

# Oz Moto Tour

By Bill Havens #136014

## Introduction

*I had dreamed of touring Australia by motorcycle for at least a decade. Having visited this unique continent multiple times, I had become enamored with its striking beauty and warm hospitality. My opportunity came in September (spring in Australia). I e-mailed a good friend, Michael Von Kopalkow of Sydney, in hopes that he would be interested. He replied almost immediately, saying “I’m there, mate.”*

*The plan was to ride north from Sydney through the Blue Mountains of New South Wales (NSW). This route would allow us to avoid the traffic and congestion of the Sydney suburban sprawl. We would go inland to ride the old “settlers’ roads,” which were originally built to open up the interior to the immigrant waves. Built for horse and buggy*

*but now sealed with modern asphalt, these roads connect small towns and villages to the larger agricultural regional centers and the coast. Fortunately for us, they wind through steep mountain passes with lots of twisties and switchbacks. They are just perfect for “adrenalin touring.”*

*Our destination was the famous surfing and counterculture town of Byron Bay, near the Queensland state border. The trip would involve 2,000 kilometers of riding over a 7-day period. We would traverse spectacular mountain ranges and valleys populated by cattle ranches and majestic forests juxtaposed between dry ranch land and the wild Pacific coast. The climate would vary from the Mediterranean environment of Sydney to the tropical banana belt of Queensland.*



**Opposite:** Coming up the twisties on Waterfall Way

**Top to Bottom:** Two mates outside the notorious Wollombi Tavern • The old Central Hotel in Tamworth, NSW • The Cockfighter Creek Tavern along the Putty Road is motorbike friendly with country cooking • Buddy Williams and other Australian country music stars are immortalized in Tamworth’s public park

**DAY 1:**

**From Sydney to Tamworth**

I picked up a 2008 R1200GS from BikeEscape in Sydney. The bike rental was relatively inexpensive at about \$800 U.S. dollars per week, but came with a whopping \$5000 deductible on the insurance. Better not drop it! The GS had only 5,000 km on the clock. It came with factory hard cases and a Givi tail box, more than enough luggage space. Michael rode his 2007 R1200R with factory hard cases and a small tail bag for sundries.

Our route took us from urban Sydney with its chaotic traffic toward Windsor in the Blue Mountains west of the city, where we connected with the popular Putty Road, which winds northwesterly through Wollemi National Park for 160 km of spectacular motorcycling terrain. After about an hour, Michael pulled off the Putty at the Halfway Roadhouse, where we gassed up and succumbed to the truly awful meat pies sold inside.

At the end of Putty Road, we rode the New England Highway enroute to Tamworth. This “highway” is mostly two lanes of well-maintained blacktop with sweeping curves and great panoramas of farms and forests. We passed through little towns like Scone, Murrurundi and Willow Tree, each with its essential pub. Two hundred kilometers later we arrived in Tamworth, which bills itself as the “Country Music Capital of Australia.”

Avoiding the motel strip, we headed downtown to check out the old Central Hotel with rooms available at \$30 each per night. There were no frills, with baths at the end of the hall and parking for our Beemers available inside the hotel’s kitchen. But the country music band blared at mind-numbing volume directly below our room until 2 a.m. Lesson learned: arrive at your nightly destination early enough to check out the scene.

## DAY 2:

### From Tamworth to Coffs Harbor via Armidale

In the morning, we headed north again on New England Highway toward Armidale and eventually our destination of Coffs Harbor on the coast. Enjoying the scenery, I managed to do a 180 in a roundabout and get separated from Michael and his GPS. Mobile phones to the rescue.

Armidale is about 170 km inland from the coast in the New England heartland of NSW. It is the terminus of two fantastic motorcycling roads: Waterfall Way and Thunderbolts Way. We planned on riding the first road on our way northeastward to Byron Bay and the second on our return trip south.

We rode Waterfall Way for nearly 150 km before suddenly arriving in the unassuming country town of Dorrigo. It was a fine place for lunch and another coffee before continuing eastward. Here we also met two blokes from the NSW Emergency Services, who warned us about the dangerous mountain road to follow. Upon leaving Dorrigo, we immediately encountered the road's extreme charms. One switchback after another, right hand hard on the brake, then back on the throttle all the way down the mountain-side. Great fun with lots of adrenalin moments.

At the other end of Waterfall Way is the main Pacific Highway along the beautiful South Pacific Ocean, which brought us shortly to Coffs Harbor. After a good curry and a few beers, we retired exhausted at the end of Day 2.

## DAY 3:

### Coffs Harbor via Grafton to Lennox Head

Michael proposed getting on the road early with a Sunday brunch later in Grafton. The entrance to the town crosses the Clarence River over one of the most dangerous, old narrow concrete bridges imaginable. At two points on the span, the bridge deck suddenly turns 45 degrees left, then right again. Accidents waiting to happen!

Grafton itself is rather pleasant, with shops, banks, cafes, restaurants and the requisite hotel pub. We were starving, but it was Sunday and nothing was open. To our rescue, the hotel was hosting a Sunday brunch. But Michael was suspect. "You're in the Aussie bush now, mate. Don't expect much," he warned. He was right. We endured rubber scrambled eggs, baked beans and do-it-yourself toast, all washed down with instant coffee. Time to move on.

We headed northward again on Summerland Way through the mountains to Casino, 102 km distant. This two-lane road winds its way along the ridges and traverses the valleys of this cattle ranching area past tiny hamlets with no names. From Casino, we pushed on eastward along Bruxner Highway toward the Pacific coast again. Seventy kilometers later we arrived in the coastal town of Ballina, where we rejoined Pacific Highway. We rode the freeway slab the rest of the way to Lennox Head and booked a two-day stay at a backpacker motel for some needed down time. What better place than the subtropical beaches of northern NSW?



**Top to Bottom:** Michael taking a big sweeper on Waterfall Way  
A working motorbiker with his herd near Casino, NSW  
Stunning view northward along the NSW coast from Cape Byron



#### DAY 4:

### Lennox Head to Byron Bay and return

A thunderstorm the night before washed our bikes clean and the tropical air was warm and fragrant. Michael called an old mate, Leon, and we agreed to meet up for lunch in Byron Bay, farther north up the coast. The natural beauty of Byron Bay is astounding. The lighthouse at Cape Byron is the easternmost point in Australia and offers stunning views.



#### Top to Bottom:

Michael and his friend Leon at the Cape Byron Light House  
Two clean machines after a tropical downpour in Lennox Head, NSW  
Lennox Head on the coast of NSW



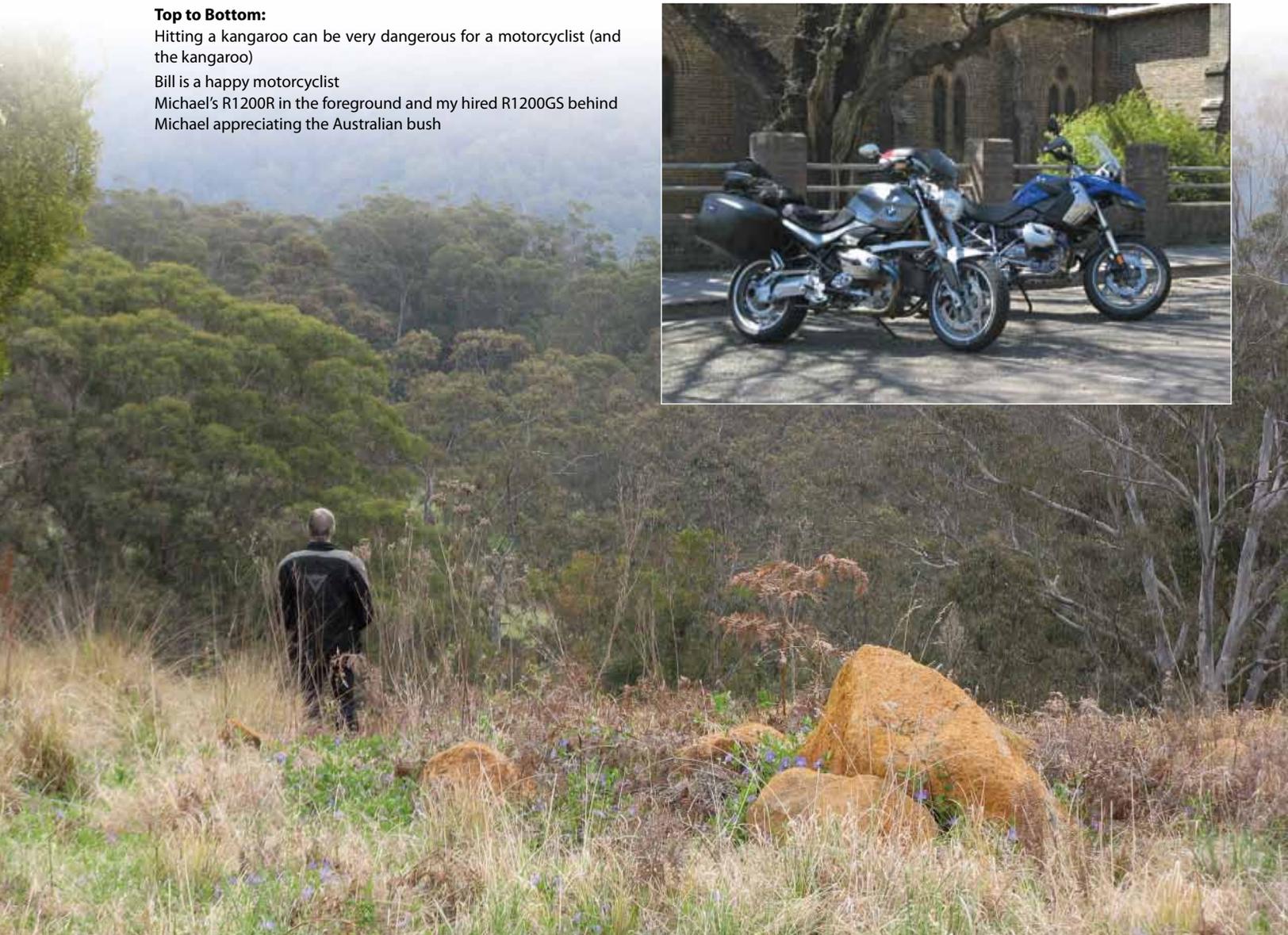


**Top to Bottom:**

Hitting a kangaroo can be very dangerous for a motorcyclist (and the kangaroo)

Bill is a happy motorcyclist

Michael's R1200R in the foreground and my hired R1200GS behind Michael appreciating the Australian bush



## DAY 5:

### Lennox Head to Armidale

Today we retraced our route from Lennox Head through Casino back to Grafton, which was now open for business. Here we met two blokes, Bill and Charlie, who were likewise riding the back roads of NSW. Unlike us, they had no plan or timetable for their adventures. They were just riding.

We left Grafton heading inland along unmarked mountain roads. Eventually the GPS routed us onto the sweepers and twisties of Waterfall Way. But then the heavens opened up. We chased lorries into Armidale in a blinding thunderstorm. Fortunately, the manager of our motel let us dry our gear in her clothes dryer. Classic Aussie hospitality.

## DAY 6:

### Armidale on Thunderbolts Way to Forster

The morning gave us bright sunshine and another perfect riding day. We had been looking forward to riding Thunderbolts Way since our earlier visit to Armidale. This country highway is over 200 km of two-lane sweepers and switchbacks which crosses the Great Dividing Range. We passed through state forests, national parks and unnamed hamlets. As we approached the regional town of Gloucester, we negotiated a spectacular mountain pass descending into the valley below. The route is unimproved from the original settlers' track, with plenty of one-lane wooden bridges and 180-degree switchbacks.

From Gloucester we took Bucketts Way to the town of Forster on the coast. Also a settlers' route, but it has been improved significantly to carry commercial traffic. The day offered beautiful blue skies and glorious scenery with almost no traffic.

Fifty kilometers later we again joined the Pacific Highway at the village of Nahiack, which has the usual hotel pub, shops and a "servo" (service station in Australian). But it also houses the Australian National Motorcycle Museum, which contains an amazing collection of vintage motorcycles. I found a restored BSA Lightning 650 with the starburst gas tank like I used to ride back in 1970. Fond memories!

## DAY 7:

### Forster to Sydney

This was the final day of our adventure. How could a week go by so quickly? We stoked up on carbohydrates and caffeine and then headed toward the wine growing region of the Hunter Valley.

It would be a shame to traverse this verdant valley without sampling its famous wines. But we were limited for time. Michael's partner, Alice, had promised dinner at their home later that evening. So we stopped at only one estate winery, but one of the best in Australia. Lakes Folly Winery, in the village of Pokolbin, was established in 1963. Since then its Cabernets have won top awards year after year.

After our ever so brief wine tasting, we beetled it toward Sydney. It was afternoon already when we joined the notorious Sydney rush hour. Avoiding the freeway as long as possible, we motored



#### Top to Bottom:

Riding Bucketts Way toward the NSW coast on a beautiful Spring day  
Armada of motorbikes housed in the Australian National Motorcycle Museum located in Nahiack, NSW  
Sunset on Wallis Lake lagoon in Forster, NSW

southward down through the Blue Mountains on an old country road, eventually arriving at the motorcycle-friendly Wollombi Pub.

Foregoing the good Aussie beer on tap, we downed a lemon squash each and girded ourselves for the traffic ahead. We passed through more little villages with odd names (my favorite being Central Mangrove). As we approached the suburb of Gosford, we joined four lanes of modern freeway cut deeply through the sandstone of the Blue Mountains as it descends into the urban sprawl of Sydney. We passed through Brisbane Waters National Park, then across the Hawkesbury River into Kuringgai Chase National Park, now only 25km from downtown Sydney. The traffic was brutal and would become even more frenetic as we neared the urban core. Inexplicably, the freeway ends at Hornsby, dumping us all onto overloaded city streets on the way southward to the famous Sydney Harbor Bridge.

Bumper to bumper for seemingly an eternity, then the exit for the bridge, and then there it was looming overhead. The bridge was spectacular! I have seen it previously from the shore, from trips on harbor ferry boats and of course from images. But this was the first time I had ridden across it. I found myself gawking like a tourist but unfortunately also riding in high speed, rush hour traffic at the same time. Where was Michael? The bridge is on his commuter route and he was impossible to catch. Fortunately, he waited for me at the automated tollbooth with his electronic tag. Ten minutes later we were at his home in the city. The adventure was very suddenly over.



**Top to Bottom:**

Bill and Charlie touring around NSW on Triumphs  
Three unattached ladies in Tamworth, NSW, looking for a good time  
Michael outside Lakes Folly Winery in the famous Hunter Valley wine district.





**Above:** Bill with a bottle of the newly released Cabernet Sauvignon blend from Lakes Folly Vineyards



Route from Sydney to Byron Bay



Route from Lennox Head to Sydney

## Conclusion

*We had ridden for a week together through some of the most beautiful scenery in Australia. We visited little country towns founded by the early European settlers which remain still vibrant communities today. We rode only the old highways over the mountain passes and through the lush farmlands and rain forests. It was truly the Aussie motorcycle adventure of my dreams.*

*At dinner that night, Michael told me his own dream of riding through the North American Rocky Mountains. Was I interested? What more could I say than "I'm there, mate!"* 🍷