

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE

17th Sep – 3rd Oct 2012

“You are absolutely bloody crazy” were Gav’s words when I told him in 2006 that I wanted to ride across the Simpson Desert on a push bike.

At Dalhousie Springs our group gathered – red car stickers identified riders and introductions and bike inspections went on into the night.

The Desert

The Fat Bikes arrived into the Desert this year and there were long discussions of who would rule. Standard bikes v Fat Bikes.

Let the race begin

From Purni Bore at 5.30 am the first convoy left and then at 6.00 am, just on sunup, a quiet voice said “Go” and we rolled onto the sand. Straight onto it, no warmup, just sand. Early in Day 1 the pattern of the Desert was evident to me. Dune after dune after dune of varying heights, separated by swales of varying distances.

Peddle, peddle, peddle, Crank up the speed and attack the dune, only to time and again, come to a complete standstill; Off the bike and push; And at the top, throw the leg back over, and Yahoo, speed down the dune holding my line. And then repeat it over and over again – 700 times across the Desert dunes.

We’d taken my back brake off, so if my speed downhill got too great, I’d sit back and heavy on my seat to kerb my pace. However, I noted speeds of 40kph downhill throughout the week. So much fun!

10 hours exactly was my ride time on Day 1 (71km in the morning: 5 hours 55 min & 49km in the afternoon: 4 hours & 5 mins). I knew the pattern of riding the Desert and I pushed on, ever present in my mind, the goal I had set myself: to start every stage!



Pre race breakfast

As the week progressed I came to recognize the changes in the vegetation and the noises of the Desert. A particular green bush by the track ahead in the distance meant deeper sand and harder riding. A white tinge in the colour of the track meant hard pack and respite for the legs OR the opportunity to ride in a high gear and stand up and give my butt a rest.

And the presence of a beautiful, little ground bush with delicate purple flowers encouraged me to relax my concentration for a moment. The yellow wattles of the Desert afforded me a pleasant aroma as I rode past.

In contrast though was the stench of a dead camel on the track. A pile of huge bones and a carcass ravaged by dingos, hawks, flies and ants.

Flies!! In your eyes, up your nose and in your ears. They would follow me until my annoyance would get the better of me and I would brave riding the sand single-handed and swat madly at the horrid little critters.

I think it was Day 2 – over yet another sand dune and there are 2 vehicles pulled up on the side of the ride. A Merv Hughes look alike, bare chested runs along the side of the track with me, yelling loudly and encouraging me to go faster.

Telling me I'm awesome. Am I hallucinating I think. Am I really in the Tour de France being chased by a supporter. I laughed out loud.

As I pushed by bike over yet another sand dune, in front of me and stretching, I guessed, 20 kms to the south was a salt lake.

I let out a yelp of excitement and lifted my weary leg over the x-bar, cleared my cleat of sand and pushed off down the dune onto the firm track.

Winding my bike up to 25kph with a tail wind, I was in my element; pushing hard and having a "fat" time! And then, to my utter joy, I sighted a Dingo up on the bank, cautiously watching my approach. We eyed each other as I sped past and I thought how lucky I was. To be capable enough, fit enough and mentally tough enough to take on such a demanding ride.

My stretch of fun was soon over though and after a compulsory water stop, I turned north and on a narrow track with deep sand cover I rode at a mere 7kph into a strong northerly blowing straight down the track. It was 42deg that day and my mood dropped. I slogged on, determined to stay in front of the Sweep and finish the stage. On and on I pushed, extremely tired, hot, sweaty and covered in sand from a few falls.

I did finish that stage! Rounding a corner I saw Gav standing on a dune – he was so excited for me – Day 3 morning stage – Tick!!!! As he ran alongside me excitedly asking me how I was, and what I wanted for lunch, I firmly told him "I didn't want to talk!" Cruel at the time, but funny in hindsight.

I only managed 10kms that afternoon before I wisely elected to drop my bike in the middle of the track and sit under a tree and wait for the convoy to come along and pick me up.



Photo taken in 2010



This decision cost me a less than 75% finish and therefore not eligible for a shining gold trophy on presentation night, however feeling faint whilst riding a bike in 42deg heat, and miles from anyone and anywhere was the sensible decision at the time. And I'm glad I made it!

At Dusk each day, all riders, support crew and volunteers gather around for the evening briefing.

Information on the following day's ride and track was shared. Groans from riders when told the dunes were getting bigger as we headed east.

Sighs of relief, when told that a stage had been shortened.

And yet another groan, when informed there would be an extra stage to compensate. A humorous end to the day was led by Nurse Donna. Everyone was a target for a "fine" with all money collected going to the RFDS. Any silly comment on the UHF was fineable. Dropping or breaking gear was fineable. No silly act was missed. Laughter was long and loud in the Desert.

It seems the bikes fared better than the cars.
Roof racks shifted and ripped out of gutterings.
Awnings bounced and broke from roof tops.
Rear doors blown backwards on their hinges by a sand storm, causing costly repair jobs;
Bikes being thrown from racks, without the knowledge of the driver, and found by the following vehicle.
Aerials and desert flags shaking loose and falling apart.

I had expected the heat, the muscle soreness, the sore butt, the fatigue and the aching hands, but I hadn't expected a sore tongue!!

Drink, drink, drink I DID, especially after getting a stern look from the Doctor at the end of Day 1 when I'd dropped 2 kgs.

I made it a pattern to drink at the top of every dune, every 15 mins, every kilometer and at any other time that I thought about it and I feverishly sucked 6 lts of water per day through my bladder tube.

To the point that I developed a row of small ulcers along the tip of my tongue.

Panic stations – I can't suck – it hurts too much!

Thankfully we had a second bladder with a different shaped nozzle which eased my poor tongue.

Day 5 consisted of 2 stages: 47km & 33kms

Dune, swale, dune, swale.

Ride, push, ride, push, on and on. Counting the kilometers.

Praying that over the next dune I'd see a kilometer marker.

The Dunes were getting bigger and bigger AND then, there in front of us, at about the 36km mark was the famous Big Red dune.

I hear our support crews had great fun getting over Big Red, but we riders swung south to Little Red. I had ridden this stage with Adam on a fat bike. He drafting off me on the hard pack and me drafting off him in the sand.

We slogged up Little Red needing numerous stops and at the top had a view of Lake Nappanerica and our lunch stop. Wow – water, a lake, freshness! I contemplated ditching the bike and wading into the murky water to drink freely – not from a nozzle!



With the convoy regrouped and tyres pumped up, the remaining 15 riders headed east, riding as a pack to the end of the final stage at the Birdsville Pub.

Excitement grew, chatter got louder and some riders took time to reflect on why they'd attempted the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge.

For me: When I reached Birdsville I just wanted to hug my husband and to thank him for helping me achieve and satisfy a 15 year dream.

I felt little elation at the time, but put it down to sheer tiredness.

The realization of my epic adventure is now sinking in and I'm feeling very proud of myself and oh so tired!

First day back at work and it is evident how tired I am – how does Quickbooks work – what does 1+2 equal? Leaving the office on an errand, I find myself clutching my Stapler Remover – wasn't I needing my Sunglasses? Hilarious!

Susie (rider #13)

