



FOLLOWING THE FINKE: A MODERN EXPEDITION DOWN THE RIVER OF TIME

PART II: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE AGESKATE EXPLORES A VAST, TIMELESS LAND AS SHE HEADS TOWARDS THE FINISH LINE.

WORDS AND PICS: KATE LEEMING





Pedalling my hi-tech fatbike over the pure sands of the Glen of Palms in Finke Gorge (Day 3), I was struck by the contrast between the present and the prehistoric. I was dwarfed by the scale of my surroundings. Ancient rust-red sandstone cliffs adorned by spindly ghost gums whose roots clung tenuously to fractured rocky ledges, majestic river gums and tall grasses bordered the waterholes - the whole lot destined to be washed down the Finke at some point in the not-too-distant geological future.

According to the Dreamtime, Larapinta was formed when the Rainbow Serpent thrust north from Lake Eyre. Geological science has a rather different take on its creation. Here in Finke Gorge, the river incises a convoluted path through the James Range that, together with the West MacDonnell and Krichauff

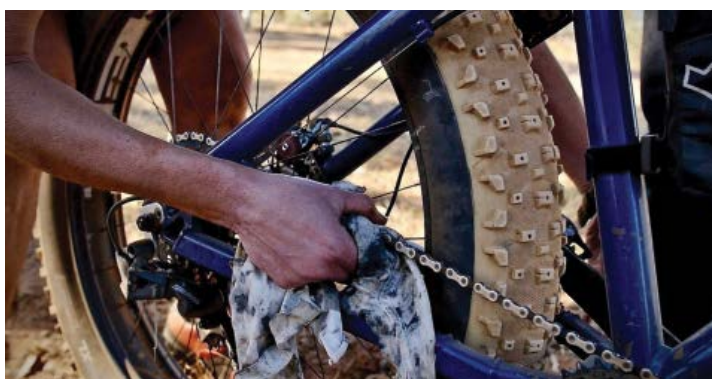
ranges, was formed between 300 and 400 million years ago. Meandering river beds form on flat plains, not through mountain ranges and so geologists have deduced that some of these parts of the Finke River were there before the mountains were pushed up. It is estimated that the Finke has flowed along its present course for about 100 million years, though some parts may date back 340 million years, before the time of dinosaurs. With the presence of prehistoric-looking red cabbage palms, I half-expected a dinosaur to pop its head around the corner! Downstream from these ranges the Finke is much younger. The river is constantly altering its course through the lowlands; transporting and transforming its prehistoric payload, from boulders to pebbles to sand, as it washes towards the desert with each significant flood.

While Aboriginal people have lived in the region for untold generations, using Larapinta as a trade route and its waterholes to survive, in 1860 John McDouall Stuart was the first European explorer to discover the river which he named after William Finke, one of his South Australian sponsors. Twelve years later, Ernest Giles became the first European to navigate the watercourse through the gorge country. Soon after, the land was opened to pastoralists for whom the river was subsequently central to the survival of their fortunes.

Setting off from Boggy Hole on Day 4, I followed a 4WD track along the river, through its environs and then out of the National Park to Running Water Yards. From there, for the remainder of the journey, I was to travel through pastoral station country stocked mainly with cattle.



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Previous spread: Dwarfed by a prehistoric landscape.

Clockwise from Opposite: The river is vital to surrounding cattle stations.

Eyes on the prize.

Giving the bike some much needed TLC.

Leaving the track, I continued along the river bed. We were now out of the gorge country and the valley broadened to be sometimes several kilometres wide. The team would usually travel ahead for five or ten kilometres and wait while I worked my way over the stony surfaces. It was often difficult to make out where the vehicle had been and I regularly lost the faint tracks. With so many channels, islands and bush sections, I was constantly worried about losing the team altogether. When I did lose the tracks, I would try to find and follow the principal channel, often demarcated by strings of semi-permanent pools.

The late afternoon of Day 4 was particularly memorable. I navigated a different course to the vehicle, following a chain of waterholes, struggling over smooth, cantaloupe-sized

stones that had been shaped and polished by the ravages of time, or sand that was trampled over by hoofs. Surfaces around the waterholes were often uncyclable. At one point I spotted a dingo padding around amongst some cows and drinking from a pool. As I edged closer, we eyeballed each other. It seemed unperturbed by my presence and casually trotted up the steep bank once I was within about 20 metres. There, two more dingoes feasted on the carcass of a cow. It appeared as though a pack of dingoes had taken down the unfortunate animal perhaps two days earlier.

That evening we camped beside a stunning waterhole near No. 6 Yards, a few kilometres from where we had seen the dingoes. Shortly after sunset, the howls began. When Brian flashed his spotlight he counted six pairs of eyes stalking us. The

chorus of howls continued in rounds during the night as the predators communicated with each other across the waterhole. Dingoes are generally opportunistic, solitary predators, but occasionally they hunt in packs, as the group here had done, to take down larger animals. This was an eerie notion as I lay awake in my tent.

Crossing beneath the Stuart Highway bridge at the end of Day 5 signified the end of Stage One of the expedition. The gorges were far behind and ahead, remote station country with virtually no vehicle access for very long distances. Camping near to where Greg and I had stopped fourteen years earlier, I realised that I was seeing the river in a different light compared to then. I still had the same spiritual feelings, but now I was putting that one point in the context of the



Left: Taking a well-earned break.

Below: Typical river scene.

Below right: Lalgra Yards Ochre cliffs.

whole watercourse. It was just one location in the continuum along the river of time.

Colours of the Rainbow Serpent

One of the main reasons why I choose to travel by bicycle is that I find it gives a powerful sense of place; a realistic perspective of how the world fits together. It was certainly ringing true on this journey, as I left the modern highway to continue along the ancient highway. Stage Two of the expedition involved exploring a watercourse that appeared to be formed when the Rainbow Serpent was angry; the river recoiling through cattle station country before it struck out at the Simpson Desert.

While the surface groundwater supply is limited to drying muddy pools roughly every 10 to 15 kilometres, below the surface flows an underground stream that supports the majestic rivergums that grace the banks. These shady trees provide a milder, more temperate micro-climate within the desert, where the sandy ground is often carpeted by bulrushes and couch grass. The river margins harbour an array of native birds and animals that bring the colours of the Rainbow Serpent to life; cockatoos, desert finches and galahs, kangaroos, emus and dingoes.

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Introduced animals such as cattle, brumbies, goats and donkeys also appeared to be thriving along the oases. Here, the brumbies had adapted to the conditions by digging into the river sand to access the water that lies below the surface and cattle wandered along the shady banks from waterhole to waterhole forming their own network of paths winding through the trees and around obstacles.

Many of these cattle paths made for perfect single-track cycling. The cattle, of course, weren't great at clearing obstacles such as fallen trees and low-hanging branches but I often found I was able to move along faster by following their tracks up and down the riverbanks rather than struggling through the sandy riverbed where the animals had scrambled the surfaces... and the single-track riding was a lot of fun!

Away from the river environs however, it was harsh country. Parallel ridges of fiery-red sand were stabilised by spiky spinifex grasses, gnarled scrub and impressive stands of desert oaks. I was constantly searching for the most energy-efficient way forward and explored all options; the riverbed, the riverbanks and fringes and occasionally cross-country, sometimes

cutting off whole bends in the river.

The journey may have been a physical and mental struggle but I was buoyed by the constantly changing surroundings. Every curve and waterhole would reveal something new as I advanced down the river of time. I was in awe of the apparent force of the floodwaters as I followed its trail of destruction. Enormous trees, uprooted by the torrents, lay strewn across the sand as if each was a fallen soldier on the battlefield. At Junction Waterhole, at the end of Day 10, the river had carved through layers of conglomerate revealing ancient mollusc shells and pieces of coral.

The following day, near Lalgra Yard, the team came across one of the most magnificent features of the journey; white, chalky ochre cliffs, maybe 25 metres high, topped with thin layers of red sand, clay and rocks. Amongst the rocks were flint-like cutting implements fashioned from the stones. Larapinta has been used as an Aboriginal trade route for tens of thousands of years, and surely this must be a place of cultural significance.

For the final couple of days, with permission of the station owners, I was able to follow some private tracks that remained within the

Finke River floodplain. Again it gave a different aspect of the land, this time of open pastoral country, with ancient buttes and breakaways.

Nearing the journey's end, I started to reflect upon my experiences and felt overwhelmed by a sense of what was about to be achieved. Navigating down Australia's ancient artery, dealing with each obstacle as it arose, adapting to and coping with the conditions had been an immense challenge and a rewarding privilege, not only for me on the bike, but also the support team.

Setting off from Beer Street Bore along the river for the final five kilometres, I was expecting the usual struggle, but it was as if I had tamed the serpent. The surface of the riverbed was the best it had been for the whole journey, allowing me to pedal the distance with relative ease.

The Old Ghan railway river crossing adjacent to the town of Finke/Aputula seemed a suitable finish point. Bob drew a line in the sand and waved the finishing flag - one of his checked shirts tied to a stick! It was a proud moment and a fitting way to end such a special journey. It had taken me 13 days to pedal the 524km from the source of the river. 🌟

