



Entering the Nullarbor National Park, South Australia



Shibuya Scramble Crossing, Tokyo Metropolis, Japan

world is to last it and not be smashed by it." That was my trigger to get going on the difficult days.

From Pokhara in Nepal I continued to Kathmandu, the fastest-growing city in Asia. Then I returned to India, crossing beautiful Bihar. After many days I reached Kolkata, where I flew to Bangkok and started my trek across South-East Asia.

ACROSS SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Small roads took me through the jungly terrain of northern Laos, where trees and high mountains met the Chinese border. Guesthouses everywhere cost £8 a night. Food was cheap and excellent: Khao jee pâté sandwiches, spread with thick pork liver pâté, stuffed with Lao sausage, sliced papaya, carrots, shallots, cucumber, cilantro and chili sauce. Laos, with her gentleness and smiles, is one of the finest countries in the world.

I ached now and my back was bent. My legs were fine but the bones in my neck hurt. I had lost a sixth of my bodyweight and was lighter than I'd been for 48 years. I rode faster while using less power, pedalling quickly across continents with plenty of time to think.

At one junction I paused at the countdown click of a set of stop lights. I wondered for a minute whether I was on this journey around the world because it was meant to be. As the lights changed, a strange sense of paranoia gave way to a grin. I rode on, heading for the border with Vietnam.

Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore came and went. It's a deep-breath feeling, taking in the fact that in just a few days you can cycle the width of a country.

Then suddenly I was in Western Australia, fettling my bike in Perth for the next leg.

“At 12,000ft the road took on the topography of a stream bed. It was cut out of a cliff face, with a 500ft sheer drop”

AUSTRALIA IN 48°C HEAT

Much of Australia's interior feels like it hasn't had time to change. Farmers in the Bush move, as author Don Watson says, “with the stiff-backed, stiff-buttocked gait” of men on the range everywhere. They scatter the flies from their backs with their hats, only to “let the wire-screen door slap behind them on its rat-tail spring”. It was 2,400 miles to Sydney.

Towns on the Eyre Highway were façades of a few stores, reduced down to the bare minimum of what a small town needs: Australia Post, a Mechanics' Institute; a library with free internet. I stocked up with simple provisions of water, potatoes, canned stew and bread, ready for camping every night on the edge the outback. I charged my batteries in cafés as I drank flat whites, sheltering from the midsummer desert heat that roasted me alive.

Café society plays a cohesive part in any local community, especially for travellers. In South Australia small towns are no bigger than a microdot on a map, yet bikers and motorists travel vast distances for hot drinks accompanied by a pastry in what for a stranger looks like a wilderness.

Those who used to travel across this landscape, meanwhile, seemed displaced. I saw

Aboriginal Australians

in the city pushing trolleys loaded with squashed cans and dirty blankets.

More days passed, then weeks. I was riding at least 90 miles each day, sometimes over 180 after entering the lush lands of Victoria. It was a marked transition. From desert heat, I was immersed in garden scents and horizons of wheat.

THE UNITED STATES – THEN HOME

Another flight, this time from Japan to the west coast of America. Soon I was cycling across Los Angeles. From space it looked like a scab but at ground level this matrix of suburbia was not untidy, and drivers passed me with courtesy.

During a battery-charging stop further on, I got chatting with one American who absently patted his hip – where there was the shape of a holster. He said: “I mean, we in the middle of the country, we have our crazy folk but we keep them hidden in the house so no one can see 'em, but out there they jus' as gone an' roam the streets.”

Looking away, he shook his big head. In politically polarised America, people talk in code, trying to figure out which part of the debate you're supporting. On the road here people do talk to passing travellers, but it seems only outliers walk or cycle.

As I powered along Highway 10 out of California, I was surprised by the spring snows along the Mogollon Rim, north of Payson. Over the following weeks, I crossed the Bible Belt of southern America to the east coast, then flew to Portugal.

The last leg from Lisbon to Amsterdam was a final push in the rain.

We long-distance travellers tread the world like ghosts. Another ride in the bag. A simple journey anyone can do. ●



At the end on Westminster Bridge, London