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GRAN DESIERTO DE ALTAR | FINKE RIVER | ALASKA | THAILAND



# Following the Finke

A modern expedition down  
the river of time.

By Kate Leeming  
Photography by Brian Cohen and  
Kate Leeming



**B**ack in 2004, during my 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 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 700 km 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 cycling 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 130 km 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 m farther north, on a mound between the two channels, I leant my bike against a suitably majestic rivergum and made it (-23.662416S +132.674942E) the official starting 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 dreamed 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 during drought for tens of thousands of years. Early pastoralists also used Glen Helen waterhole as a vital watering 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 m 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 100 km 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 Earth, 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 and 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 straight forward. 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 m 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

Paddling across Glen Helen Gorge. **Opposite:** Glen Helen Gorge. **Opening page:** Cycling through deep bulldust on station tracks, on the way to Beer Street Bore, final day.



**Clockwise from top left:** Investigating a waterhole about 10 km north of Hermansburg. Palm Valley. Brumbies dig holes in the river bed to access water, which is just under the surface. Cycling through Finke Gorge towards Glen of Palms. Station cattle frequent semi-permanent waterholes. Red dingo on the river bank a few kilometres from No. 6 Yards, waterhole.



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, 46 km 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 m 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 6 km and 7 km 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 surfaces had been broken up by animal hoofs—cattle, brumbies and goats being the main offenders.

## THE CYCLING

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 - 5.5 psi. 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 had worried as to how much the constant grit would wear the spiral gears and the drive train. 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 500 km of constant grind, the systems faired really well.

## A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Peddalling 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.

Aboriginal legend has it that 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 riverbeds 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.

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 a 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 uncycleable. 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 m. 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 on from where we had seen the dingoes. Shortly after the sun set, 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



Part of a string of semi-permanent waterholes near No. 6 Yards.

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 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 km, below the surface flows an underground stream that supports the majestic river gums 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 bullrushes 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.







**Clockwise from top left:** Typical river scene. Sunrise beside No. 6 Yards waterhole. Setting off from lunch at Hart's waterhole. Adding dry lube to my chain at lunch near Hart's Bore. I was always careful at night not to leave shoes outside or my tent fly unzipped to avoid creatures such as the painful sting of the Northern Territory scorpion. The river carves through layers of sand, yellow and white ochre, just before the Central Australian Railway crossing.

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 a whole bend 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 sands



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 m 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 524 km from the source of the river. ⊕



A pure stretch of sand approaching Little Amphire waterhole. The powerful force of the river in flood dislodges and transports enormous river gum trees downstream. Lalgra Yards Ochre cliffs.