

# Running beyond... the black stump

Despite Australia experiencing its worst drought in many decades, Richard Smith recently went on a three month trip around Australia to revitalise his running. Although he encountered 50°C heat, bushfires, snakes and other nasties, he discovered some beautiful and remote areas in which to run.

## Dreaming of dreamtime...and going runabout

Have you ever dreamt about taking some time out to go on a big road trip around Australia? Living mainly in pockets of urbanised sprawl, we do occasionally venture to the edges of the bush. However, rarely do we explore the true outback. This is despite the area beyond the black stump

being so integral to the Australia psyche.

There are several excuses that people use to shy away from taking the trip to the distant corners of *Terra Australis*: work or family commitments, lack of money, fear of snakes, even fear of the unknown. As runners, we might also have concerns about how such a trip would affect our training.

After all, we struggle to maintain our regular running schedule during the interruption of a short summer holiday. Imagine the havoc that a lengthy trip around Australia would cause.

But don't think of excuses. Just think about the adventure of exploring the far reaches of the continent. Think about the nobility of the Never Never, the

wonders of Woop Woop, the beauty back o' Bourke. Think of the freedom and the fresh air, the sun and the sand, the good times and the dreamtime. Think of running along barren beaches, through radiant rainforests, across dazzling desert trails. And think of rewarding a hard earned thirst.

Making the decision to go is the hardest part. But it can be done. I went last year on a three month trip around the whole country. I had always wanted to see more of the land. Plus, my running was getting in the doldrums and not in the record books. I figured that a change in scenery would help revitalise my running. So at the end of September I packed my car and set off from Sydney on what would be a journey of over twenty three thousand kilometres – equivalent to nearly one and a half times the distance from Sydney to London.

**“Think of running along barren beaches, through radiant rainforests, across dazzling desert trails.”**

## Taking life easy – up the east coast into Queensland

I began my journey by heading north to the Warrumbungle National Park, an area full of the majestic remnants of volcanic peaks. The scenery was spectacular, such a contrast to the stifling city. I felt rejuvenated. I wanted to explore it all, so I spent several wonderful days bushwalking. However, by

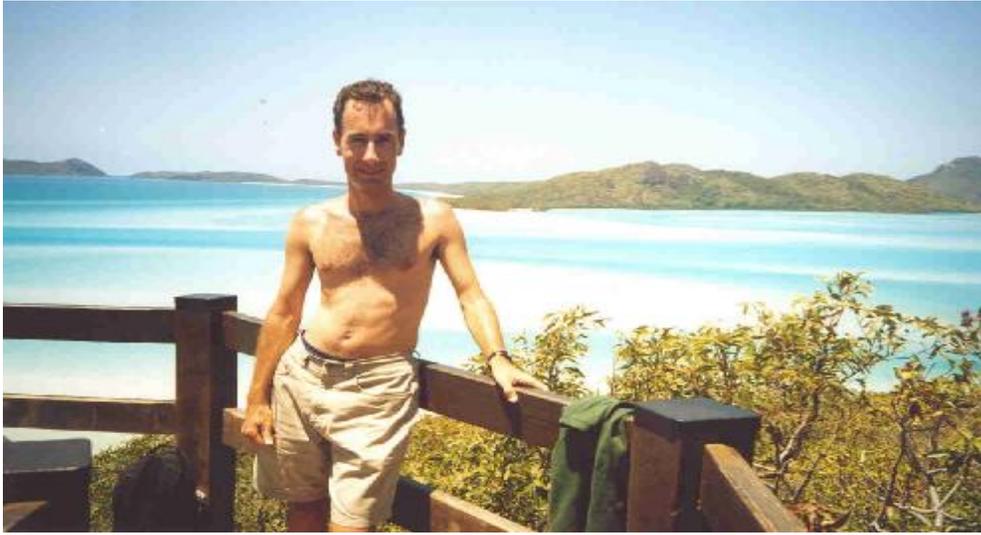
diverting all my energy into bushwalking, I wasn't doing any running at all. My training log was starting to look embarrassingly blank. Then I remembered the concept of cross-training. I had always regarded it as a bit

of a cop-out but I suddenly (and conveniently) became a convert. Thus my 'ambles through the bush' went down in my training log as cross-training.

As I meandered northwards through country NSW, my training log continued to be guiltily filled with cross-training



*The Breadknife,  
Warrumbungle National  
Park, NSW*



*Relaxing after a run on Whitsunday Island, Qld*

days. In fact, it was not until I reached Ballina on the far north NSW coast that my drought finally broke and I managed my first run of the whole trip. However plenty more runs soon followed as I made my way into Queensland and my focus shifted from the bush to the beach. I had lovely long runs along some of the state's best beaches including those at Coolum, Noosa and Rainbow Beach.

The running was beginning to go well. The worst thing that I had so far experienced was a dive-bombing magpie that was unrelenting in its attacks on me during my morning run at Kinka Beach near Yepoon. Things started to get a lot tougher as I headed further north above the Tropic of Capricorn into Northern Queensland.

### **Trying to keep cool in tropical Queensland**

It was mid-October and perhaps a little late in the year to be heading north. The air

was becoming more humid and the temperature was soaring higher. I had an utterly draining run one afternoon at Airlie Beach. I struggled to get through a forty minute run after becoming overheated and dehydrated. I spent the rest of the day desperately gulping down litre after litre of liquid to replenish myself. It was a scare for

me; I resolved to start taking my runs in the relative cool of the early mornings.

So I started getting up earlier and earlier in the mornings for my runs. By the time I had got as far north as Mission Beach near Tully, I was having to get up

well before dawn at five o'clock to start my run. This is not the sort of time at which most people expect to get up when on holiday. However, at Mission Beach, there is an idyllic palm-fringed beach; each morning I was raring to get its sand between my toes. As I ran along the golden sweep of beach, I would watch the sun gradually smoulder above the horizon of the ocean. Only after the sun had ignited into full flame would I reluctantly wind down my run.

***“As I ran along the golden sweep of beach, I would watch the sun gradually smoulder above the horizon of the ocean.”***

I next moved up to the Daintree rainforest, my most northerly point on the east coast. It was there that I heard news that a tourist had been taken by a crocodile in the Northern Territory. Later that day, as I went for my run along a remote strip of rainforest-bordered beach, I made sure that I ran a little further away from the water's edge than usual. Each small ripple in the water seemed ominous. All the way up the east coast until this point, I had generally been in my comfort zone. But I was starting to get more nervous, especially as it was time for me to head west into the unfamiliar territory of the outback.

### **Angels in outback Queensland**

After fixing a cracked windscreen down in Townsville, I headed out along the Flinders Highway towards the Northern Territory. There were significant changes as I travelled further away from the ocean. The rainforest quickly gave way to desert, the air became a lot drier, and the population vanished. I suddenly felt like a stranger away from the tourist-frequented coast.

I stopped for the night at a small farming town west of Charters Towers. I pitched my tent and thought about going for a run. But I was nervous and reluctant to venture out running. Would the folks in these remote communities appreciate that people run for fun? Perhaps the only critters that the locals see running are emus – and emus end up in pies. I wasn't keen on providing any local hoons with some target practice. Plus, how would people react to my skimpy running shorts? Most of the locals seemed to be wearing the regulation R M Williams and Akubra uniform.

I anxiously abandoned plans of an evening run and decided to go for a walk around the town instead. As I later headed back to my campsite, I saw three figures approaching me from out of the sunset. I couldn't make them out at first. Then I saw the familiar gait. Runners! Three angelic young women jogged past me, cheerily greeting me as they went. I had been sent a sign: running in the outback was not only a done thing, it was a beautiful thing.

*Termite mounds in outback Qld*





*The most remote running track in Australia?*

### Into the top end

I think that the outback is more immense than most people realise. As I drove to the Northern Territory, I was averaging six hundred kilometres per day just to reach the next reasonably sized settlement. Some towns had been established solely for mining (Mt Isa), others were farming centres (Hughenden), a few focused on tourism (Mataranka), but most appeared to be just refuelling stops (Barkly Roadhouse).

Tennant Creek was allegedly established where a cartload of beer became marooned in the 1930s. It now has plenty of pubs. So after a long and *thirsty* drive to get there, I didn't bother going for a run.

I was now so far into the outback that it was a very rare (but not unknown) occasion for me to encounter a fellow runner. At Mataranka, I happened upon a woman finishing her run as I was setting off for mine. There was only a hint of dawn in the sky at the time, so she must have started her run especially early.

### Running in the heat

It was now absolutely essential to rise early to avoid the hot temperatures that were soaring to extreme levels during the day. For example, I had to cut short a gentle lunchtime bushwalk near Katherine Gorge because I felt uncomfortably close to getting heatstroke. I subsequently found out that it was officially estimated that the heat reflecting off the sandstone gorges that day had soared to over 50°C.

My running attire was usually a simple pair of shorts and running shoes. Singlets would have been drenched in perspiration before I had even 'worked up a sweat' figuratively speaking. I started thinking about new ways to gauge

temperature and humidity during outback running. Forget Celsius and Fahrenheit. The best method was to wear light coloured shorts and see how many minutes it took for them to completely darken over with perspiration. Half an hour was relatively cool. Twenty minutes was getting hot. The

***“Kookaburras, hidden on their high perches up in the gum trees, would laugh at me running in the heat.”***

not unusual ten minutes was stinking hot (literally stinking hot).

### The wildlife – dead and alive

Starting my run around dawn had other advantages in addition to avoiding the heat. I would often have early morning encounters with roos and wallabies, emus, lizards, and the most extravagantly coloured parrots and

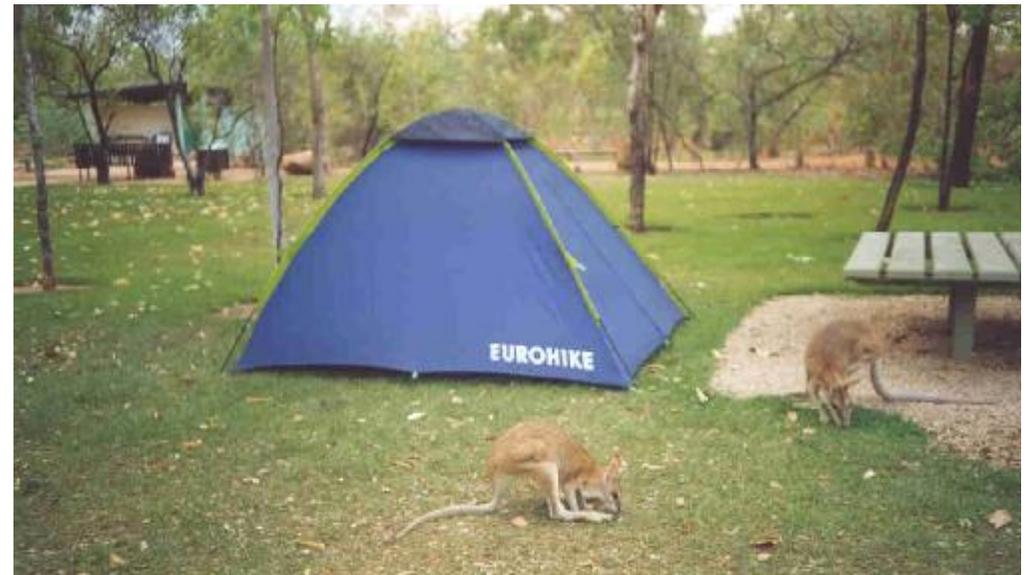
cockatoos. On one particular run I startled a group of brolgas into flight, a sight rarely seen. These were some of the most rewarding times of my trip.

One early morning encounter that I could have done without was with a four metres long Olive Python. It was hiding itself around a corner in the path that I was speeding along. Only quick reflexes on my part stopped me from planting my foot on it. While I cleaned myself up after the shock, the snake leisurely slipped away.

Although I saw much wildlife, there was plenty more wildlife that I only heard. In the middle of the night, I would hear animals foraging and munching the moist grasses near to my tent. When out running during the day, I would often hear surprised roos crashing away through the scrub. Small lizards would scurry around unseen in the grasses. Kookaburras, hidden on their high perches up in the gum trees, would laugh at me running in the heat.

I would often find dead animals too. Given the climate, I would usually smell

*A couple of my more friendly and welcome campsite visitors, NT*



the carcass at least half a minute before I passed the bloodstained remains. Often they were roadkill. They were mainly roos, but I did pass a dead horse once. Imagine the stench of that. Late in my trip, I spoke to a fellow who had discovered a dead camel. I conceded that the camel probably stank the worst.

### Stranded in the outback

Darwin was the most northerly part of my trip. I found it uncomfortably humid. I had some rewarding runs there, but it was too hot in my tent at night to be able to rest properly. So I headed off in the direction of Western Australia. This was one of the most remote parts of my journey.

I was sometimes nervous about being troubled by township dogs when out running. To avoid them, I would often drive out of town to go for my run. Early one particular morning, I was looking for a place to start my run when a stranded motorist flagged me down. He explained that he had a punctured tyre and had been stuck there all night. I thought that he was mad not to be

*A deadly desert landscape in WA*



carrying a spare tyre on such a lonely highway. However when I mentioned that I had been about to go for a run out there, the uncertain look he gave me suggested that he thought that it was I that was mad.

After giving the fellow a lift into town, I returned to the desert for my run along the quiet highway. Half an hour into my run, the first car of the day drove past. I gave the driver a wave to let him know that I was okay. Even so, he gave me an aghast look indicating that he was another one who thought that I was mad. It was quite common

***“I guess it wasn’t usual to see a half naked skinny white fellow running along such remote highways.”***

for me to receive similar bewildered looks from motorists. I guess it wasn’t usual to see a half-naked skinny white fellow running along such remote highways.

Later that morning, I rescued another stranded

motorist whose car had broken down. The gear box was blown. While the car was not going anywhere, the dishevelled and giddy owner was already well on his way to insobriety. It was not yet nine o’clock in the morning. He had two pieces of luggage: a holdall and an esky half full of tinnies that he continued to knock back throughout our *very long* one hundred kilometre journey together to Kununnurra.



### Bushfires liven up the endless highway through WA

I spent the next couple of days driving a mammoth journey, passing through the desperate settlements of Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing to the oasis of Broome. The magnificent Cable Beach at Broome provided an endless stretch of sand for me to run along. There is nothing like going for a

*Large bushfire crossing the remote highway south of Broome, WA*

long run and then cooling off afterwards with a dip in the sea. For the rest of the day, I would relax by the pool and wonder what the workers of the world were doing.

I spent a lot of time in my car over the next week. Observing the nuances in the landscape and flora of the outback was often mesmerizing. At other times, I was just bored of it all. I would sometimes cry out for something just to happen. But be careful what you wish for. Near the appropriately named Sandfire Roadhouse, on the searingly hot Great Northern Highway, I had the scare of my life by having to drive through a large bushfire that straddled the highway.

At Port Headland, the Great Northern Highway became the Great North West Coast Highway. The road dragged on. At Geraldton, the Great North West Coast Highway became the Brand Highway. The road dragged on. Finally, the outback turned to farmland, and the traffic became more frequent. I was getting close to Perth.

## Refreshing runs in Perth and southern Western Australia

After so many weeks in the outback, it was refreshing to get to Perth. Admittedly it would have been refreshing to see any city, but I was particularly taken with Perth. As I went for runs around Kings Park overlooking the city, and through the beachside suburbs near Cottesloe, I greeted my fellow runners with more gusto. To add to my delight, the high temperatures had finally moderated as the winds off the Indian Ocean strengthened. I felt at my most relaxed of the whole trip.

Although I still had the whole of the country to drive across to get back to Sydney, I felt as though I had now completed the hard parts of the trip. Even the prospect of crossing the infamous Nullarbor Plain failed to daunt me.

Before facing the Nullarbor, I had the treat of a week in the lush south west corner of the state. I went on some beautiful coastal runs at Margaret River, Walpole, Albany and Esperance. Although most Australian towns have cycle and walking tracks which runners use, I found the tracks of these towns particularly invigorating.

***“I felt fitter and healthier than I had been for years. My car tyres were in not such good shape. Nor were my running shoes.”***

I was enjoying my running more than ever. As well as regarding my runs as a great way of keeping fit, I was also using them as a means of exploring the new areas and towns that I was visiting. Consequently, I was no longer concerned about trying to run my fastest. But I found that the length of my runs had gradually risen during the course of my trip. I would now often run for over two hours.



*A great place to run, Flinders Ranges, SA*

## Across the Nullarbor

After a night camping in the desert just east of Norseman, I was up early and driving the thousand kilometres across the Nullarbor. 'Struth, it was a long day. Although Australia was experiencing its worst drought in decades, I actually saw a spell of rain on the Nullarbor. I doubt if the rain would have had any effect on the exhausted land. I saw a dingo scavenging near a roadhouse; it was so emaciated that it would have eaten anything.

At the eastern end of the Nullarbor, I had planned to rest up at Ceduna.

*Full solar eclipse, Lyndhurst, SA*



Unfortunately for me, the small South Australian town had been descended upon by tens of thousands of star gazers to watch a full solar eclipse. All the accommodation was booked out, so I headed off to the Flinders Ranges for my last taste of running in the outback. I managed to see the solar eclipse there in an appropriately dusty and barren lunar landscape.

## Back towards civilisation

A few days later, I was back in comparatively mainstream Australia. Running along the Riesling Trail - through the sophisticated vineyards of the Clare valley - seemed a world away from the desert landscapes of a lot of my recent runs. It was still not all sophistication though; during a run in the coastal holiday town of Goolwa, I noticed a waterfront guesthouse called *Vue de Merde*.

Feeling strong, I headed to the Grampians mountain range in Victoria for some intense running and bushwalking. Nearby is the town of Stawell, of *Stawell*

*Gift* fame, with an interesting museum dedicated to the historic race. I meandered eastwards through central Victoria to the edges of the Great Dividing Range for some runs around Mt Buller, Bright and Mt Beauty. Just before Christmas, I passed into NSW for a few days on the magnificent alpine trails of the Kosciuszko National Park.

My journey was drawing to a close. It had been an exhausting but rewarding trip. I felt fitter and healthier than I had been for years. My car tyres were in not such good shape. Nor were my running shoes. They had literally worn through to their insoles. One more run would have had the soles of my feet scraping the ground. Oddly, the idea of a run with the skin of my feet touching the raw earth appealed to me. So having spent the last three months communing with the remoter parts of this ancient land, I put away my running shoes and went for one final run... barefooted.

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