

Cycling

The Savannah Way

AN EPIC RIDE ACROSS CAPE YORK

Campers and cyclists enjoy the Savannah Way in equal measure on the annual Cairns to Karumba Bike Ride.

Words & images: Fiona Harper



Clockwise from far left: Supporters and volunteers are the backbone of this community – it wouldn't happen without their dedication and support! ❖ Vast open spaces sum up the landscape as riders and supporters move westwards. ❖ Road riders followed the bitumen for 780 km between Cairns and Karumba. ❖ The Gullfander historic train runs between Croydon and Normanton.

There are really only two ways to do the Savannah Way. Straddling the continent between Broome in the west and Cairns in the east, it's an iconic road trip right up there alongside notables such as Victoria's Great Ocean Road or West Australia's Cape to Cape. Being so vast and isolated in spots it's best to break it down into manageable sections.

Despite its remoteness, or perhaps because of it, it's an extraordinary outback adventure. Not to mention the bragging rights that come from such an epic escapade.

You could drive the Savannah Way as most people do. But why follow the crowd? Why not ride it instead? We're not talking motor bikes here, we're talking good old fashioned, pedal-powered bicycles.

The best (and safest) way to cycle Queensland's Cape York section between the Coral Sea and the Gulf of Carpentaria is to join the annual Cairns to Karumba Bike Ride (C2K). Which is how I find myself alongside 170 cyclists riding out of Cairns at dawn, bound for Karumba 780 km to the west.

For hard-core long distance cyclists the Savannah Way is an alluringly crazy challenge. With road trains the length of 10 cars or more on a highway that is often little more than a goat track, it's not the sort

of ride you'd tackle on a café-latte training regime.

The first C2K ride in 1996 was created as a fundraiser for the Cairns School of Distance Education. It's since expanded to support children living in remote rural areas of north Queensland. Almost one million dollars have been donated in the intervening years with bush kids and their education needs being the biggest beneficiary. Remote communities who benefit from donated funds roll out the red carpet as the C2K circus passes through town.

I've roped my mum in as support crew to drive our plush four-berth 'mother ship' Euro Tourer from Apollo Campers. It's got all the bells and whistles. Think hot shower, flushing toilet, decent-sized fridge, oven and cooktop and, most importantly, two super comfortable double beds.

Mum is also volunteering as part of the catering crew tasked with feeding hungry riders and support crews. Between shifts she's packing up camp each day, driving to the next stop and setting up camp again. Riders arrive in various stages of exhaustion and filth, particularly the mountain bikers who are known as *dirty boys* for good reason.

Atherton Tablelands

Leaving Cairns, the Kennedy Highway

twists and turns through the Kuranda Range, popping out of the rainforest onto rolling hills and farmland of the Atherton Tablelands. At almost 900 metres above sea level, skilled riders at the head of the pack ascend ever so slowly while others board the bus up the Kuranda Range Road. *Dirty boys* follow an old rail trail to Mareeba Wetlands before riding into Northcote Station. Riders and support crews regroup in Atherton, camping at the BIG4 Atherton Woodlands Tourist Park. A relative metropolis (population 7300) compared to towns further west, Atherton offers a fine opportunity to stock up on produce that the Tablelands are famous for, like avocados, corn, mangoes, bananas, macadamias and coffee.

Ravenshoe

Herberton Historic Village is a cracker of a museum that is styled as a historic village with a gazillion fascinating exhibits. Further on, the soothingly warm waters of Innot Hot Springs would be an ideal place to soak weary legs but there's plenty of kilometres to go and a schedule to keep so riders carry on while support crews linger. Queensland's most elevated town awaits, Ravenshoe (pronounced Ravens-hoe, like no, not Raven-shoe like new. Get it?). Rainforest thrives at this elevation, so does the wind so it's a handy spot to position Queensland's largest wind farm.



Top to bottom:
Cattle stations provided their own hazards with cattle reluctant to give way to riders or support drivers. ❖ The famous Purple Pub at Normanton is a highlight of the Savannah Way.



Mt Garnet

By now lush wet tropics rainforest have been left behind and the landscape starts opening out into savannah country. Eucalypts, low scrub and gravelly soil prevail; the sort of landscape that has hosted historic gold rushes. Mt Garnet's name is a dead-set giveaway in relation to its origins. A former mining town, streets are named after the minerals (tin, copper, zinc and you guessed it, garnet) that encouraged early settlement. We camp out at Mt Garnet Rodeo Grounds where squatter-like huts provide shelter for those roughing it in tents.

Mt Surprise

Support crew take the opportunity to visit Undarra Volcanic National Park where there is one of Earth's longest lava flows from a single volcanic eruption almost 200,000 years ago. Rainforest and wildlife thrive in underground Undarra Lava Tubes, which is one of the longest lava tube cave systems in the world.

The population of Mt Surprise is more than doubled with the arrival of 200-odd C2K riders and supporters, which delights the publican as we camp out in the paddock behind the Mt Surprise Hotel.

Georgetown

Georgetown is a ubiquitous name, no doubt because historically there were a lot of explorer guys named George with a penchant for immortalisation. There are at least four Georgetowns in Australia and no less than 65 globally (USA takes a bow, they've got at least 44 of them). Georgetown, Queensland doesn't stake too many claims to fame, but it can take credit for a number of notable mentions in Nevil Shute's novel *A Town like Alice*.

Croydon

Once the centre of a gold rush, Croydon was bursting at the seams with more than 7000 residents in the late 1880s. Things are a little more sedate these days with just 300 residents residing in a veritable living museum with restored heritage-listed buildings everywhere you look.

Croydon is one of two stops for the *Gulflander* train, famous for being a historic train that goes from nowhere to nowhere (the terminus being Normanton). But that's a bit harsh – even if you're not a train spotter it's worth hopping on board to savour some history. Croydon rodeo grounds provide one of the best camp sites on the entire ride with lush green grass and shady trees. We plug

the 'mother ship' in to a powered site and could've happily spent a few days there!

Normanton

Home of *big things* like Krys the Croc and the Big Barramundi as well as the famous Purple Pub, Normanton needs little introduction. Krystina Pawlowska shot an 8.6 metre (think about it – that's about the same size as an adult giraffe) saltwater crocodile that has been replicated in actual size. Riders descend on Krys for the annual photo bombing opportunity en route to the pub before camping out at Normanton rodeo grounds.

Karumba

High fives and tears, hot chips and beers, there's both jubilation and relief at the Sunset Tavern on Karumba's waterfront. Seven days, 780 kilometres and with almost \$100,000 raised, this is an epic ride. But, perhaps what makes it really special is that it's not just for cyclists. It's hard to determine who has more fun, the supporters or the riders! Billed as a Bucket List Ride on the Savannah Way, it fully lives up to expectations. ❖

FACT FILE



Getting there

The C2K Ride starts from the Cairns Esplanade and finishes 7 days later on the shore of Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria. For more details visit www.ridefnq.com



Where to camp

Group campsites are pre-booked and vary between caravan parks with facilities such as grass tent sites, swimming pool, bike wash down area and well-appointed eco cabins like BIG4 Woodlands Caravan Park. Others, like Normanton rodeo grounds, are far more basic.

When to go

The 2016 ride is from 25 June 2016 to 1 July 2016.

Further information

Apollo Campers Cairns have campervans ranging from two person budget through to six person luxury campervans. Visit www.apollocamper.com

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