

# IN THE BEGINNING

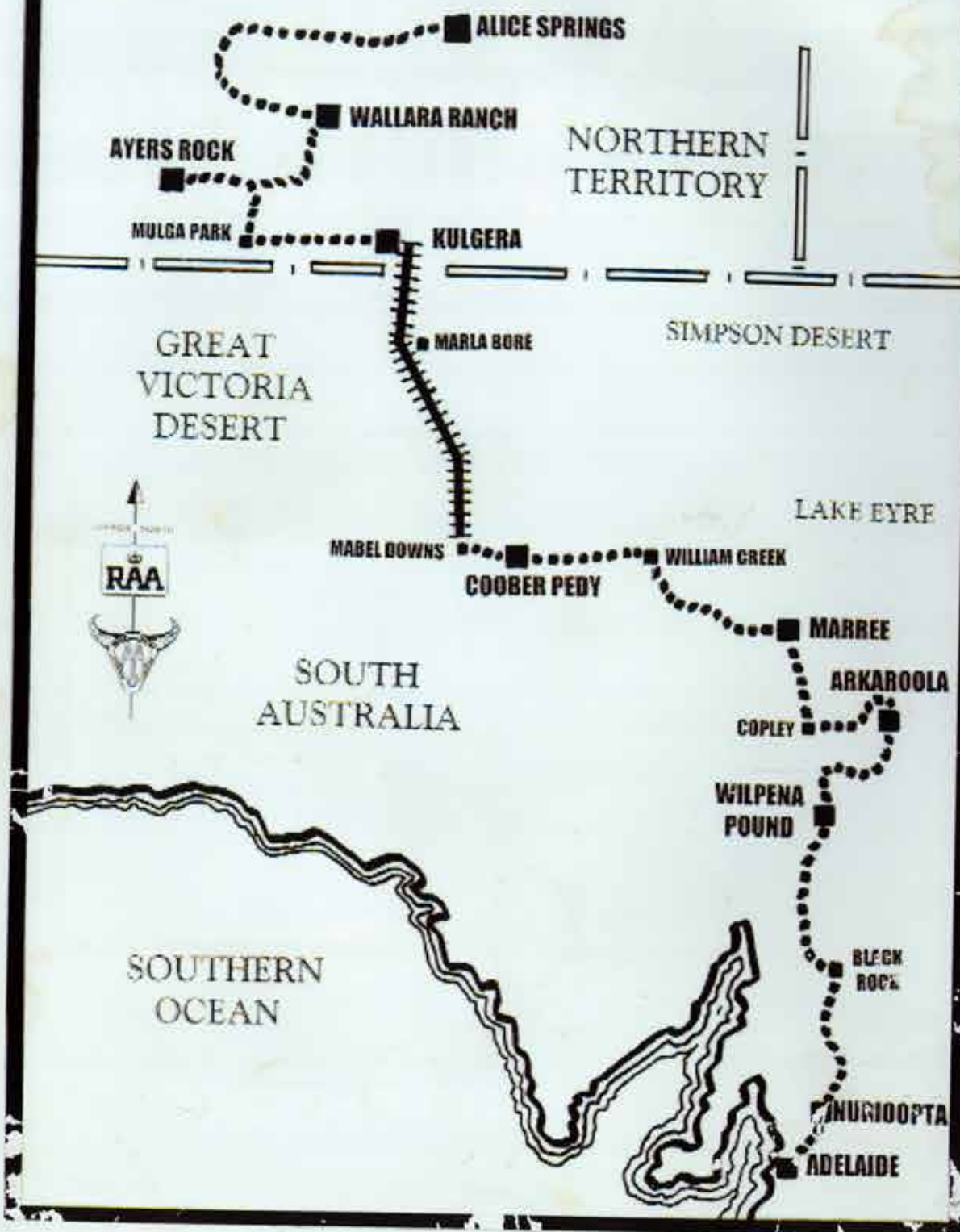


ADELAIDE TO ALICE SPRINGS



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9<sup>TH</sup> - 20<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 1982



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# IN THE BEGINNING

*"Life ain't all beer and sickles,  
and more's the pity"*

Apologies to George Du Maurier  
1834-1896

DEDICATED TO  
John 'JB' Bennett - Honda XL 250  
Patrick Dwyer - Honda XL250  
Wayne McCarthy - Honda XL250  
Gavin 'Chickenman' Morisset - Honda XL250  
Bob Morrison - Honda XL250

IN APPRECIATION  
Of all the originals

COVER: The mythical Red Hat is said to imbue the wearer with the power to imbibe unlimited quantities of piss without any ill effect.



"Are you still terrorising North Sydney on that bike of yours, Pedro?", came the unannounced call.

"It's quicker than that clapped our Ferrari of yours, you wanker", retorted Pedro, "why?".

"A few mates and I are organising a ride up from Adelaide to Ayers Rock", replied Wayne, ignoring the barb, "and thought you might be in it".

"What brought this on?".

"Last year JB and a few guys you don't know, but you've met Gavin I'm sure, rode up to Cape York and are doing something similar this year. We're getting a crew together now".

"Adelaide's a long way from Cape York", replied Pedro, "and you and Gavin don't even ride bikes, what's the story?"

"I gather they found the going a bit tough and there's a distinct lack of pubs between Cooktown and Bamaga so we thought we'd do something with a bit more style, cruise the wineries in the Barossa Valley, see Ayers Rock and finish at the new casino in Alice Springs", argued Wayne, "what d'ya reckon Doc?".

"I reckon it's a bloody long ride from the Barossa to Alice", replied Pedro, "no matter which way you go".

"But there's lots of tourist resorts in the Flinders Ranges, all first class", enthused Wayne. "And we'll catch 'The Ghan' over the boring bit in the middle. Should be *terrific*".

"Count me in", replied Pedro.

\*

Which is how, some weeks later, Pedro found himself in the prestigiously piss elegance of 'Ayer House' arguing the finer points of cognac consumption with a rather dogmatic Bob and a confused geologist named Jan, hoping that Bob would desist and 'the more beautiful by the glass' geologist would turn into a bikies' moll at midnight.

To Pedro's knowledge neither occurred and he wasn't the only cold and dejected rider in the wet and windy Hilton car park the following morning, having spent half the trip's budget on cognac the previous evening during the argument with *tifiosi* Bob.

Barring a few dropped wine glasses in several cellars, the morning was remarkably accident free considering the state of the weather and roads, let alone the state of the riders. But at a post lunch contretemps over the location of the tools, Pedro finally threw in the towel.

"Did you remember to bring the tools Bob?", questioned JB offhandedly.

"No I *didn't*", replied Bob, "actually I remembered shortly after we'd left the Hilton but we were already on our way then".



The riders on this first cross country journey were a truly eclectic bunch however the choice of machinery was homogenous - the Honda XL250. With the exception of Araldited Acerbis tanks for the Cape York survivors the bikes came straight off the showroom floor. Top, from left to right; Pedro, Gavin, JB, Bob, Patrick and Wayne. Bottom; same crew in less serious attire with cameraman Bob missing.



"What if we need them?", continued JB seeking support, "it was *your* responsibility".

"You've never used tools in your life", countered Bob, "and no-one else will need them, will they Pedro?"

Pedro, who with a well researched and winning argument had still managed to lose out to both Bob and John the previous evening could only rejoinder, "I've had enough of all this wine tasting, where are we staying? I'm off to the nearest pub for a cleansing ale. See you all in Tanunda. Or Nuriootpa. Or wherever."

As luck would have it there was a cosy little pub directly opposite the motel and with a thirst driven by a hearty log fire, Pedro had just ordered his second Coopers when Wayne burst through the door.

"Ah, I *knew* you'd be here", he accused.

"Exactly where I said I'd be", responded Pedro, "so no prize for you, here try one of these, local brew, very flavoursome".

"I *thought* I'd find you two here", stated Gavin as he fronted the bar only minutes later, "whose shout is it?"

"Didn't take *you* lot long to find a pub", added Robert, one step behind Gav, "I'll have one of those", he added.

"Why *am* I not surprised to find you all here?", asked Patrick rhetorically as he quietly side saddled a bar stool, "w...s to drink?"

"Coopers Sparkling in the stubbie, or Pale Ale on tap", replied Pedro, "or there's the black".

"No Resches?", quizzed Patrick, "what *else* do they have?"

"Just have one of these", said Bob, "very moreish".

A contemplative drink or two later someone was heard to ask, "What's happened to JB?"

"He's off sightseeing", replied Patrick, "Let him find us, there's not that many pubs in town". Just then JB burst in enthusiastically.

"I've been to the information office", he stated, "there's an old jail worth a look at and a few more wineries right here in town. And lots more to see. Let's not waste the afternoon," he admonished.

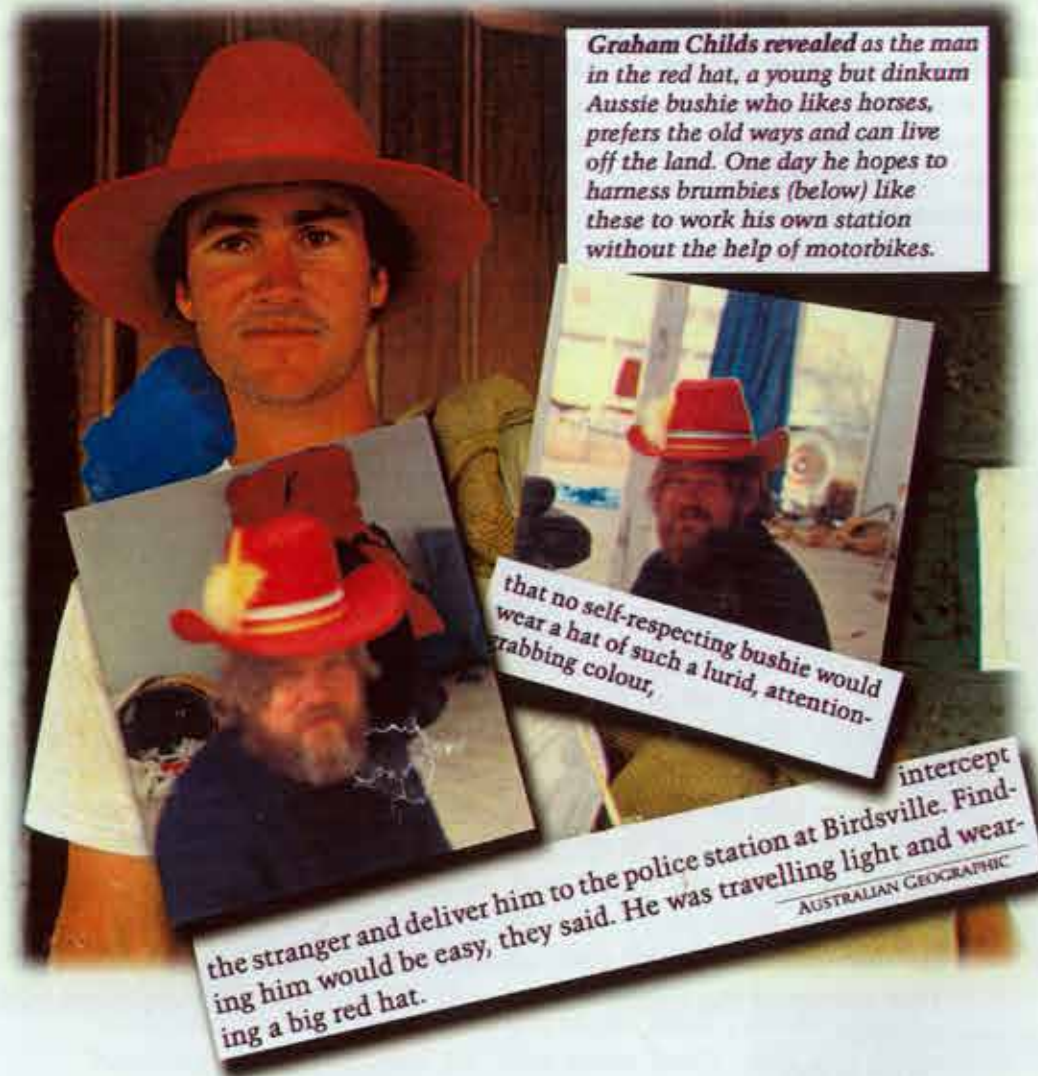
"You've been *riding* around in the rain all day for a free glass of plonk", rejoindered Pedro, "and now you want to *walk* around in the rain. They sell wine right here!"

"You're right", said JB, noting that no one was rushing to put on their coats "who wants another drink?"

And so the rest of the afternoon passed in an amber glow until JB pointed out that the motel dining room closed for orders at eight.

"Time for a Red then", declared Gavin, as the group entered the dining room "two be enough?"

"I'd like a little White first", replied Patrick.



**Graham Childs revealed as the man in the red hat, a young but dinkum Aussie bushie who likes horses, prefers the old ways and can live off the land. One day he hopes to harness brumbies (below) like these to work his own station without the help of motorbikes.**

**that no self-respecting bushie would wear a hat of such a lurid, attention-grabbing colour,**

**intercept the stranger and deliver him to the police station at Birdsville. Finding him would be easy, they said. He was travelling light and wearing a big red hat.**

**AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC**

Unfortunately the paparizzi were otherwise engaged on the evening of the Marree Annual Ball else there would be proof positive of JB's all conquering bid for the legendary Red Hat. The fact that this unique item of haberdashery passed through JB's hands at all is evidenced by two rather fuzzy "morning after" photographs taken just prior to JB reluctantly relinquishing his proprietorship of said headpiece; an item referred to in many non fiction chronicles such as Robert Ludlum's - *The Red Protocol*, Wilbur Smith's - *Red in the Wilderness* and Tom Clancy's - *Red Alert*.

The legend lives on with regular items in Australian Geographic Magazine and occasional eyewitness accounts on "Macca's All Over Australia" (Sundays on Radio National) providing strong evidence that the legendary headpiece remains in the Australian Outback, however Dick Smith claims to have sighted it floating off Norfolk Island on his last round-the-world solo gyrocopter flight.



"OK. Two Reds and two Whites", ordered Gav, passing on the garbled details to the waitress in double quick time. Certainly much quicker than it took to place the dinner order.

Incited by Gav's maniacal laughter, the group became louder and unusually raucous, quickly driving all the other guests from the dining room. As the merriment continued, no one seemed to notice that somehow the room had become smaller.

"They've shut us out", decried Gavin.

"Or in", observed Patrick.

"What's this dividing wall then", Gavin challenged the eagerly departing waitress.

"The dining room's now closed", she stated, "the weekly Rotary Club meeting is on behind that screen and they've asked if you could keep the laughter down at bit".

"I want *everybody* to be happy", responded Gavin and with that jumped to his feet scattering the remains of the cheese platter and threw back the dreary grey bi-fold room divider to reveal the dreary grey Rotarians buried in the files and water jugs of volunteer bureaucracy.

"Time for a few drinks and a few laughs", proclaimed Gav, who, after a few reds, is an event all on his own.

"We were discussing the new water bubbler for Rotary Park", sniffed the startled Chairman.

"Not *that* sort of drink", cackled Gav, "here, have a *red*", he added, weaving dangerously close to spilling wine over all and sundry.

"Perhaps we'll join you later", replied the Chairman pacifyingly whilst inching his chair away from the advancing madman.

"In that case, I want all your *addresses*, right now!", roared Gavin.

This stumped the committee completely as they cast perplexed looks at one another.

"Who is he?"

"Addresses. Why *addresses*?"

"Must be *someone*".

"Yes, yes that's obvious".

"Is this in the minutes?"

"I've seen him *somewhere* before".

"Ask the Chairman".

The Chairman rose to his full importance but was clearly out of his depth. "What? By what right do you demand to ascertain details of our residential arrangements?" he demanded pompously trying to save as much face as possible under such an unusual challenge to his authority.

"Well, if you're going to sit around all night muttering about bubblers", replied Gavin with astonishing clarity, "we'll just go and see if your *wives* would like a few drinks and a few laughs."

"I believe we should adjourn the meeting", suggested the Secretary

midst nervous laughter all round, "perhaps we should.....I mean could have a drink with these chaps".

There was murmured agreement all round but the observant noticed a few committee members slip quietly away. Maybe Gavin had given them a few extramarital conceptions of their own.

\*

There was a cold and bitter headwind the following day when the riders soon discovered the limits of an XL250's fuel capacity.

"I just assumed there'd be a fuel station along the main road somewhere", stated Patrick.

"These things should have a fuel gauge", complained JB, "clearly a manufacturer's fault".

"Maybe we should have filled up last night", Gav pointed out practically.

"I thought you did a pretty good job", observed Wayne.

"Well, it's obvious that we're not going to get much further than 150km on a tank, so we'll just have to refuel at every opportunity and carry extra somehow where necessary", stated Bob.

So, after a bit of to-ing and fro-ing on the cold arid plain, everyone was mobile again and, once out of the wind in the foothills of the Flinders, enjoying some welcome sunlight and spectacular scenery. The first thing the riders did on reaching Wilpena Pound was calculate the distance to Arkaroola and refuel the machines.

That done, JB insisted on a walk into the Pound.

"It's fantastic", JB enthused, "a huge natural corral. This walking track goes for over ten kilometres".

"What can you see when you get to the end?", asked Gavin.

"Nothing really", replied JB, "just more bush. But I've *flown* over it before, it's very impressive".

"From the air?", clarified Patrick.

"What's the point then?", asked Bob of anyone.

But Pedro was already on his way back to the bar.

\*

"We'll stop at Blinman for a snack and fuel", advised JB, "from there it's only about 150km to Arkaroola so it should be an easy day".

It was a degree or two below chilly at speed but the panoramas of the Flinders Ranges were spectacular. And the country, particularly 'The Great Wall of China', made every primary school geography lesson about the earth's plates as perfectly clear as the weather.

There was a good gravel road through to Blinman and out to Wirrealpa Homestead and the inexperienced riders had it easy for most of the way. But as the track swung north, the surface deteriorated and the going



became tougher until Wayne came to a complete stop.

"This is awful", he complained, "I'm all over the shop".

"Maybe it's because you've got a flat rear tyre", observed Gavin, "that wouldn't help".

"Oh! Shit!", exclaimed Wayne, "what now?".

"Well", advised Bob, "my mate Terry, who's got a law degree, was a chopper pilot in Vietnam and a Californian desert racer says they can change a tyre and put in a new tube in *less than three minutes*".

"All we need is a new tube and some tools then", deadpanned Gavin. "And maybe Terry."

"Alternately what they do is stuff grass into the tyre", continued Bob, not missing a beat.

"I reckon there's less than 100km go go", ventured Pedro, "we could just give it a try and ride slowly. I don't think you'll have any luck with that", he added to Wayne who had half heartedly pulled out a few clumps of dead *paspalum*.

So the riders fired up and set off at a much reduced pace but within minutes the rim of Wayne's machine was rotating like a hula hoop on hallucinogens with the following riders in danger of copping an errant spoke for a tooth pick. There was no way they'd make it to Arkaroola.

"I'll ride on ahead", volunteered JB, "and organise a recovery vehicle. Gav, why not come with me?" he shouted over his shoulder.

"This is fucked", declared Pedro, looking at Wayne's rear rim, "you've lost half the spokes and I think the rim is bent".

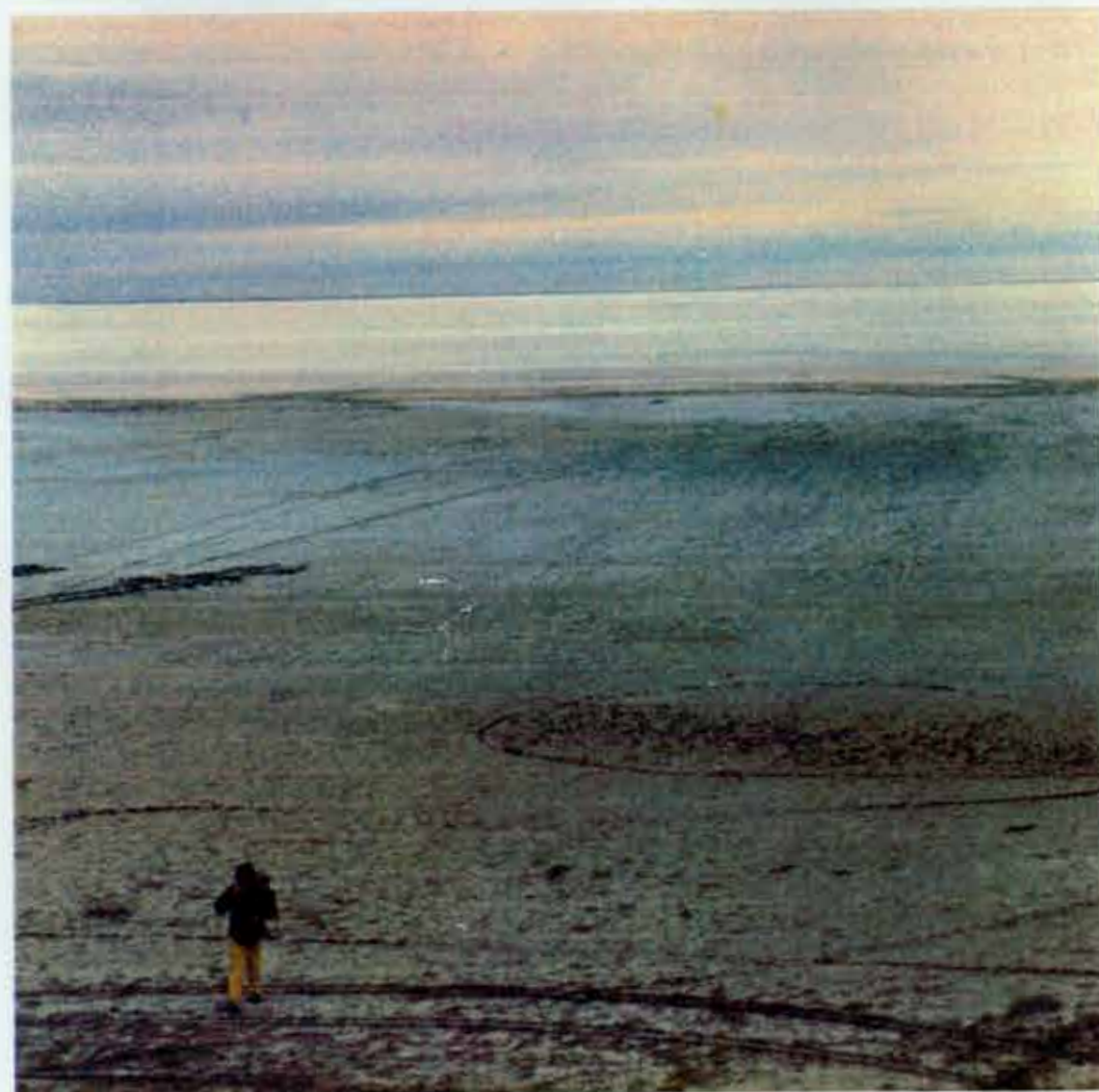
"We might get an old wheel at a homestead", suggested Patrick, "why don't you and I give that a go and Bob can wait with Wayne?".

It was just on nightfall when all six riders regrouped at Arkaroola with Wayne's stuffed bike, a handful of assorted spokes, a rusted rim of a Yamaha DTI and the complete rear wheel assembly from a 1952 G80CS Matchless Scrambler that a renovator would give his eye teeth for.

"The resident mechanic has gone down to Adelaide for the weekend and won't be back until Monday morning. The manager is not all that helpful, in fact quite the reverse, the shop doesn't open until tomorrow, dinner is served from 7 'til 7.30 and don't be late, our cabins are over there, I've got the double bed in the closest one and the bar will be open in a minute or two", reported JB to the group of riders, looking despondently at the pile of miscellaneous spare parts arrayed next to Wayne's bike. "Oh", added JB, "the bar closes at 8 and the manager seems disinclined to provide any sort of takeaway service".

"Lucky we *haven't* got any tools", observed Gavin, "otherwise we might be obliged to use them".

"We might have been able to get a puncture repaired, but I can't see how this can be fixed", added Bob.



Nothing can adequately depict the gloom of the cold and bleak day following the Marree Ball. Here Gavin trudges back wearily after inspecting the water in Lake Eyre South under orders from Bob.



"What're we going to do then?", asked Patrick, "we'll have to organise something. This is not much of a resort is it? The manager seems to think it's Stalag 13".

"Problem solved", declared JB authoritatively as he returned in a rush and thrust some paperwork at Wayne.

"What's this?", asked Wayne.

"A one-way ticket on that bus over there. Down to Port Augusta. One of the passengers just decided to spend a night here. You're in luck".

"What about my bike?", said Wayne, a little taken aback at the speed of events. "It'll fit upright in that compartment, just put those bags over there", said JB supervising the loading of Wayne's bike. "Baggage gets misplaced all the time", he added vaguely, "I'll be in the bar, there's a cute little German backpacker who says she's a gymnast and has just been unloaded off the bus and needs a shoulder to cry on. Good luck Wayne".

JB disappeared as if by magic.

"Well, I guess it's all settled then", said Wayne as he was bundled on to the bus without even a sixpack.

"Give us a call in Coober Pedy", yelled Gav, "you'll be able to catch us up somehow I'm sure".

"He'll have to be lucky", observed Patrick.

"If he doesn't stop at any pubs and we continue at our normal pace, he'll probably be at Copley before us", observed Pedro. "Besides any alternative would be better than staying here".

\*

You'll have to go back through Balcanoona to get to Copley", stated the manager at the following morning's refuel.

"Why can't we go north west past Aroona Bluff?", reasoned JB, proffering an RAA map of the Flinders.

"Can't go that way because you can't go that way", repeated the manager ignoring the map.

"If we just head due west we'll eventually have to hit the old Ghan route", muttered Gavin in the background.

Was this déjà vu or déjà va pondered Pedro.

\*

The rough, station two-tracks presented the first real outback riding experience for many of the riders but there was a track and it was not difficult to follow. Nor did the terrain present too many difficulties for the riders though Pedro managed to hit a feral cat that was at least 1.8 metres from nose to tail, without injury to either participant. The cat should be dead. Even if the hit didn't kill it, it should have shit itself to death. Pedro almost did. Everyone made Copley by mid morning after a great ride along the northern edge of the Flinders.

The rest of the morning on the badly corrugated road from Copley to Marree left everyone badly shaken. And surprised to find the town deserted. It could be said that Marree *always* looks deserted since the re routing of the rail line in 1980 but on this day the silence was almost eerie.

Eventually JB spotted a lone woman hanging out the washing in the backyard, rode up, no doubt scaring the bejeezus out of the poor woman and, over the roar of his engine, managed to ascertain that everyone else was out at the racetrack. Where else would they be? It was the Marree Annual Picnic Race Day.

Somehow the group managed to find the venue, the last of five thousand people to do so, and bypassing the mass of 4WD's pulled in as close to the action as possible.

"Do you reckon all our gear will be safe here?", worried Patrick.

"Bit of a risk I reckon", replied Gav.

"There's not much else we can do, we haven't even arranged any accommodation", observed Bob.

"Here, put these on", ordered JB, handing everyone a Royal Flying Doctor Cap, "this lovely young lass from the RFDS Auxiliary will look after our gear", continued JB, introducing a slightly bewildered seventy year old blue rinser to each of the riders.

So, with the bikes stored safely in the RFDS enclosure, a beer in one hand, race ticket in the other, the boys got stuck into the thick of things, all other concerns forgotten.

It was a very pacey afternoon and, as the sun set, the group found themselves at a barbeque in some bloke's yard back in town.

"We can kip at the old Stationmaster's Cottage", advised JB at some stage during the long afternoon session, "might be a bit rough and ready but everything's been organised".

"Sorry mate, the beer's run out", apologised Pedro's newfound mate, "won't be able to get anything now until the bar opens at the Ball".

"Beer seems to have run out", Pedro advised JB. But within seconds, JB's offsider delivered a pair of freezing coldies.

"Where'd you get *these*", puzzled Pedro's amazed mate, who turned out to be not only the local postmaster but also the *host*.

Pedro was mightily impressed that JB had silently organised a special delivery from the local pub which had been secreted, on ice, under the postmaster's house, within minutes of him leaving the racecourse.

To report that everyone was more than a little happy before the Annual Ball or Bush Dance - depending on who one spoke to - would be an incredible understatement.

It may well have been a ball but everyone was still in raceday clobber so the dipsomaniac crowd simply moved the ongoing party seamlessly into the Maree Community Hall.

"Six beers please mate", requested Pedro at the frenetically busy bar which ran across the entire width of the barn-like structure.





Riders preparing to embark on 'The Ghan' were dismayed to learn there was no Porter Service or First Class Refreshment Rooms at Manguri Station (above). Their dismay turned to despair when 'The Ghan' arrived disguised as a slow freight train on its way to nowhere fast. However Bob did get to 'drive' the train (below) on one of the straighter sections of track between Coober Pedy and Kulgera where, unlike the Nullabor, there are two or three bends in the track.

"Where's your tickets", was the shouted response. "Tickets! Get your tickets over at the Cashier. Next!".

Pedro eventually got to the head of the queue at the single Cashier's locked and barred enclosure.

"I'm told I need to get drink tickets please".

"BlueforbeerpinkforBundy.Beer'stenbucksforfiveticketsthirtyticketsforfiftybucks. Bundy'sfourfortenbuckstwenyfiveforfifty", the cashier rattled off in the mechanical monotone of a bored race caller.

"Here's a hundred bucks, half beer half Bundy", responded Pedro as anxious not to miss any of the action as he was thirsty.

"What took so long?", complained Bob on Pedro's arrival at the table the group had commandeered, along with JB's growing entourage.

"Your shout", advised Pedro, flicking the kitty to Patrick.

The night flashed on.

"You didn't tell me I had to get tickets", moaned Patrick on his return, "but I got \$100 worth so we don't have to go through that again. Look at that queue now! Silly having only one Cashier."

JB returned with an armful of beers. "Kitty owes me \$100", he demanded, throwing another fistful of pink and blue tickets on the table.

"At least we won't have to queue again", quipped Gavin, "we could even start our own ticket sales".

The highlight of the riotous night was the auctioning of the flashest red hat any of the group had ever sighted.

"Look at *that*, it's so *you*", advised Patrick prodding JB incitingly.

"What a hat band!", added Gav, as JB joined the ferocious bidding, "looks like it's made from the extinct Lake Eyre Salt Snake".

"And with a feather from an unborn Miniature Desert Lyre Bird", added Bob, as JB, flushed with the day's many successes, could see no one in the bright red headgear but himself. JB gazumped and then regazumped his own outrageous bid to the intoxicating cheers and tumultuous applause of everyone in the smoke filled hall.

Finally, with his face as flushed as the glittering prize he so despairingly desired, and, with the dexterity of a desperate debutante, JB, garlanded with a plethora of pink and blue ribbons, leapt up onto the trestle table and sang the song aspiring auctioneers the world over love to hear. "More! More! More!", he screamed in triumphant glory.

In fact, such was his triumph that only the tyranny of distance kept JB off the cover of that week's 'TIME' magazine.

"How magnificent do I look?", JB asked, finally donning his crowning glory to the admiration of all.

"They fit both your heads perfectly", enthused Pedro, "you both look great!".

"Do you think I paid too much?".

"Not at all", observed Patrick, "besides how many people do you know have an RFDS Piper Cherokee named after them?".



Finally, in the early hours of the morning, along with several hundred other happy souls, the lads staggered back to their lodgings on the cold ironbark floors of the Stationmaster's Cottage.

Urged on by 'the man' in the red hat, the party continued raging, causing Gav to seek alternative accommodation in a semi-abandoned Morris Minor, with Bob nodding off whilst still upright, Pedro donned all his riding gear to find a soft patch of grass, whilst the enigmatic Patrick cast a wry eye over proceedings.

Sleeping on the grass in black oilskins on a moonless night proved not to be a wise idea as Pedro was nearly slashed to death several times before he crawled under the house for a fitful few hours kip.

On crawling out to greet the freezing dawn, it was obvious that the day couldn't get much worse. JB was sitting dismally on the verandah, battered and featherless red hat in hand, it having dawned on him that the hat was at least three sizes too small for his swollen cranium. Gav looked in need of a chiropractor and Bob was still practising his somnambulism. Only Patrick appeared in anyway chipper but, then again, he still had half his roll of pink tickets left.

It was a slow and aching start as the riders refuelled and set out towards William Creek in an icy, vicious headwind on the outrageously corrugated road on which it was impossible to pick a comfortable speed short of flat strap. Which would mean running out of fuel. Not an option.

By mid-morning, shattered, sore and shaken, the five riders were on the edge of Lake Eyre South when Bob woke up.

"It only happens once a decade maybe less", he enthused, "just look at that. I've never seen anything like it!"

"It's a lake", observed Patrick.

"But it's a *wet* lake", replied Bob disdainfully, "it only floods once every ten to fifteen years, aren't we lucky?"

"I feel blessed Bob", remarked Pedro as he pulled out the morning snack; a packet of dry biscuits that had been corrugated back to flour and some cheddar that now resembled curdled toe jam.

"Look at that field of 'Poached Egg Daisies' dotted with 'Rosy Dock' and 'Darling Lillies' and look, imagine that, *pelicans* so far from the sea. Isn't that *amazing*?", Bob rabbitied on.

"Can we go now?", pleaded Gav shivering in the wind.

Even though the weather improved marginally, it was a slow grind. Petrol tanks split, wires frayed, bolts fell out and nuts fell off. The riders weren't faring much better.

The William Creek Pub was a welcome sight but, after a few bracing Bundies, it was west along the dog fence to Coober Pedy.

This unimproved service track was a delight after the heavily corrugated Oodnadatta Track and, with what wind there was coming in over the riders' shoulders, it was a fast run along the winding route.

It needed to be, for not far out from Coober Pedy a rare storm built up and as it started to rain, the white clay surface of the track became treacherously slippery. Fortunately the boys made the pub without mishap and just in time for Happy Hour as the road becomes totally impassable after heavy rain.

There was no riding the following day which turned out windless, mild and sunny. Very pleasant.



Over morning tea and scones with the newly appointed Reverend and his sister in Australia's only underground church, the Rev was at pains to resolve his lack of understanding over his new flock and sought some advice from fellow Easterners.

What he must have done to deserve a posting from Sydney's leafy Mosman to the treeless and lawless expanses of Coober Pedy God only knows, but in affluent Mosman he explained that he'd had many upright and influential Christians on his parish register, many of whom attended Sunday services regularly but at the close there was bugger all in the collection plate.

"And if someone put in a whole \$20 they'd make sure everyone saw it", added the Rev's sister.

"It's not that we don't get a good roll up here", explained the Rev, "but the donations are breathtaking by comparison".

"Rarely see anything less than a \$20 note", Rev's sister elaborated, "and lots of \$100s".

"But there was no parish register", Rev went on, "and when I tried to start one, Sunday attendance dropped to zero. But during the following week the donation box was be stuffed with notes. If anyone put \$100 in the plate in Mosman, they'd want it writ large on the Church Notice Board but here they're anonymously magnanimous. It's really quite exceptional".

"They're all tight arses in Mosman", advised Pedro, "that's why they stay rich. And drive Ferraris! Just like Longuevillians".

Not only do the opal miners wish to remain anonymous but the most outgoing of them could only be described as taciturn, so having seen one opal mine, there's little to talk about. Just as the Rev was pondering where the donations came from, one has to wonder where the opals in the shops come from. Because none of the miners in Coober Pedy will ever admit to digging them up despite there being no tax on opal mining income.

"Who's for a look at the opal shops", asked Bob.

"Not me, I'm off to the pub", replied Pedro.

There was only one other drinker in the cavernous public bar and another two blokes playing pool over in the far corner. And a lone barman.





*With the exception of the final morning's ride by no means were any of the tracks technically difficult, however the route was often tedious and extremely arduous due to the limitations of the Honda XL 250 suspension.*



*The riders were further incumbered by carrying 30 kilos of gear on the inadequate luggage racks and running 35 lbs pressure in the original equipment road/trail tyres.*



As Pedro approached the bar, he felt all four sets of eyes on him. Was it his imagination or was there really tension in the air? Buying a beer seemed to ease the situation enough for Pedro to acknowledge the bloke at the bar.

"G'day".

"G'day".

"Nice day".

"Yeah".

"Yesterday's rain didn't last long".

"No".

"Rain much around here?".

"No".

"You from round here then?".

At this the lone drinker sculled what was left of his schooner and moved a further ten metres up the bar, the pool players both stopped their game and before Pedro could even think about ordering a second beer, the barman confronted him.

"We don't want any trouble around here", he advised firmly making it quite plain that Pedro had quickly worn out any welcome he thought he may have had.

One long day stretched to a second as the riders re-bolted their bikes together with Araldite, Gaffer tape and fencing wire before Wayne's professionally rebuilt bike finally turned up on the back of a truck with Wayne arriving a few minutes later after a long trip on the overnight bus.

Wayne might well have continued on, for the plans were already laid to avoid the next 400km of boring blacktop in favour of the first class dining car of 'The Ghan' from Manguri to Kulgera.

The riders were soon to learn that Manguri, some 50km west of Coober Pedy, was no more than a railway siding and loading ramp for the nearby Mabel Creek Homestead.

"Hope this is it. Doesn't look very first class does it?", worried Bob.

"What do we do, just flag the train down?", queried Wayne.

"Maybe we should ask over at the homestead", suggested JB.

"I wondered what those two carriages were for", declared the lady of the house, pointing out the two railway carriages at the siding, "they'll be for you. Just load your bikes into the freight van, you should find some rope in there, and the other carriage will be for you. Train should be along about eleven".

"Crazy, two carriages just for us", remarked Patrick, "no wonder the railway is losing money".

Sure enough, at the appointed hour an eighty seven wagon train ground to a halt on the main track and, after some stuffing about as to where the two carriage consignment was to slot in, and some very serious

## Where are they now?

### The Man in the Red Hat

The last time we saw Graham Childs he was walking the Birdsville Track (AG 12), alone and in the middle of summer, wearing a bright red hat.

That was in 1987. In the meantime, the photograph of that moment, captured by contributing photographer Colin Beard, has become one of AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC'S most enduring and popular images with readers: here was a living, breathing Australian bushie who could have walked straight out of a Henry Lawson poem.

And well he might have! For, a decade on, we've heard neither a roar nor a whisper from him, despite our best efforts to track him down. Our search has taken us all over the country (by phone, of course): to the town of Birdsville, near the Queensland-New South Wales border; over to WA's Kimberley cattle stations, where he'd worked as a stockman for eight years prior to

1987 and was believed to be heading when Colin met him; and, finally, to Cessnock, near Newcastle, where he'd said his family was from. Sadly, each phone inquiry met with bemused silence at the other end.

Mind you, we did manage to track down one Graham Childs, originally from Cessnock and now of Gunnedah, NSW, but he wasn't our man. That Graham was 32, a plumber, and had never been on the Birdsville Track. But, mysteriously, he added: "You're not the first one who's asked me that question."

Our Graham, the Man in the Red Hat, was 26 when first photographed, so he'd now be 36 or thereabouts. Other than that, we're in the dark. We'd love to hear from Graham, or anyone who may know of his whereabouts, if for nothing else than to satisfy the stream of readers who regularly call us to find out what he's up to and whether he still wears that famous red hat.



*There is no truth to the rumour that the red hat has been reconfigured into a 'fez' and can regularly be seen early mornings in the Possum Creek region of the Northern Rivers District.*



shunting, the two carriages were coupled up and the boys were on their way. But it was definitely not 'The Ghan'.

"A fucking freight train", moaned Pedro, "there goes lunch and a glass of red in the dining car. No piss and no food, at least it's only a 350km trip, we should be there by Happy Hour".

"I've got some chewing gum", offered JB, "and look, we've all got a decanter of stale water. After all it is a 'First Class' carriage".

The maximum speed of the train was 60 kph and the rigamarole with the shunting only happened at Mount Clarence, Pootmoura, Mount Willoughby, Cadney, Marlo, Chadney, Iwantja and Victory Downs. As the entire kilometre long train was manned by only three people, all pickups and deliveries, no matter how large or small, were made by the full carriage to or from each destination.

"I always wanted to be a train driver", enthused Bob.

What a mind numbing experience thought Pedro. Not only was the train controlled by a dead man's handle but there was also an overriding emergency brake that activated if a big red button was not pressed every three minutes.

"All I wanted was a feed and a beer", retorted Gav.

"We've run out of chewing gum", reported Patrick.

It was a cold dark night when, at last, the two carriages were unceremoniously shunted off at Kulgera siding almost nine hours later.

"Which way do we go?", asked JB as soon as his machine was unloaded from the freight van.

"Looks like Kulgera is about ten or twelve klicks to the east of the railway line", advised Pedro.

"So which way's that then", JB repeated as he fired up.

"Well the line runs north south", said Wayne, "so east is *that* way".

"No, it's *that* way", argued Bob, pointing in the opposite direction, "the train came in from that direction which is south so that track over there must head east".

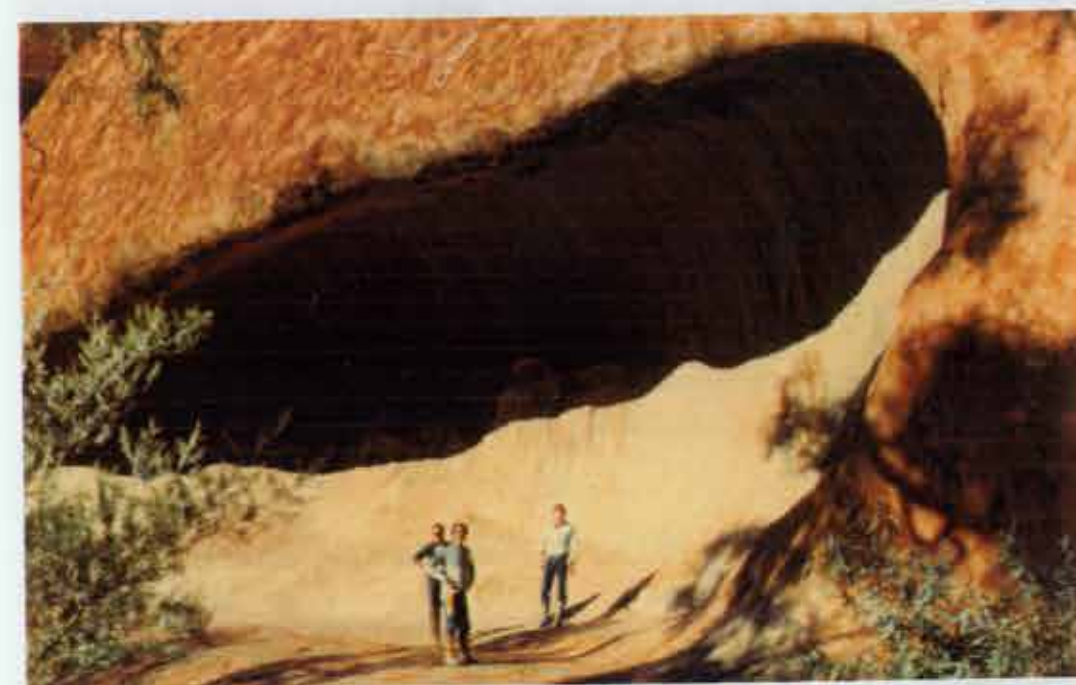
"I thought we arrived from *that* direction", put in Patrick.

"The loading platform was on my left as we came in, I'm sure that's south", said Gav, "Patrick's right".

"But you were sitting opposite me", answered Bob, "facing backwards, which means that if *that's* south then the loading platform would have been on your *right*".

"Wait a minute", reasoned Wayne, "the carriage we were in was in front of the goods van the bikes were in so the goods van was the most *southerly*, therefore that must be *east*".

"Glad that's settled then", sighed JB.



It's a long way to the top (above) and Bob, despite not remembering the tune made a memorable climb. Pedro didn't attempt the feat citing a continuing buzz in his ears. Until the time of the great post-Chamberlain dingo cull, many dingoes were to be sighted around the base of 'The Rock' which was then accessible at all points (below).



The manager of the roadhouse was quite surprised to see travellers arriving so late as only the most intrepid road train drivers were usually to be found on the road after dusk. He was even more surprised when Pedro insisted that accommodation had been booked.

As the tattooed road train drivers looked on, the manager double checked the register but returned quite adamant.

"No, there's definitely no booking for you, that is unless you happen to be Mr. & Mrs. McCarthy", he sneered, "or maybe Mr. & Mrs. Morrison, or the Bennett's by any chance?"

A few beers later the red faced riders had thought they'd laughed off the situation, though some of the truckies were *still* casting the odd look at the three 'couples' who were just getting stuck into some food when JB, who had gone off to suss out the best bed, room or view, returned ashen faced to inform the room at large that each 'couple' had to share a double bed inserted into a shipping container no more than 200mm wider than the bed.

This information caused much smirking amongst the spectators, none of whom had spent the night in the Stationmaster's Cottage in Marree after which any accommodation was a luxury.

There's been worse digs before and, no doubt, worse to come but no one was keen to be seen to be first in bed and the riders were up and away well before sparrows the following morning.

Like the majority of travellers before them, they first mistook Mount Connor for 'The Rock' but as they pulled into the Uluru Motel 400km later, there was no mistaking the profile of the real thing.

The riders were as knackered as the 250XLs which were not built for comfort or speed and had literally vibrated apart during the day.

The accommodation consisted of a half dozen fibro motels, scattered around in the spinifex and accessed by the gravel track that ran around the base of the rock.

After the obligatory photos at sunset, the riders returned to the bar for pre-dinner cocktails, dinner and, of course, post dinner drinks.

\*

"What are you doing out here?", asked Bob, "I thought you'd gone to bed".

"Just thought I'd come out and get some fresh air", replied Pedro, "just look at those moons, must be nearly full".

"Bullshit", said Bob dismissively, "you were thrown out and it's not much past half moon".

"No I wasn't", challenged Pedro, "Was I? What happened?"

"Well, you were asked to leave for swearing, it's the same thing".

"What fucking crap", retorted Pedro, "who wants to drink with that bunch of ponces anyway? Wayne's waxing lyrical about binary surface

layer airflow with that wanker Nigel. JB's trying to crack on to Nigel's wife. Gavin's torn between another red and total remorse and that Patrick's just too polite for words. He'd have a better chance at Nigel's wife than JB if he put half a mind to it. Let's go for a ride and check out the rock".

Bob considered about the alternatives and soon the two riders were cruising along the deserted moonlit track with the headlights doused.

After a dreamy lap or two around the imposing monolith, the two riders pulled in to Mutijilda George, dismounted, staggered the final few metres to the base of the rock and fell back to look at the stars.

A little later Pedro passed the joint to Bob.

"Listen, can you hear that?"

"Mmm?"

"The rock, it's humming".

"Mmmm".

"Seriously. It's humming. Quite clearly. Just listen".

"Mmmmmmm....that's very nice stuff", replied Bob dreamily. "What's it humming?"

"It's just humming, you know, 'mmmmmmmm' humming!"

"Mmmmmmmmmmm....".

"Stop humming and listen", demanded Pedro. "No wonder the friendlies think this place is magic. Fucking biggest rock in the world just sits there all day and then hums all night. Can you hear it?"

"Mmmmm".

"Really?"

"Mmmmmmm".

"It's so constant. Must be the molecules contracting, fucking rock just sits there all day in 30 degree heat then drops to bloody near zero at night. Something must contract".

"Mmm!".

"What do you reckon?"

"Mmmm", replied Bob, "maybe we should head back.

\*

"You should have been there", said Pedro to anyone who was in earshot at breakfast the next morning, "seriously the rock hums. You can hear it quite clearly, can't you Bob?"

"Quite clearly", confirmed Bob, "but I've forgotten. What was it humming again?"

\*

It was to be a relatively easy afternoon ride out to Wallara Ranch with the 'earth formed' roads being less travelled and therefore far less





The 'long range' 14.5 litre plastic Acerbis fuel tanks had a nasty and potentially dangerous habit of splitting when full and were no more useful on corrugations than the standard 9.5 litre steel tanks, causing many not always convenient re-fuels on the 2,200 km.

corrugated than the gravel roads, so a morning excursion out to The Olgas (Katajuta) was planned.

Such was the state of the riders' health that a half-way rest stop was required for the 28km journey.

"What's that sticking out of your back wheel Pedro?", enquired Gav, "I haven't got one of those".

Gav pointed at the silver rod protruding from the rear hub of Pedro's dirty, dusty and dilapidated machine.

"Don't forget mine's a later model than yours Gav", replied, Pedro bending down to inspect the protruberance glittering in the sunlight.

"That's your fucking back axle", declared Bob walking up.

Sure enough, the split pin had really split and the lock nuts had worked loose, allowing the axle to do the same. It was within millimetres of allowing the rear wheel to follow suit.

The other riders dispersed to check their own machines and after a few swift kicks to the offending part Pedro rode *slowly* back to Ayers Rock to fix the problem.

But not a nut could be found until JB finally confided.

"You can take the axle nut off my bike", he advised Pedro in a secretive aside.

"But what about you?", puzzled Pedro.

"I've already decided to fly out to Alice", replied JB nonchalantly, "I've booked a seat on this afternoon's flight".

"What about your bike?"

"Oh I've organised a truck to take it up to Alice so you can have my axle nut", whispered JB conspiratorially.

"JB, all this has nothing to do with my rear axle", replied Pedro disbelievingly, "what's the story?"

"Well, I've run out of Mylanta and my guts are killing me", advised JB quite untruthfully, "besides I'm only missing one night".

JB, who was taking more prescription drugs than Elvis Presley at the time, had run out of more than Mylanta thought Pedro. Either that or he was off to meet a geologist, a German gymnast or Nigel's wife. Or possibly all three. And Nigel's wife will probably turn out to be a compliant pharmacist speculated Pedro wildly.

"Just don't say anything till I'm gone", said JB and disappeared in the direction of the airstrip. Pedro was simply happy to be mobile again.

Over the past few days, a procedure had developed that there was no passing in the dust, with the riders rotating in the lead after every, quite frequent, stop so that each one received a fair share of clean air and a fair distribution of dust as very little other traffic had been encountered.

Shortly after the 'Liddle Hills', Pedro, who was riding last in the line of five riders, felt something frightening about to engulf him. A new and



strange thrumming above the sound of Patrick's exhaust. Was it the roar of a 4.5 litre straight six or the pounding of substantially wider treads than the narrow patch of the XL250's rear tyre?

Certainly the not so subtle tap on that very same rear tyre attracted Pedro's complete attention as he belatedly realised there was a large 4WD right up his clacker. Right up!

Pedro would have been more than happy to let the monster through but the almost opaque conditions caused by the dust and the setting sun made any attempt to find the edge of the narrow rutted track impossible. Let alone find a safe place to pull off.

There was no choice but to accelerate up beside Patrick who immediately looked across at Pedro and gestured forward with his left hand as if to say, 'what do you expect *me* to do, it's impossible to see a thing in this dust'.

Pedro gestured rearwards with his thumb, 'look behind you, I don't know *what* you can do but you'd better do it *quickly*'.

Patrick looked in his rear vision mirror only to see a large 'T'. Unsure as to whether it was the first or the second 'T' of the Toyota logo in the grille of the rampaging FJ40, he *was* sure that the monster was now his problem as much as Pedro's. Both bikes ploughed into the bright orange wall of dust, their riders figuring that the slowest of them would serve as a chicane or at worst as a speed bump allowing the other rider time to escape.

Both riders almost went right over the top of Bob as, way too late, all three riders recognised the hazard warning triangle they had only just passed and found themselves line abreast, out of the all enveloping dust but dropping into a deep washaway.

A combination of speed and sheer terror kept all three upright as they exited the washaway ahead of Wayne and Gavin, who'd both taken the relatively clear detour around the hazard.

Gavin, who's quicker than a rat up a drainpipe to accept any challenge, immediately took off past Wayne to haul in the other riders.

But the detour had cost the 4WD its momentum and whilst it thundered lurklike at the rear, ready to pounce on any mistake, it ceased to be an overt threat to the wide-eyed riders.

Adrenaline was at spill levels when the riders entered the bar of Wallara Ranch Roadhouse shortly after. And each had downed at least a couple of quick ones before the driver of the 4WD entered the bar.

"Hey, thawasfun, juslak Mad Max", he enthused, as he rushed up to join the group "youblokesrardgood".

"Lesavabeer", he added.

The Toyota driver's obvious lack of malevolence and cheerful euphoria overcame the riders' delayed shock and rightful anger at the abject terror they'd just experienced at the hands of this madman who soon had everyone agreeing what fun it had been.

Jim, the proprietor and founder of the Wallara Ranch Road House was besotted with Kings Canyon which, he claimed, was discovered by his grandfather. He also believed Kings Canyon to be the greatest natural wonder in Australia, if not the entire world, something his ranch hands entertained with tongues firmly planted in their cheeks. And possibly elsewhere.

The ranch itself was little more than a staging point for 'full day tours' to the fabled Canyon, some 100km to the west at the end of a no through road.

Jim's exaltations to visit the Canyon were constant but the riders agreed, with almost 250km to cover the following day, adding an unnecessary 200km made no sense at all.

"Even if we did do it, there'd be no time to really see the Canyon at all", pointed out Bob, correctly.

"Wait till you see the slide show", answered Jim.

"I don't want to see a slide show", responded Pedro.

"*Everyone* sees the slide show", dictated Jim. And sure enough the bar was closed and the lights were all turned off for Jim's lengthy slide presentation. Maybe other activities *did* take place during this totally underwhelming spectacular, but as all the lights were out, that would be mere speculation.



"Breakfast in five Pedro", yelled Patrick in the darkness. "You've missed breakfast, I've packed your gear we've refuelled your bike, let's go", he continued sixty seconds later.

"What's the fucking hurry", moaned Pedro as he staggered out to the fuel pumps, "it's not even *six* and it's less than 300km to Alice".

"And where's my gear? And what the fuck's that drum doing on the back of my bike?"

"We're all going to Kings Canyon", advised Bob.

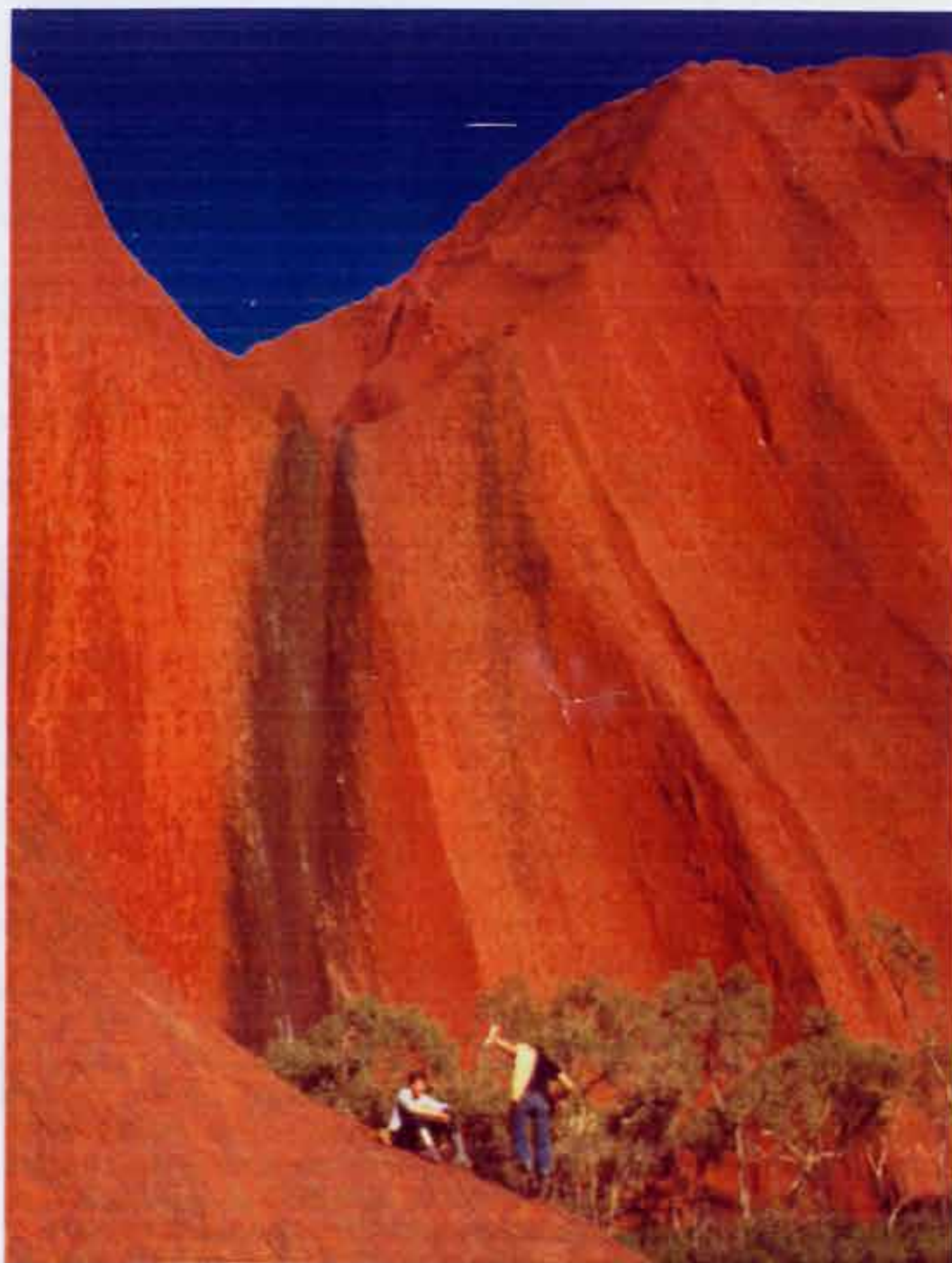
"I'll wait *here* for you then", replied Pedro heading back to his bunk. "Pick me up on the way back".

"No, we're going to Kings Canyon *then* on from there to Alice", rationalised Bob, "that's why you've got that fuel drum on your bike".

"Even if this track you're talking about *does* exist, how is twenty litres of extra fuel going to get five bikes almost 450km?", reasoned Pedro, his dry mouth croaking the same argument that he felt *must* have taken place the previous evening.

"Once you've seen the Canyon", advised Jim, "you continue along to the south of the range, you can't miss the cutting through the pass then the track heads towards Camels Hump, just go to the west of Gardiners Range





Climbing on 'The Rock' was open slather in 1982 but this was all to change with the opening of Yulara in 1984. Visitor numbers increased from 25,000 per year in 1970 to 70,000 per year in 1980. By the year 2000 over 1 million people per year visited Uluru not one of whom did it over dirt tracks on a Honda XL 250 (the bikes till exist but the tracks don't).

and in about 40 kms you'll eventually hit the main track to Hermannsburg Mission and Alice".

You said we couldn't go to Hermannsburg without a *permit*", objected Pedro, "*now* you reckon we can refuel there. And I suppose all these hills you mention are clearly sign posted".

"Don't be churlish Pedro", chastised Bob, "where's your spirit of adventure?".

"Lots of people have continued through that way after appreciating Kings Canyon", added Jim as he tried to look convincing through what appeared to be a terminal hangover.

"OK, but why the fuck do I have to carry the fuel", complained Pedro bitterly.

"Because you've already thrown away nearly all your gear", reasoned Patrick, "surely you can see that it was much easier for us to distribute what was left of *your* gear than it was for one of us. Besides it's only for the first 100km then we can share the fuel out".

"Just leave the drum by the side of the track, I'll pick it up later", said Jim. "Good Luck" he added as he staggered off to find his wife.

The official description of the *marked* track to Kings Canyon was 'Suitable for conventional vehicles at certain times' so possibly the red sand was *not* all that deep and certainly the track was very wide, allowing for long slow turn-ins and even wider exits to the long corners. But with tyre pressures to the max and over 30 kilos of sloshing weight hanging over the back axle line, Pedro knew that this was one hangover that would do exactly that.

Having got moving, there was no way Pedro was going to stop until the first stint was completed despite the smell of the petrol fumes and the early morning sun beating down on his black oilskin clad back.

On reaching Kings Creek, just short of the Canyon itself, Pedro dropped his bike in the narrow rocky creek and fell face first into the shallow water.

The other riders distributed the fuel whilst Pedro, who was less than his ebullient self after forgetting his tobacco was in his pocket, couldn't even have a fag to cure his itchy teeth and refocus his bloodshot eyeballs. "Well, are we going to see this fucking Canyon, or what?", he exploded.

"No, we only told Jim that to get him off *our* back", replied Gav. "We just thought this would be a more interesting way to get through to Alice. We've got all day".

"It shouldn't be too hard from here", added Patrick, "it's not even ten and we've already done the first quarter of the trip".

And we're 100km further away from our final destination than we were four hours ago, thought Pedro.





The original 'page 30' girl. Some of the cultural works on display in the underground dwellings at Coober Pedy are, well, unique. And not necessarily politically correct.

From there on in the track became what everyone was to discover later was called 'technical' but it had turned quite cool in the mid morning shadow of the George Gill Range and the ride was not difficult.

It was only when the track swung up through the pass that the going got tougher and hotter. And hotter and tougher.

Had any previous experience or even common-sense ruled, Pedro would have removed the heavy black Belstaffs, or at least some of the layers of clothing beneath them as the ambient temperature was now well above 25°C. But if ever his brain functioned rationally this was not one of those days, for when he dropped his machine off the side of the track into a deep washaway on a rocky uphill section of the pass, Pedro panicked.

His only thought was to keep going and, fully clad, without removing as much as his helmet or gloves, Pedro attempted to drag the bike up the steep incline. Even Patrick's return and welcome assistance did not quell Pedro's anxiety for as soon as the bike was back on the track, he jumped on and continued riding.

Little wonder he suffered complete brain fade and on cresting the rise, found he could not operate any of his limbs even though his brain kept screaming to change down a gear and hit the brakes. Nothing worked. It was a totally out of body experience. And the resultant crash did nothing for Pedro's general demeanour.

"So far, so good", remarked Wayne, "exactly as Jim described it. Now we just more or less follow this track in that direction", he added with unsupportable confidence.

A few klicks further on the riders were far less confident.

"I thought this must have been the main road", said Bob, "but it just comes to a complete dead end. Not even a walking track".

Back the other way it was the same, except that the riders had crossed yet another major graded road.

"Jim didn't tell us about this", observed Gavin as the riders realised they'd ridden into an abandoned mining exploration camp and by now the many intersecting 'shot lines' made it impossible to even agree on the entry point, let alone the correct track onwards. There were intersecting four lane gravel highways at every compass point, surrounded by looping 4WD tracks, gravel pits and abandoned campsites and all the other evidence of a major earth moving fleet being in the area.

The riders were lost, without food, without water and with barely enough fuel to cover 70 klicks in what is now known as the Mareenie Oil Field (Take care: numerous tracks in this area read the *current* maps).

"Well at least we know we've got to travel east", said Pedro, "we might as well continue on now. And let's stick together".

But with no cornerman system and no actual plan, Pedro soon found himself with Patrick at a three-way intersection waiting for the others. But did they wait long enough? Had the others been and gone? If so which



way did they go? There were no road signs. The tracks weren't even marked on the map.

"Well what do you reckon?", asked Pedro, "north east or south east? I reckon we're about 50km from Hermannsburg we might as well head there and hope for the best".

And in less than 20km the pair reached Hermannsburg. Except that it turned out to be Areyonga Native Settlement. Nowhere near Hermannsburg. But at least two of the riders now knew *where* they were, had obtained enough fuel to get all the way through to Alice, and, most importantly, knew *how* to get there thanks to the bemused friendlies.

"Well we might as well do it", said Patrick, "there's only one way out of here, back to that intersection. We can make the call from there".

They found Bob at the unmarked intersection and Wayne and Gavin, who'd done a few exploratory kliks up the road, soon returned to a full on blame storming session with major accusations, recriminations, denunciations, reproofs and censures thrown about with invective and abandon.

"It's all *your* fault Pedro", denounced Bob finally, "you didn't even want to be here in the *first* place".

As the sun dropped over the mountains to the north west, the temperature took an immediate nose dive and, with it, took the heat out of the argument as the riders realised they'd be lucky to reach Hermannsburg Mission before dark let alone Alice, a *further* hours ride to the east.

It was quick. Cold. Done in silence. And there were no more welcoming lights than the foyer of the recently built Alice Springs Casino.

"Are you *sure* you have a booking?", asked the receptionist in disbelief casting a suspicious eye at the filthy riders who, no doubt, were feeling a collective guilt at the vitriolic denouncement they'd laid on each other only a few hours previously and were now looking for any opportunity to blame an *outside party* for any minor offence and shift the focus of attention from themselves.

"I'd just find some rooms if I were you", suggested Wayne to the receptionist, "and worry about the paperwork later".

"Is John Bennett booked in?", asked Pedro.

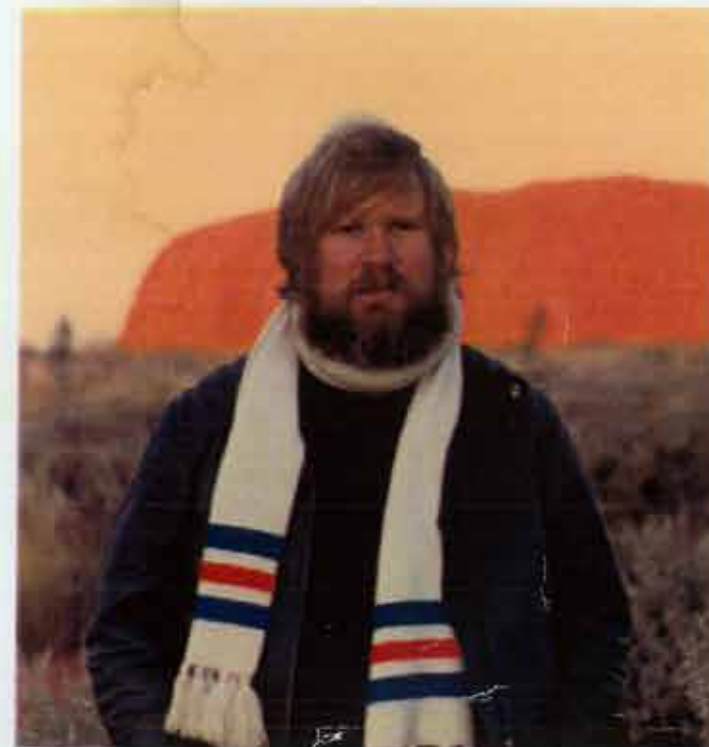
"Oh, are you with Mr. Bennett's party", said the girl, brightening considerably, "he asked me to let him know the moment you arrived".

"The rooms *first*", demanded Pedro, just as a freshly scrubbed JB burst into the foyer arms wide in welcome.

"Where have you been?", he exclaimed loudly with unappreciated enthusiasm. "What took you so long. I was expecting you for lunch. It's great here. Nice outdoor bar. Nice pool. You'll love it!".

"Forget the rooms, let's just have a beer", sighed Patrick.

"I'm glad that's over" said Gavin a little later "I'll never do that again". But they did. And they would. Again and again.



JOHN BENNETT

*Head and shoulders only, make sure I'm in focus, don't worry too much about the rock in the background. Can you see the scarf? Good! Now make sure it doesn't look too posed. Got it? OK. Would you mind taking another one just in case? Thanks.*

*This photograph is but one of many hundreds (if not hundreds of thousands) showing JB in a typical pose on his constant travels around the globe. Only the backgrounds and the garb change. Although over the years the degree of hirsuteness has also diminished.*

*Undoubtedly the Hercules of Hedonism, JB is also a maestro of manipulation and a chameleon of commitment. At a very early age JB had a micro chip implanted into his big toe to catalogue a comprehensive file on everyone JB had ever played for, against, over or under. And how they would best fit into his scheme for a pleasurable future.*

*On his ultimate plans JB was heard to say "I really haven't thought too much about the afterlife but I believe one should keep one's options open. So I'm planning to travel to Heaven one day because I know it's a lot easier to move down a class if necessary than it is to get upgraded".*



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