

Pooncarie and Ivanhoe

Over the Christmas New Year period I decided to go for a ride. I was not sure where to head so I took out the map and stuck a pin in it. No, I didn't stick the pin in Pinnaroo although it did get very close by pinning near Pooncarie.

The easiest way to get to Pooncarie from where I was staying at the time is up the Western Highway through Ballarat and St Arnaud. Leaving as close as I could get to 7 am, after locking the backup mobile phone inside the house and then having to unlock all the doors to get it, I headed off up through the Pentland Hills not before taking a picture of the Bacchus Marsh sign near the on ramp to the freeway. Did I ever tell you about the time I was knocked off my bicycle in the Pentlands while heading back from Bungaree and ended up in the good old Bacchus Marsh hospital?



Bacchus Marsh



Unauthorised passengers

It was too early to pay my respects to mum, dad and grandma at Ballarat Cemetery. The walk through gate was open but the drive through was locked. I had far too much stuff strapped to the bike to leave it outside so off I headed; next destination Mildura. I saw a service station open in St Arnaud so as I was not sure what other servos would be open further up the road I filled up. This would now definitely give me enough to make it through to Mildura.

From here to Mildura the locusts were out in numbers content on committing suicide on my helmet. One even used my knee and that hurt. Three managed to get under my visor and one hitched a ride for ages sitting on my "dashboard". I thought it was dead. It stayed there for at least 20 minutes before I noticed its feelers twitching and then it started to move. Sorry Mr. Locust no non-fare paying passengers on this trip so the hitchhiker was squished lightly between my fingers. It continued to keep me company until Pooncarie just that it didn't know about anything anymore. Just as well I filled when I did at St Arnaud as there was nothing else open along the highway until Mildura and then I opted to fill at a 24 hour automated service station as it was 4 cents a litre less than the "open" garages.

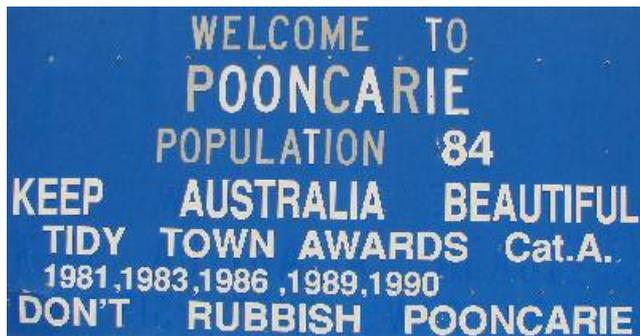
From Mildura I headed along the bitumen roads rather than choosing one of the numerous dirt roads as I knew the planned trip past Pooncarie was going to be on roads of dubious quality. Heading out of Mildura towards Wentworth I saw my first group of emus. I'd seen plenty of kangaroos up until then; fortunately all off to the side of the road. What is a group of emus called? -- http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_a_group_of_emus_called - Isn't it wonderful what you can ask the internet and get an answer?

After the turn off from the main highway, near Dareton, the road narrowed, the corners became more interesting and the houses fewer. The locusts stopped committing suicide or at least they didn't make their presence known. I think I prefer locusts. I remember being out during the mice plague in the 70's and mice are very squishy and extremely slippery in corners but then again none of them joined me on the dashboard or under the visor.

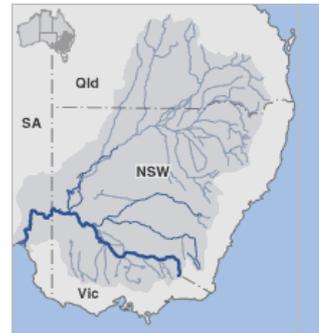


The Darling – Pooncarie. The water level mark behind me showed a mark of 26 ft.

Pooncarie has a population of around 80 people. It is on the eastern banks of the Darling River. The Murray-Darling is one of the main rivers serving NSW, South Australia and Victoria. In fact the Murray-Darling is the world's 16th-longest river at 2,310 miles. Not knowing the town I saw the start and the finish and no signs of a camping ground. As with most rural towns of this size the pub stood out and the sign advertising accommodation was very attractive. A quick check revealed an available bed for the night. In hindsight spending a night in a tent, when the temp during the day between Mildura and Pooncarie had nudged the 39 degree mark, I'm sure would have been hell.



Pooncarie, New South Wales



Murray-Darling Basin

For the rest of the day I did exactly that and rested. Tomorrow was going to be a tough day. I had a very slow walk around town from one end to the other and along the swollen Darling. There were many fully furnished houses for rent in the main street. The town looked bigger than the population sign indicated. Even though the pub closed at 6 the owner managed to rustle up some cold pork, ham, turkey and salad left over from their Christmas lunch. My loaded bike was not going to be lightened by much in the morning. I put one of the several small orange juices in the fridge for the morning – that would help to lighten a little.



Pooncarie Hotel along the Darling River, New South Wales

In the morning, after eating Vita Brits washed down with orange juice, I got underway. On the way out of town, in fact after leaving town, I saw the sign to the camping ground. Oh well, put that in the memory banks for another trip.

The road was bitumen for a good distance and then the dirt began. The wildlife was abundant. The recent rains had greened things up. The dirt was great. It was 100+ kms per hour sort of dirt in fact I'm sure I topped out at greater than 140 on one stretch AND then the sand started. Not gritty sand but sand the consistency of talcum powder. At one stage the GPS indicated that I was averaging 18 kms per hour and this was after averaging over 110 kmh for the first leg of the trip. That meant the average for the dirt section alone had dropped well below the indicated 18. In fact my bike will only idle with the clutch out and no throttle input at all at 13 kmh. I was having to slip the clutch and roll with the clutch fully in for many sections of the road. 13 kmh was a luxury I could not reach in some patches. I made a mental note to stop every 12 kms. It was a 120 km trip to the next town. Some times I stopped at 12 kms and others I managed more. The scenery was worth stopping for.

I am glad I had put my water bottles in the fridge the night before at the pub and also frozen ice blocks for the Camelback. The temperature had once again crept up to over the 38 degree mark. Being a responsible, safety conscious, motorcyclist I was dressed in fully padded jacket and Kevlar lined jeans. My lined, gauntlet gloves were dripping with sweat and at one stop they would not go back on over the sweaty hands without a lot of energy sapping effort. The two pairs of short, summer gloves I carried were packed in one of the panniers along with the air compressor, tools, first aid kit etc. and there would be far too much effort required to get them out. There must be a better way of packing the tent and sleeping bag on the seat so that it does not hinder access to the panniers.



The tyres sank into the sand.



Miles & miles of soft dirt between Pooncarie and Menindee, NSW

The talcum powder was getting deeper and the bike was behaving badly but I was having fun. It is said a Wii Fit is good for people wanting to be able to keep their sense of balance as they get older. I have always said just riding a motorcycle keeps your balance in tune. Riding in talcum powder certainly works out more than just your sense of balance. The shoulders get a good work out manipulating the steering from left to right and back again to correct a possible fall. The feet get a work out paddling through some of the softer sections and then the legs and hips are exercised holding the bike up.



It was certainly "dry weather"



Civilisation – a power pole!

Having nothing better to do than stare at and analyse the road surface a few hundred metres in front of the bike and then a quick glance off in the bush left and right looking for wildlife and constantly making steering corrections the old brain certainly gets a good work out as well. I saw plenty of emus and kangaroos crossing the road in front of me and even more to the left and right. I am sure if I could have looked in the rear view mirror, for more than the few seconds I could manage, I am sure I would have seen plenty behind me.



A mob of emus crossing the road in front of me.
This was the only time I managed to get my camera out in time.

Of interest to me was a constant stream of ants migrating from one side of the road to the other. Why do ants cross the road? -- Because it was the chicken's day off! Miles and miles of ants trails crossing the road. Umm, small things amuse small minds especially when there is not much else around ☺



An army of ants



Thousands of ants – crossing the road

At Tolarno Station the first of the lakes begun and then the road returned to bitumen. Soon after that the town of Menindee came into sight – one of many towns on the Darling River however this town can lay claim to being the oldest European settlement in western New South Wales, and the first town to be established on the Darling River.

It was a lot bigger than Pooncarie with around 900 more people and it even had a few open shops. I had morning tea consisting of a thin piece of steak with onions in between two slices of bread. After the arduous ride it was the best steak sandwich I have had. It was washed down with a freezing cold 600 ml of milk.

From here the various roads lead to several other towns including Broken Hill, Wilcannia and Ivanhoe.

Statistics: Pooncarie to Menindee, Average = 46 km/hour, Distance = 122 kms, Moving 2 hours 42 minutes. Google maps estimates 2 hours and 5 minutes for this trip.



Menindee Lakes, New South Wales



Near Menindee Caravan Park



Menindee Bridge spanning the Darling River, New South Wales

Menindee was not my destination. I was feeling good and could do more miles today. After the meal I was off to Broken Hill. The road to the Hill was bitumen all the way unlike Wilcannia or Ivanhoe. It was full of traffic with plenty of room for overtaking. Getting closer to the Hill the road tightened up; signposted at 75 kmh and most being able to be taken at least 40 kms above that even with a fully laden bike. Beautiful corners. Similar to the ones, once you hit the bitumen, from Brindabella to Tumut. Corners that you can mostly see through. A road similar to this in Victoria would have had a 100 kmh speed limit and be totally wasted on a motorbike. Even the dirt road from Pooncarie to Menindee was 110 kmh limited and on patches of the dirt more than that was able to be achieved.



Broken Hill, New South Wales



Main Street, Broken Hill, NSW

Broken Hill! I think everyone had taken the opportunity and left town for the festive season. Subway was open but after my steak sandwich I bypassed it and filled the petrol tank instead at the only servo I could find open. The queue said it all - it was probably the only servo I was going to find selling petrol in town.

My next stop was Wilcannia where, due to the unknown petrol situation, I topped up taking less than 8 litres of low grade fuel. With a 16 litre tank the tail wind had meant good consumption even though the average speed was 5 kmh above the speed limit. I also topped up the Camelback with water and iceblocks. The knowledgeable lady behind the counter said the road to Ivanhoe was dirt but in good condition. Ha! Maybe she rides a GS with knobby tyres. I had initially planned to take the long way around to Cobar and then down to Hay but after the favourable road report decide on the A76 – Cobb Highway.

There is a tourist route stretching from Wilcannia to Moama (in NSW) and it is known as The Long Paddock. Towns include: Wilcannia, Ivanhoe, Booligal, Hay, Boorooban, Wanganella, Pretty Pine, Deniliquin, Mathoura and Moama. Information points are dotted along the side of the road making an interesting distraction from what would otherwise be a boring relatively straight drive. -- <http://thelongpaddock.blogspot.com>

The first 40 kms from Wilcannia was black top. The next 136 was questionable as to whether this should be shown on maps with the designation of **A76**. An "A" road? Umm, must be a different definition to what my expectations of an "A" road should be especially since the road from Ballarat to Ouyen is classed as a "B" road.

About 20 kms into the dirt the onboard computer indicated a yellow, flashing, triangle, error symbol and the tyre pressure indicators stated that the back wheel was down to 2.6 bar. Normally I run the back at around 3.1 bar but on dirt less is better. I kept monitoring the tyre pressure and as it dropped to below 2 bar the warning light changed to a red triangle and the flash rate increased. Everything became more urgent. At this stage I stopped and fished out the compressor and inflated the offending tyre. It was a slow leak and pumping was better than repairing in the 38+ degree temp besides I figured out if I stuffed the repair I might be delayed for a very long time.



The usable part of the road sometimes widened like this shot shows

20 kilometres down the road and it was time for another pump. A further 20 kilometres and it was time for yet another pump. At least the hole was not getting bigger. This time I was less enthusiastic about getting the pressure right but of course that meant 10 kms down the road it was time for yet another stop. This time I found some shade while the compressor did it work. Wrong! The blarry compressor was not attached correctly and after 10 minutes there was less air in the tyre than when I stoped to pump it up. It was time for a rest. A time for a photo shoot. Time to restock the now depleted camelback with more water. I tried to send off an SMS but like every other place along my journey there was no signal. The two way UHF was working but I was not interested in whether the farm hand had brought more tie wire or not to where the fencing contractor was so I stopped listening to that. I was considering my options if things did not improve. The whole time I was stopped along that road and I stopped many, many times I saw only one car.

After 45 minutes of rest under the shade of a tree it was time to retry. This time I managed to get it back up to 2.6 bar. Just as well because the road improved and 110 kmh was achievable but of course the sand returned as did the low pressure. This time I decided 2 bar was good enough and I think since I could only

average about 20 kmh it was okay. The stopping and pumping went on and on and on. Sometimes I had shade and others I had Christmas Company?



Sometimes I had a bit of company, Father Christmas was in the front seat
Note the compressor at the back of the bike



Ivanhoe Hotel along the Cobb Highway in New South Wales

The bitumen started 5 kms out of the town of Ivanhoe and 5 kms at 20 kms per hour took ages. What was around 180 kms on the map had taken about 6 hours in very hot and trying conditions. Ivanhoe is on its way to being a ghost town. The motel on the way in from Wilcannia was closed permanently. The service station was closed. The camping ground was closed permanently. The only place open was the police station and the pub and it was air conditioned. The publican laughed when I asked if he knew of someone with a good air compressor. I was standing next to him at the bar. Anyway Steve, as I found out, was the local bush mechanic. He owned the "closed for the day" service station and was thinking of buying the other one across the road from the pub as it had better access.



Steve's Garage and Café at Ivanhoe, New South Wales

Steve was not willing to leave the pub although I think he would've if I had pushed for it. I didn't want to leave the pub. I was bugged, night was coming, and all I wanted was a rest for the night and the pub had a room although I think the tent would have been of more solid construction. I should have taken pictures but as I said I was bugged. One wall was straight the rest were bowed. The fridge was from the 70's and the lock was even older. It could have been from the 1800's! The black and white, sometime colour TV, worked really well receiving at least 8 satellite programs. I decided on Imparja. A frequently watched television station in Papua New Guinea. The accommodation was good, safe and secure but less than two star accommodation.

I had arranged with Steve to meet at 8am the next day. He arrived a little after 9am. Maybe he was on Imparja time? Imparja, being a satellite station, was advertising Queensland time and an hour different to NSW time. From the pub we went to his house to pick up the compressor and his repair stuff rather than using mine. I repacked mine later. Steve showed me his bench drill that would have originally been run off a steam driven engine and he explained how the associated lathe was also in town but at Evan's place. I had met Evan the previous night in the pub. Steve does the mowing of the local roads and the local roads go for over 200 kms in all directions from Ivanhoe. He does a lot of travelling and needs to keep his tractor / mowers running. This is where his bush mechanic skills come in handy. I saw how he was modifying one with new bearings but the new bearing surroundings needed fitting and turning and welding and all sorts of skills.

After the grand tour of Steve's workshop and collecting the necessary requirements it took him less than a minute to fix and inflate the tyre. My little compressor would have taken over 20 minutes just to inflate the tyre. The day before I had tested one of the CO2 gas cartridges I carried along with the miniscule hand pump and I estimated the 5 remaining cartridges would have over inflated the tyre if I really needed to. I have saved those for a real emergency. Umm, and I better replace the spent one.

After I repacked the bike it was almost 10 am so I rode to Steve's café and after waiting 10 minutes I obtained the key to the petrol pump off the girls inside. Luckily I filled the tank. I had estimated the night before that I would have enough juice to get to Hay. This would have been achievable except for the very strong wind coming from the South. I estimated the tank would probably have run out at least 20 kms out of Hay and as previously mentioned it is difficult to get into the panniers with the tent, sleeping bag etc sitting on top of them so it would have been a pain in the backside getting out the 6 litres of spare fuel. As it worked out filling, even with low octane fuel in Ivanhoe before leaving for Hay, was definitely a big plus.

The morning trip was interesting. I had to dodge lizards and snakes sunning themselves on the road. The lizards were slow to move but many of the snakes did magnificent 180 degree turns and headed back off the road at a great rate of knots. After 105 kms, sitting close to the speed limit and continually creeping above it due to boredom, it was time to ditch the summer gloves. I had managed to extricate them from the panniers during one of the many stops to inflate the tyre the day before. After several days of the temperature being above 38 it was darn cold. I wished I had worn more than a thin t-shirt under my jacket but at least it was bearable. The heated grips turned on in the middle of summer did not do much to warm my hands. The only solution was to change back to gauntlets.

Hay, civilisation! Almost! The first servo only had low octane fuel and after half a tank of low octane from Steve's garage I decided I better look for another one to bring up the overall octane level. The local Kawasaki dealer offered a reasonable price and 95 octane even if it was advertised as "Premium". He even gave a 2

cent a litre discount for motorbikes but in fact it was really for paying cash. It just sounded nice to offer a discount to motorcyclists. Because I had filled in Ivanhoe the discount netted me a saving of 15 cents.

Coming into Hay there was a visible police presence but since I was at least 10 kmh under I was not worried. Leaving Hay and sitting on 95 slowly getting up to 110, because I had nothing better to do, another unmarked car went by. Sorry, not me, not today. From Hay I stopped in Deniliquin to top me up (not the bike) and stretch the legs. A great mix - kabana and yoghurt. It was a welcome rest on the side of the road outside the local IGA supermarket even if I had to suffer looking out at the utility on the pole. Deniliquin - the home of the famous Ute Muster. See -- <http://giaman.com/pg/?83c0d9>



Ute on a Poll at Deniliquin, New South Wales

Next stop was Bendigo, Victoria for fuel and a snack. I nearly stopped in Moama thinking the petrol might be cheaper in NSW but when you have a 16 litre tank saving a cent a litre doesn't really make much sense. I had gone on to reserve just outside Bendigo. Bendigo was a welcome stop. A cup of coffee and choc chips biscuits with Sim and Mandy before receiving my Christmas presents from them and heading off home. Leaving Bendigo it was freezing. The temp had dropped to 13 degrees. Should I stop and put on something over my t-shirt? Nope it was non-stop to my home and luckily the house was warm and I soon warmed up.

Total kms travelled using the GPS was	1879
Average Speed for the whole trip was	94
I must have behaved myself as the maximum was	142

My fuel economy is usually around the 3.9 litres per 100 kms but due to the head wind this rose to over 4.26 litres per 100kms. That's still better than 60 miles per (UK) gallon and still better than what I get going to Eucla, West Australia each year.

I am glad the pin in the map didn't choose Brisbane. I am not sure my bike is certified as a submersible. I don't like riding in areas where there are bushfires so West Australia was out and equally snow and me on a motorbike does not work too well. It is even more unpredictable than talcum powder. Ask Stephen Williams about the time we returned from the Alpine Rally via Rules Point (The fact that the road is now permanently closed might say something) although I think having Steve as a pillion put more weight over the back of the bike and made it more stable.

I have complained about the tent, sleeping bag, gas stove and saucepans etc. but they helped to lower the bike slightly so I could put my feet flat down in the dirt.

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