



THE HOLY GRAIL

By Roger Fryer

IF EVER there is perfect trekking, my vote will go for the gorge country of the upper Macleay River, inland from the mid-north coast of NSW.

The Macleay is the third largest coastal river in the state, and along with its tributaries cuts a series of deep gorges in the hard geology of the Great Escarpment, which rises to more than 1500 metres along the northern boundary of its catchment.

The catchment is so extensive that rainfall far away can raise the river without warning, leading to a number of drownings over its history and warnings to treat crossings with extreme caution. The river descends 1460 metres over its 298 kilometres and one reference claims it is the second-fastest flowing river in the world.

The river valley itself is in a rain shadow and the natural vegetation is open, dry eucalypt woodland on the hillsides, “dry” rainforest in the gullies and cleared grassland along the valley floors, kept free of forest and scrub by Aboriginal burning in the past, and free-range cattle grazing since.

This makes for wonderful bushwalking and horse-riding with extensive views and fast, free movement. The ruggedness of the gorges means there has been little development like roading and so much of it is very isolated, including the amazing Kunderang Brook – my Holy Grail.

Kunderang Brook is one of the Macleay River’s major tributaries, rising some 60km south-east of their

junction. It meanders tightly, but follows an almost straight fault line, is naturally cleared for most of its way and is bound by majestically tall mountains.

It is an unusual geography for Australian streams. Surrounded now by national parks, the few tracks in are gated so it can only be approached on foot or by horseback, or those willing to carry a mountain bike from Youdales hut near its source, or by canoe downstream from West Kunderang.

So it was that I attempted for a third time to reach the brook in April this year and trek nine days bushwalking and cycling nearly 250 kilometres from Point Lookout to Kempsey, visiting Diamond Flat along the way (see separate story).

The first time I tried to reach Kunderang Brook by walking downriver from West Kunderang, but was thwarted by a river rise, and the second by walking upriver from Georges Junction, but was battling a strangulated hernia.

This time I was determined to reach my goal, or die in the process.

It's a 1400 metre climb from my home in Grafton to Point Lookout, so I was lucky to cadge a lift from a friend. Diamond Flat has recently been acquired by the NPWS, but the locked gate was at the entrance rather than the top of the hill, so after leaving my bike at the Little Styx River cabins, courtesy of owner Jack Gordon, I was saved the walk down.

I had a quick look around Diamond Flat, then camped the night, trying out my new "stealth" tent (slips under the radar).

The walk out next day was uphill all the way, about a 500 metre climb and the first time I had carried a full pack for many years. However I handled it okay with a take-it-slowly, bit-by-bit technique I have developed to suit my advancing age. There was no foreboding of what was to come!

That night's camp was at the New England National Park's Thungutti campground where I had previously spent many a night spotlighting and photographing greater gliders in the messmate trees and spotted-tail quolls amongst the lichen-covered boulders.



Next day the real work began as I wobbled off down Forest Way on my fully-laden cycling rig, expecting an easy downhill run descending more than 1000 metres over 44km.

Trouble started almost straight away as the trailer wheel siezed. I didn't notice immediately, but wondered for a couple of k's why the whole thing was dragging – vibration from the rough track surface had shaken the mudguard loose and it had wrapped itself around the axle! However with a bit of metalwork I managed to prise it free with no lasting damage.

That rough track surface meant coasting downhill had to be taken slowly and the weight of the rig meant dismounting and pushing on even easy uphill grades, so I wasn't making good time – a worry because I was using water rapidly in the heat and there would not be enough to cook with if I had to camp before the river.

Fortunately a friend from Thungutti came by and refilled my water bottles. Camp was made at the helipad clearing at the top of the escarpment and I coasted down the steep, winding road next morning for a lay-off day at the brilliant Georges Junction TSR campground on the Macleay.

Dave at Bass Lodge, a stylish cypress pine log cabin overlooking the junction, let me stash my bike rig securely as I set off on my big walk. Now the real fun began.

The Macleay is a big river by Australian standards and at average depth the current can still knock you off your feet. Slippery rocks can lead to a tumble and a soaking so I was careful not to drop my camera in the drink. There were four crossings before I made East Kunderang homestead by lunch the next day and was welcomed by a bunch of families on school holidays there.



Kunderang was the most upriver cattle run with squatters ejecting the Thungutti tribe following a number of massacres from the 1840s. It was the most isolated and didn't have a road connecting it to civilisation until the 1960s and no electricity until 1973. It has a fine homestead made from cedar pit-sawn on-site, acquired by NPWS and can be rented for three days at a time for a reasonable rate.

One thing about getting older is you tire easily and there is no alternative but to stop and rest, so I made base camp at Rafferty's crossing with the intention of "summitting" the next day to Kunderang Brook.

There were three more river crossings to negotiate and some steep climbs, but I made the brook by lunchtime, had a look around and returned to my base at Rafferty's in time for dinner – all up more than 26km in one day. The next day I retraced my steps to Georges Junction with enough time to get back on my bike and head off on the last leg of my journey, along the gravel Kempsey-Armidale road aiming for Blackbird Flat.

You may think that travelling in such isolated country would be terribly lonely, but in fact the reverse is true, it can be very social. You inevitably run into someone and it is polite to open a discourse. I met local landowner Neil Booth with a ute-load of grandkids looking for his horses.

Campgrounds are very friendly because no-one has any boundaries to defend and conversations become quite intimate very quickly. At Blackbird Flat I found myself discussing breasts with a woman I had met only 20 minutes before.



Next came the quaint village of Bellbrook which like many small country villages has become somewhat gentrified as baby boomer retirement money moves out of the city. I had a delicious home-made pie and sausage roll there and headed for Willawarrin, the longest day of all, a mind-numbing 45km. That's not a long way by flat Grafton standards, but it is when you're lugging 50 kilos of gear up very steep hills.

With my major goals achieved the motivation began to subside and although I was travelling through beautiful countryside, my experience became focussed on pounding away on the pedals and making distance.

I had assembled the cycle touring rig over the preceding few months, including the single-wheel trailer. With a pair of Ortlieb panniers and the trailer I could take a lot of stuff, so I did, only discovering too late it was so heavy I could not pedal uphill. That meant getting off and pushing for much of the trek.

My strategy was to pick a spot 40 or 50 metres ahead and rest when I got to it to wait for my heartbeat to come down. It was one of life's best lessons to take big projects incrementally in bite-size chunks.

It was long; it was hard; it was painful. In my head I fought my enemies, my weaknesses, my history of failure but I couldn't give up – there was no other way out.

When I got home, after my weary body and aching joints recovered, I felt elated; suburban hassles which once seemed big became much smaller and I was full of energy with lots of ideas – isn't this why we trek?

I like to eat well in the bush and roasted a beef rib on the first two nights over a “scientific” open fire, and breakfasted on bacon eggs for three mornings. I kept my blood sugar up during the day with a scroggin of nuts, dried fruit and chocolate, lessening the dependence on big main meals. Lunch was wraps which carried better than bread or crispbreads, with sardines and home-made tomato and onion relish.

Thereafter I ate into the dried food, porridge, rice and pasta, finishing up with old staples I was glad were still available – fried Spam with Deb instant mashed potato and Surprise dried peas, a regular feast after a day’s hard work.

I found this trek difficult and it tested my physical and mental capabilities to the limit. Now planning my next trip, I will dump the trailer and obtain a lighter sleeping bag and tent, and not take on such a long trek – at least I have learned something.