

## Saddling Up for a Northern Exposure: Across Cape York by Bicycle!

Jessica Lovett

Recently I met up with Dave, a cycling buddy, after the Northern Queensland cycling adventure I'd enjoyed in July 2017 with Mulga Bicycle Tours, and an adventure it surely was, with my wheel-tracks following in the outback footsteps of 19th century Australian pioneers like Ludwig Leichardt, gold diggers out to make their fortune and some of our earliest cattle pastoralists. Dave was understandably curious about the trip:

**Dave: So, your 650 kilometre ride was from Cairns to some town I've never heard of?**

Jess: From Cairns to Karumba. It's west of Cairns across Cape York Peninsula and is a port on the Gulf of Carpentaria.

**And you did this with Mulga Bill!?**

No. With a group tour organised by Mark and Denise Arundel, the founders of Mulga Bicycle Tours, named not after the Banjo Patterson character who came to grief on a bike, but after the colourful native Mulga Parrot that flies in small groups in outback Australia.

**So why would you do this?**

How much time do you have to listen, Dave? Eternal mild summer temperatures away from the southern cold, wide open spaces, interspersed with scrub or rainforest in places, a canopy of endless blue sky, fascinating towns and outback characters, and what better way to appreciate them than from the bicycle saddle? Plus the opportunity to leave all my responsibilities behind and just ride where few others do, to enjoy something new every day, while my gear was transported for me, great, plentiful food on tap (especially the Barra and prawns!), staying in good accommodation (garden cottages in Yungaburra and the quirky, converted railway carriages at Undara were luxurious!)...

**OK, so I get the picture! But what was the highlight of the trip for you?**

So many top experiences that it's difficult to single out only a few. But some that stay in my



**A well-earned break for cyclists atop the Gillies Range Road, famous for 263 corners and 800 m of elevation in 19 km, that separates the far north Queensland coastal plain from the interior Atherton Tableland.**

mind were the town tour of historic Croydon by indigenous story-telling guide Patrick, who had worked in the mines and on the stations there, rattling and rolling on the iconic Gulflander train with its steel sleepers laid directly on the ground, the visit to the amazing Undara Lava tubes, inky skies filled with the Milky Way among a myriad of stars and an array of incredible sunsets — one of them enjoyed while drinking champagne and nibbling hors d'oeuvres on a sand island in the Gulf of Carpentaria — believe it or not!

**And what was the group like?**

There were nine riders plus Mark and Denise, three couples, plus three singles with spaces on the trip limited by the accommodation available in the smaller towns. Since we were all active, with an adventurous outlook and a shared interest in riding, this made for a very harmonious group. Ages were immaterial, but ranged from mid-50s to 77. Mark and Denise were the perfect leaders, friendly, endlessly hard-working, with nothing

too much trouble: determined to make our holiday as memorable and enjoyable as possible. Interestingly, all the riders except for me were from other states, but half had taken part in and enjoyed Bicycle SA Annual Tours in the past.

**I guess you were upset to be parted from your beloved road bike?**

No, there were all sealed roads and so I took it with me (no surprise there!) and I had no problems, mechanicals or punctures. About half the group took their own bikes, while the others hired Mulga bikes and all of them performed well.

**Knowing how fussy you are about it, how well was your steed looked after?**

Beautifully! When it needed to be transported or secured for the night, along with the other bikes, it was fully protected in Mulga's unique, purpose designed trailer about which I'll fill you in more fully some other time. Suffice to whet your interest by saying that the trailer was fully

enclosed and entirely made from aluminium, reinforced inside with mesh with a folding second floor that could carry 17 bikes supported, never to touch. Inside it also housed shelving, bag storage, lighting, a fridge freezer, a plumbed hand washing sink, a portable bike stand, and a resuscitation kit in case of a medical emergency. Outside there was an electrically operated awning for shade during breaks, a reversing camera and on the roof, two 120-watt solar roof panels to power everything.

**Wow! But what about safety on those outback roads?**

You know how wary I am of Australian drivers generally, but I have to say that I've never felt safer on a ride than on this one. We all carried two-way radios which Denise and Mark supplied and charged every night. Mark, in the 4 Wheel Drive towing the high-tech trailer travelled in front of us, while Denise in the 12 seater bus followed behind the last rider and both vehicles displayed warning signs with flashing amber lights. They kept us informed by radio of vehicles approaching from in front and behind, so that we always knew what to expect. In the case of the infrequent road trains, we dismounted before they approached. There was always the opportunity to ride in the bus, rather than cycle, but none of us needed or wanted to do this.

**Since you haven't complained about organisation — one of your things — I assume it was all good?**

Spot on and super-professional: as I'd expected after telephone conversations with Mark before I booked and as you'd expect from people who had previously won a Telstra Small Business Award. Not a single hitch — though I suspect it was a bit like the swan — exhibiting serenity to the observer but a lot of work going on 'below the water' by our leaders!

**So when can I book for the next Cairns to Karumba tour?!**

Dave, I know you'd definitely enjoy the trip, so do check it out on the website at <[www.mulgabicycletours.com.au](http://www.mulgabicycletours.com.au)> (and their Facebook page). And if you are serious about booking, contact Mark and Denise as I did, but don't leave it too long (in your usual way!), as my tour booked out six months in advance.

### Cycle Salisbury

Maureen Merrick

After four years as the Cycle Salisbury Ride Group Coordinator, Nigel Griffiths, is handing over the role to Elaine Kuczarski, another extremely capable cyclist. Nigel is one of the founding members of Cycle Salisbury and we wish him well for the future.

The group organises a variety of road and off-road rides on Wednesdays and at the weekends. Please feel free to contact Elaine on 042293 997 for further information.



Rattling and rolling on board the iconic 'Tin Hare' as we cross the Norman River between Croydon and Normanton



Those faraway places... On the Savannah Way, the highway to Karumba (and adventure!) via historic outback town



Be reassured, dear readers, that our brave cyclists were far too speedy to be caught by Krys the Croc who lives in Normanton's main street



Intrepid cyclists on top of the (Queensland!) World, near Ravenshoe