

# An Adventure Down Under!

Nov. 11 – Dec. 1, 2006

By: *Laura McCabe*

Three weeks in Australia - what better way to celebrate a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, burn some “use it or lose it” vacation days, and enjoy an extra few weeks of summer?! It’s f-a-r way, but well worth a visit and we will definitely return to tour other parts of the country. (We’ve heard Melbourne is supposed to be excellent for cycling and the home of thousands of cyclists.)

Our trip was really a counter-clockwise tour of “greater Sydney,” as we were never more than 2-3 hours by car from the city. Trip highlights were the city of Sydney itself, the beaches north of Sydney, the Hunter Valley wine region, and the Blue Mountains (Blueys). November is an excellent time to tour this section of Australia as you will enjoy early summer weather and avoid the school holidays. Our books and maps are available to any of you planning a trip.

We splurged and stayed in mostly 4+ star hotels and B&Bs. The airline baggage restrictions would have made it difficult to haul camping gear in addition to a tandem bicycle (that’s my excuse, and I’m sticking to it!). We made our first and last nights reservations at the Shangri-La in Sydney on-line before we left the US, but all other arrangements were made en route, usually at visitor information centers. The Shangri-La stored our suitcases for us while we were on tour.

A few “fun facts” about Australia:

- Be prepared for an incredibly long, uncomfortable flight. San Francisco to Sydney was 14 hours, with 260 other passengers in coach, sharing 8 bathrooms and 6 flight attendants.
- Food, even packaged snacks, must be declared upon arrival, so leave your Power Bars at home or eat them before you get off the plane. Also be prepared to be “fumigated” before being allowed off the plane.
- We found the Aussies (pronounced Ozzies) to be friendly, easy to understand, fun-loving (gambling, rugby and beer), informal (shorts and flip flops were OK everywhere), and laid back. Their favorite phrase seems to be “no worries, mate!” They were curious about us and would often come up and begin asking the usual questions (Where are you from? How much did the bike cost? How far do you ride? Do you like Australia?). We also heard “she’s not pedaling”, just like in the States. And Duncan never got tired of being told he didn’t look 50 years old!
- Road surfaces are rougher and grades steeper than in the US. As a result, we had more flats and covered less daily mileage than on previous tours in the US, France, and Sweden. Drivers were generally more courteous than in the States, though less courteous than in Europe. We had no problems adapting to riding on the “wrong” (left) side of the road.
- The food was good, with a heavy Asian influence, especially Thai. Also lots of seafood, salads, and pizza. But for some reason Aussies and Kiwis like to put sliced beets on their sandwiches and hamburgers.
- Aussies don’t drink much Fosters or Yellow Tail - both seem to be primarily for export. VB (Victoria Bitters) and Toohey’s New are the Budweiser and Coors of Australia. And speaking of beer, in pubs it’s served nice and cold in pints (perfect after a hot day of riding), schooners (probably more prudent than a pint), and middys (too small too bother with). We always found a drive-thru bottle shop open when we needed it.
- Australia has the most obnoxious flies on the planet, especially on hot, windy afternoons. The flies and ants shortened many picnic lunches. On the plus side, we never met any Aussie mosquitoes.
- “Ta” apparently means “you’re welcome” or “that’s OK”.
- Delawareans may be interested to know that the car license plates for New South Wales also say “The First State”.

## Equipment:

We traveled via a coupled tandem Bushnell “push bike” (Aussie for bicycle) with front and rear panniers. We wore Camelbak “Hawgs” because we like their large water bladder and the convenience of the backpack for stowing last minute wind breakers and groceries, though admittedly the pack can be uncomfortable on hot days. For this trip we tried out Shimano sandals with cleats and loved them! They were the only shoes we brought on tour. On the few cool mornings, a pair of socks were adequate to ensure warm feet, and the cleats were easily removed for the bush walks we did. Plus we liked the interesting tan lines we got from the sandals! We packed 3 sets of bike clothes and one set of off-bike clothes (pants that zip off to shorts). Many of the hotels had guest laundry facilities, or stoker Laura the “laundry drudge” would hand wash each day. A final tip: carry an accessible strap or bungee cord for securing the bike on the ferries.

## Most useful reference material:

- Bike Rides Around Sydney, by Ian Connellan and Neil Irvine, picked up at Dymocks Bookstore in Sydney. This was our primary route planner.
- Qantas has an excellent website for making hotel bookings before you leave the US: <http://www.qantas.com.au/content/dyn/readyrooms/search>
- City Bike Depot in Sydney (305 Kent Street) – ask Hugh to make you a cappuccino!

Now a day-by-day look at our trip:

**Saturday, November 11:** Departed USA.

**Monday, November 13:** Arrived Sydney about 25 hours later, checked into the Shangri-La and spent the day site-seeing, though we've excluded the details because every tourist has different interests and budgets. Do some research before you go, pick up brochures once you arrive, and ask for advice. You should allow 2-3 days for Sydney, via walking and public transportation.

**Tuesday, November 14:** More site-seeing and put bike together in hotel room.

**Wednesday, November 15:** No problems getting out of Sydney. We maneuvered through the big city commuter traffic, down to Darlington Harbor. This is when we first learned that loaded tandems ride escalators surprisingly well. From there we headed west to Olympic Park (site of Australian Olympics), near Parramatta, with the intent of working our way west to the Blue Mountains, even though it would require many km on the M4 highway. But gale force headwinds and an ominous weather forecast (unseasonably cold temperatures and possible snow) made us change our minds. Olympic Park had nothing to offer (it felt like a big construction site) and we would not recommend it. We re-evaluated our options over cappuccinos and decided to head north and then east back towards the coast north of Sydney. We enjoyed a scenic descent through Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park with beautiful water views of Pittwater, into Mona Vale, where we assessed our options and found a brochure at the library for The Arms Hotel, just up the road in Newport. The Arms had a beautiful setting overlooking a lake and the largest beer garden in Australia (which was deserted due to the unseasonably cold wind). Our room was up one short flight of stairs and had plenty of room for the tandem. Mileage: 43 miles with pleasant temperatures (mid-70s) and strong winds. We enjoyed a takeout Thai dinner from a restaurant across the street.

**Thursday, November 16:** Woke up to rain and decided to stay another night at The Arms. We took a bus into Sydney and finished up our site-seeing, focusing on indoor activities such as shopping and museums. That night we had a great pizza in the hotel bar.

**Friday, November 17:** Flat #1 (rear) was discovered and repaired while still in our hotel room. The weather had cleared and we had sunny, warm weather the rest of the trip. From Newport we headed north up the peninsula towards Barrenjoey Head and the Wagstaff Ferry, with rugged and beautiful coastline views on both sides. Many of the climbs were steep and exhausting on a loaded tandem. The passenger-only Wagstaff Ferry was small but the friendly staff gladly accommodated us and waited patiently while we maneuvered the tandem on and off the boat. The views from the ferry as we crossed Broken Bay were stunning. The information center in Terrigal provided excellent lunch (the Cove, overlooking the coast) and overnight (Stanley House B&B) recommendations. After checking in with Nita at the B&B we rode into The Entrance for groceries and to look around, bringing the day's mileage to 49 miles. We cooked a simple dinner at the B&B and chatted with Nita.

**Saturday, November 18:** Headed up the Central Coast beach highway, which unfortunately had more traffic than we had hoped, and only brief glimpses of the beautiful beaches to our right and lakes to our left. We stopped en route for a short hike in the Wyrabalong National Park. This is when we first discovered the virtues of the Shimano sandals. It was a simple matter to remove the cleats for the hike, and the sandals were quite comfortable for walking. We also detoured off the busy main highway down to Catherine Hill Bay for a picnic on the beach. In Swansea we stopped at the information center and made reservations at The Lakeside Motor Inn on Lake MacQuarie, just up the road in Warners Bay. Most of the ringed the lake, but during a tough climb around 4PM we had flat #2 (rear). Note: while all flats are at least annoying, there is something particularly dispiriting about a flat late in the afternoon when you're focused on getting to a hot shower and cold beer! We reached the hotel with 53 miles for the day. Several nice restaurants were a short stroll away along the paved path around the lake.

**Sunday, November 19:** We followed Lake MacQuarie via the scenic and popular paved path and then northwest to Pokolbin in the lower Hunter Valley (wine country!). Flat #3 occurred almost immediately, while we were still in sight of last night's motel. The day included some steep climbs, scenic views, and continuing great weather. Flat #4 occurred as we were entering the Hunter Valley, about 2 miles from the Wine Country Visitor's Centre. We rolled into the parking lot just minutes after it had closed. Fortunately there was a new Crowne Plaza golf resort directly across the highway (\$\$\$). We arrived hot and tired (50 miles) but spent some time chatting with a couple interested in our adventure. The hotel was happy to accommodate us with a large room on the first floor – we wheeled our bike through the fancy lobby without incident. During our one-night stay we made the most of the 2 restaurants, bar, pool, hot tub, laundry, and even the fitness room (hey, the arms and abs needed some attention, too!).



**Monday, November 20:** After a leisurely breakfast and late checkout at the hotel, we cycled over to the visitor's center and reserved a night at The Carriages Country House, which also granted us dinner reservations for that night at the exclusive Robert's (French) Restaurant, a short stroll from the B&B. After checking in and dropping off our gear, we grabbed our winery map and went wine tasting via unloaded tandem! For those of you with wine and cycling interests, the Hunter Valley is a lot of fun: mostly flat, lightly-traveled rural roads, with a few challenging climbs and hundreds of wineries just a few miles apart, as well as a couple of micro-breweries, plus chocolate, cheese and olive shops, and cafes. Cycling was NOT the priority today: only 17 miles!



Kangaroo crossing

**Tuesday, November 21:** We checked out of The Carriages, leaving our gear there so we could continue our tour of the wineries. Flat #5 (rear) occurred on a dirt road. We toured Hunter Valley Gardens (touristy). Later in the day we picked up our gear and then headed back to the visitor's center to get another room recommendation. We ended up at Peppers Guest House and rode the tandem in the dark the short distance to Harrigans Pub for dinner (in retrospect it would have made more sense to get a room at Harrigans). 43 miles today.

**Wednesday, November 22:** Flat #6 (rear) only a few minutes into the ride. We replaced the Panracer Pasella tire with a Soma New Xpress (both 700 X 28) and had no more rear flats the rest of the trip. Today

was a very pleasant cycle day on good rural roads through the bush, heading generally southwest. We didn't see any live kangaroos, but unfortunately lots of 'roo roadkill in various stages of odiferous decay. We stopped at Undercliff Winery for tasting and a pleasant chat with the owner, then lunch at the tavern in Wollombi, and then on to the elegant Judson's B&B at Laguna (40 miles today). For the first time, we could see and smell evidence of the bush fires west of us in the Blue Mountains.

**Thursday, November 23** (Duncan's 50<sup>th</sup>): After an unsuccessful side trip to look for live kangaroos, we spent the day on idyllic country roads, continuing generally southwest. After a tough climb in the morning over Mangrove Mountain, the afternoon was easy and scenic on rural roads with little to no traffic, through several national parks. We took the short, free historic (1817) cable ferry across the Hawkesbury River to Wisemans Ferry. While on the ferry, Duncan



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Nifty to be fifty: Duncan and the crowd of well wishers

discovered one of the boom tube couplers was loose, which explained the shifting problems we'd been having. The captain vowed to resume daily checking of the couplers! We climbed the hill into Wisemans Ferry, checking into the rustic and relatively cheap Wisemans Ferry Inn (66 miles). That night an impromptu party erupted in the hotel pub when the locals learned it was Duncan's 50<sup>th</sup>. It was a memorable birthday!

**Friday, November 24:** The continuing bush fires have us concerned that we will not get to the Blueys, but we continued southwest along the river, which was very scenic and flat. After the short free Sackville Ferry, we stopped at a historic winery (closed) and picnicked on their lawn. Flat #7 (front) occurred as we pulled away, probably due to the rose bush trimmings where we'd parked the tandem. We replaced the tire to match the rear and had no more flats the rest of the trip. We stopped for coffee in Windsor, a charming historic town, and then rode west into Richmond, ending up at a new non-descript hotel at the racetrack (53 miles). Better accommodations were already booked due to a water skiing race that weekend. Dinner at the Hogs Breath chain restaurant next door was also uninspiring.

**Saturday, November 25:** Started the morning with an unpleasant, hot and open ride south through the quarries, which was reminiscent of riding through the phosphate mines in central Florida. After the ugly industrial city of Penrith, we escaped through the pleasant Bents Basin State Recreation Area for a picnic lunch at the scenic reservoir. Camden's Crown Motel turned out to be a nice surprise after 59 miles. This was the first night we were not able to bring our tandem up to our room, but the motel staff was very happy to lock it up for us in the liquor storage room, where we knew it would be secure!

**Sunday, November 26:** We rode the very short distance to Mount Annan Botanic Garden, which welcomes cyclists. After touring the gardens, we proceeded on to Campbelltown, where we hoped to rent a car. By this point we had decided the Blue Mountains were not going to be an option, because of the bush fires. So our plan was to rent a car and head south. But at the visitor's center we learned that no cars were available until Monday, AND most of the Blueys were open, AND it was possible to take the train to Katoomba, the gateway to the Blueys. Thus began one of those memorable adventures that happen on trips like this: first we took the train east back to Sydney's Central Station, then a bus west back to Penrith of all places (a portion of the railroad tracks was closed for weekend maintenance), then the train west to Katoomba. The tour books all tell you it is impossible to take a bike on the bus or train, but because it was a weekend and we were not interfering with commuters, we had no trouble. We popped off the panniers and slid the tandem on its side into the luggage compartment under the bus with no problems at all. At the train stations we survived a couple elevator rides, an escalator, and a rush down a set of stairs to catch the train. On the train we took up most of the area by the doors, but no one complained and in fact several folks stopped to ask questions and chat about our "tandem push bike". When we arrived in Katoomba, we rode one block to the historic (1882) Carrington Hotel for the night, which we ended up extending to 4 nights. Only 17 cycling miles again today! The Carrington staff was extremely friendly and interested in our trip. Our bike was locked in a secure storage area. We explored the small town of Katoomba on foot, found an excellent wine shop, and enjoyed a Thai dinner.

**Monday, November 27:** We started the morning by cycling the scenic but steep Cliff Drive, enjoying the gorgeous views of the Blue Mountains, despite a slight haze due to the bush fires. We spent the day touring the area, including an extended bush hike through the National Park, down and around Echo Point and the Three Sisters rock formation, returning to the top via the historic coal train to Scenic World (touristy). After cycling back to the Carrington (21 miles) we walked to a vegetarian restaurant across the street for an early dinner.

**Tuesday, November 28:** Today we took a day off the bike for a bus tour to Jenolan Caves, deeper into the Blueys. On a different trip, it might be fun to ride to the Caves (unloaded) from Katoomba and spend the night at the historic hotel there. We enjoyed the bus ride and cave tour, and wished we'd had more time at Jenolan. That evening, back in Katoomba, we walked to the Three Sisters observation platform to view the tasteful way they are lit at night. After that long walk, we splurged on dessert at a resort nearby, then called a taxi to take us back to the Carrington.

**Wednesday, November 29:** We rented mountain bikes from Velo Nova bike shop in Katoomba and rode out the aptly named Narrow Neck Road (a ridge with scenic valleys on each side), marveling that it was actually 4WD navigable. It was a technically difficult ride for a couple of novice off-roaders like us, and Laura still has some bruises to prove it! The rugged track took us past a fire tower, the highest point in the Blue Mountains. The watchman invited us to climb up to enjoy the beautiful views and to observe the bush fires off in the distance.

**Thursday, November 30:** Our trip is nearly over and still no 'roo sightings! So in desperation we signed up for an eco tour "breakfast with the kangaroos" and were finally rewarded with sightings of wild gray kangaroos, swamp wallabies, red neck wallabies, and wallaroos. Kangaroos are like deer in that they come out at dawn and dusk to graze in pastures, but they look

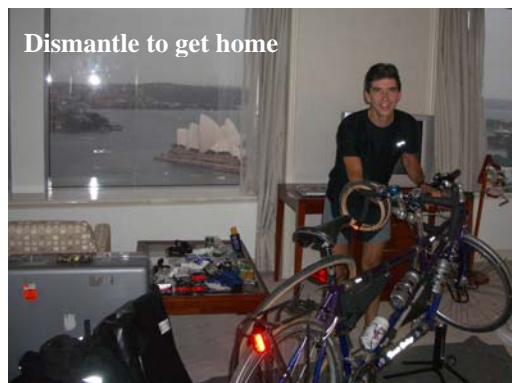
like a creature Stephen Spielberg would have invented! After the 'roo tour, we checked out of the Carrington and rode through Leura down to Wentworth Falls, checking in at Moments B&B (only 11 miles today – our shortest!). Our room had a beautiful view overlooking the Blueys. We enjoyed a hike to Wentworth Falls, and ordered Thai “takeaway” delivered from a local restaurant.

**Friday, December 1:** “it’s all downhill from here”! The descent from Katoomba to Emu Plains drops 970m in 54km! Except for one intense stretch on the interstate, the route followed a quiet tourist route. What a great way to finish off the trip! At Emu Plains (31 miles) we rolled the bike onto a train to Sydney without incident. It was mid-day so the train was essentially empty. We then walked the tandem the few blocks back to the Shangri-La. Our 27<sup>th</sup> floor corner room was huge and had plenty of room to dismantle the bike and pack up for our flight home. It also gave us a perfect view of Sydney Harbor and an unexpected fireworks display that night!

**Saturday, December 2:** We returned to the US without incident, arriving in San Francisco six hours before we left Sydney!

**Trip statistics:**

- 14 tandem riding days (553 miles) plus 1 mountain bike day
- Shortest mileage day: 11 (Katoomba to Wentworth Falls)
- Longest mileage day: 66 (on Duncan’s birthday)
- Average loaded speed 10-12 mph



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