



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

*PART I: TRAVERSING AN ANCIENT LAND
DR KATE LEEMING HOPS ON HER CUSTOM-MADE
BIKE TO TAKE ON THE AUSTRALIAN INTERIOR.*

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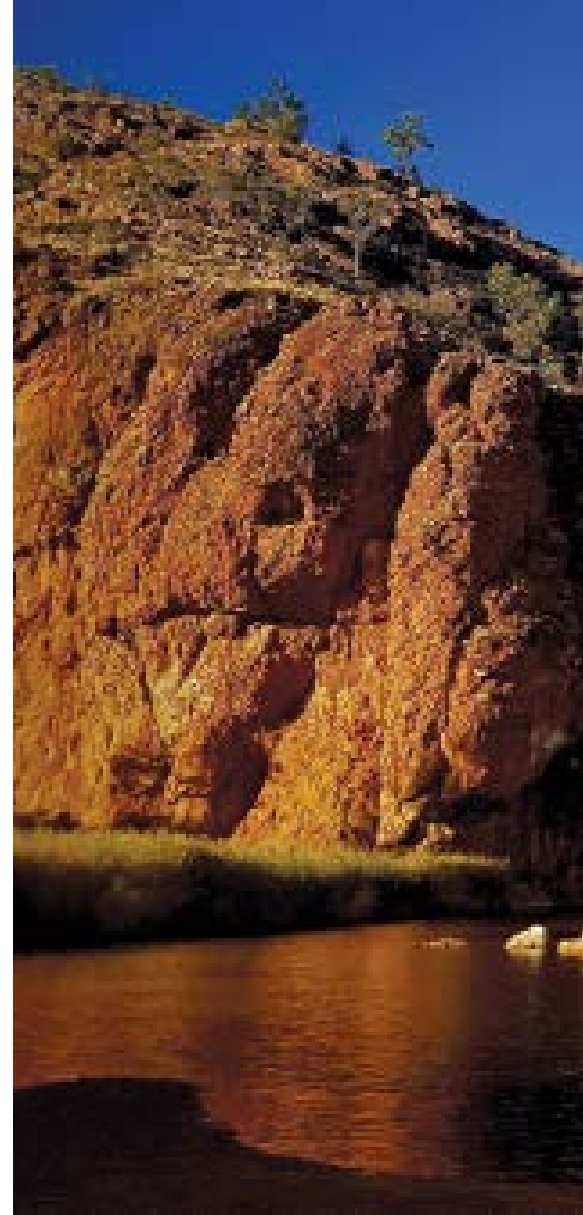
Back in 2004, during my 25,000km Great Australian Cycle Expedition (GRACE), cycling companion Greg Yeoman and I camped beside the Finke River near to where it intersects with the Stuart Highway. We were on our way to Uluru and beyond and the Finke River crossing was at the end of our first day's ride south of Alice Springs. I'd aimed to reach this point because I wanted to experience camping beside what is commonly referred to as the world's oldest river. Even though we were only a few hundred metres from the main highway, I felt this was a special place. Peaceful, spiritual, timeless; it had an aura of its own. The Finke is a 700km ribbon of semi-permanent waterholes that meanders through the desert, an oasis that has been the lifeblood

for the local Aboriginal people and wildlife, in the present day and for eons past. If Uluru symbolises the nation's heart, then the Finke River, or Larapinta as it is known to the local Arrernte, must surely be its ancient artery.

This is where the germ of my idea to travel the course of the Finke River evolved, however the concept of biking along the sandy and stony bed of the ephemeral river at that time was an impossibility. A decade later, the development of fatbike technology began opening doors for adventure cycling and with it, my vision for what is possible. This is when I started on my quest to make the first bicycle crossing of the Antarctic continent via the South Pole. I already knew from experiences in Australia and Africa on a regular MTB that biking on sand, with soft, irregular,

unpredictable surfaces requires a similar skill set to pedalling over snow. My 'Following the Finke River' expedition therefore would double as a credible expedition in its own right and as excellent physical and mental training for cycling across Antarctica.

The Finke originates about 130km west of Alice Springs in the West MacDonnell Ranges, the remnants of an ancient system of fold mountains that was once on the scale of the Himalayas, but has now diminished to be a series of heavily weathered ridges crumbling in parallel formation. The river is the backbone of Central Australia's largest drainage system that once fed an inland sea. My plan was to follow the Finke River or Larapinta from its origin to the township of Finke or Aputula on the edge of the Simpson Desert.





The start

The team - myself, support vehicle driver, Bob Carr and filmmaker, Brian Cohen - drove along a sandy track just north of Glen Helen Gorge, past Two Mile Camp as far as a barbed wire fence. We then continued on foot to find the confluence of Ormiston and Davenport creeks - the origin of the Finke River. About 750 metres further north, on a mound between the two channels, I leant my bike against a suitably majestic rivergum tree and made it (-23.662416S +132.674942E) the official start point.

I was feeling excited, a little emotional and full of expectation at the adventure ahead. No one had ever attempted this journey before, it was a concept I was proud to have dreamt up. I had imagined what it would be like to

navigate the dry watercourse but now this was for real. As I set off in the early afternoon, there was also some trepidation. This expedition was totally unprecedented, the nature of the terrain and my ability to traverse it by bicycle, unknown. For the most part, there would be no tracks to follow and I would have to rely on meeting up with my support team at various points along the way.

The terrain over the first four kilometres to Glen Helen Gorge served as a microcosm of the types of surfaces I would face during the journey; sand (finer than I imagined), loose rounded river stones, craggy rock faces, large boulders, river debris and pools enshrouded by reeds and long grasses.

Known as Yapulpa to the Arrernte people, Glen Helen Gorge has been a major refuge

Opposite: The definition of improvisation.

Above: The stunning Glen Helen Gorge.

“My all-wheel drive Christini fatbike was made to traverse Antarctica, not to be slung onto a kayak to cross an ancient gorge in Central Australia!”

during drought for tens of thousands of years. Early pastoralists also used Glen Helen waterhole as a vital hydration point for horses and cattle in the 1880s, before bores were sunk. From my perspective, though stunningly beautiful, the gorge represented the only point on the whole journey where the river was not passable by bicycle. We had spent a couple of hours that morning trying to figure out how I was going to traverse the deep water that lapped against the walls of the gorge. The crumbling cliff faces on either side were not navigable, even if I tried to haul my bike. I considered starting a long way back from the gorge to see whether I could scale the barrier - one of the ancient ridges of the West MacDonnell Ranges. Fortunately, we met a tourist with a kayak who was willing to loan it to me to make the crossing.

My all-wheel drive Christini fatbike was made to traverse Antarctica, not to be slung onto a kayak to cross an ancient gorge in Central Australia! It was awkward to paddle with the bike balanced over my lap but the pool was only about 100 metres in length. I delivered the bike and supplies for the afternoon to the far beach, paddled back to return the kayak and then braved the

frigid water to swim back to the bike. The bracing dip was a kind of slap-in-the-face way to begin the expedition. I felt alive!

South of the gorge, I was totally alone. No vehicles can pass through this area. The plan was for the team to drive more than 100km around the range to access the river via a small track and meet at designated waypoints farther along. For the first few kilometres south from Glen Helen Gorge, the river cut a stoney course through the diminishing ripples of the range. Constricted by the hills, the valley was no more than a few hundred metres wide, making it easy to find my way, but the going was tough. The riverbed was a conglomeration of deep, loose stones. There were places where I had to scramble over the rocky tree-covered bank in order to skirt around the permanent pools.

Studying the Finke River from Google Maps, navigation looked to be pretty simple - I would just need to follow the obvious river bed as it winds through spectacular gorges, station country and sand dunes out to the Simpson Desert. However, about eight kilometres after Glen Helen Gorge, where the countryside opened out and the river was intersected by other tributaries, it was evident



that finding my way was not going to be straightforward. At ground level, the route wasn't so apparent as the river divided into several channels; the braid of rivulets splayed out across a heavily treed floodplain.

As access for the support vehicle could only be from the west, we had agreed that I should keep to the right-hand side of the river, but which channel? I trail-blazed back and forth across the various dry waterways, constantly searching for the best path. The floodplain was now at least 500 metres wide and extremely rough, with sand moguls, long grass, trees and fallen branches to negotiate. I passed the first waypoint, but no one was there, so I continued. I sent messages on my satellite phone and checked in on my SPOT Tracker, but no response. I pushed on towards the next rendezvous point, but as the sun sank below the hills, I started to worry. This was meant to be a straight forward part of the journey, a simple half-day. I wasn't equipped to camp on my own and started to ration my water and the two Battle Oats protein bars I was carrying.

I reasoned that the best plan of action was to keep moving forwards and regularly try to make contact. If I kept to the riverbed, someone would eventually find me, or I would reach the only settlement beside the river at Hermannsburg, 46km from Glen Helen Gorge. It was a clear evening and the winter chill rapidly set in. There was an almost-full moon, so if I did have to keep going, I could travel by moonlight.

Eventually I heard a crackle on the CB radio, and then Brian's voice. I was so relieved because it meant they were no more than five kilometres away. As we drew nearer to each other, they sounded the horn and flashed the headlights. They were on a different channel, about 500 metres away. I cut back across the dry waterways and we were reunited. It turned out that the track marked on the map wasn't even there and they'd had to find an alternative route to access the river. Then, driving along the river the vehicle bogged several times and needed to be winched free.

From Day One we learned not to underestimate any part of this journey; the remoteness, the difficulty of the terrain or the need for effective communication.

On average, I seemed to be able to progress at between 6km and 7km an hour, which is what I thought would be possible in sand. What I hadn't envisaged was how many long, stony sections there would be. Over the first week it was almost 50:50 stones and sand and most of the time the



Opposite: Crossing the Finke.

Top: The official start point.

Above: Investigating a waterhole about 10km north of Hermannsburg.

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surfaces had been broken up by animal hooves - cattle, brumbies and goats being the main offenders.

The conditions for cycling changed with each pedal stroke. I preferred the pure sand, or even better, when the sand was coated by a crust of washed clay or small stones. When the stones became tennis ball-size, cantaloupe-size or even larger, it put incredible stress on myself and the bike. At any stage, when the surfaces were broken up by hoofs or if I had no option but to follow fresh vehicle tracks, it made cycling an incredible struggle.

By the end of each day, it was my upper body and core that were most exhausted. Over all but the smoothest surfaces, it was a constant struggle to stay upright. The technique that I used on the Finke surfaces is essentially the same as for riding over snow. I keep the bike in a low gear and aim to skim over the soft surfaces with as little pressure as possible, using the extra flotation from the 4.8 inch wide tyres. From trial and error, I found the ultimate tyre pressure here to be 5.0 - 5.5psi. Then, if extra power is required to jump stones or branches, or push out of a soft spot, being in a low gear is essential. To keep up this kind of effort day after day, I try to relax as much as possible on the smoother, more conducive terrain in order to save my strength for the more challenging obstacles.

The bike I used for the Finke was developed as the second prototype for Antarctica, first tested in Greenland. For this project I have been collaborating with Steve Christini of Christini Technologies (USA) who has pioneered all-wheel drive bicycle technology. I approached Steve when envisaging the ultimate design for traversing the Antarctic continent, believing that combining the maximal flotation of a fat-tyre bike with the extra traction of his AWD system (similar benefits to that of an all-wheel drive vehicle) would make the best combination. Steve’s system of spiral gears and an internal shaft drive I found to be remarkably efficient, robust and the extra kilogram that the AWD components add to the bike is insignificant when weighing it up against the benefits of superior grip.



Over the varied surfaces on the Finke River, the AWD bike gave better traction to enable me to power over fields of large river stones, roots, sand moguls and up steep, sandy river banks and stay upright over soft unpredictable surfaces. I was worried as to how much the constant grit would wear the spiral gears and the drivetrain. Twice a day I carefully brushed the working parts and applied Bike Milk dry lube (by Ride Mechanic) and amazingly, by the end of two weeks and over 500km of constant grind, the systems faired really well. 🌀

Top: The wildlife was a mix of native and introduced species.

Above: There was quite a lot of gear to carry.