

Australia Sydney to Brisbane Cycling Tour

Brady Rhodes

April 4, 2006

I can't believe I have finally made it to Australia. I landed around noon today on a red-eye from Bangkok. Fortunately, the plane was 1 1/2 empty and I had a whole row of seats for a bed. I awoke in the middle of the Australian desert - nothing but longitudinal sand dunes as far as you could see. But, I realize I need to bring everyone up to speed...

For those who don't already know...for the last year I have been on a sabbatical leave from teaching. I've spent most of the year in Thailand on various research projects. This trip to Australia is a belated birthday present to myself ... a cycling trip from Sydney to Brisbane. As a warm-up, I will take a train to Wangaratta in Victoria (where is that Chanon?) for 4 days of cycling in the so-called gold medal cycling district - the name comes from the two Olympic gold medalists that came from that area. I am there to join the Bike Friday Club of Australia's 10th Anniversary. What is "Bike Friday" - Google it!

Back to Sydney.... I am staying with Tok and Nashon. They have a cozy cabin like home in a near-suburb. The feel of Sydney is much like So Cal - except everyone talks a bit funny and they drive on the wrong side of the road. It is actually like I am in some strange parallel universe out of a star trek episode where the place is an odd combination of LA, SF (without the hills), Seattle (because of all the water) and Boston (narrow street, small shops).

I have already learned a few things: 1. Tok is an amazing cook - she made some fish/egg noodle dish that was delicious. 2. Tok is an excellent bartender - she introduced me to a Rusty Nail (normally 1 shot of scotch, 1/2 shot of drambuie - but her version is two shots of each). I am presently under the influence of aforementioned cocktail. 3. There are no kangaroos here - at least not in Sydney. Tok promised that there would be one waiting for me ather house, but I haven't seen it yet. I think they are a myth. 4. Australians (even recent immigrants) say "yea" after every sentence - similar to the Canadian "eh?". 5. For Australians everywhere is "up there".

My intention is to randomly continue this blog until I reach Brisbane, depending on the frequency of Internet cafes, inertia, frequency of pubs, and whether I can even walk 10 feet from my bike at the end of the day. Feel free to trash this or send it to any interested parties. Now it is time to but these rusty nails to bed.

BBB (Biker Boy Brady)

April 5

I am now in the small rural town of Wangaratta, in northern Victoria. Came on the train yesterday (8 hours+). The train ride gave me a good feeling for the vastness of this country. Mile after mile of flat to rolling, brown plains dotted with grayish green trees. And sheep, thousands of sheep. And a few cows too. But no kangaroos, the myth continues.... The train was very comfortable - more so than an airline. Good service too, with many announcements so you always knew where you were and what was going on. And the buffet car had reasonable priced, decent food. I had a falafel roll for lunch.

We arrived at the train station here (a deserted platform). Two other Bike Friday guys were on the train too, and just the 3 of us got off here. No sooner did we get off and start assembling our Bike Fridays, when the rain started. My image of Australia with a searing sun shining down on the dusty outback is shattered. The temp. overnight was in the 40's (that's degrees F), with a cold wind blowing. It rained all night, but now the sun is coming out. We start a ride today at 11:00 am, a short one of about 40 km - out to visit some outlaw's shrine.

Last night I had my introduction to an Australian pub. Really more like a family restaurant. But the beer was good, and everyone is super friendly. Pretty basic food - steak, chicken, etc. I already am looking forward to Thai food. I did see a Thai restaurant in town this morning, surprising for such a small town. I left the pub crowd early because my head was about to land in my pint. Too many rusty nails and too much travelling. It will be nice to stay here for a few days.

The internet cafe is in a computer shop - nice and fast, but I am not sure of there open hours on the weekend, so I will pick this up when I can.

G'Day!

BBB

April 6, 2006

Woke up to very strange weather today. I looked out my tent and saw bright blue sky and sunshine. So I stepped out from under the tree that shelters my tent, and found out it was raining! One lonely cloud hung over my tent. But the beautiful rainbow made it all worthwhile.

Yesterday we had any easy ride to Glendorra (sp?), the town made famous by the Bush Ranger Ned Kelly. I was told by countless of my fellow bikers that all Australians hold Mr. Kelly in great esteem. In case you don't know, a bush ranger is basically a thief/outlaw/gunslinger/murderer. They finally caught, tried and hung him for his crimes. He was a hero to the common folk though and until this day he is a symbol of the Australian lower class's struggle against the English upper class. Anyway, the town was

a dreadful tourist-trap, with tacky museums and over-priced tea shops. The ride was pleasant though along quiet country roads. The wind made it a struggle though. Maybe someone can explain to me why, when it is windy, and you ride one direction and then come back the opposite way, the wind is still in your face???

I am looking forward to today's ride, which includes a cheese factory, a mustard factory (huh?), and a winery.

The internet shop is closed on weekends so my next blog will come on Monday or Monday night.

G'Day!

BBB

April 10, 2006

Now I am back in Sydney, after the 9 hour train ride back from Wangaratta. Back to Tok's great cooking, real (and free) Internet, and cricket on TV. I have much to catch up on so here goes.

I have just spent 4 days at the Bike Friday Club of Australia's 20th Anniversary Event. This club was founded by Margaret Day, the most remarkable Australian I have yet to meet. Margaret is 5 foot even of spark and sputter, old enough to be my grammar school teacher, and energetic enough to ride 60 km up and down hills without breaking a sweat. She has a gleam in her eye, a frog in her throat, and passion for life. She is feared by all and loved by all.

She has single-handedly molded this unlikely group of Bike-Friday owners into a thriving community. Case in point: Green Gear Cycling, makers of Bike Fridays, has sold only about 400 bikes in Australia – a country about as large as the continental US. This event had 130 participants – many of which owned multiple Bike Fridays. They came from all over Australia, some taking a day or more to get to Wangaratta. Eleven came from overseas (including me). Hanz Scholz, one of the founders of Green Gear Cycling was here with his wife and two young daughters.



Ready to ride!



Country Road in Wangaratta



Margaret Day

Margaret makes each event into a cause. And no one can say no to Margaret. My example: I rode into the venue campground in Wangaratta in the rain on Wednesday night and checked in at the office. I was flagged down by Margaret as I cycled by her cabin on the way to the tent-sites. “Come on in out of the rain and sign-in” she called. After a few pleasantries and paperwork she got down to business: “Would you like to make a donation to the Guide Dog Association, this year’ says official charity”. Her eyes bore through me. I asked her if there was a suggested donation. “Dear, give us whatever you would like”. I pulled out a \$5 note thinking that would be about right. “Son, that’s not US dollars you’ve got there! We were hoping for a bit more than that.” With a deep pang of fear, I quickly fumbled in my wallet for a twenty. “Would twenty be enough” I pleaded. Fortunately, with a twinkle in her eye she replied “That would be just fine!” I survived my first encounter with Margaret! I’ve attached a picture of her riding her BF. Now, anyone from Australia who buys a new Bike Friday automatically has their contact information forwarded to Margaret. After that they wouldn’t dare to refuse her offer of membership.

We actually had a blind person participating in the event. She rode on the back of a Bike Friday tandem. At our Saturday night banquet, she gave a thank-you speech for the \$3000 raised via an auction and donations. She also told a funny story about her and her guide dog. One day she arranged to meet a friend (also blind) at a park in their home town. They met and chatted awhile on a park bench. They heard the sound of a fountain nearby and decided to go see it (her words) up close. With her friend grasping her arm for guidance, and her guide dog at her side, they moved closer. Suddenly, her dog stopped cold. She knew this was an open park with no obstacles, so she said “forward”. Her dog sat. Maybe he didn’t hear her. “Forward”, louder this time. Still he wouldn’t budge. Now she was getting perturbed. “FORWARD” she shouted in an angry tone. It worked. All three of them stepped off a bank into the waste deep water of the lake that surrounded the fountain! She has never doubted her guide dog again.

Our rides on Friday and Saturday were moderate in length. On Friday, we cycled 25 km up a bike trail made from a converted railway. I got my first flat tire. Fortunately several people stopped to help me change the tube and I was off again in a few minutes. Saturday’s ride was up and around the Warby Ranges. Now, Australians are a bit delusional when looking at their country’s topography. Their hill is our plain. Their mountain is our hill. And for them, a collection of hills (by our definition) make up “Ranges”. So, the Warby Ranges were a pretty easy climb, up and over and back. Some nice views, but the wind was strong and cold, and some mechanical difficulties with my bike forced me to climb all the hills in a high gear.

On Sunday, only a short ride out to a hotel and winery was planned. After a good nights sleep and after another helpful BF-er fixed my bike as good-as-new (it turned out to be simple), I was ready for more. After stopping by for a quick egg mcmuffin (yes, they are everywhere!), I headed south on my own, following the obvious signs to Greta. After 25 miles of lovely biking, with blue skies, no wind, no traffic and flocks of raucous parrots making the only sound, I arrived at Greta. Greta is just a church. Nothing else. A sign in front reads “Next Services on April 23”. This was April 9th (a Sunday). My kind of church – once a month services! I have attached a pic.

Wangaratta is a neat and tidy, prosperous town of around 15,000. In spite of a new K-Mart nearby, its down-town business district (computer stores, fish and chips eateries, a music store, and assorted other shops) seems to be thriving. Another remarkable fact: Small town Wangaratta, far from the big cities, surrounded by zillions of acres of cattle and sheep infested wasteland, has not one, but two Thai restaurants! I tried them both. In the Emerald Café (or something like that) 20 of us bikers took over the place. I never saw a Thai person. I think they were all



Downtown Greta

covering in the kitchen. The food was so-so. On Sunday, I tried Baan Thai alone. Baan Thai is owned by Supanee and her Aussie husband, who works a farm some distance out of town. They met when Supanee came to Australia to visit a friend and they married 6 months ago. Supanee brought her children (from an earlier marriage) with her to settle in this quite town. When she discovered I could speak some Thai, the whole family came out to see this weird bald, biker guy who could speak their language. I got Supanee’s life story in rapid-fire Thai (including the fact that she is fighting cancer), and I spent much of my dinner time chatting with her teenage son who can already speak fluent English. He thought “Bike Friday” meant we could only ride on Fridays.

Not everything went perfect though. I made a real embarrassing rookie mistake. But I have tried this many times before with several tents with no mishaps! When I awoke this morning, my tent was damp with dew. I hate packing a wet tent, so I took it over to the handy on-site laundromat and threw it in a dryer (on lowest heat, of course) for 5

minutes. Well, either “low-heat” in Aussie really means fiery hot, or they are now making the mosquito netting on tents out of new low-melting-temperature nylon. Since my tent is 50% netting, I will be shopping tomorrow in Sydney for new accommodations.

Finally, I need to tell you about George and Adrian, the perfect odd-couple. I have attached a picture. I met them on the train from Sydney to Wangaratta when they noticed my strategically worn Bike Friday T-shirt. George is a crotchety, gap-toothed bear of a man. Adrian is a gentleman’s gentleman. George was born in Paraguay to German/Latin parents, and speaks a blue-collar vocabulary in loud, German/Aussie accented English. Adrian was born in Switzerland but speaks perfect and polite Aussie. George is disheveled and always frowning. Adrian is perfectly groomed and has a full white beard that frames a smiling elfish face. Adrian is gentle, warm, sincere and helpful-to-a-fault. George is loud, blunt, impulsive, and helpful-to-a-fault. On the train ride back to Sydney,



1George and Adrian

Adrian, with occasional gruff kibitzing from George, spent 2 hours going over a map of my future route town-by-town. They have been close friends for thirty years, and mine for 6 days.

Five days of cycling through mostly open grass-lands, and still no Kangaroos sighted. I asked the locals about this – when will I see a Kangaroo? Their reply was that kangaroos are mostly nocturnal and only come out to graze at dusk and dawn. But I know they are teasing

me. I saw *Kangaroo Jack*, and he was out and about in broad daylight. It looks like the Brisbane zoo will be my last, best hope.

BBB

April 12, 2006

Tomorrow I will set out for Brisbane. I have now been in Sydney for two days. Yesterday (Tuesday), was pretty much lost. I spent the day assembling my bike, and shopping for the last minute necessities (new tent, new shoes because my old ones had gaping holes in the soles, etc.). I was in bed quite early.

But today was fabulous. Tok kindly took the day off of work and took me on a 10 km hike around the shoreline of northern Sydney. We took a train and a bus to "the Spit", a narrow spot in one of the inlets. The hike took us around numerous coves and bays, some of them with beautiful pocket beaches that were virtually deserted. This all within the city! The trail was went along the shoreline, passing through a couple of nature

preserves. You had the feeling you were in the bush, even though you were still in the city.

At one of the beaches we paused for a swim. The water was "refreshing" and very clear - no sign of pollution at all. At several points the trail climbed high above the shore to points with gorgeous views of Sydney harbor. Sydney reminded me of a warm, dry version of Seattle - without the rain and conifers. We ended the hike at Manly (where I will go to start my cycling tour), with a meal at a small Thai restaurant in Manly. We returned to central Sydney via a 1/2 hour ferry ride, which passed right in front of the famous Sydney Opera House.

We finished the day by driving back to north Sydney to a small Japanese Restaurant. There we met Tush and her mother (Nana or something like that), family friend of Neshan. What a fun pair they were! We drank wine and ate Sushi and talked and laughed for two hours. I was sad for the night and the fun to end. I hope to meet those two again one day. Thank you Tok and Neshan for a wonderful day!

So ended a really great day. This day has made me rethink my cycling trip. Up until now, I have thought of this trip as a challenge, of an obstacle to overcome. A goal to be obtained. A mountain to climb. I've thought of it almost like a race. How fast can I get to Brisbane?

I've changed my thinking now. The only contest should be to see how much I can see and experience as I ride north - not how many kilometers I can ride. I have decided that it will be OK if I want to stop along the way. Its OK if I end up not making it all the way to Brisbane and have to take a train from some point in between.

Tok and Neshan have talked me out of trying to cycle into downtown (where I need to catch the ferry to Manly). Instead, I will walk my bike and trailer onto the train, and on to the ferry to Manly. I will start my cycling trip after I get to Manly.

I don't know when or where I will find the next internet connection to send the next issue of this rant. But I am guessing that when I do find a connection - I will have some new stories to tell.

BBB

April 14, 2006

Its now the 2nd night of my trip north. No Internet around, so I am writing long-hand and will type it up later when I find the internet. Lots to tell over the last 2 days!

I started from Sydney yesterday, I left Tok and Neshon's house at 6:25 am. I am thankful they talked me out of trying to ride through town to the ferry Wharf. Instead I took the train downtown to Circular Quay (which is really square). I walked on the train with my

bike and trailer. Since it was early, the train was pretty empty so this was no problem - people even helped me get the trailer off the train.

From "Circular" Quay, I took the ferry to Manly (back where Tok and I were the day before). Just like that I was on my bike at Manly and riding north under blue skies. That was sooooo much better than trying to ride downtown.

Manly seems like the Newport Beach of Sydney. Many expensive houses and condos, popular surfing beaches, and too many cars and too little space. Unlike California's Newport Beach, Manly is quite hilly, and that is where my problems began....

As I started up the first steep hill, my rear hub gear started slipping, a recurrence of what happened down in Wangaratta. No manner of adjustment or monkeying around would make it work right. I plodded on, not knowing what else to do, stopping every so often to try a new adjustment. Unfortunately, only the highest rear-hub gear worked, so I basically had a 6 speed bike - all high gears. Arg! Since I had to catch a ferry at the north end of the Manly peninsula, I decided to continue on, and try to fix it on the other side. I had to hustle to catch the ferry, which meant doing leg presses up every steep hill.

Then, Problem #2: I boarded the ferry, and asked the deck hand/ticket master for a ticket to Ettalong. No problem so far. When we had crossed the bay, I walked my bike off onto the Wharf, and as I did the deck hand gave me a strange smile and wave.

Before riding anywhere or even looking around, the first thing I did was try to fix my bike. I started disassembling the shifter, but stopped when small plastic pieces fell out onto the ground. I had no idea where they came from or how to put them back properly - so in my pocket they went, and I put the shifter back together as best I could. Things didn't seem any worse, I still had only the high gears. Time to find a bike shop. This search was made urgent because this was the last day before a long 4 day Easter weekend. My Lonely Planet guide said there were towns ahead with bike shops so I saddled up and took off.

I rode 50 m and came to an abrupt stop. None of the street signs matched even remotely to the route description in the LP guidebook. Out came the maps. Thanks to Adrian (from Wangaratta), I had some good ones. He sent them to me by overnight mail and I got them just before I left Sydney. Ten minutes of studying the maps, and I figured out the problem. I got off at the wrong bloody ferry stop! I didn't even know the boat stopped at more than one place. I was at a place called "Pretty Beach", which was very pretty, but a wide bay and several large mountains away from where I was supposed to be.

Now I know why the deck hand gave me that shit-eating grin as I left the ferry. Jerk!

A nice couple stopped when they saw me pouring over the maps, and pointed the way back to my route - which was straight up. After 1 hour of high-gear climbing I was back on route.

After another hour or so of relatively easy riding (or would have been if I had some low gears) under increasingly cloudy skies, I came to the town of Terigal, a small resort town on a bay that, according to the LP book, has a bike shop. Used to have a bike shop, that is. This is one of the problems with caring a 5-year old guidebook. Nothing here but tourist shops and lots of tourists (early arrived for the holiday). Nothing I wanted, so I slogged on.

By now the beautiful clear skies have turned to a stormy-looking overcast. I pedaled on to "The Entrance", a rather low-budget-looking touristy town perched next to a narrow inlet that connects a huge lagoon (called Tuggerah Lake even though it is salt water) that stretches 20 km inland with the ocean. By then it had started to rain a stiff drizzle, so I figured I better find a campground. After 2 circuits around town I finally found the campground described in LP (which had changed its name). After pitching my wet tent, I headed out to find a bike shop - ever more urgently now - the thought of riding the next 4 days in high gear was not nearly as appealing as taking a bus back to Sydney. LP said there was a bike shop here. Used to be again. Arg! A few more inquiries and I found out that back 5 km down the road I had passed within 500 m of a bike shop. I raced back to get there before closing time.

The bike shop was busy with kids getting new pedals for their bmx's. The mechanic very kindly stopped what he was doing and helped me out. He affected a repair with cable ties (the bike mechanics answer to duct tape). It seemed to work OK, I now had all 24 gears for the first time. He said the missing plastic pieces were just cosmetic, so off I went. He didn't even charge me for the repair! We'll see how long it lasts. At least 4 days, I hope.

I had dinner at a Bistro. I always thought a Bistro was some kind of trendy club or cafe. Here a Bistro is basically blue collar a restaurant/cafeteria mix. You sidle up to a counter, place an order for food and beer, and they give you a number. When the food is ready they bring it out (kind of like Sizzler in the US). The fare is basically meat and potatoes in various combinations. But when you are as hungry as I was, it tasted gourmet.

After my meal, I crawled into my wet tent and was asleep by 7:30 PM, dreaming of clear skies, low gears, and helpful deck-hands.

To Be Continued

April 14, 2006 - continued

What a difference a day makes (especially after 11 hours of sleep)! I awoke to clear blue skies and no wind. I was packed and ready to go by 6:30 am, but couldn't find anyone around to check-out with (and return the bathroom key to). So I went back into town for a hearty breakfast of sausages, eggs and roasted tomato - very British.

Pedaling with the sunshine, a fresh wind at my back, all 24 gears working, and beautiful coastal scenery, I could almost forget about the previous day. This was why I came!

In the morning I stopped by a turn off to Wyrrabalong National Park and, intent to smell the roses, I dismounted and enjoyed a 5 km hike through a very nice, quiet red gum forest that covered a large area of stabilized coastal sand dunes.

Only 2 slight mishaps marred a great day. As I approached the outskirts of Newcastle, I began to notice a clicking sound emanating from somewhere around my right foot, that grew louder whenever I was climbing. On one particularly steep section, I kept staring down at the crank, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from and ... BONK! I ran smack into the back of a parked car, bounced off the bumper, and did a slow-motion lateral fall with my feet squirming unsuccessfully to get out of the pedal clips. Good thing I was only going about 5 km/hour, so no damage was done save my wounded pride. I didn't hear any laughter so I guess no one saw me.

A short while later, also while climbing a steep hill, my rear seat bag fell off. This time I was able to squirm a foot free and thus avoided a repeat fall. The bag mount was toast though; the nut that held it in place had stripped threads. So everything went into my trailer, and I continued on to Newcastle.

Newcastle is the 2nd largest city in NSW. It used to be a steel mill town, but now, apparently, tourists have taken over. I cruised into town via a nice bike trail (thanks to Adrian's map and tip), and went straight to the wharf and caught the boat across to Stockton.

Stockton is a pleasant seaside suburb with a large park buffering it from the beach. I purchased a site at the Stockton Beach Tourist Park – the last site available thanks to the Easter weekend crowds. Huge 5 room tents (some bigger than my house), trailers, SUV's, and parked boats were jammed in cheek-to-jowl, and a million kids were racing all manner of bikes and scooters around the paved streets of the park.

It is definitely a party atmosphere here, even though today is Good Friday, a national holiday in Australia. I thought that Good Friday was supposed to be a day of mourning for Christians - for prayer, and not-eating-meat. Must not be too many Christians here, but there's plenty of beer, BBQing meat, and drunken singing.

I ate my dinner in the bistro inside the RSL and Citizen's Club of Stockton. RSL means Returning Soldiers League – I guess adding "citizens" made up for the lack of returned soldiers. Strangely, if you live within a 5 km radius of the club, you must be a member to enter. Since I come from slightly greater distance – they gave me a temporary membership card that was good for the day. I had fish and chips for the first time in Australia – but I wish I had ordered the steak.

April 15, 2006 – the day before Easter.

I'm writing this from the bar at a very nice lakeside resort called Bumbah Point (or something like that). I had the option of passing by this spot and continuing on another 15 km to the next town. But then I spotted the bar....

My day began with a quick breakfast of Muesli and fruit at the campground's kiosk. Every tourist park has a kiosk, which is a combination convenience store/restaurant/snack bar/newsstand. Some are just a corner in the reception office; others are full restaurants (like this one).

If every day's ride is like today's, this trip will be a piece of cake. The entire 80 km was tabletop flat, save one 100 m long climb. The weather was cool – around 20 degrees C (upper 60's for the metrically challenged). A fresh breeze was directly at my back. The day also included two ferry rides – one lasted over an hour, the other less than 2 minutes.

I am a bit surprised by the coastal area of this part of New South Wales. For some reason, I pictured a fairly straight coastline, with some sea cliffs, and long sandy beaches. The sandy beaches are here, but the coast is anything but straight. To a geologist, this is a classic submerged coast. Long barrier beaches and spits enclose huge lagoons that extend up to 20 km inland. If you were to measure the actual length of the coastline, it would be many times longer than the distance you would measure on a map of Australia. Hence, my trip so far has consisted of hopping from peninsula to peninsula via ferries; in three days I have taken 5 boats.

The halfway point today was Port Stephens – where I caught the ferry to Tea Gardens. I arrived with an hour to spare, so I roamed around a bit. The pier area was packed with tourists here for the shops, kiddie amusements, whale/dolphin watching cruises, and restaurants. I wolfed down a Subway sub – isn't it amazing how exercise makes ordinary food taste gourmet! The ferry was packed, but I did see some dolphins nearby.

The afternoon's ride northward was mostly in a national park. The ruler-straight, quiet paved road sliced through a forest of 6 m high trees. It was like riding in a 20-foot deep canyon of foliage. I went 30 km with no views further than the edge of the road.

Much of the coast around here is lined with mangrove swamps. I had to stifle the urge to jump off my bike, wade into the mud, and start coring for tsunami deposits!

April 16, 2006 (Easter Sunday).

I ground out another 81 km today, and every one of them was tough. I started with 10 km of dirt road. The guidebook said "good dirt road". Yea right. For a cyclist "good dirt road" is an oxymoron. But at least I made it through without a flat tire. I will avoid dirt roads in the future.

After the gravel road, the route became quite hilly, with two especially long climbs that wore me down. So much for Australia being flat. Going up the steepest hill, the incessant click, click, click, coming from my crank or pedal, that I have been living with for the past 2 1/2 days, miraculously quit, and didn't come back. I figure that this means something serious is busted down there and I will get stranded in the middle of nowhere when the pedals fall off. Till that time I am enjoying the quiet.

Finally, for the last 15 km into the resort town (they're all resort towns, it seems) of Forster (in spite of the spelling it is pronounced like the beer) I had the wind at my back and the road was flat. Thanks to the last stretch, my average speed went up to 15.4 km/hr. for the day. Its amazing how important such statistics are to me now!

This area of NSW is known as the Great Lakes Region. Several very large coastal fresh water lakes have apparently been dammed by barrier beaches and/or spits that have left them sealed off from the ocean with no tidal influence (and fresh water, so I was told). A sparse population inhabits the area, except for the isolated tourist town like Forster; most of the area is still bush. Australia sure has room to grow - and they don't need to grow into the desert either; this area is quite lush. Maybe California could send them a few illegal aliens....?

Today is Easter Sunday. Sydney must be deserted, they all came here. The tourist park where I am camped is completely sold out - I lucked out getting the last site. Here Easter is a 4 day national holiday (Friday-Monday), and the kids are off school for 2 weeks following Easter. I probably couldn't have picked a more crowded and expensive time to come. I am hoping that most people go home on Monday.

One thing about this trip is a big surprise. I am following the route laid out in the LP Cycling Guide to Australia. Because of the huge popularity of the LP guides, I thought I would meet many other cyclists following this route. So far, I haven't met even one. I have met a few cyclists out for the day - they always stop and ask me about my strange bike pulling a suitcase behind. But I haven't seen one other through-going cyclist. Even I am staying in mostly campsites recommended in the LP guide, still I am the Lone Cyclist. I expected to meet many others and maybe even join them for a day out to as we move north. The reaction I am getting from the local folks suggest that I am indeed on an unusual journey. As one local told me today "I'm glad I'm not you today mate, I'm going to find some surf!". I am now resigned to the fact that this will be a solitary journey, with plenty of time for self reflection (always scary) and plenty of time to write wordy blogs like this without the fear of a journal editors red pen. But I will be glad to get back to Chiang Mai and talk with friends again.

The more I am here, the more I realize how similar Australia is to the USA. The differences are mostly subtle, but interesting. For example, cashiers say thank you when you hand them the money (or sometimes even before that when they tell you the amount), instead of waiting to say it when they give you your change. Also, there is no tipping, and tax is built into the prices always. There are many traffic circles (roundabouts) and fewer traffic lights. There are clean, mostly graffiti clear, public restrooms scattered

about every town. Their liquor laws are a bit strange though - perhaps they based them on Utah's? I am having dinner in the Hogsbreath "Saloon" - but can't have a beer unless I am ordering dinner. Liquor stores (called "bottle shops") seem to be always attached to a pub. The strange laws don't seem to slow anyone down, though.

BBB

April 17, 2006

I SAW ONE!!!
I REALLY SAW ONE!!!
I REALLY DID!!!



April 17, 2006

Isn't it amazing to what lengths the Australians will go to perpetuate the Kangaroo myth? It even looked and smelled real. Why don't they just admit to the world that Kangaroos are a big bluff!

This morning I got an early start and just kept going and going. I ended up doing 118

km, all the way to Port MacQuarie. This mileage includes several hilly sections, 25 km of really bad dirt road, and a final 30 km straight into a gale. (insert here some suitably macho grunts and snorts). I know I said I would avoid dirt roads, but the alternative was taking the main Sydney to Brisbane hiway which at this point has 2 lanes, no shoulder, and half of Sydney and Brisbane hurrying home from their Easter holiday. I chose the lesser of two evils and now my teeth are still chattering from the washboards.

Really not much else to tell about today. The weather continues to be fine. I passed through a National Park that is supposed to be filled with Koala bears, but I was too busy dodging all the rocks in the bad road to notice any. I also lost my Bike Friday special water bottle :-(. I think it fell out of its holder during a white knuckled, 45 km per hour, steep descent down a badly wash-boarded and rutted, rocky dirt road. Hey, I earned every bit of the elevation gain, I'm not going to waste it by using my brakes on the way back down!

I am camped at a large tourist park along the Port MacQuarie waterfront - I can hear the waves crashing from my tent. At A\$35.50, this was my most expensive campsite yet.

I can feel my legs hardening and my jeans feel a bit looser. I feel like I have earned a day off tomorrow, but if the weather stay good, I'll probably keep going.

BBB

April 18, 2006

I awoke this morning at 6:00 am as usual even though I had shut off my alarm. The wind had died down, and still no clouds - another perfect day! I had been thinking about taking the day off after yesterday's long grind, but I felt surprisingly good. I was packed and ready to go in a half hour. But I still got a late start because I stopped on the way out of town for breakfast (mcmuffins, yum!), to attempt to have my seat bag repaired at a bike shop (failed), to fix my reading glasses that lost a screw (success), and 2 hours on the internet catching up and typing. So it was 10 am before I finally pulled out of town.

Today was just along slog northward up the main hiway. It went pretty fast in spite of a headwind - 16.7 km/hour over 104 km, my second fastest day so far. Today was basically put my head down, put my bum in the back of my saddle, put my mind on autopilot, and put the pedals to the metal.

I stopped for lunch in Kempsey. Kempsey has taken urban planning lessons from the USA. A long strip of fast food places, motels, car dealers, and petrol stations line the route into and out of town. But have you been in McDonalds lately??? Holy Cow! I had a quaterpounder with cheeses that had lettuce, tomato, beetroot, and special sauce!! And the french fries (.er, I mean chips) were amazing. They were lightly salted, crispy on the outside, and cooked to perfection! Did they hire a new gourmet chef or what? Oh, I forgot, "hunger is the best spice".

The junk food lunch got me to Macksville, a small town (population 7000) on the Taylor's Arm River. I arrived just at sunset - cutting it a bit close given I am carrying no bike light. Luckily, I didn't have a flat or anything to slow me down today or else I would have had to bivvy alongside the road. No way would I try to cycle this main hiway at night what with all the monster trucks and speeding tourists.

Knowing I would be getting in late, I called ahead and booked a room at the Star Hotel - a pub overlooking the river (in Australia, a pub is usually called a hotel, and has rooms as well as a Bistro and bar). I had one of my cheapest meals there tonight, A\$12 for chicken schnitzel, chips, salad, and a schooner of beer. Apparently, since Australia went metric, you can't get a pint of beer anywhere. Only a schooner (I thought a schooner was a kind of boat?), which no doubt is exactly 400 ml or something metric.

The hotel is quite old - it was built in 1885. My room is directly over the bar, and my window looks out onto the 2nd floor balcony which is also a restaurant. Too bad I left my earplugs behind. But in the end it didn't matter, exhaustion works even better than earplugs.

One more thing, I am getting real tired of all the ugly guys calling me "mate". I am not their mate! If I were to have an Australian mate, they wouldn't have a pot belly and two-day old stubble. Why don't any of the pretty Australian girls call me "mate", I wonder? Strange country.

BBB

April 19, 2006

Today's cycling was just plain not fun! Although it was only a short run (just 64 km), all but the first 15 km was back on the main hiway. And those first 15 were up and down, which sapped what little energy I had left from the past two 100+ km days. So I struggled all morning - my slow average speed of 15.1 km/hr suggests I need some rest.

Luckily, I arrived at Coff's Harbor early at 1 pm and I had a restful afternoon doing laundry, using the internet, and relaxing.

The coastal towns, such as Coff's Harbor, are all beginning to blend together to me. So far they are all pretty much alike, with large tourist camps, fish and chip shops, and various touristy stuff. How many beautiful beaches can you see before you start yawning?

For the first time on my trip, the weather seems a bit sticky, perhaps evidence of my northward (toward the tropics) progress. The vegetation is also thicker - looking much more like rainforest the farther north I go. Still no rain though, only some tropical looking clouds.

I have now reached the point in the trip - and every trek, backpack and climb has reached the same point, when, shortly after passing the 1/2 point, you begin thinking about the end. I've found myself thinking about nice beds, days spent without a narrow seat stuck up my crotch, good food from known restaurants, I night spent without legs cramping up into knots, and most of all talking with friends. I haven't talked so little so many days for a long time. When I finally do talk, to order food, ask directions, or tell some inquirer about my strange bike, the sound of my voice startles me.

Tomorrow I head inland along a (hopefully) quiet road - I'm looking forward to the change in scenery.

April 20, 2006

Today was a much, much better day of cycling than yesterday. The route followed the "old" road to Grafton from Coff's Harbor. Now that they have built the hiway, this road has only local traffic. Although the route was quite hilly, especially the long grind uphill out of Coff's Harbor, today I had energy. My short day yesterday and afternoon of rest helped me recover some. Stats for the day: 87 km @ 14.6 km/hr. This is the 2nd slowest day so far - because of the hills.

The route began in lush rainforest near Coff's Harbor. The vegetation gradually thinned and dried as the day progressed. By the afternoon I was cycling through rolling cattle ranches with open fields of lush grass and copses of Eucalyptus and other unidentified trees. And more kangaroo corpses. Lovely (the scenery, not the corpses), but unspectacular country.

Today I met the first touring cyclist other than me. A solo woman from Ireland who is hop-scotching her way around Australia by cycle and by bus ("cheating, in her words"), and staying in hostels along the way. For me, I have avoided the hostels, preferring to stay in campgrounds and hotels. I worry that the hostels will be populated by backpacking, pot smoking Europeans. I guess I am just a loner at heart. She said that she actually saw a kangaroo in south Australia. We both agreed that the Brisbane Zoo is my best bet.

The town of Grafton is on the surprisingly huge Clarence river. I never thought of Australia as a major source of timber, but that seems to be a major industry in this otherwise quiet town. I splurged today and anted up for a real motel room; which is actually part of the riverside Crown Inn Hotel Motel. A huge room with three beds. I guy could get used to not pitching a tent, and not having to climb out of a sleeping bag and stumble 100 meters to the toilet at 3 am, only to discover the key is back in the tent. Ah, what conveniences money can buy!

Diner tonight in the Hotel's bistro was a scotch fillet (a cut of steak, not a kind of whiskey) and a Greek salad. Scrumptious! As was the beer. I am favoring Cooper's Pale

Ale and Toohey's Old as my favorites. Sure beats Bud Light! If I continue to eat like this when this trip is over, I will put on 5 Kg a week!

April 21, 2006

After a huge breakfast at the Crown Hotel's bistro (seems I now have a bottomless pit for stomach), I was ready to go by 8:30 am. My cycling route followed rural roads that were, until the final 15 km, virtually traffic free. The roads mostly hugged the banks of the Clarence River, and followed it downstream all the way to its mouth. Fields of tall sugar cane and lush pastures for cows and horses covered the river's floodplain. Not one hill had to be climbed today, except for the 3 m high approach to bridges that crossed the river or one of its distributaries. The days ride also included two ferries, one about midday to cross the wide river, and the other at the end of the day to cross the rivers mouth.

My cycling ended at the town of Yamba, on the south side of the river's delta. From there, a circuitous boat ride wound around islands and sandbars to the small, quiet village of Iluka. The caravan park where I am camped is just next to the wharf. I pitched my tent just next to the ocean (facing inland, so no noisy surf). I am having a very peaceful and quiet evening.

The village of Iluka, although tourist-oriented, is small enough to have that everyone-knows-everyone feel to it. Everyone from the receptionist at the park, to the people in the pub where I had dinner seemed small-town friendly. No keys needed for the toilet, no gates, and though pretty full, the campsite is very quiet. Its the kind of town where you can walk down the middle of main street on a Friday night at 7:30 pm - which I did - without having a single car move you to the sidewalk.

I very much enjoyed the cycling today - one of the best days of the trip. I went 68 km @ 16.2 km/hour which includes a 1/2 hour of riding slowly around Yamba while I waited an hour for the ferry. The weather remains fine - boy have I been lucky so far!

I passed through a small town around lunch time that actually has a cycling shop that was actually open. The friendly proprietor fixed my seat bag mount in 3 minutes at no charge. Now I can actually shut my trailer without having to jump up and down on it first!

BBB

April 22, 2006

Today I awoke to a weather change. Overnight, I knew something was going on because the wind picked up, when usually at night it is dead calm. I also needed to crawl in my sleeping back in the middle of the night, and in the morning I needed to wear a jacket.

The sticky, tropical-like weather had disappeared, just like that. It was like I was back in Sydney again. A cold front must have passed through during the night, but with no rain, and not even many clouds. By morning it was clear, with a strong wind out of the south. Perfect, because I was headed north!

A strong wind directly at my back, a flat route, cool temperatures, and my strengthening legs, made for the fastest day yet - 19.5 km/hour over 92 km. I actually blew right by my intended overnight stop at Evan's Head, and continued on to the larger seaside town of Ballina. Much of today's route followed the main hiway, so it wasn't much fun, just fast.

Ballina is a rather nondescript town - medium sized, and much like the others I have seen. Since the LP guide had no info on Ballina, I explored on my own. I found a caravan park close to the town's center, and had my tent up by 3:30 pm. My campsite is just next to a road, with a bright street light shining down on my tent, and noisy neighbors watching TV from their camper. This is not the best campground of my trip.

I wandered along the main street to get some dinner. Pretty much everything was closed (even though this was Saturday night). I passed a couple of pubs, but I was pretty bored with bistro food. "Thai by Night" won out over a dumpy-looking (but good smelling) pizza joint.

As I was eating my dinner in the Thai restaurant and minding my own business, a not-so-slightly overweight woman entered the restaurant and walked up to my table. She shoved a cell phone in my face and said with a big gap-toothed grin "here talk to me friend!". I calmly gave her a gentle shove towards the door, and she staggered out laughing. This was my excitement for the night. At least she didn't call me "mate". I had to dodge a couple of other drunks on the way back to the campground. Such is Saturday night in Ballina, NSW, Australia.

I now have some choices to make. I have picked up another 1/2 day on my itinerary. Should I push ahead and try to pick up the other 1/2 day so I can make it to Brisbane 2 days ahead of schedule? Or do I slow down and smell the dead kangaroos, err, I mean roses? I am guessing the former, depending on the weather and my legs.

April 23, 2006

For those of you out there that have been hoping these blogs will end soon (if there is anyone who hasn't already put my email address on their junk list), you will get your wish! Tomorrow, I will arrive in Brisbane and write the last blog.

This morning I was wide awake at 5:30 am. I was soon packed and ready to go. I could smell the finish line. In spite of my intentions at the start, this tour has now become pretty much a race. I wanted to pick up that extra 1/2 day, and this was the perfect day to do it.

I was on the road by 6:30 after choking down a pasty Trader Joe's style "healthy" fruit bar. Yuk. Following hilly but quiet roads, I took just over two hours to get to Byron Bay, the next large town up the coast. Just east of town is Cape Byron, Australia's eastern most point. Byron Bay is also a surfing and international travelers/backpackers center, judging from the crowd hanging around the bus station.

I should have stopped by and followed the 3.5 km foot trail out to Cape Byron so I could say I stood on the eastern most point, but the scent of Brisbane was too strong now, so I kept going after a quick (second) breakfast.

I soon joined up with the hiway which here is limited access freeway. Cycling on the freeway actually wasn't bad. There's normally a wide shoulder and the pavement is quite smooth. It is amazing what difference the texture of the pavement makes with 4 wheels in contact with it. The right surface will bump up my speed by 3-4 km/hr. What's more, every time a big rig goes whooshing by, my speed jumps up 2 km/hr by the suction. Makes me think of the drafting scene in "Breaking Away".

I reached Tweeds Head, the last major town before the southern end of the Gold Coast, by 3 pm - 98 km @ 17.1 km/hr. I found a pretty nice Caravan Park but it was in a residential neighborhood so the outlook for dinner was bleak. At the suggestion of the park's manager, I caught the free shuttle bus to the Seagull. The fact that it has its own free shuttle bus tells you something - it was the size of a small Las Vegas casino. It is also a "club" but takes out-of-towners like me. Like a casino, it also had rows of "Pokies" (aka poker machines) that take your money just like a slot machine. It had live music in one of the bars, rows of TV's showing every conceivable race or sporting event, what looked like a sports book, a fitness center, and of course a bistro. I had a quick T-bone and chips in the bistro and made my escape.

Tomorrow will be my last day of cycling on this tour. I will cruise across the border into Queensland, and will coast along the high-rises of the Gold Coast. By then I will be within reach of Brisbane's train system, and will find a station and ride into Brisbane in style. I'll write one more of these blogs in Brisbane, then be done with it.

BBB

April 26, 2006

I have now been in Brisbane for 2 days - I will fly back to Bangkok in a few hours. So this will be my last BBB.... Hey, stop the cheering!

On Monday morning, I left Tweeds Heads around 8:00 am, after seeing the campgrounds bird feeding. It was amazing to watch a million chattering rainbow lorikeets fight over the food. I also learned not to stand under the tree while the feeding was going on. Luckily I had my bike helmet on at the time!

My ride up to the Gold Coast was easy - perfect weather and only a few hills to climb to skirt headlands. The view of the Gold Coast skyline from Tweeds Heads across the 15 km wide bay was spectacular. It looked like NYC on the beach. The Gold Coast is Australia's Waikiki or Miami Beach - a place to be avoided. Which I did by cutting inland to Narang where there is a train station on the Brisbane City network. So I rode the final 70 km into downtown Brisbane in style and was in a hotel room by 1 pm. Only 35 km at 16.7 km/hr on the day - easy ride.

The rest of the story is an anticlimax. Yesterday, I had a nice 15 km ride up a 300 m high hill that overlooks Brisbane. I also visited the rinky-dink Brisbane zoo, which involved a half-hour train ride way out of town. There I saw a bunch of lazy overfed kangaroos - just about as exciting as seeing the squashed ones by the road. The monkeys were better.

Some final thoughts. I was amazingly lucky with weather, except for the first day, I had blue skies and nice temperatures every day.

The best part about the trip was that it was a kind of boot-camp for my body. I would like to have one of these every year.

The Bike Friday worked well but I am not totally convinced that it is more convenient than a regular bike. Maybe it will be once I get a few things on it changed.

Australians are friendly, but not overly so. They are about like Americans in that respect. Their food is rather bland - good steaks though.

If I were to do this over again, I would plan a more scenic route - perhaps in south Australia along the coast. Somewhere with less traffic. I would also plan to take some days off during the ride. I think my legs have never had a chance to fully recover and have been sore every night of the ride. They feel great now though.

In the end, I will now be glad to get back to Chiang Mai, where some work awaits me...

BBB