



Mt Kosciusko to Lake Eyre

By **KENT BENNETT**

Some of my passions are botany, Australian landscapes and outdoor recreation, so on the conclusion of my university studies I knew that I had to take a break and go on a bit of an adventure. The idea of travelling from Australia's highest to lowest point first arose during a conversation at a Rover meeting as a bit of joke. But when some of the Crew remarked at how cool it would be, I didn't hesitate in starting to

plan. That was three years before I embarked on my journey.

Slowly but surely a route began to develop, hiking the first part, kayaking along the Murray and cycling through South Australia to reach my destination, Lake Eyre. This was a solo expedition, so I had to make sure that I was extra cautious when it came to safety, ensuring I was adequately prepared for all eventualities. I had a lot of experience hiking and kayaking which was built on through my involvement in Scouting, but cycle touring was something that was new to me and it passed through the most remote part of my trip. Over this period of three years I put together all the equipment, undertook risk assessments, familiarised myself with emergency procedures and ensured I had all the

knowledge for an undertaking of this scale. As you might imagine, some of my biggest concerns were fire and the availability of water.

After concluding a traineeship at the CSIRO and Botanic Gardens in Canberra, I packed my bag and headed off for Kosciusko. I have to admit the first day was a little nerving, I have never been on an expedition of this scale, but I quickly found my rhythm and reminded myself it is no different to anything I have done in the past, just a bit longer.

The whole trip took me six months to complete and covered a total distance of approximately 2700kms of which 400kms was hiking, 1300kms kayaking and 1000kms of cycling. Each mode of transport had its unique advantages. Being on foot allows you to fully immerse yourself in the bush, and stop when and whenever you want. This was often for me, exploring the plant life around me and taking plenty of photos of the landscapes. The kayaking was much less draining than hiking, considering that I was going with the flow of the river (although at times it seemed like there was no current at all) and it gave me a lot of opportunity to drift and ponder. I did find at times I was restricted to the Murray and didn't get the opportunity to check out its surrounds, so I made sure to pull into towns whenever I could. It is amazing the distance you can cover on a



Day 1: Mt Kosciusko



Six highlights

The question I am asked all the time is 'What was your favourite location?'. Being away for so long it is so hard to narrow it down to one, so instead I have six.

The High Country

This is where my expedition began. There is something special about this place, standing on the top of Australia and looking out to the rolling mountains in the distance that just seem to go on for ever. Crossing crystal clear streams and absorbing myself in the local flora. This region is home to some of the smallest and tallest plants Australia has to offer, a range of bryophytes (mosses and related plants) and eucalyptus trees.

Burrowa-Pine Mountain National Park

Being a bit of a plant nerd, it is no surprise that many of my favourite places are influenced by the vegetation of an area. Burrowa-Pine Mountain National Park was quite unique. Every ascent or drop into a saddle welcomed me with a range of different species. The western slopes had a bushfire a few years before, so it was nice to observe the regeneration that I had learnt about in my studies.

The Narrows and Barmah Lakes

This is a narrow section of the Murray and the current increases, which makes it really fun zig-zagging between all the

snags. This then opens into the Barmah Lakes, large expanses of shallow water that is a haven for birds. I saw everything from Pelicans to Kingfishers to a pair of Emus that were feeding knee deep in water. However, it wasn't all a positive experience as there was also evidence of environmental disasters such as the population explosion of introduced carp and land degradation due to the lack of flooding.

Ned's Corner

This is a large station in north-west Victoria that is managed by Trust for Nature. I was fortunate to be able to attend a workshop they were running and learn about techniques that private land holders can use to improve the quality of their land. The section of river was also spectacular, with large red cliffs and the river is incredibly wide in places.

Chowilla and Dangali Wilderness Area

This is where I first started on the bike and I threw myself in the deep end. Sand dunes for as long as the eye could see. It is here that I took on some advice from someone I met earlier in the trip 'It's called a push bike for a reason - when the going gets tough, get off and push.' The Mallee is a vegetation group I had learnt a lot about through university, but it was nice to be able to observe it in a semi-arid environment.

The Flinders Ranges

The Flinders Ranges are so vastly different from anything else I had passed through. Here I had a bit of a break managing to fit in a couple of day hikes. I have a habit of talking to people on the trail and on one of these days I think I may have been mistaken for a ranger as one individual fired all these questions at me. Fortunately I had done my research on the region and was able to answer all of them. To make the most of the Flinders Ranges and Lake Eyre while it was in flood, I did a fly over. I have never felt so small, seeing the land just go on forever.



bike. I was averaging about 60kms a day on gravel tracks.

I took as many back roads as I could to limit the number of cars and road trains I was sharing the road with. Safety always being a priority. Cycling in the desert during winter means you wake up with very fresh mornings (-5°C) but would always have beautiful sunny days of about 25°C. *Cont. on page 20*





Sunset just past Wentworth.



Flinders Ranges from the air.

Food and water

For food I had to be self sufficient, carrying enough on me to get between towns where I would do a big restock. This did mean at times my pack was quite heavy, but by the end of the week it would be lighter again. Water was collected from streams and when I was kayaking on the Murray, it was collected from the Murray itself. I would always purify my water twice, firstly using a UV steripen and then with tablets. I didn't want to take any chances. The exception was when I was cycling through the desert where places to restock and refill were too far apart. I was fortunate to have my grandparents being my support vehicle and I would meet them at designated locations every four to five days where I would pick up food and water.

My moto for this trip as been: 'Time, distance and difficulty are all just perceived barriers... If you are willing to commit, anything is possible.'

So get planning, go out and explore!

Kent Bennett is a member of the Everest Le Page Rover Crew at 1st Beaumaris Sea Scouts.



Burrowa - Pine Mountain National Park.

I am frequently asked: On such a long solo trip, did you ever get bored or lonely?

You can never be bored in the bush. There is always so much going on, so much around you. Sometimes you look at things up close and other times step back and see the whole picture. I am so intrigued by the natural sciences that I was always interested while on my trip. At times you would go a week without seeing anybody else, but I was comfortable with my own company and expected this. However, travelling solo also gave me some incredible opportunities; people were more inclined to invite me over to share a campfire with them or talk at the camp kitchen in the caravan parks, and I was inclined to reciprocate.

A large steer blocking the rail trail that I was walking on. Without a doubt the scariest animal we have in Australia.



Everyone I met was friendly and eager to hear about what I was up to and the opportunities I had were incredible. I was invited to attend meetings by environmental action groups, invited to dinner by a celebrity chef, paddled with an adventurer who has summited the highest peaks on six continents and rowed the Atlantic, been given tours of timber mills and land used for conservation. It was fantastic talking to farmers and getting their perspective on environmental issues and seeing the power of volunteers in reviving a 100-year-old bakery in the middle of the desert. It was incredible how my story would sometimes travel ahead of me and at times I was expected at certain towns, with people looking forward to hearing more about my adventure.

Now I don't expect many people to be able to do a trip like this, but I hope that I have inspired some to experience outdoor recreation and what the Australian bush has to offer.



The high country.