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Expat Life

Outback adventure of a lifetime

William Verity revels in the red dirt and blue sky on a lonely desert ride

So there I am, as alone as I have ever been, the vacant outback road stretching out before me to the distant horizon.

The desert here is so flat that it curves away at its distant edge, another sign that this country is tricky, magical perhaps also, and that what once seemed certain and solid has now become fluid and unsure.

Hot wind buffets my face and the edges of my helmet, while the powerful thrumming of the motorcycle thrusts me forward towards the endless space of the vacant blue heavens. Although the road is arrow-straight and perfectly flat, the appearance is one of a constant, gentle sloping up towards the horizon. And while it is high summer now, towards the middle of day and sweltering with a dry heat, there is the mirage of cool, shimmering silver flooding the bitumen, always retreating from the approaching hollows and reforming at the furthest distance, where the road meets the sky.

The heat melts even the landscape so the rocks and red sand blur with the outlines of gun-metal green saltbush and stunted gums, used by feral goats and resting kangaroos for scant shade from the unrelenting sun.

Then, out of the distant heat haze comes a sign of life.

At first, it's a hint, a glint of sun on chrome sparking a sharp reflection. Then a dark form emerges from the mercury mist, becoming solid as it edges closer until it takes the shape of the rushing monster of these vacant outback highways.

Although the road train and the Harley-Davidson are closing at a combined speed of 250kmh, the climax comes with agonising anticipation. After minutes that seem like hours, the Mack truck is upon me and I brace my body, holding to the handle bars for dear life.

WHOOOSH!

The smashing headwind threatens to send the bike wobbling out of control and onto the treacherous gravel lining the shoulder, but I am staunch, the bike is true and the truck is suddenly gone, leaving me alone again on the empty road with the rocks, the roadkill, the flapping black crows, the 'roos, the emus and goats, the sand, the saltbush, the heat, the beating sun and the blistering blue of eternity.

It's been a dream 20 years in the making, to get on a bike and ride west, with no direction home.

Since that first glimpse of the endlessly rolling sand waves of the Simpson Desert



Feeling the heat: William Verity on his Harley-Davidson in New South Wales, Australia

as I flew over my new country for the first time on a plane from London, I knew I had to go. That I could never call myself an Australian if I had not experienced the red dirt and the blue sky for myself.

It was Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* who wrote that travelling through a landscape in a car is just more television. That to experience it, you have to be in it. To smell it. To feel the heat. To be weary but exhilarated by the end.

And so it was finally, that I found both the time – seven clear days without commitments – and the transport, a massive Harley-Davidson cruiser.

It was 200 miles west of Sydney that the world started to change. The first saltbush started appearing in the wheat paddocks that stretched to the far horizon, dotted with gums. The land stretched out and became flatter and so straight that corners, when they came, surprised me. There's the Great Dividing Range that comes first, barely more than a hillock if you cross west of the Blue Mountains.

Hard to believe that this dyke splits the continent, that

all rain west of here flows not east but the long route south. If it flows at all.

Then the paddocks became larger and the settlements further apart, a rich mix of cattle, canola, vineyards and olives giving way to golden wheat dotted with gums.

The traffic cop stops me for a random breath test on the western edge of Nyngan on the Mitchell Highway, near the geographical centre of NSW, and warns me of feral goats and emus west of Cobar.

"They don't mix too well with these machines," he says, nodding at the Harley. "Where are you headed?"

"Broken Hill," I say. "Long way to go."

One of the truths seldom expressed is that large swathes of the travelling experience are often unpleasant – hanging around in airports, missing trains, schlepping around city pavements, coming down with some disease. We remember the 10 per cent that lifts us out of the ordinary, and that's enough to set us dreaming for more.

Yet for a motorcyclist exploring his own state, the adventure starts the moment he rides out of his driveway. If

he's lucky, the trip will build and culminate in a moment of the sublime, even the spiritual.

So it was on this outback trip, as I set out from Broken Hill, an isolated mining town in the far west of NSW, 500km from Adelaide and more than 1000km from Sydney.

It was the end of a sweltering day, as I rode out past the mining town of Silverton (home of Mad Max and many Aussie beer commercials) to the Mundi Mundi lookout – a flat area of gravel with a view onto landscape so flat that the horizon is curved.

On the way out, the change came. Rain started spitting, stinging my cheek, and releasing that fragrant, dusty smell of the desert when wet. On my left was the setting sun and the clear blue sky. On my right was a massive wall of grey cloud flickering with lightning and scored through by a double rainbow.

Ignoring the hesitant rain, I rode on towards the distant horizon until dusk set in and the kangaroos started appearing. Then I returned to my hotel and my slow journey home.

French sales can begin... because the law says so

FROM THE EXPAT BLOGS

JANUARY 9 was a hugely important date in the French calendar, a date observed more passionately than the 14th of July, except perhaps for the fireworks. Certainly you see more people out in the streets participating in the day's ritual than you do in the Bastille Day parades.

Yes, this was the first day of the winter *soldes* – the sales. And I had waited to write about them because strictly speaking it was illegal to mention them before then. Well, almost. Suffice it to say that any shop daring to start its *soldes* before 8am, even online, could have been hit with a hefty fine.

Strange, you might think, to be so strict. Surely the French government should be rebooting the economy, letting businesses do what they want to make money? *Mais non*. You will begin your winter sales (and I quote) at "8 o'clock on the morning of the second Wednesday in January, except if it falls after the 12th, in which case the sales will begin on the first Wednesday of January."

It's the same for the summer sales, except they're on the last Wednesday of June. And they can only last for five weeks.

To us free-market Anglos, it sounds crazy. If I as a shopkeeper want to cut my profits and clear my shelves or racks before, say, going skiing or heading off on a stock-buying trip, why shouldn't I?

The simple answer is: because you're in France. But to get some more subtle detail on the subject, I turned to an expert, Pascale Hebel, head of the consumer department of the Crédoc, the Centre de Recherche pour l'Étude et l'Observation des Conditions de Vie.

"It's all about protecting small businesses," she told me. "The law stops big chain stores cutting prices whenever they want, and it also makes it illegal to sell anything at a loss, even during sales periods. That way, small businesses, who can't afford to sell too cheaply, have a fair chance."

However badly treated, on Jan 9 French consumers were out showing their gratitude for the French service sector actually serving them. They appeared en masse in the chic fashion zone around the Avenue Montaigne in Paris, queuing outside the posh brand shops.

Though prices may go as low as 70 per cent off, the shops still won't be selling at a loss, remember.

Stephen Clarke

Follow Stephen at telegraph.co.uk/stephenclarke

Learning to go green with Denmark's devoted recyclers

It's 8am and the peninsula is still draped in soul-killing darkness when the doorbell rings. From the light in the porch I can make out a grumpy, bearded man in a hood. Just the sort of stranger-danger a girl should answer the door to... on her own... in her dressing gown... I think. But he can see that I've seen him. I crumple.

"Hej!" he says.

"Hej!" I reply.

Then he makes some vowel sounds.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Danish yet."

He shakes his head and says something about "neighbour", "trash" and "wrong place" before holding aloft a crumpled piece of paper. "Look!"

I do.

"We go through trash for a long time to find you!"

Alarmed, I realise he's

holding a letter addressed to my husband.

He's been rifling in our rubbish? Am I living among spies?

"You put your paper in wrong place." He points at what I had taken to be the communal recycling bin next to the neighbourhood's bike racks. "That is not for you! You must sort and put outside your house only."

He presents me with a doll-sized black bin bag and makes a show of placing the offending letter in there, before whipping out a roll of green sacks from the depths of his anorak. He mimes cutting something with a knife and fork and then chewing.

"Food?" I take a punt. "The green bags are for food?"

"Yes!"

"Ah. Thanks."

The following morning, a

second bearded man calls round.

"I am also your neighbour," he beams. "We have all talked and we thought it was not fair that you could not understand the Danish system, so I have taken the liberty of translating the 'what may be recycled' list and printing it out for you."

He hands me a stiff, shiny A4 sheet.

"And you laminated it?"

He waves his hand as if to say, "It's nothing."

"Anything else you want to know about recycling, just ask!"

The Danes, it turns out, are expert recyclers. Almost 90 per cent of their packaging is recycled and the government aims to reduce CO2

emissions by 40 per cent by 2020. Paper, cans, bottles, cans, food and organic waste

all have separate recycling homes and sorting out what goes where is an art form. A week on and I'm slowly getting it. I now have green bags that apparently go in my new blue bin and black bags that go everywhere else.

Bottles are taken to a booth at the supermarket where a machine resembling a Fifties jukebox sucks them in and uses lasers to determine their worth before spitting out a coupon for money off your next shop. My husband is now convinced that if he drinks enough beer, he will actually save us money and single-handedly meet the country's emissions target.

What we haven't yet established is when the bin-men come. Messrs Beard & Beard have been unable to confirm likely dates and our stack of mini bags is fast becoming a mountain. Just as

I've almost given up hope and started typing "municipal tip" into Google Translate, a grey-green truck rolls past.

In slow motion, I leap up from my chair and run to the door. Tearing outside into driving rain in just my sock feet, I wheel our overflowing black and the blue bins into position. Once manoeuvred, I look up, sodden. The rear lights of the truck glint as it speeds away.

"You just missed them!" calls the first Mr Beardy from across the street, cheerfully.

I manage a grimace and trundle my wheelie bins back off the pavement. A Thursday-night trip to the tip beckons – we are truly living the expat dream.

Helen Russell

Helen is a British journalist and the former editor of MarieClaire.co.uk.