

CYCLING COOPERS CREEK TO CUNNAMULLA

taking the long way home



The 470km between Coopers Creek to
Cunnamulla is a long way to ride a push bike...
but as *Amy Williams* discovers,
it sure is a great way to see the Outback

Sometimes travelling by car just doesn't quite cut it, especially if it's the 'experience' you're after. Taking a group of 65 bike riders across some of Australia's most distinctive and beautiful outback

scenery, the Coopers Creek to Cunnamulla event traverses vast savannah plains and tiny towns with populations in the single digits.

The arrival of the bikes in Cunnamulla at the end of the ride marks the start of the biannual Cunnamulla "Outback" Masters Games, where not-so-conventional sports like wood-chopping and shearing headline the program.

According to Games Coordinator Karen Ticehurst, the four-day bike ride is the most popular event of the Games and has people coming back for more.

While the event lures a number of experienced riders who train beforehand, Karen says you don't have to be a competitive bike rider to take part.

"There is usually a one to two hour gap between the first and the last person," she says.

"Most of them just want to see the outback, and they can take their time on a bike."

There is also the option to compete in a team where each person rides a leg while the others take the car.

"When you're on a bike for 120km at a time, it really takes it out of you," Karen says.

Karen remembers one year a participant rode a Penny Farthing with disastrous consequences.

"During the first ride, temperatures were unseasonably warm and reached 37 degrees," Karen says.

"It couldn't have been too comfortable for the Penny Farthing rider who struggled through a bad dose of hives received from the heat."

After setting off from Coopers Creek, the first stop along the road is Noccundra, a town with a population of the three, who, anticipated cold drinks.



Most nights are spent in local towns or camped out under the stars with meals prepared by resident chef, Dogga Dare, who according to Karen "undertake the catering duties with style and pizzazz."

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After a hearty breakfast, the riders leave Noccundra the next morning and it is at this point that Karen says riders will really start to "feel it."

"Bums are very sore by day two," Karen says. "And those unaccustomed to the daily onslaught of flies that stick to you from dawn to dusk, may ask themselves why they put their hand up to do this."

However Karen is quick to point out riders need only lift their heads and take in the spectacular country views, to acknowledge that any pain is worth it.

"People don't realize the beauty that's out there," Karen says.

"There's not a tree to be seen in the first two days of the ride."

Day two's course takes riders across the Grey Range to Thargomindah, the 'hub' of the Bulloo Shire, where participants are invited to take a tour of Australia's first hydro-electricity system driven by artesian water pressure.

On the third day the group heads 127 km down a sometimes 'harrowing' stretch of bitumen according to Karen, to the green haven that is Eulo.

With a population of 50, Eulo sits on the pristine Paroo River and keeps riders busy with mud baths and bird-watching.

Friday morning's final 67km ride sees the group cross the mighty Warrego before arriving at its destination for the start of the Cunnamulla "Outback" Masters Games.

With students lining the streets to welcome them, the triumphant travelers are led into the town by the fire truck and awarded medals in front of the famous Cunnamulla Fella statue.

Two-time medal recipient Robert Herrmann, a Company Manager from Ballarat, Victoria has been on both rides since the event's inception after hearing about it through a friend.

"I think what makes this ride so special is the local people you get to meet along the way, including the organisers," he says.

"Most of the friends I took with me had never been into that part of the country before, and had such a good time that I expect we will have an even bigger group next year."

"We also have a team of sisters from across Queensland who use the ride as an excuse to get together for a week and enjoy each others company," says Karen of some other recurring faces.

"It seems to be a trend that is increasing with other sisters and brothers or families using the ride as a great way to spend a holiday together," Karen says.

**CUNNAMULLA "OUTBACK"
MASTERS GAMES**
27 APRIL - 10 MAY 2009
WHERE: CUNNAMULLA
WEB: WWW.CUNNAMULLAMASTERS.COM.AU
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