

White knuckles

Postcards from Down Under



White water makes for white knuckles.
Rapids, Queensland, Australia

Postcard 5

Postcard 5: White water, white knuckles

Messing about on the river

The raft rolls up the side of a boulder about the size of the coach that brought us out here. We stood no chance. Everything happens faster than we can think and as the bow flips we're all thrown backwards into the spray. Upper section of a Grade Four rapid. Our first of the day and we're already in the water... and under it, completely submerged.

Bounce up into the airspace and glimpse the edge of the inflatable that we were sitting on a moment ago. Safety line ironically still intact. Back under again, completely submerged, for the first time actually feel the ice cold water across my face: filling my ears, drowning my eyes, forcing its way up my nose. Kick for the surface and gasp. Scooped up by the currents and hurled against another rock. No idea where I am. Dragged past these rocks as the inflatable crashes back down on me. Other people in the water: Martin in front, Dan somewhere in the air pocket. Think back to the training in the calm of the distant forest upstream: Feet first, head up, arms in, look forward.

Ugh! Another boulder knocks the air out of me and we're taken into a slalom. Under water. Bounce. Scrape through. Back in the centre channel. Paddles pass me. Legs scraped across more rocks. Above water. Breath: fast deep breaths. Open eyes. Breath. More rocks, standing wave, edge of the inflatable, too close, can't see beyond.



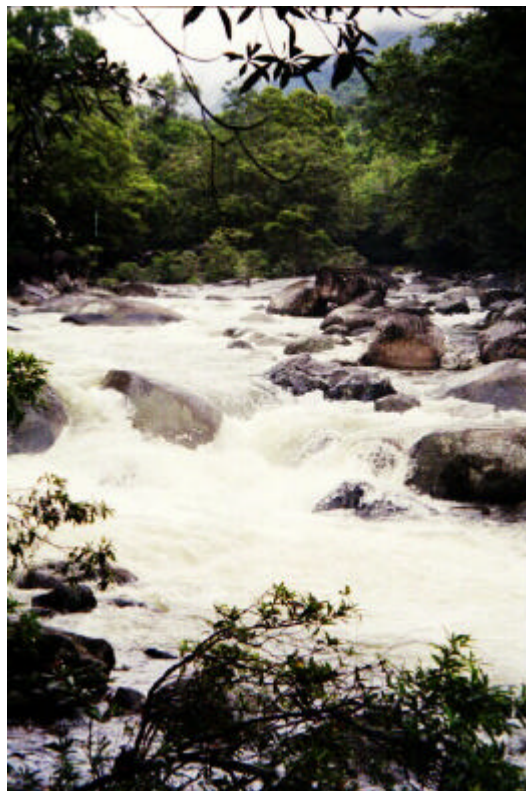
Moments after we flip Martin (front) and I (rear) break the surface next to the raft. At the top of the rapid. Alarm Clock Rapid, head of the Tully River, Queensland.

Then I'm in front of the raft and the full force of the rapid hurls it into me and pushes three of us, now clinging to the ropes against another rock wall. As we spin round the

drag takes our shipwrecked group back into the centre channel for the final fall in this section. Stephanie, wide eyed and clinging to two paddles, gets thrown towards us. We grab her and pull her towards one of the safety ropes. All start catching their breath. Finally, our instructor John, rather sheepishly, appears behind us as the water slackens and we enter a long pool.

The safety watch on the nearest rocks either side of us still have their ropes. None of us had the strength to look up. Stephanie stops spluttering, two of the other rafts tie up to us. 'Alarm Clock' is the first rapid on the uppermost section of the Tully River and its our wake up call. John clammers onto the upturned inflatable and rights it with help from Chloe, a tough energetic young Kiwi and one of the few women rafter guides around.

Battered, bruised and very, very damp, we crawl back into the inflatable nursing our cuts and grazes. Twenty four rapids left and no-one's joking about falling in anymore.



White water, white knuckles: A magnet for travellers exploring the Tropical North. Queensland.



Drying out: Martin, Dan, Stephanie, our guide John and the rest of the team a little drier in the slacks just before we break for lunch. Tully River, Queensland. Photo, Raging Thunder.

It was enough of an incentive. For the rest of the day we watch the water astutely, steering through the slaloms, twisting about the rocks and holding tight through the falls. With the added danger of me taking the helm for the second half of the river, we still manage to slither through the rocks (staying the *right* way up) the rest of the afternoon.

A fantastic time as our party of a dozen rafts snaked their way down to the plains. The only downcast face in the boat belongs to our guide John who is yet to face the embarrassment of buying rounds of four-ex for all of the guides when we get to the pub as a forfeit for the splashdown this morning.

Magnetic Island

Backpacker country. The small air-conditioned hall in the ferry terminal is littered with the debris of a hundred or so European backpacks. Actually this has been traveller country since Captain Cook's day. Okay, so the First Fleet were a little more hardcore in the travel stakes than today's backpackers who are armed with their designer sunglasses, Lonely Planet guidebooks and mobile phones rather than maps and sextants, but it was Cook's travellers who named the place following some confusion with their ship's compass. Cook named pretty much all the main peaks and islands along this part of the coast and the Cook legacy lives.



The pier on the western edge of Magnetic Island. Many islanders commute daily to Townsville. QLD.

I dare not think what he'd have made of our ship with its bar, sun deck, sleek lines and tinted windows. It's probably not much smaller than one of the First Fleet but instead of sailing the oceans this gin palace is confined to shuttle runs between Townsville Port and the white wooden pier that stretches out from the western edge of the island across the muddy shallows. The hulls of the steel catamaran rise out of the water as it cruises out of the port and cuts through the calm waters of the few kilometre stretch. A breezy twenty-five knots, wind races past us up on the top deck, hard to hear, basking in the hot sun, few other boats in the channel. European voices slapping on buckets of sunscreen. We dock in less than twenty minutes.

What is it about backpacking? The first thing to do when you get anywhere is explore. Its an instinctive response and even though we have one mere daypack between us we're though the cluster of buildings that ring the pier and out onto a trail while other passengers are still wrestling with their luggage.

The middle of the day in the middle of the dry season is probably not the best time to begin a trek in shadeless bush country, but undeterred we attack the steepest slope we can see. A little help from a ten year old island native (clad only in the traditional island clothing of Australian football gear and new Nike sneakers) points us onto a path so we neatly avoid the embarrassment of getting lost only moments after leaving the one island road. It looked less steep from the pier. Everything looked less steep. After fifteen minutes we're climbing a gradient close to that of a staircase. Drain all the drinks containers before halfway point. Lose T-shirts by the time rocky boulders that hide the summit appear. Reduce the giant leaps and fast walks of the low slopes to a leisurely sedate amble (somewhat undermined by the less sedate pants for breath).

This island's meant to be a haven for koalas, those cute doll-like bears that lounge around in gum trees chewing leaves for tourists who want to take home a pic of the national treasure. Instead we find a different legendary animal. Now I can't remember if the Taipan is the second or forth most deadly land snake in the world, but as the three foot long stripes down the length of this one slide through a crack between my boulder and the next in this leapfrog of a path, I realise that this really is snake country. It's Disneyland for cold blooded reptiles. Hot rocks under hot sunshine with little to disturb. I guess that makes tourists Mickey Mouse or, as in our case, the entire Disney Parade. With this in mind: slow down pace, watch steps (note to self: try trainers, aluminium socks and thick jeans next time rather than sandals and shorts!).



Views of the Pier and the hull of an old shipwreck from the south western hill of Magnetic Island, QLD.

Anyhow, bitten only by the sun we reach the final boulder and look out across the island, the reef that fringes it and a few of the bays – one with the hull of an old wreck lodged in the gently sloping shallows. It's a great view back to the mainland and up and down the coast. The toy ferry, barely moving, has a white trail following it and the only sounds are from the sea breeze pushing through the leaves (and the odd crackle from creatures slithering through the scrub, but we chose to ignore those).

Back down under the shade of some palms by the pier the drinks are cool and the ice cream's colder.

From the shade of the palms the low tide reveals the mud flats and a rocky reef in the bay by the Pier. Magnetic Island, Queensland.



Bush fires

The hills that the southern part of the town nestles up to have been clouded in smoke for a few days now. In the scorching heat of the end of the dry season the grasses are brown and the trees thin. Last time it rained was over a week ago and that half hour was barely enough to get the topsoil damp. It's a giant tinderbox from here up to the far Northern tip of the country and the bushfires are catching everywhere.



Smoke sweeping inland from managed burns clearing cane fields on farmland in the coastal plain just north of Cairns, FNQ.

“On those slopes we just leave them burn”, says Steve whose family grew up in the hills. “There are hardly any people out there so no-one makes an effort”. Park

rangers have been setting up managed burns along some of the roads and cane farmers across the state are using field burns to clear the stumps of their crops ready for reworking the land, but driving up in the hills is a different story.

The sea breezes peak in the early afternoon and act like giant bellows fuelling the flames with the air they pull up the slopes. “Get yourself a good vantage point and look out up the hills t’night. Y’ll see the flames all round the town. But I dare say, we’ll all still be here in the mornin’”. So that’s tonight taken care of and I head off to the quiet of the wharf to see for myself.



The aftermath of burns sweeping the state. Above: Fire rejuvenates the bush - the first green shoots already breaking through. Left: A ribbon of burned bush alongside the road out of Herberton, Atherton Tablelands, FNQ.

Night glow

Steve wasn't wrong. The next night the lights are even stronger. There's a ribbon of orange creeping down the hills in the south and all the way through town the still night air is thick with the taste of burning bush. The fires must be intense. We're over five kilometres away and some of the spots are brighter than the streetlamps here in town. On tonight's news, the government's emergency services minister, Stephen Robertson has a rather grave look on his face during his interview: "Southern Queensland is a tinder dry ready to catch. We're issuing severe fire warnings as far north as Cairns".



Nightglow: The orange ribbon of fires stretching five kilometres along the hills across the bay to the South of Cairns, FNQ.

The next morning 'Tinder Dry' is splashed all over the front page of *The Post* and a thick brown smog hangs over the plains. The hills are hidden behind white clouds of smoke and from the suburbs, the CBD looks like a distant haze. Firefighters are complaining that up to ninety percent of the bush fires are being deliberately lit by children, so with school holidays just a week away the outlook is pretty bleak.

Its like this across the state with hundreds of burns fanned by strong winds and no-one even tending most of them. Isolated stations are left to handle the problem themselves as firefighters concentrate on the edges of built up areas. Driving along any of the highways you'll be lucky to go ten miles without smoke drifting across the road.