



# Wild ride

'Down Under' tour presents its challenges

By John Dinsmore

**I** have the good fortune to travel for work. One of those destinations is Sydney and there is usually one trip per year that takes me there.

I lived in Australia in the late 1990s, so I am familiar with the country. However I was not able to ride there during that time as I had not yet returned to the world of motorcycles. It's only since I have been back in Canada that the bike bug bit hard enough to get me off the couch and back onto the unforgiving seat of an off-road steed.

So, on a recent trip to Sydney I decided to see if there was a two-day dirt bike trip that I could fit in on a weekend. Having picked up several Aussie motorcycle magazines on previous trips, I found Sunny Corner Trail Tours based in Wallerawang, a small town about 150km northwest of Sydney, near Lithgow and just beyond the Blue Mountains.

I contacted Sunny Corner Tours trail boss Geoff Henning, who informed me that while they did not have any tours available for the dates I would be there, he was willing to put together a ride for me anyway. A few days later Geoff emailed to say the trip

was a go and that he and several 'mates' would be along for the ride.

Originally we started with six (all partners of Sunny Corner Trail Tours), but the ride group quickly grew to include a local Yamaha/Sherco dealer, a photographer for a motorcycle magazine and a few others. In addition, Geoff had arranged a 30-minute helicopter flight over the Capertee Valley. The valley is second only to the Grand Canyon in size and the scenery was supposed to be magnificent, so who could turn that down?

Geoff and his wife Tracey had business (an AC/DC concert!) in Sydney and were able to pick me up from my hotel and drive me out to 'Wang', as it is affectionately known by the locals. We arrived at the Top Pub and I arranged my room. After a good meal and a few introductions, it was time to head off to bed to get some rest.

Saturday morning I was picked up by Coxy (Matt Cox) and we drove to Geoff and Tracey's home about five minutes outside of town, which would be the start point for our trip.

It was good to see we had a support vehicle for all our gear, extra fuel, swags (heavy

duty sleeping bags), tools and so on. I jumped aboard my bike for the trip – an '05 Suzuki DR-Z400 that had apparently been 'borrowed' from a friend who was on holiday, but I was assured it was fine and familiarized myself with the controls.

The Sunny Corner Trail Tours team consisted of Geoff, Macca (Paul MacLachlan), Rabs (Mick Grant), Eddie (The Desert Racer) Lamborn, General (Kevin Burrows), Swaney (Richard Swane – the Narromine Goat Herder), Coxy (Matt Cox) and Mencho (Joe Menchin).

All fueled up, we kicked out from Geoff's house and travelled through the back gate directly into the rolling foothills along single-track trails. We had a lead rider (Mick) and a sweep rider (Macca) and were using the corner-man system, so everyone got to take part. The trail led steadily through the gum trees and all was well until the first hill. Now, it could have been the fact that I hadn't been on a bike for several months, or that the bike was unfamiliar, but I had a hard time with this hill and had to walk up most of it. Thanks to Mick and Macca, I eventually made it up and, after a rest, we continued.

I started to feel more comfortable and we

continued on through Grey Rocks track to some of the prettiest rainforest sections I have ever seen. It was here that I began to think this was going to be a challenging ride, as we were going through some rough terrain with very steep downhill sections. The terrain until this point had been pretty rocky, but there was moist soil and good traction.

At the bottom of a very steep hill we wound our way through ferns almost as big as we were and eventually made it to the

smoko (rest break) stop at Lyre Bird Camp.

After smoko we rode via single and twin-track trail through the purely breathtaking Wolgan Valley escarpments to lunch at Cullen Bullen pub. There we met the support vehicle again, topped up the Camelbaks and after a great feed headed on towards Capertee. It was at this stage that things went slightly sideways.

Just after leaving the pub, we travelled on tar road for around two kilometres and turned onto a wide trail which would take

us around to Capertee. Another two kilometres down this trail, disaster struck when Swaney – while test-riding Macca's KTM 450 – grabbed a handful of brake to avoid a puddle (or a goat, but this is unconfirmed) and crashed hard enough to dislocate and break his ankle and ruin a good helmet and riding jersey. It was all hands on deck and we managed to get Swaney comfortable while we waited for the ambulance and support crew.

After all was taken care of with Swaney, we realized we had little time to make it to Capertee and my helicopter ride. So Geoff, Max (my personal paparazzi) and I headed off via pavement while the rest went via dirt to Capertee. We arrived just in time for lift-off and flew over the valley to view spectacular rock formations, caves and scenery. This was a welcome diversion from the previous couple of hours and well worth the time taken from the bike ride.

After a refuel and refresh, we headed off to Turon Gates and the Turon River Valley. The route we took was mostly twin-track and dirt road but the valley was incredible with endless sweeping turns, beautiful scenery and treacherous drop offs.

It was easy to get distracted by the scenery and there were more than a couple of 'oh sh\*t' moments when we were caught out looking at the views instead of watching our speed and where we were headed.

After a short photo stop and a jaunt in the river, we cruised along more sweeping twin-tracks before arriving at our stop for the night, the Old Sofala Gaol (Jail) in the gold mining town of Sofala.

Sofala was established in 1851 as a gold mining settlement and at the peak of the gold rush there were over 51 pubs, general stores, hotels, butchers and other businesses. Today it's a beautiful country village with many examples of its past in the remains of abandoned mines, miners' cottages and period buildings. The Old Sofala Gaol is a restaurant and museum and the history of the town and area can be seen in the many artifacts, photographs and newspaper clippings throughout the restored jail house.

Our accommodation was a large manager's cabin, which was basic but very comfortable. Due to the size of the group, many stayed outside in swags, so after a meal at the local restaurant, Cafe Sofala, and a cou-



Mick (Mick Grant) and Macca (Paul MacLaughlin) crossing the Turon River in Turon National Park, New South Wales.



Steeper than it looks - just one of the many serious hillclimbs throughout the Grey Rocks tracks.



The crew at a vista overlooking the Blue Mountains and Capertee Valley.

PHOTO BY MAX SULLIVAN



Dave, one of the 'Sherco' team at Longswamp near Lyre Bird Camp.

PHOTO BY MAX SULLIVAN

ple of refreshments at the local pub, it was off to bed to rest for day two.

After a full breakfast at the Gaol, we refuelled and set off toward Mount Horrible over more twin-track and gravel roads. This road must have been made with marbles, as we all had a difficult time maintaining speed through the corners at the risk of sliding out. Along this route we encountered flocks of cockatoos, lorikeets, eagles, galahs and a couple of kangaroo as we wound through Winburndale and into the

Sunny Corner state forest.

The first area we went through was called Dark Corner as it was on the northern side of the forest and received considerably less sun than the other side. We stopped at a look-out which gave us a beautiful view over the valley to Bathurst and the famous Mt Panorama race circuit. This trail was primarily single track and was very rocky and loose, which kicked up quite a bit of dust. At one point we were stopped to have a rest when Macca pointed

over the edge of the road and motioned to get going – down some of the steepest hill sections I have ever ridden to a valley at the bottom.

Next came more single track as we emerged into Sunny Corner. This area offered wide twin-track, gravel logging roads, pine forest single-track and loose rocky sections. It was here that we followed some of the trail that was being laid out for the Australian Four Day Enduro (with Macca and Mick being responsible for this section) and some of the steepest hills yet encountered.

Then, while following three of the lead riders, they seemed to disappear over the edge of a cliff! I kept going a short distance and decided I was not going down that! All I could see was the helmet of the rider in front – it was that steep! I waited and was motioned by the sweep rider to follow another path – almost as steep but passable. We met up with the lead riders a few minutes later and they confirmed that it was near vertical and we shouldn't have gone that way. No kidding!

We made it to lunch at Yetholme, and then back through winding twin track, logging roads and single track to Golden Grove near Portland. At this point there was about another hour of hard trail to go and I decided to break off with two others and head back to Wallerawang (about 10 minutes away). I was too beat from the travel, unfamiliar bike and the lack of riding to go through another hour of single-track and the inevitable hill that I know Macca was planning to throw in. Eventually we all met back at Geoff and Tracey's house.

What a difference from when we left. All the bikes were filthy, we were filthy and thoroughly 'rooted' but with big wide smiles and stories to tell. We received an update on Swaney and it was confirmed that the ankle was being operated on that afternoon and he wouldn't be riding any time soon. But it could have been worse and thankfully there were no other casualties on the trip.

The ride was very well organized and the route gave all participants a real feel for the varied terrain and breathtaking scenery of the area. Hats off to Sunny Corner Trail Tours (check them out at [www.sunny-cornertrailtours.com.au](http://www.sunny-cornertrailtours.com.au)) for an unforgettable experience and to my fellow riders for their friendship and humour. **IM**