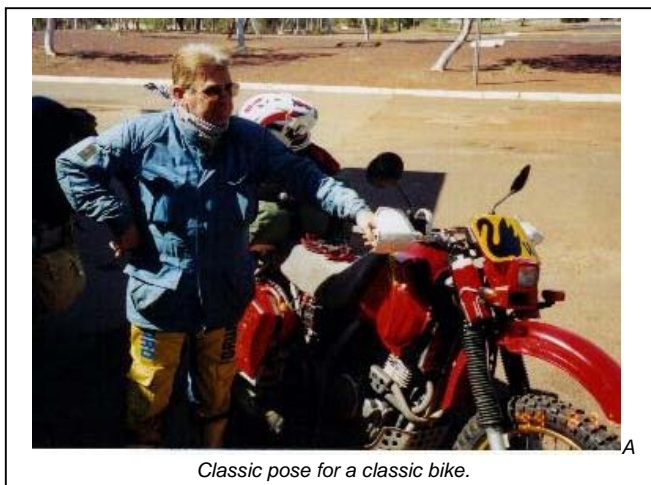
George thawing out at Laverton.

and any thing else necessary for the 14,000 kilometre journey. A journey that, after bashing the bitumen from Perth to Laverton, would take in the Great Central Road to Yulara, the Simpson Desert, the Channel Country to the Gulf and then to the Cape, returning via Cairns the Atherton and Barkly Tablelands, Alice Springs and the Gunbarrel Highway. It was a large part of the country, a big ask, a big adventure – perhaps we had “bitten off a bit more than we could chew”.

The bone chilling ride to Kalgoorlie and on to Menzies was a “shakeout” – as are most first days of any big trip – motorbike or otherwise.

Familiarise oneself with the bike, re-adjust the load, race around Kalgoorlie buying forgotten, desperately-needed items, get the gear right, switch on, get with the program, get into touring mode.

Laverton, on the edge of the Great Victoria Desert, was the end of the bitumen and start of the adventure. The dirt track to Yamarna, site of a failed tourist venture, was a good, easy warm-up for what lay ahead. Not that many years earlier a bold soul had tried to establish a tourist venture at Yamarna Homestead - an oasis in the desert for the adventurous traveller. He was probably a dozen light years ahead of his time. Isolation and a distinct dearth of passing traffic would have seen to his demise in the normal course of events - unfortunately.

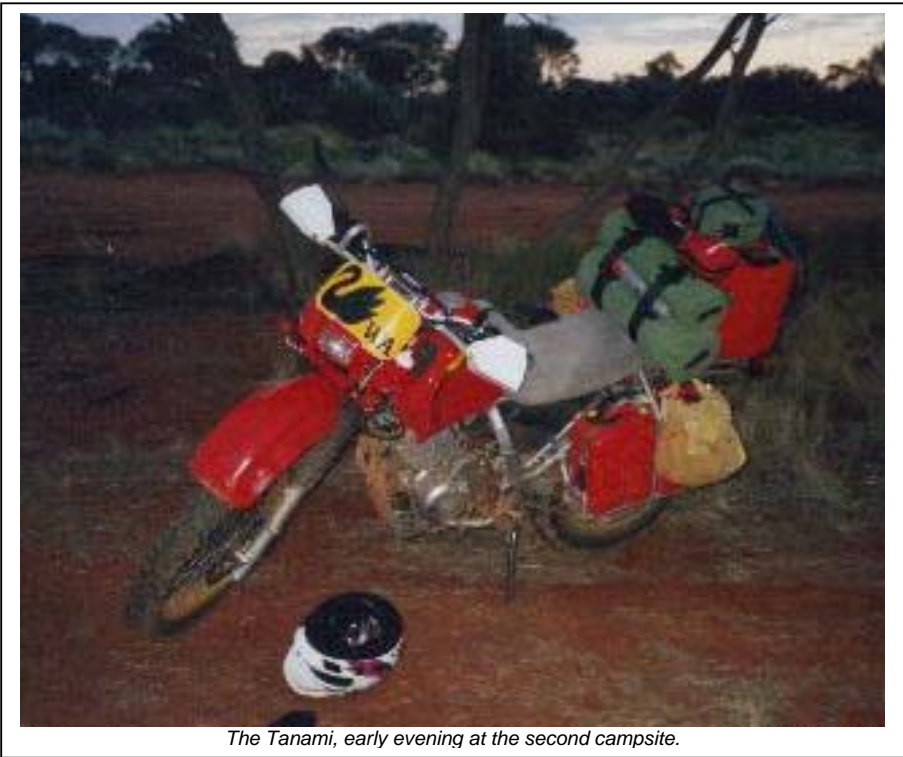


Classic pose for a classic bike.

However, sour opposition and twisted bureaucracy forced him into premature closure. He made the mistake of selling a cold can of beer to a thirsty traveller.

At Yamarna we made time to adjust and repair our gear. A combination of a rough track and excess weight was beginning to rip the straps from the saddle bags. Gaffer tape to the rescue.

Local rain had given the country a green tinge and left trackside puddles, bogholes and quagmires. Just out of Yamarna I felt confident enough to grab a large handful of throttle. Wrong!



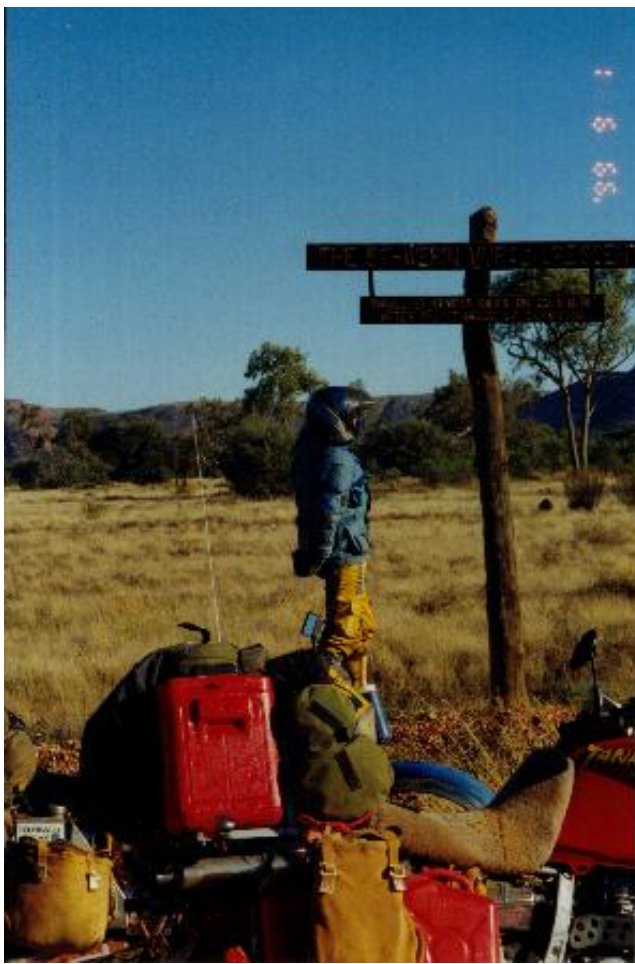
The Tanami, early evening at the second campsite.



Rod and George around the campfire, Great Central Road.



Bowser security was tight at Tjurkayirla Roadhouse.

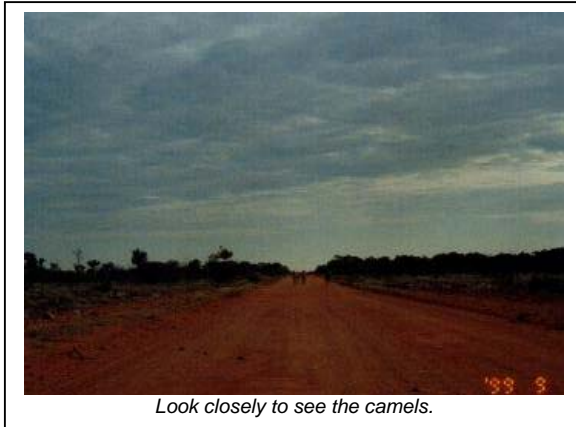


George at Schwerin Mural Crescent.

I rounded a blind bend to be confronted by large sheet of water. George was close behind and had only a moment to react. He cut right, wrapped on the throttle and threw mud everywhere as he found a way past the 100 metre "puddle". Mmmm! Now my turn. I took a wide berth to the left and picked my way through the spinifex and mulga trees to firmer, drier ground. Mud plugs are for mugs.

Further down the track the sign said "4WD Only". Bike riders translate this to mean "soft sand, difficult riding". This was no exception to the rule. Heart in the mouth terrain. It was only a matter of time before I went down after a quick "tank slapper".

George helped me pick up the bike, brush off the dirt and regain some lost pride. At least he didn't take a photograph of my first fall! Very soon after I hit a kilometre of the toughest bit of riding encountered so far. I was on the foot pegs, fighting to stay upright. Loose, deep sand was dragging down the bike.



Look closely to see the camels.

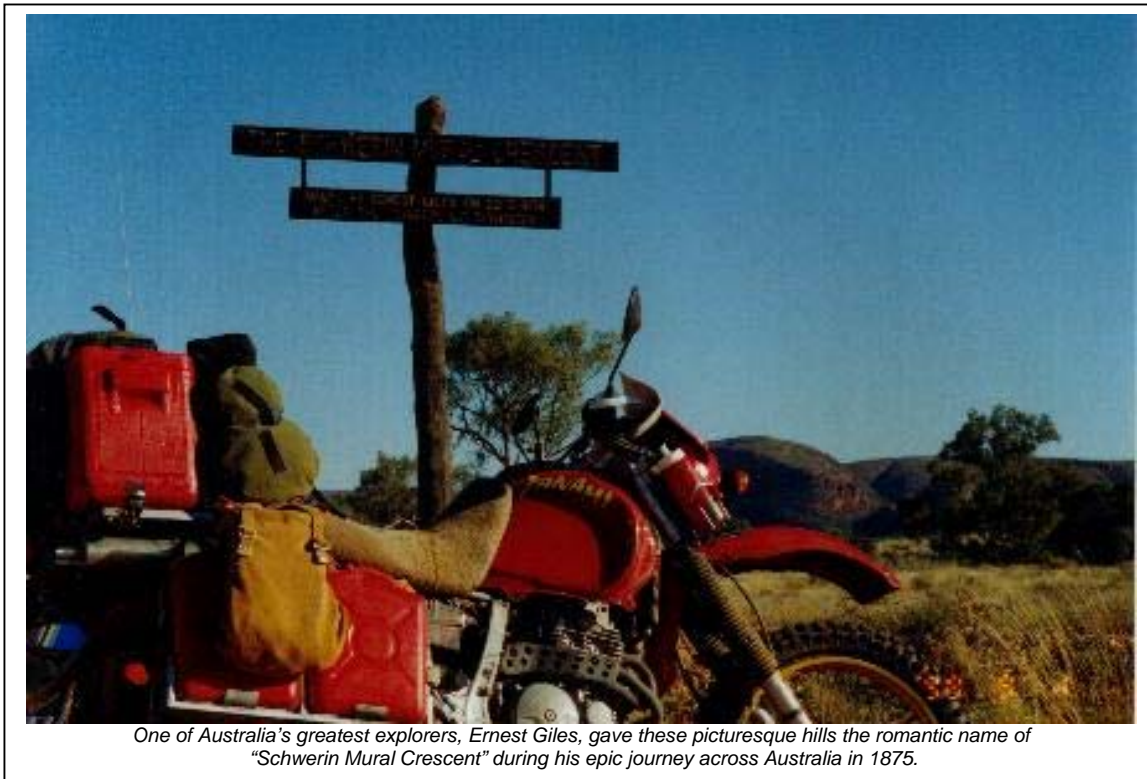
I kept telling myself to keep the front wheel pointed in the direction I wanted to go and everything would be all right. The sand seemed never ending. Fatigue overcame my fitness. When would this ever end?

Hard breathing, aching legs, arms and lungs. What's it going to be like to fall off again? Have to keep that bike straight! And then suddenly the ground firmed. Phew! Stop the bike, helmet off, jacket off, get my breath. Where's George?

As I later discovered, George had also fallen.

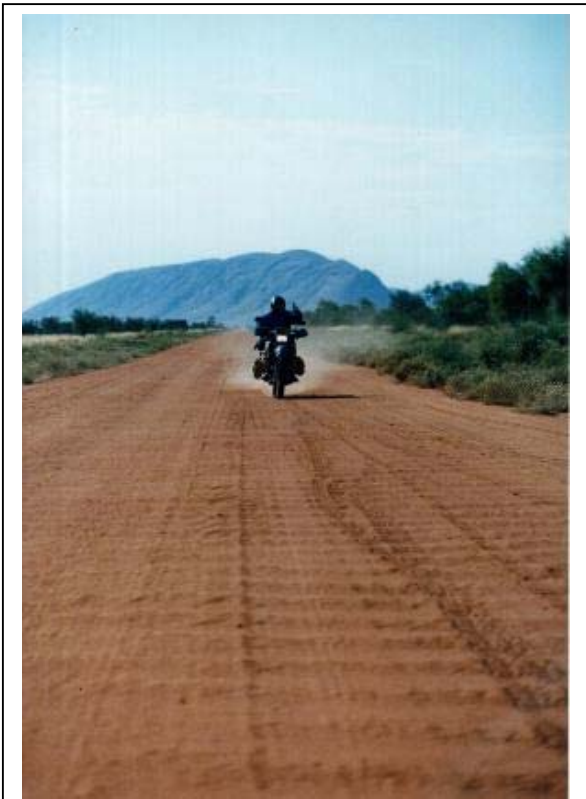
After a short discussion about perhaps calling it day and selecting a campsite in the spinifex we decided otherwise and pushed on. Just on dark we reached the Great Central Road where the Laverton Shire grader driver, Rod, was camped.

He invited us to share his fire. We set up our tents under threatening skies, prepared our evening meal and then sat around the fire swapping tales. Rod explained that his next job was to grade the Connie Sue Highway – a task about which he, and both George and I, had great misgivings. It seemed that the Shire President, who ran tag-along-tours out to the Connie Sue, wanted a more comfortable ride for his clients. We sat around stoking the campfire, telling lies and contemplating whether the distant flashes of lightning heralded rain for us before hitting the sack early.



One of Australia's greatest explorers, Ernest Giles, gave these picturesque hills the romantic name of "Schwerin Mural Crescent" during his epic journey across Australia in 1875.

We made an early start across the big, wide-open spaces of Australia. First stop was Tjurkayirla Roadhouse (known locally as "Chooka") with its caged bowsers (as with all the fuel bowsers in the "Lands"). The price on the gauge was a reminder of the isolation - \$1.15 per litre.



Typical of the Great Central Road.

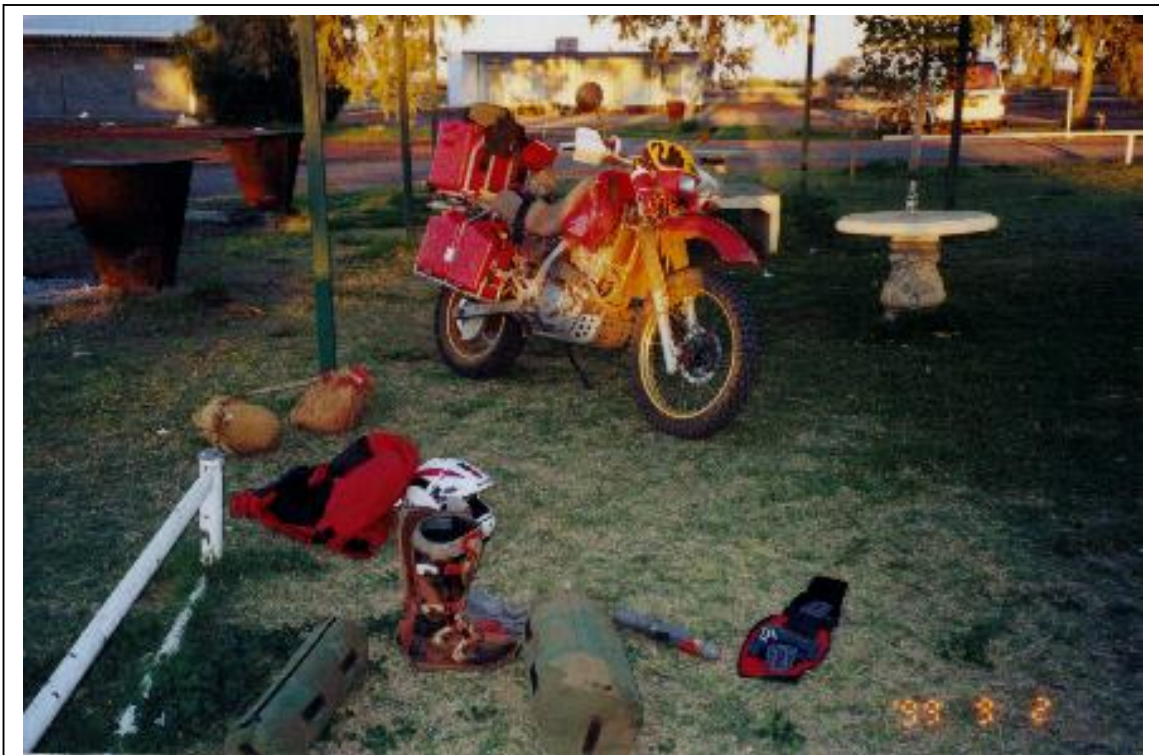
By the time we reached Warburton the day was heating up. We had an icecream on the concrete verandah of the Roadhouse, chatted to fellow travellers (who, curiously, were ignorant of the country through which they had just travelled and, perhaps not so curiously, were insensitive to the sensibilities of Aborigines with regards to photographs), stretched the muscles and checked the gear.

The ride east from Warburton was uneventful. The light failed just short of Giles. We set up camp in the spinifex of the Great Victoria Desert with the red desert sands for a floor, the horizons for walls and the galaxies for a roof. And a spade for decoration! What would be the odds of turning off the Great Central Road at a random spot in the huge expanse of the GVD and finding a spade?

As we lay back in a clearing of spinifex under a sky shotgunned with stars I ruminated on the fact that the “countless stars” one sees in a clear sky number no more than 3000.



Looking towards the Petermann Ranges.



Early morning at Kulgera before adjusting the chain, checking the bike and packing gear.

Both George and I are experienced campers and we didn't take long to get going in the mornings. I was ready first and I picked my way through the clumps of spinifex out onto the gravel road and headed east, getting a five minute break on George so my dust would dissipate. He later reminded me that the most dangerous times on our hugely unbalanced bikes were at low speed (such as getting back onto a road from a bush camp) and that I should have waited to ensure that he made it onto the road OK. A very valid point! Store that one for the future.



George spent a few hours on maintenance at Kulgera.



Kim at the Lambert Centre sign

We rode through Giles without stopping. The Mulga Park Road intersection came up a few kilometers later. To the right was the original Gunbarrel Highway. Our route was to the left – a sandy stretch lined with desert oaks. If it wasn't for the bark of the bike and the sound insulating qualities of the helmet I'm sure I could hear the sibilant sound of the desert wind whispering through *Casuarina decaisneana*.

At Docker River George was unsure if I had gone into get fuel or continued on. He rode into the Community to enquire. Meanwhile, I had continued past the turn off, intending to stop at Lasseter's Cave, further ahead. Since the Schwerin Mural Crescent we had been travelling with two 4WDs, passing and re-passing them. Rounding a bend just past Docker River one of these vehicles had unaccountably parked next to a bog hole that straddled the entire width of the track! A metre wide strip of relatively smooth dirt immediately next to the 4WD was the only way through. Fortunately the driver didn't open his door as I zipped past at 90kmh, brushing his outside rear view mirror.



Slowing down for a stop.



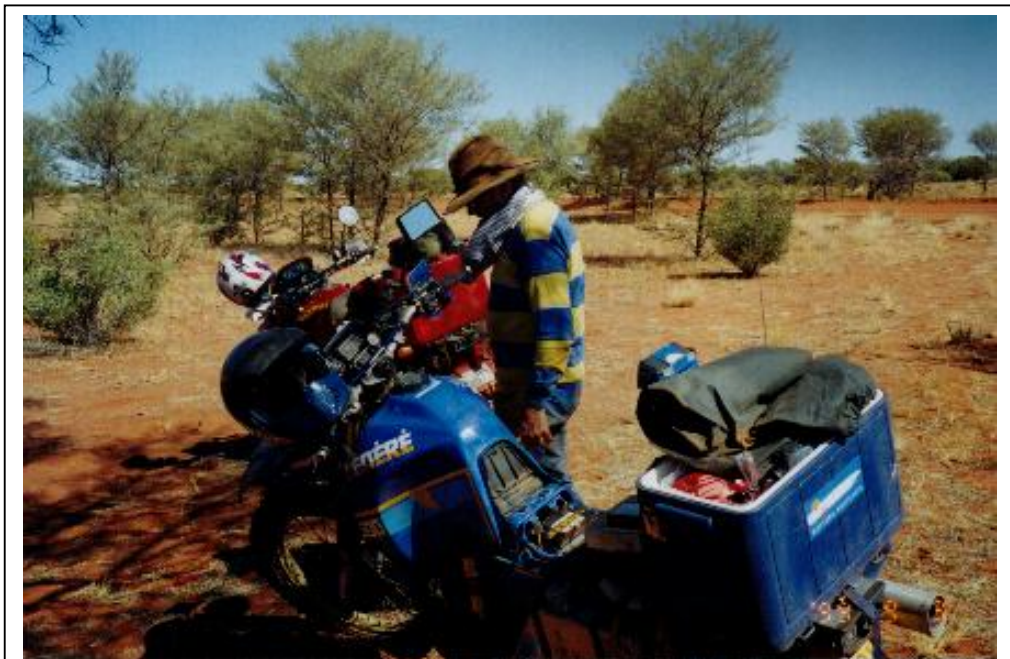
The beautifully maintained store at Finke, reputedly the best managed Aboriginal community in Australia.

There then occurred one of those co-incidences that happen often enough. We met three Israelis travelling from Adelaide to Perth with the intention of riding the Gunbarrel Highway. Two of them were riding a Dominator and a Tenere. They cast an envious eye over our purpose-modified bikes as they compared them to their mounts that they had to keep in basically stock standard condition so they could more readily sell them

when they arrived in Perth. After a short period of chat best wishes were exchanged and the Tenere and Dominator departed in the opposite direction to the Tenere and Dominator.

We hit the bitumen at the edge of Uluru National Park and wizzed into Yulara, past Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) and Uluru (Ayers Rock). As we had both seen them a number of times previously there was no great desire to visit them now. The twisting road is carefully routed to ensure that the sight of Uluru, in particular, dominates throughout the 50 kilometre trip from the edge of the National Park to Yulara.

Red sandhills are one of the most common sights of Central Australia but a sight that is nearly as common, particularly around The Rock, is that of tour coaches, closely followed by Britz, NQ and Maui campers.

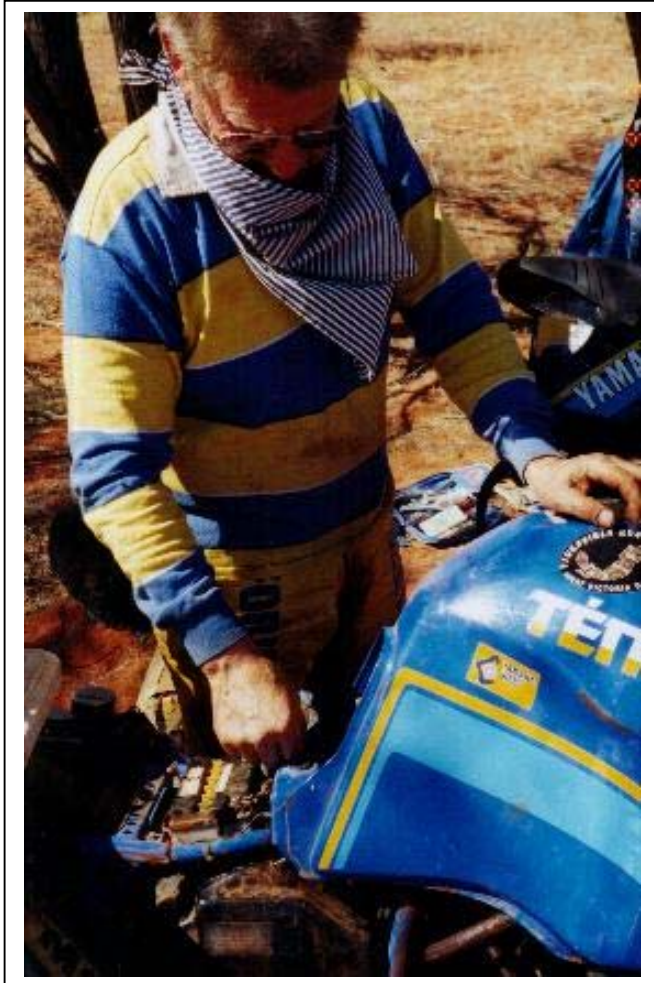


George repaired the Tenere's fuel tank just out of Finke.

We pulled up on the concourse of the Yulara Shopping Centre and George headed to the bar for that cold beer he had promised himself. Dressed in brightly coloured nylons and motorcross boots we stood out from the crowd. Sitting in the plaza under the shadecloth we were the centre of attention for many of the tourists.

Out of Yulara, after refuelling and restocking, we decided to keep to the bitumen through to Eridunda rather than travel the dirt road through Mulga Park as we headed to Kulgera. There was still a chance to get to Birdsville in time for Race Day, though the schedule would be tight. We believed we would pick up some time by bashing the bitumen. The neon sign that announced Kulgera from a distance of about five kilometres over the featureless terrain was seen shortly after darkness had fallen.

We had a late departure from Kulgera after fixing a few problems, tightening chains and giving both bikes a service.



The track to Apatula (Finke) was good and we made good time. The Birdsville Races were a possibility. Remote – but still a possibility.

George's fuel tank had been leaking for some time. Eventually the discomfort of riding while soaked in petrol (quite apart from the very real danger) forced a stop. We selected the shade of a tree just past a gate as the "Workshop".



The tank repair took a couple of hours.

Unsurprisingly (by now) we found a hubcap at the base of the tree. The tank repair was not an inconsiderable task. After the repair compound was applied to the site of the leak there was nothing to do but wait for it to set. The instructions on the pack stated two hours. We dozed for about an hour and then got underway again.

South of New Crown the track deteriorated. It was hard to “read” in the late afternoon light. We powered through a few small bulldust holes. I decided to stop just past a gate to check on the tank repair. Too late I realised that my planned stop was a large bulldust hole.



After setting up camp George removed the gear from the Tanami and stood it up.

And too late I was into it – way too slow and not correctly positioned on the bike. The result was inevitable. I used the whole width of the track to fight my way through three giant tank slappers before ending face down in the dust.

It was hot.

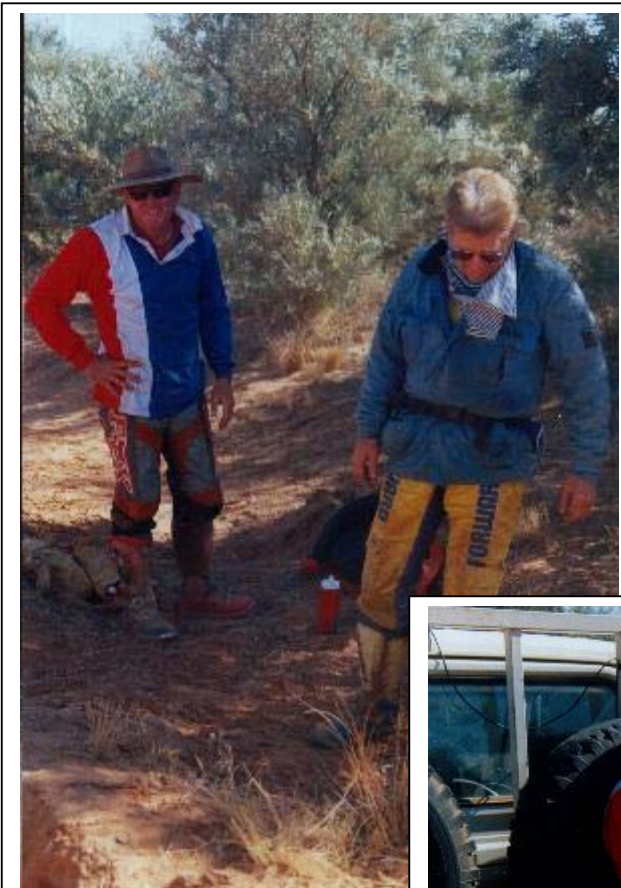
Overwhelmingly, and suffocatingly hot. I was breathing short, shallow and sharp. Quite apart from everything else, I wasn't feeling very well.

I reached over and turned off the engine before I dragged myself out from underneath the bike. George arrived and helped me up.



The reason for the crash is all too obvious.

The grating of bone on bone when I placed my weight on my left leg gave me a fairly good indication that it was broken. I hopped and George dragged me to some shade at the side of the track, where I nearly fainted. I had a pressing desire to remove my helmet and jacket – I was sooo hot!



I was able stand in what looked like a normal posture.

The feeling of light-headedness and imminent fainting gradually passed and I was able to take stock of the situation. George had returned (from where I knew not). We decided that it would not be wise to push on. In fact, it would be a good idea to camp right here! I crawled and hopped to a clearing in the spinifex. I lay down puffing and groaning. George retrieved my camping gear from the bike where it lay in the middle of the track.

I opened the first aid kit. Panadol, while good for a headache, seemed woefully inadequate for a broken leg. The anaesthetic qualities of JOHNNY WALKER were tested that night.



Our style of travel meant that we couldn't carry more than a good "taste". It was now that I discovered one aspect of growing older that I had hitherto not considered to be an advantage – a reduced capacity to handle alcohol or, conversely, a greater effect for a smaller amount.





Kim supervises packing for departure.

We had a sufficiency to dull the pain and make light of the situation.

George had erected pyramids of bush wood to warn approaching motorists of the Tanami laying on the track. Some time later he retrieved the bike after a Herculean effort, making the warnings redundant.

The topic of conversation for the

evening was rather incongruous given the setting and the circumstances – the art of good bookkeeping (and George’s proven theory of same). The noise of rutting cattle in the near distance rounded out an unforgettable night!

Next morning we (well mostly George) packed up and hid my bike in the bush. I hopped and crawled my way to the edge of the track and found some shade. George took off to New Crown Station. I passed the time considering my predicament, what was in store for both George and I, and how my unfortunate mishap had stuffed up the trip for us both. I was not able to rid myself of the feelings of self-recriminations. An hour and a half later George arrived back with the Station owner in a Toyota trayback 4WD. Also in the vehicle were two of the Station ringers and George Prosser, a visitor to the Station who decided to come along for the ride to see this hapless bike rider. The Tanami was retrieved from the bush, I clambered onto the back of the Toyota and the painful journey back to New Crown started. Though I wasn’t about to let anyone know at the time I felt every rut, gutter, bump, hole and corrugation in that track.

The Flying Doctor roared in only minutes after we arrived at the Station homestead. My main recollection of the time at the homestead was of the laid back, casual approach. Everyone wanted to have a bit of a chat, discuss the weather, pontificate on the State of the Nation, commiserate on cattle prices, and find out the latest news from Alice Springs (never mind me I only had a broken leg).

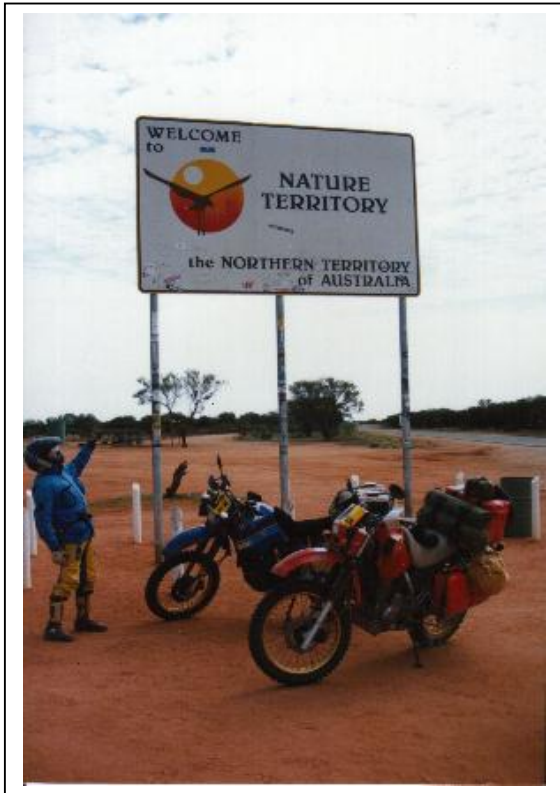


Outside the Kulqera Pub before George and Norm departed for WA.

After fighting over who was going to remove my boot in the Emergency Department of Alice Springs Hospital (I took it off, the nurses held my leg and the boot), the leg was operated on and a plate and seven pins inserted in the fibula.

George spent the night at New Crown Station. The next day, with the help of the two ringers, he moved the bikes into Kulgera, where he spent the next five days.

I escaped from the Alice Springs Hospital after five days and picked up Norm Nickerson at the airport. After phone calls from George to explain our predicament he had flown in from Perth to ride my bike back to Perth. We drove to Kulgera, met up with George and spent the evening commiserating over what might have been.

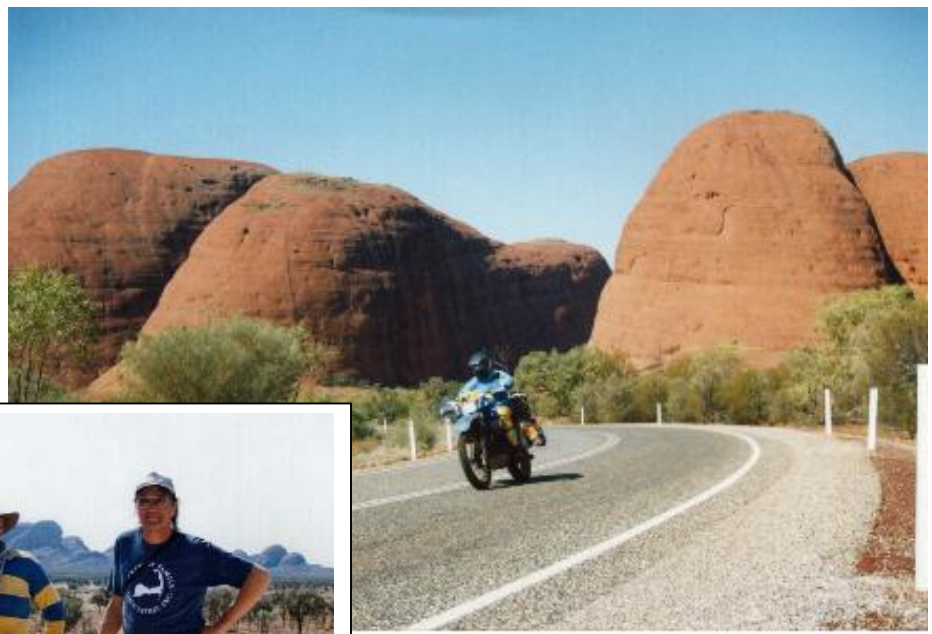


The next morning George and Norm headed off back to Perth. I was able to wave only a perfunctory farewell – the commiserations of last night were insufficient – the trip of a lifetime had become a mini nightmare, regardless of the demeanor I portrayed. I headed back to Alice Springs, caught the GHAN to Adelaide and enquired about a relaxing journey across the Nullarbor aboard the INDIAN PACIFIC – one of the World's great train journeys. "Yes sir, we can get you a seat in three weeks – it's wildflower season. People come from all around the World to travel the INDIAN PACIFIC to Western Australia to see the wonderful display of wildflowers".

I resorted to the plastic and flew out on Flight AN 83 that afternoon. The hosties were wonderful. Thanks Tiffany!



George leaving the Olgas.



George and Norm at the Olgas' Viewing Area.

Kata Tjuta (The Olgas).



Norm with the Tanami in front of what is arguably Australia's most recognisable natural feature.



Norm at the wreckage of a Blue Streak missile at Giles.



George trying to imitate the central figure of McCubbin's "Down On His Luck".

