

# CROSSING THE CANNING

Story and photos by Jakub Postrzygacz



I pedaled out of the sleepy town of Halls Creek in western Australia early in the morning of September 1, 2005, full of energy and high hopes. The Canning Stock Route, the route I was attempting to ride, starts with no signposts or warnings. It was hard to believe that the faint path fading away in the barren land before me would emerge more than 1,200 miles later on the opposite corner of the continent.

Seven hours later I was cringing in the faint shade of my bike, trembling from overheating and dehydration. Good judgment of your own capabilities is the result of experience, but gaining that experience is often the result of bad judgment. I was learning fast — with many painful lessons still to come.

In March 2003, I went to a presentation given by *National Geographic* journalists who had completed an epic automobile expedition across the Canning. My eyes were riveted to images of a land so different, harsh, and merciless that I couldn't resist imagining myself biking through its mysterious terrain. After the slide show, I asked the travelers if it was possible to bicycle the route. They burst out laughing and said, "Forget about it!"

The Canning is the longest historic stock route on the planet. If laid along the West Coast of the U.S., it would extend from Los Angeles to Seattle. It winds through the most inhospitable areas of the Australian Outback, crosses four deserts, and climbs innumerable hills of steep



**No swimsuit required.** *Jakub enjoys a rare oasis in the middle of the desert.*

sand. It was marked out 100 years ago by Australian surveyor Alfred Canning as an alternative route to drive cattle from the green pastures of Kimberly south to Perth, away from tick-infested shores. The condi-

tions were so harsh and casualties were so high that the track never truly served its purpose and soon was forgotten.

In 1968, a group of surveyors for the first time drove the complete length of the



**Rough riding.** *The challenging terrain never lets up on the Canning Stock Route.*

Canning in a convoy of specially prepared vehicles. Even today, anyone wishing to complete the trek must organize a substantial fuel drop at the route's halfway point. Many attempts to bicycle the track with motorized backup had failed, and nobody had ever tried to ride it unsupported. I wanted to be the first.

It took me nearly two years to get ready for the challenge. The most complex task was creating a bike that, fully loaded with supplies, could cover great distances across a land considered impossible to ride. There were many experienced and passionate people from around the world involved in the project, but it wasn't until the guys from Surly decided to join in that I truly believed in the success of the expedition. Although their Pugsley model was still a prototype, I decided to stake my trip on its success. With its monstrous four-inch-wide tires capable of working at incredibly low pressures, the bike could float through deep sand and tackle rough terrain better than anything I had tried before. In a potential first in the history of cycling, my machine had interchangeable wheels with an emergency cog fixed to a 135-millimeter front hub, so I could keep moving if I damaged my rear gearing (a comforting feature considering how many people have died in deserts when their vehicles ceased to function).

I had my bike, but I also needed a way to haul large amounts of weight over desert terrain. Then I found the Extrawheel, a new single-wheel trailer made in Poland. With some modification, it could roll on the same style of fat tire as the bike and was equipped with four independent bladders holding more than ten gallons of water in total. My panniers were filled with a month's worth of dehydrated pro-



**Trendsetter.** *They'll now have to change this sign to read "Motorists and bicyclists ..."*

clothes or even a toothbrush.

That first evening, as the heat ebbed and the air cooled, I met an aborigine coming back from a hunt. "Heading to Wiluna? Long way, you need meat," he said, cutting

*Good judgment of your own capabilities is the result of experience, but gaining that experience is often the result of bad judgment.*

visions, based on a Spartan 1,300-calorie daily ration. With so much ballast already on board, the weight of all my additional equipment had to be shaved down to just 11 pounds, leaving no room for spare

off a couple of still warm kangaroo ribs. With my scarce food supplies, I gratefully accepted the extra calories.

The first stage of the journey led through the broad plains of the Tanami

Desert, speckled with termite mounds and dense shrubs. The biggest surprise was the astonishing diversity of the landscape. There were majestic, eroded hills, granite islands among seas of red sand, and, surprisingly, periodic swamps provided shelter for migratory birds. The burned wreckage of an SUV with its key still in the ignition reminded me that this seemingly safe section of the track had taken the heaviest toll on human lives. The last two adventurers were lost in 2004.

Although a satellite phone provided some feeling of security, I knew that in case of emergency it would take several days before a rescue party could reach me. So far everything was going well. The bike and I

**Not entirely alone.** *Jakub and friends.*



rolled fearlessly across the wilderness, and my body went into survival mode. Senses became sharper, unused muscles rapidly came into use, and my heart even began to beat more slowly. Yet the biggest challenges were still in front of me.

Before long I learned to supplement my menu with locusts, lizards, and other specialties caught on the track, but my biggest concern was always water. Most of the 52 wells established by Canning's expeditions have turned into ruins, with only some rusty buckets, dilapidated troughs, or sand-filled holes left to reveal their locations. With only a handful of places still providing water, I searched for sources that weren't marked on maps but had been known for centuries to the indigenous people of Australia. There could be a tiny waterhole hidden among spinifex grass or the remains of a periodical stream trapped between rocks. Even an abominable dark puddle with slimy animal corpses in it was greeted with joy because it marked the line between life and death.

With my survival strategy in place, the route quickly turned rough beyond my wildest expectations. For 1,000 miles past the ruins of Well 37 there is a kingdom of huge sand hills sculpted by the prevailing winds. The ride turned into the world's longest roller coaster. First, there was a stiff climb requiring all the power I could muster. Then, for a few seconds, I would hammer down through deep sand at 25 miles per hour until the rough track ate up my momentum and brought my speed back into the single digits. A few moments later I climbed again, starting another punishing cycle that I would repeat a thousand times along the way.

Very often the sand was so deep that even wild camels struggled to climb the hills, leaving crater-like footprints. Then the only way to reach the summit was by "two-foot-drive." That same soft sand could conversely shape itself into rigid, ten-inch-deep corrugations sturdy enough to devastate the suspension of the best all-terrain vehicles, bursting fuel tanks and breaking axles — as well as the spirit of a lonely rider. I thought that at any moment the bike would break into pieces and my sore bottom would turn into one mas-

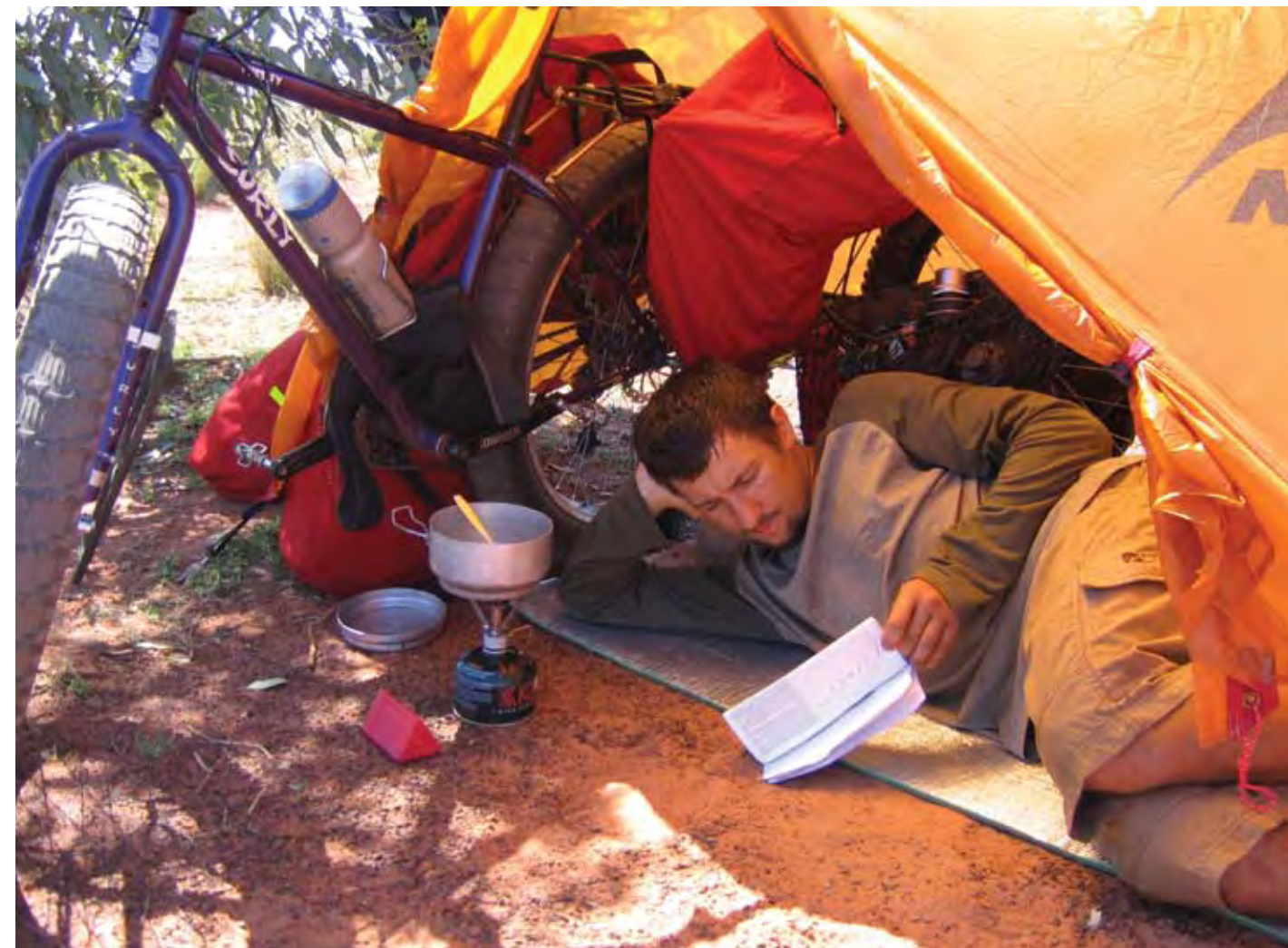
sive bruise. The end of the track was no longer my destination — I pedaled to the next hill, the next rock, the next bunch of thorny bushes.

On the second week of the expedition, I ran out of luck. I crashed badly several times, broke my chain, and punctured one of the water tanks, spilling most of the contents. The track no longer matched the map's descriptions, with seven wells in a row being dry. Then I lost a piece of my map. I'd hit rock bottom; I'd had enough. But then, following a dry riverbed, I saw a lone gum tree. Underneath was a tiny, rocky pond filled with clear water. The leaves of the tree were rustling in the wind, and small birds were chirping. I could finally wash the red dust off my face and refill the nearly empty tanks.

Two hours later, I was ready to battle the track again. As I moved south, the landscape changed constantly. The snow-white surfaces of dry salt lakes shined among the red dunes, the pale chains they created marking the courses of ancient rivers that flowed thousands of years ago. In a thick layer of salt, I spotted mummified insects, scorpions, and other small creatures — some of them not dead. Australian deserts are inhabited by a unique species of shrimp whose larvae can survive for years until a heavy rain fills the lake for a week or so. Within that time, they need to mature to have their offspring, which, with a bit of luck, will survive until the next storm.

At the end of the nineteenth century, explorer Frank Hahn reached the largest of the western salt lakes and, unable to find even a drop of water, called it Lake Disappointment. For me, however, the salt pans were a true miracle — only there could I forget about sand and obstacles and enjoy a smooth, fast ride.

Every day the desert was revealing its miracles. Bushes smelling of fresh bread helped me forget about hunger, and a thorny lizard sunbathing in the middle of the track saved me from losing a camera from an open bag. One night, from the top of a lonely rock, I gazed at an endless sea of sand dunes bathed in the pale light of the full moon, listening to the husky calls of camels and the howls of wild dingoes. The camels wandered around my tent all



**Shade lover.** *Second only to water, shade is a coveted commodity on the Canning.*

night; the dingoes bumped into me the next morning. For a while, we watched each other, the dogs wondering if I could be breakfast, and me wondering how long it would take to grab a solid Brazilian knife from my pannier. I'd like to think my average speed increased dramatically thanks to that meeting, but the improved track conditions helped too.

Shortly after Well 11, sand hills suddenly gave way to a landscape of stone. After months of research, this dramatic change of environment should not have come as a surprise, but it was still hard to believe that I could pump up my tires to 18 pounds per square inch and continue to ride. Barren rocky plateaus pushed my riding skills to the limits, but with almost no food left in the panniers, the bike was a lot more nimble and easier to control.

In my last days, I cut my map into more convenient pieces. Day by day, well by



**Life source.** *A few remnant wells still deliver water.*

## Nuts & Bolts: Canning Stock Route

The Canning Stock Route is one of the longest and most difficult tracks on Earth. It navigates the most remote and inhospitable areas of West Australia, including multiple deserts and hundreds of steep sand hills.

**Terrain and Travel:** The 2,013 kilometers (1,250 miles) from Wiluna to Halls Creek contains numerous terrain types, with the majority consisting of spinifex (perennial Australian grass) plains separated by sand ridges. Outside of pastoral areas, no road exists except wheel tracks. When tracks diverge, follow the one that looks the most used. Permission is required to pass through lands owned by the Gregory Lakes and Balgo Hills communities. Permits

is located 949 kilometers (590 miles) southwest of Wiluna. The return to Perth from Halls Creek via paved roads is 2,800 kilometers (1,740 miles).

**Best time to visit:** May through August, though access is weather dependent. Average temperatures and rainfall range from 15.3° - 29° Celsius (59.5° - 84.2° Fahrenheit) and 19.7 millimeters (.78 inches) in May, to 12.5° - 28.2° C (54.5° - 82.8° F) and 6.1 millimeters (.24 inches) in August.

**Supplies/Facilities:** Repair facilities and/or habitation is nonexistent on most sections. You are entirely on your own. Spare parts should be taken of all critical components. – At the start of the CSR, Wiluna (pop. 1,640) supports



– Kunawarritju Community (Well 33) is an aboriginal community that operates April to October and offers refueling for vehicles, food supplies, souvenirs, camping, and washing/shower facilities. – The final destination, Halls Creek (pop. 1,300), functions as a support center for remote cattle stations and a major hub for local indigenous people.

**Drinking Water:** Typically, water can be obtained from wells 6, 12, 15, 26, 49, a tank at well 33, and Georgia Bore. Most well water will require treatment and the ability to take on large amounts of water is critical. A sturdy bucket and about 20 meters (65 feet) of rope is needed to extract water from most wells.

**Maps:** Look for 1:250,000 series geological or military maps produced by the Lands Department (08 9323 1222). Geodetic benchmark overlays will pinpoint the exact locations of benchmarks on the Land Department's maps and can be obtained from the

Geodetic Branch of the Lands Department (09 323 1228). Additionally, Westprint has created a Canning Stock Route map for \$9.50 AU ([www.mapsdownunder.com.au/cgi-bin/mapshop/WP-CANNING.html](http://www.mapsdownunder.com.au/cgi-bin/mapshop/WP-CANNING.html), 03 9748 0422)

**Emergency:** Two tracks allow travelers to exit the CSR – the Talawana Track south of well 23 leads to Newman and the Kidson Track at well 35 leads to Port Hedland. These track conditions vary and can be just as difficult as the CSR, so check ahead of time. Airstrips exist near well 33, Cotton Creek, and Billiluna Community, and at pastoral leases on the southern end of the route.

**Web Resources:** [www.exploroz.com/TrekNotes/WDeserts/Canning\\_Stock\\_Route.aspx](http://www.exploroz.com/TrekNotes/WDeserts/Canning_Stock_Route.aspx). – [www.breakloose.com.au/html/adventure\\_articles/regional/wa/golden\\_outback/go\\_canning\\_stock\\_route.php](http://www.breakloose.com.au/html/adventure_articles/regional/wa/golden_outback/go_canning_stock_route.php)



are available through the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority (08 9322 7044) or the Australian National Four Wheel Drive Council ([www.anfwdc.asn.au](http://www.anfwdc.asn.au)). Perth, the nearest capital city,

a small selection of stores including a grocery store, post office, hotel, and general store. – Billiluna Community (pop. 220) offers vehicle repair, a centerlink office, general store, and clinic.

well, I cycled across each portion, and soon I was holding the last one. The Canning Stock Route once again showed its claws with rough rock gardens, huge washouts, and deep corrugations. Some sand hills even emerged out of nowhere, as if to say goodbye. When I finally got to the town of Wiluna, the end of the Canning, on October 3, tears were mixed with the dust on my face. It had been the hardest 33 days of my life, and I'd lost a full 40 pounds on the ride, but amid the overwhelming solitude, the scarcity of resources, and the incredible beauty of the desert, the journey changed me more than I'd ever expected. The joy I felt at finishing the ride was mixed with great sadness. My soul was crying to turn around and go back to the desert, but my body was too weak. **AC**

*Jakub Postrzygacz is a 26-year-old cyclist from Warsaw, Poland, who moved to Auckland, New Zealand, after his Canning ride. He used the ride to raise funds for WaterAid ([www.wateraid.org](http://www.wateraid.org)), which works to increase awareness of the potable water crisis affecting people around the world.*

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The last twelve days tested my mind, spirit, body and bike to a level I've never experienced before. The riding conditions were some of the worst I've ever encountered. The "road", when there was one, was a semi-consistent mix of deep sand, loose gravel, huge rocks and skull jarring washboard. On the Salar Uyuni, we rode for three days to a horizon full of nothing but whiteness with sunsets that made you feel like you were on a different planet.

*Brooks Allen*

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