



View from the heavens: from far left, flying above the Great Barrier Reef in a helicopter; the writer's five-year-old son Kai, about to snorkel off Cairns; four-wheel driving on Rainbow Beach; a cassowary crosses the road at South Mission Beach; the boys explore the beach by bicycle; swimming in Alligator's Nest, near Tully; main photo, drinking in a magnificent Fraser Island sunset.

As the family hits the east coast at the end of their trip, *Pamela Wilson* realises her journey has been life changing.

HOMeward BOUND

CAIRNS is a party town. So it was no surprise that on our first night there we danced the night away; our two small sons in their matching pyjamas and sandals, my husband and I in our damp swimmers and boardshorts.

A series of '80s pop tunes vibrated from the speakers of the MP3 player in our caravan, and the four of us boogied until at least 7.15 pm on our sun-warmed concrete slab.

We were euphoric, celebrating the midpoint of our three-month, 16,000 km journey around Australia.

We had spent the past six weeks exploring inland Australia, travelling some 9500 km, and we now looked forward to a slower journey down the sun-soaked Queensland Coast.

Our senses hummed with the mix of salt air, tropical ambience and red cordial. And, like all good tourists, we would, over the next six weeks, plough our cash into helicopter and snorkelling trips to the Great Barrier Reef, mini-mokes on

Magnetic Island and whale watching tours of Hervey Bay.

But it was the inexpensive and unexpected home-grown experiences that we would later write up in our journals as highlights.

As we ambled south away from the busyness of Cairns, the paddocks of freshly harvested sugarcane became fewer and fewer. In their place were plastic bag farms.

We tried to convince our five- and seven-year-old sons that there were bananas ripening under the blue, yellow and white bags hanging from the branches. But they were not convinced.

"Mum, if we lived here, you wouldn't have to buy poo bags for Rusty's walks at the dog park anymore. You could just pick one off the tree," my youngest exclaimed, proud of his own ingenuity.

Some 130 km south of Cairns, we turned off the Bruce Highway and into the lush tropical rainforest that leads to South Mission Beach.

This pearly of a place is the quieter cousin to Mission Beach, which is the restaurant hub of this region.

The permanent population of 4000 swells to about 12,000 in

the peak tourist season of June to October. Here, the year-round average daily temperature rarely drops below 25 degrees.

TROPICAL HERITAGE

We were beaming as we pulled into the Beachcomber Coconut Caravan Park. But after 17 attempts to line up the caravan with the small concrete slab we were allotted, our smiles had turned upside down.

But we finally got it parked, put two beers and two lemonades on ice to chill and raced to the beach. We revelled in the sight of Dunk Island, just 9 km offshore. Looking down, I was inspired by the flat, firm texture of the fine sand and the gentle lapping of the miniscule waves against the shoreline.

Ten minutes later, risking rust and clunky chains, the four of us were squealing with delight as we pedalled our bikes along the untracked sand.

We darted in and out of the water holding our feet aloft as our wheels formed wakes behind us.

Riding north towards Mission Beach, I had time to take in our surroundings. Making up just some of Australia's 900,000 hectares of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, the rich rainforests and 14 km of pristine beaches buffer you from the rest of the world, enveloping you in their hues of emerald and ochre.

At the expansive tourism office in town later that day, we had soon planned the rest of our itinerary here: to track Australia's largest land animal in the wild

(the endangered southern cassowary), and chuck rubber footwear at the annual Golden Gumboot Festival in nearby Tully.

Reluctant as we were to leave this nirvana, we were excited about another of our upcoming destinations, Paluma National Park, about 70 km north of Townsville.

So when we were greeted by birdsong and the gentle lull of calm crickets as we crunched along the gravel road to the Jourama Falls camping area in Paluma National Park, we were appeased.

We reversed in, successfully on the first go, to a wide opening under a tall tree and put our \$11 into the self-registering camping box. Hiding our lunch scraps (Vegemite sambos today) from the foraging bush turkeys, we donned hiking boots and trekked the steep 1.5 km to the Jourama Falls lookout.

Makeshift river crossings of rocks and timber guided us over Waterview Creek, and mist circled the forest of palms, umbrella trees and figs, keeping us cool as we ambled up the path.

We discovered serene swimming holes, home to turtles and tiny azure kingfishers.

Later, in the pitch black of the moonless night, we could hear the brush turkeys gathering scraps. Then all was quiet, except for the gentle tapping of light rain on the rainforest canopy above us.

The road back across the trickling causeways took us out of yet another

magical destination and back onto the Bruce Highway.

As we inched closer to our home in Sydney, we found ourselves driving even slower, putting off the inevitable of concluding our magic caravan ride.

But we soon found ourselves squished into a tight corner of the Rainbow Beach Holiday Village and Caravan Park, joining the throngs of families enjoying the spring school holidays.

Nothing bothers you much when you have been holidaying for this long, so the close quarters didn't faze us. Besides, we were too busy fishing, dolphin spotting, swimming and driving along the low tide mark to surf Double Island Point's perfectly rounded waves.

Against a backdrop of formidable sand dunes, the ocean here shimmers in the late afternoon sun and the sea looks as if it is made of millions of sparkling diamonds.

On closer inspection, the sand dunes

reveal their inner secret – exposed, flat walls shaded in vibrant swirls of pink and yellow, carved from wind and rain. Apparently there are 72 different shades woven through these dunes, derived from minerals such as rutile, ilmenite, zircon and monazite.

Personally, I prefer the traditional Aboriginal explanation for this phenomenon. Yiningie, the spirit of the god of rainbows, was killed when he plunged into the cliffs following a vicious battle with a tribesman and this is how the dunes got their hues.

DOLPHIN ENCOUNTER

At sunrise the following morning we joined a family of fisherfolk at Inskip Point where holidaymakers and locals are ferried to and from Fraser Island.

We were stirred from our meditative states by a gentle splash in the water only metres away. A dolphin searching for his

breakfast spent the next 30 minutes bobbing in and out of our fishing lines.

Although not usually one to rave about fishing, I couldn't think of a better place to be as I sat on the warm sand, rod in hand, watching the dolphin and listening to the happy sounds of my family frolicking at the water's edge.

This is the image I often recall now – of us watching the sun's early rays glistening on the dolphin's smooth skin – when seeking respite from a hard day's work.

Three months on the road is long enough to be life changing, to instil a new calm and new ideals and dreams in a person.

Now I try to hold on to some of that inner serenity and not rush my children, unseeing, between school, music and swimming lessons. These days, I lift my head to look at my community in

the same way as I did when we were holidaying – with my eyes open and alert.

Sure the caravan now sits idle on the front lawn and is little more than a guest room, but guaranteed, those wheels will be clunking their way down the Pacific Highway again soon.



movies

Mesmerising portrait of a petty crim



Margaret Pomeranz

Last Ride (M)
Director: Glendyn Ivin
Starring: Hugo Weaving, Tom Russell

THIS year is certainly turning on its head the myth that Australia doesn't produce good movies.

Last Ride is the feature film debut of director Glendyn Ivin, who won the Palm d'Or in Cannes in 2003 with his short film *Cracker Bag*. It's an adaptation of a novel by Denise Young and at its core is a father/son relationship.

The father, Kev (Hugo Weaving) is a piece of work. He's a petty crim, hardened by time spent in jail, and we first meet

him on the road, driving wordlessly with his son, Chook (Tom Russell), as they head west, into the outback.

At a roadside service station, Kev shaves his beard and cuts his hair; he then dumps the car and jumps on a bus. We're getting the picture. Kev is on the run.

We get the measure of the man as he picks up bunches of flowers from graves in a cemetery to impress a former girlfriend Maryanne (Anita Hegh), now living in a country town. She's moved on; she's wary of Kev and won't let him stay, but it's obvious she is still a little entranced by him. It doesn't really matter to Kev – he steals money from her anyway.

Meanwhile, Chook is concerned about Max (John Brumpton), a friend of Kev's with whom they were living. Something's happened to Max, we don't know what and we



The relationship between Kev (Hugo Weaving) and Chook (Tom Russell) forms the core of *Last Ride*.

don't know why.

Kev's such a hard-bitten creature, he's hard to like. No wonder Mum took off years ago. Hugo Weaving's performance is just stunning, what a fine actor he is, he makes Kev real. This flawed man whose instinct is towards violence is the product of a harsh upbringing.

And yet, despite petty and not

so petty cruelties to Chook, you know he loves his son.

Young Tom Russell stands toe to toe with his seasoned co-star, he is heartbreakingly good.

This pared-down film is sparse on dialogue but rich in imagery. It is the work of a real director.

I imagine some people will not find Kev an easy person to

spend time with in a cinema, but his journey with Chook is mesmerising, painful and ultimately deeply moving.

Last Ride opens on 2 July

Margaret's verdict:

