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Adventure Rallye.
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Red Centre Adventure *Rallye*

Rocks, deep bulldust, heat, the Finke track and long, high-speed blasting through Australia's red centre. The Red Centre Adventure Rallye had it all.



Main: Adelaide's Brad Teagle and Italy's Lukas Pfister wheelied everywhere, all the time, side-by-side whenever there was room. Why? "It's fun!" said a smiling Lukas.

Left: Riding through rocks and deep sand offered rewards like this oasis.

Below: The happy crew.



There seems to be a big market in adventure rides built around loamy dirt roads, heartbreaking scenery and an eye on rider comfort. There's a good reason for that. It's a fantastic way to spend a few days and a fabulous way to see some hard-to-access parts of the Land Girt By Sea.

But Outback Motorcycle Adventures in Alice Springs went a different way. Based in Alice Springs under the care of Damian 'Damo' McGrath and Michael 'Vroomy' Vroom, the guys had thousands of kilometres of hard-to-access, heartbreaking scenery, but the pair thought an event where the emphasis was more on the riding than the comfort might be a starter.

They were right.

The Rallye

For the first running of the Red Centre Adventure Rallye entries were capped at 20. Vroomy rode lead on a rally-kitted 690, and Damo – possibly in need of a mental-health assessment – took care of sweeping on a KTM1190.

Those bikes would make a punter think the course wasn't set out to be too tough, but that's a relative measure. What might be easy for some might be tough for others.

There were a couple of particularly appealing features of this particular ride.

The first was each day looping from, and back to, Alice Springs. That allowed riders to set up a base and carry very little luggage on the bikes. Another was the

variety of terrain available within a day's ride of Alice, and of course, there was all the mystique and spirituality of the incredible sights in the Dreamtime region. Ridges of hard-edged stone, thousands of years in the aging, thrust up through the primordial ground, desert horizons show the curvature of the earth, night skies are velvet black and sprinkled with the twinkling celestial lights of millennia and the very soul of Australia can be felt in every grain of blood-red dust.

Due to the heady, jet-setting lifestyle of the motorcycle magazine world, *Adventure Rider Magazine* lobbed into Alice to join the Red Centre Rallye on its third day. The first two days had gone well with few problems. One rider had hit a ►



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kangaroo and a couple of other riders had opted for a day's rest as we arrived, so it was a happy crew of 15 or so who headed out into the surprisingly chilly Alice Springs morning. The day was expected to be around 320km and to include what the organisers assured everyone was 'a bit of everything'.

Due to the previous day running a little longer than expected riders left town early so everyone could be back by the forecast '4.00pm or so'.

Ha. Like that was ever going to happen.

Ride hard

Outback Motorcycle Adventures has a string of CRF450s available as hire bikes. The entire fleet was hired out for this inaugural running and joined by a couple of KTMs, a DRZ400, and an astonishing 1982 XL500.

Yes. An air-cooled, drum-braked, kick-started, silver-and-red blast from the past, ridden by Mt Gambier mechanic Murray Saunders. As you work your way through this story just remember that bike and rider were in the thick of things and at the front of the field the whole way.

Adventure Rider Magazine started the ride on one of the CRF450s and it was

spectacularly well-suited to the terrain. The bikes, fitted with Safari Tanks, were light, nimble, had plenty of power and were incredibly good fun to ride. On the final day we were lucky enough to get some time on a CRF250 Rallye, and it was a hoot! Especially as the temperature nudged into the high 20s and the rocks got bigger and the hills steeper. We had a quiet chuckle to our sweaty selves when the bikes were being manhandled down rocky descents. The 250 weighed next to nothing and was super comfortable.

But that was later. Things started with a 450 enduro bike, the throttle wide open and the red dirt flying.

Gut feeling

Heading off into the crisp, sunny, desert morning the group made its way out of town and hit the dust. Some of the dust was red, some of it was white, but there was plenty of it. If you're going to ride in the centre of Australia, you're going to have to deal with dust and that's all there is to that. Thanks to the course being supplied as GPX files and formatted for several phone apps, riders could spread out and hoon or cruise as they chose.

Lunch was scheduled for around the middle of the day, and the highlights mentioned at the briefing included the Rock Garden, a cutting of some variety, and 'a hill with a bit of a washout up the guts'. ►



Top: Out of town and into the sand.

Right: Mark Delatour and Dee Kiernan from Taupo, New Zealand, made the whole course look easy.

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As the day progressed and the amazing expanse of the desert floated by, the pace settled and everything moved along nicely. Some roosted and rorted and rode at insane speeds, railing dust berms in turns and running the long, red-dust straights pinned in top. The 130kph speed limit of the Northern Territory was clearly much appreciated by the more proficient riders. *Adventure Rider Magazine*, of course, maintained a high level of dignity and wobbled along following ruts and bouncing off hidden rocks while trying to look everywhere at once so as not to miss any of the incredible setting.

It was a very pleasant morning's ride no matter how fast a rider chose to travel.

Hang on a sec...

The 'bit of hill' turned out to be no real challenge to anyone, and the cutting, while spectacular, didn't stop anyone either. But the Rock Garden was an absolute howler.

The obstacle was probably only a couple of hundred metres long, but it

accounted for quite a few riders. Mostly it was due to a missed footing when a bike had a wheel perched up on a sharpish boulder, and you can believe us when we say there were plenty of those.

The smaller bikes revved, boofed and clanked their way through with all hands chipping in to help each other, and eventually almost all were through. Jackets, gloves and helmets had been flung into the surrounding scenery and

riders were gasping for breath in the overheated desert air.

Then someone pointed out the 1190 was still to come.

"Goody!" said no-one.

But Damo and Vroomy had ridden the course on big bikes and knew what was needed. With a careful choice of line and a little watchful care the big KTM was walked through the danger area. In fact, it went through with less drama than ►



Above: Lunch in the Finke River Gorge was a welcome break after a fair run through the sand to get there.

Right: The Rock Garden was only short, but it caught out quite a few very experienced riders.

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some of the smaller bikes which had come unstuck with riders on board.

It was definitely a character-building section, and plenty was muttered quietly about the two characters who'd included it.

Onward

After the Rock Garden just about anything was going to seem easy, and the trail leading away from the area was a tight, sandy goat track with lots of rocks here and there to keep everyone

Above: Trying for race speed on the Finke Desert Race track whoops.

Below: The tough sections were only short, but they made sure riders were concentrating.

Below right: There's a perception the terrain around Alice Springs is dead flat. With local knowledge the Rallye covered plenty of ups and downs.



honest. The 450s carved through, riders and bikes both loving the air moving across overheated surfaces, making their way to Boggy Hole, a small body of water which looked like it belonged on a tourist brochure. From there it was a short, sandy blast through the scrub to lunch in the Finke Gorge National Park, served from under the shade of a gazebo and offering lots of cold drinks, snacks, serious tucker for those who wanted it, and, best of all, a chance to recover from what had been a solid morning's riding.

The day had got away a bit by this stage, and it was obvious the crew wasn't going to be back in Alice by 4.00pm, but nobody seemed too worried. The first two days had finished late as well, but with such exceptional riding, and the late sunsets in the desert, that suited everyone just fine.

At around 6.00pm a tired bunch parked the bikes at Desert Edge Motorcycles – home of Outback Motorcycle Adventures – cracked open the cooler of cold drinks supplied by the organisers, and sat back to talk their way back through what had been a tough, but very satisfying, day.

Go easy

After a challenging third day Damo and Vroomy had sensibly programmed in a much less demanding course for the fourth day. It was forecast to be warmer as well, so everyone's eyes lit up when the briefing covered fast, flowing, freshly graded 4WD roads, a pub (which turned out to be an historical site, not an actual working pub), and home-made lasagna for lunch.

The route also included Ruby Gap and riding through a couple of valleys which pretty much set the standard for outback majesty. The views across the low hills and deep, craggy rock walls were incredible.

This day did include a fair swag of deep-sand, and it was interesting to see how well everyone coped. The group was made up of mostly experienced and capable riders, and it showed. Anyone who wasn't comfortable at the thought of the terrain was offered optional cut-outs and escorted around via roads or easy trails, but very few did. Most seemed glad of the chance to cut their chops in conditions and terrain not too many get to see.



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A huge bonus of the fourth day was a stop at Hale River Homestead at Old Ambalindum station. It was an unexpected opportunity for a morning scone or chunk of rocky road in the middle of the outback, and, best of all, it had coffee.

Life was good on the fourth day.

Above: Boggy Hole on the Finke River. One of the few permanent waterholes in the outback. It has several unique species of fish.

Below: Clowning at Ewaninga Siding on the Finke track.

The deep-sand track out to Ruby Gap was a hoot and the home-made lasagna fulfilled the briefing promise – although finding the support vehicle proved an adventure in itself.

Still, it appeared eventually, and once again the cold drinks and food were consumed amid laughter as everyone realised they now wouldn't run out fuel (refuels from the support truck were part of each lunch stop), and as the desert glowed orange in the fading sunlight a hard-worked crew made its way back to Desert Edge Motorcycles to close out another big, 340km day.

Cruise to the finish

The final day was a mere 180km or so, and a late start allowed weary riders a sleep in. The idea was to run several trails around the town itself and it was expected to be a cruisy sort of day.

Well...that's the way it seemed at briefing.

Somehow, a few snotty hills found their way into the first section for the morning, and that took some more teamwork to get sorted, and then a deep-sand 4WD track out to Emily Gap had everyone working hard. Fatigue had to be considered by this stage and quite a few bikes speared off the track into the scrubby grass when caught by the sand ruts. It was hot too, and that took its toll.

Still, everyone was soon at the gap and wandering up to see the aboriginal art which decorated the towering rock faces. We can't show you the paintings because there was a sign requesting they not be photographed. They were interesting, though.

From Emily Gap, some riders still foolishly believing this was to be an easy end to a great week, the crew headed through the sand to meet another fast, open road for a session of WFO fun through to meet the Finke Desert Race track.

This was a big highlight of the ride.

Everyone knows about the Finke Desert Race, and here was a chance to ride ►



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some of the track and just see what the riders have to deal with each June long weekend. The track itself runs alongside the old Ghan railway, and for a great deal of it, a dirt road known as the Finke Service Track.

Some riders were clearly right at home carving through the deep, red bulldust, throttles open and holding impressive speed. Some were shocked at the severity of the terrain on the track and opted to ride the service track instead – which was no picnic either, just quietly.

But all eventually ended up at Ewaninga Rail Siding, a series of concrete dongas for the Ghan Railway service crews many years ago. The siding is now abandoned

and has been vandalised, but is still a great marker of central-Australian history.

Whoops

From Ewaninga Vroomy and Damo promised some 'real' red bulldust and whoops. They led everyone back onto the Finke track and for probably 10km or so riders got to flail and flap their way across some serious Finke whoopage, wondering how Toby Price could possibly hold the speeds seen in the Youtube videos.

It was incredible.

A hard-packed road ran alongside for anyone who didn't want to tackle the whoops, and after a little clowning and some laughs it was time to head for lunch.

was a cruncher, and the descent itself a ball-tearer. Where the Rock Garden had at least been fairly level, the short, boulder-strewn drop meant there was no stopping to catch a breath. Once committed bike and rider had to make the run, and that was all there was too it.

The trail to the top of the descent was a tad gnarly and caught out a few, and that had heart rates high for arrival at what was really a very short drop. But the rocks made sure everyone was focused, and again, teamwork carried the day.

There were quite a few deflated, tired and beat up riders by the time that trail and obstacle were dealt with, that's for sure.

Above: If you're going to ride the outback you have to be prepared for dust.

Below: Damo's 1190 must've been a handful in some of the rough going, but the Alice Springs resident seemed to cope well on the big bike.

Below right: There's some big-name landmarks on the ride.

Rock stars

There was mention of 'a couple of rocky descents', and seeing it was the final day everyone was fairly sure they'd be nothing much.

It was the last day, right? Only 180km and bound to be easy?

The rocky track leading to the descent

Next year

Of all the amazing sites this ride had covered, and all the fantastic, challenging terrain which had been conquered, lunch on the final day still marked an incredible high point.

High on a narrow ridge overlooking the surrounding desert, with Pine Gap and ▶



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the Alice Springs airport in the far distance, riders on the Red Centre Adventure Rallye were treated to what must be a world-class, once-in-lifetime, 360-degree view of Australia's heart.

Above: The view from lunch on the final day.

Below: The last day was easier, naturally. There were still plenty of rocks, though.

Below right: Murray Saunders from Mt Gambier had done a rebuild on his 1982 XL500 and thought he'd see how it went. It went awesome!

In the blazing sun, and against a deep-blue sky, the wonder of the outback was laid bare in every direction. It was an unforgettable experience, even alongside all the unforgettable sights the ride had already revealed. And it would've been a fitting way to close out the ride.

But that wasn't how it happened.

Oh no. There was lots more riding to be done, and it was mostly a high-speed blast along sandy trails and riverbeds to wind up, beat but elated, back at Outback Motorcycle Adventure headquarters.

The cold drinks flowed, the stories were shared, and that glow that only comes from completing a tough and memorable ride shone from everyone.

The farewell dinner was a very pleasant and enjoyable way to swap a few more stories, relive some high points and share phone numbers and addresses.

The Red Centre Adventure Rallye is scheduled to run again in 2019, and *Adventure Rider Magazine* can't recommend it highly enough.

Get there if you can.

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Outback Motorcycle Adventures

For more info on the Red Centre Adventure Rallye and other rides Outback Motorcycle Adventures has planned, log on to www.outbackmotorcycleadventures.com.au

