

Peddalling to ends of the earth

Sandor Lau cycles through a kangaroo graveyard, past the longest wooden jetty in the Southern Hemisphere, to reach Cape Leeuwin, where the Indian and Southern Oceans meet

I AM pedalling through a kangaroo graveyard on the road to the end of the world. The gleaming white skeletons on the roadside remind me that a lone cyclist is just as easy roadkill for the Yobbus Australis as the 'roos are. Yes, this is what I call fun.

I've been to the ends of the earth before: Cape Finisterra where Spain plunges into the Atlantic, Olanbi where Taiwan disappears into the South China Sea, and of course Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape Reinga).

It's always something magical to go as far as your legs will carry you; the ends of the earth are my Mt Everest, North Pole, Golden Fleece and Maltese Falcon. They're treasures in themselves, but more importantly, the challenge of the journey to reach them is something you'll never forget.

So now I'm on a mission down the coast of the Indian Ocean from Busselton to Cape Leeuwin (pronounced loo'-in in Te Reo 'Strayan), one of only four places on earth where two oceans meet. It's the southwest tip of Australia and from there the next stopoff is Antarctica.

Perth to Bunbury 250km

My two most vivid memories of Perth are the following: you must pay to use the public toilets but, fortunately, they come fully equipped with hygienic disposal for hypodermic syringes and needles.

Only seconds after stepping into central Perth, I can't help but notice two cops hassling two homeless Aboriginal men so foolish they don't even know it's illegal to be homeless.

But I haven't left one city just to come to another, and a few seconds later, I'm on the train for the countryside, the sunshine, and Bunbury.

Bunbury to Dunsborough 81km

This is the start of the real journey, cycling 200km through the bush and beaches of Western Australia in search of a little adventure, a little communion with nature, and the kind of satisfaction that comes only when you earn it.

Since I took my first trip from Auckland



JUMPERS' END: The road to Cape Leeuwin is lined, in places, with kangaroo skeletons, victims of road kill.

PICTURES/SANDOR LAU

to Wellington four years ago, I have understood that cycling is the perfect way to get to know this earth on a first-name basis. In a car, those kangaroo skeletons would be nothing but a blur and stopping to check them out would make a major event.

But on a bike you can stop on a whim and a skeleton on the side of the road is like a sign to remind you of your own mortality — which is perhaps the best reminder in the world that today is a grand day to be alive.

More important than brushes with death are the brushes with life. From the car you

may see a live kangaroo bouncing away, careful not to join its friend in the ditch, but when I see my first kangaroo, we make eye contact and I'm just about to ask him to take my photo when he hops off.

I'm so engaged with the kangaroo, I nearly fall into a web scurrying with spiders the size of a baby's hand, then sit down to have some lunch with them and take a look at the world from their point of view. That view is worth it — ripples of mirage floating off the brown earth make the billabong in the distance look like an oasis illusion.

It could be an Outback postcard, but no postcard includes the smell of the peppermint trees that make every breath like the first breath of the day.

I've spent the day cycling near the coast, but it's not until late afternoon when I reach Busselton that I get to taste a view of the dark blue waters of the Indian Ocean and Geographe Bay.

It's not enough just to look from the distance, because you can see it up close from the Busselton Jetty, the longest timber jetty in the Southern Hemisphere.

It reaches out 2km into the ocean, 2km closer to India, the only land in that direction for thousands of kilometres.

I've always found cycling to have a kind of short-term karmic value that pays itself off in the sacrifices and rewards of the hills and valleys of the road. Here though, the Bussel Highway is gorgeously flat and I plan to spend my energy enjoying the view.

Maybe as penance for counting my blessings too soon, I develop a paranoid feeling that the wind is against me and would actually push me backwards if I stopped pedalling. But when I reach Dunsborough the payoff is the sweet forgetfulness that exhaustion brings, and the pleasure of one of the finest sleeps I've ever had.

Dunsborough to Margaret River 48km

Early in the day, I make a stop in Yallingup at NgLLI Cave (so spelled because the g is silent).

The theatrically lit chambers bring out the subtleties of the limestone caverns, which so resemble the delicacy of a bridal gown they occasionally play host to weddings for those seeking something different on the big day.

I'm always looking for something different, and I find it in helicitites, neither a stalactite, nor a stalagmite, but a twisty, curly, stalagupside-down-and-backwards which defies all laws of gravity and science. I can't help but like them.

The curves of Caves Rd and the Margaret River region are not littered with kangaroos

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Peddalling to the ends of the earth

Continued from D1

but wineries. Wine tasting is not exactly recommended for cyclists who wish to remain so, but pulling up on a nice patch of grass with the nearby rows of grapes glowing gold in the afternoon sun and lying down for a little nap — that's strongly advised.

The bush in this region is dense and spiky and scarred black from the fires that have been a part of the Australian ecosystem since the Dreaming. Aboriginal people controlled them for their own benefit long before colonisation declared them a threat.

Shortly after awakening I race around a corner on a lonely road into another world. Cars screech to a halt as the dense, burned bush instantly opens into a green expanse of eucalyptus 30m tall and leisurely spaced so you can actually see the forest for the trees. This is surely one of few natural wonders so beautiful it's a traffic hazard.

Margaret River to Cape Leeuwin 72km

The Baywatch Manor Resort YHA, voted the best YHA backpackers in Australia, is tucked away here in Augusta — last town before the end of the world.

I'm losing the light and anxious to make Cape Leeuwin and back before dark, but I'm worried and ask Neville, the owner, about people stealing my bike. He just laughs and says, "We dream of something that exciting happening here".

As I push the pedals over the last few hills around the last few curves, I know that the cold wind whipping off the water and nearly blowing me off the road is not just paranoia. But after the last few kilometres along a rocky coast where the waves explode like firecrackers, I finally reach my destination.

Almost. I reach the gate in the fence which blocks off the lighthouse and the tiny finger of



CHANGE WHEELS: At 2km, Busselton Jetty is the longest wooden jetty in the Southern Hemisphere.

land which is really, really the end of the world. Which closed an hour ago. So I resign myself to the fact I've come all this way to be locked out at the very end, and pull out the camera to capture what I couldn't quite reach.

As a man from the ranger station begins to approach me, I notice the sign indicating this is a military installation, and wonder if the war on terror has reached even here.

Just as I'm bracing myself for the news my film will be confiscated, ranger Paul Sofilas asks me, "Did you really cycle all this way?" And so not only do I get in free, but also the guided grand tour. Paul's a cyclist himself, and when I ask him if I've been paranoid about the wind, he says certainly not. It blows up straight off Antarctica, and he points south.

To the south is not a bad view, especially from the top of the lighthouse, and at sunset.

Unlike at Cape Reinga, where the Tasman Sea

and the South Pacific smash together in an eternal grudge match, unlike the countries of the world and human beings in general, the Indian and Southern Oceans actually get along. They come together like old friends and in the golden sunset at the end of the world I can't even tell where one starts and another begins.

As far as the war on terror goes, Paul reckons this end of the world is the most geographically distant place on earth from Washington, DC, which I reckon also makes it the safest.

As the sun sets and I head back to a warm bed in the best backpackers in Australia, I can feel the wind blowing off Antarctica pushing me along. I almost don't even have to pedal.

A documentary Sandor Lau made on an earlier trip to the end of the world, walking from Auckland to Cape Reinga, will screen on TV One, Saturday (June 26), at 3pm.

Case Notes

Difficulty

Not a strenuous ride as cycling goes — say 5/10 — and an excellent trip for beginners, but to take it easier and spend more time sightseeing, do the trip in five days. Drink plenty of water.

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies direct to Perth ex Auckland twice a week — www.airnz.co.nz, 0800 737 000. (Warning: transtasman flights usually have a weight limit of 20kg, and bringing your own bike may well cost you its value.)

Local transport

To hire a bike try About Bike Hire (Perth), www.aboutbikehire.com.au, or phone 0061 (8) 9221 2665. For regional transport, book ahead as bike space is limited. TransWA www.transwa.wa.gov.au runs trains (to Bunbury only) and buses. South West Coach Lines, also runs regional buses, ph 0061 (8) 9324 2333

Accommodation

Bunbury: Wander Inn Backpackers ph 0061 (8) 9721 3242; email wanderinnbp@yahoo.com
 Dunsborough: Dunsborough Lodge (backpackers and motel) ph 0061 (8) 9756 8866
 Margaret River: Margaret River Inne Town Backpackers ph 0061 (8) 9757 or email innetown@bigpond.com
 Augusta: Baywatch Manor Resort YHA ph 0061 (8) 9758 1290; email enquiries@baywatchmanor.com.au

Further information

www.westernaustralia.com is a good introduction to the entire state. www.downsouth.com.au has specific information on lodging, attractions and transport in the southwest region. In print, check out the Lonely Planet guides.