

THE SILVER CITY

IAN HANCOCK



A lesson in how to ride fast, drink fast and think fast with Broken Hill's finest bunch of blokes.

I plunk a double-shot macchiato down on Wigan's desk, and take a long, well-earned sip of my own steaming hit of caffeine. We're buckling down for another long night in our Sydney office, trying to get the latest issue of the magazine out the door.

"Just had a call from a mate," Wigan says as he spins around in his chair. "What are you doing in two weekends' time?"

My heart sinks. I'd been planning to go for a ride with some mates of my own, taking my un-loved WR-F for a blat, before chaperoning my equally un-loved girlfriend out for dinner. Weekend work was the last thing on my mind. "Pretty busy, mate. What were you thinking?"

"Wanna go to Broken Hill for a ride?" he says, as my ears prick up. "Classic bunch of blokes that I met a few years back on a Seven Deadly Sins Tour have this club out there,

the 'Silver City Motorcycle Club'. The clubhouse is an old church and they've been doing this annual 'Anabranch' trailride for longer than you've been alive." I couldn't hide my excitement. "Thought that might grab your attention," Wigan smirks.

So I book my flights, text my mates and ring my girlfriend. Within 20 minutes, I'm good to go. The thought of a clear nights sky, a few cold beers and two solid days on a bike has my mind racing.





There was no shortage of blokes 'having a go' on the forgotten station tracks to Anabranch.

The plane circles and makes its decent, but surely we're not in Broken Hill. We've been flying for long enough, but with all the greenery, it looks more like Orange or Bathurst than the dusty little mining town I remembered in far western NSW.

We touch down, and within minutes I'm shaking hands with Adrian Channing. "Tall skinny bloke with glasses was the description Wigan just gave me on the blower - couldn't miss ya, mate!" says a hardy-looking bloke in a reflective top.

"So have you done much racing, Ian?" Channo asks as we head for town. "Bits and pieces, but nothing serious, mate. Yourself?" I fire back. "Done the Safari a couple times," he says.

Must be a local Broken Hill event, I figure. After all, this is the bloke Wigan said had never even done a creek crossing before the Seven Deadly Sins ride some years back.

I try to act impressed, thinking there's no possible way someone who'd never crossed a creek just a few short years ago had done the Australasian Safari. Then Channo adds, "Yeah, finished second behind Andy Caldecott once, and I've got his old factory KTM 660 Rallye in my lounge room." Thanks for the heads-up, Wigs!

We stop at Channo's house to grab swags, and I get introduced to 'Ange's Kitchen'. Not of the stainless steel stovetop and granite benchtop variety, but Caldecott's old steed that had carried him to a Safari win.

The reason behind the name? Channo's wife Ange was due for a new kitchen some years back, but the funds set aside for the work ended up being funnelled into the bike. "Between Andy and me, this particular bike has the Safari trifecta - first, second and third," Channo explains.

We then head for the Silver City 'clubhouse'. I've learnt before that country people don't do things by halves, so how wrong I was to assume it'd be a dicky tin shed in the outer suburbs.

We fight for a car space among a sea of utes and trailers, then wander over to an old weathered church hall, complete with tall pitched ceilings and knotted, dry wooden floorboards stained black from years of celebratory dirt-bike burnouts. Where the pastor's pulpit once stood, now sits a bar, full to the gunnels with beer, bourbon and rum, and above it, a flat-screen as big as a pool table.

Later that night we retire to the Channings', and I ask Ange what she thought of having her kitchen money spent on a motorbike, half expecting that I'd regret asking the question. "Couldn't be happier," she says, as we stare at it across the carpet on the other side of the living room, before calling it a night. 🐾



The exhausted Anabranch troopers crowd the front of the club's ex-church clubhouse.

CLUB CULTURE

While most dirt bike clubs in and around capital cities struggle for volunteers, there appears to be an abundance at the Silver City Motorcycle Club, and the club culture seems stronger than ever. "Our core group is down from what it used to be, but there's still a number of us who meet up every week to plan future rides, watch old movies and drink plenty of beer," explains club secretary Ted Baxter. "But there's plenty of people enthused about what we do. Blokes come from as far as Adelaide and Geelong for Anabranch, and we have an annual club games with the Cobar club. Next year's Anabranch should be huge, too, as we celebrate the 40th running."



2009



The desert comes alive. Check the difference in greenery on the same corner between 2009 and 2010.

2010

The sun creeps up over Broken Hill and Channo and I wearily drag ourselves out of bed. We don our gear and ride through the deserted back streets to the local tyre shop, where a couple of leather-clad, Harley-riding blokes are cooking snags on a giant barbie. Before long the expansive carpark is packed with bikes and riders of all shapes and sizes.

Mid-way through my bacon and egg roll, I end up in deep conversation with an enthusiastic local, who'd been waiting for this day for months. The topic turns to the latest Mad Max flick, being filmed in Broken Hill. "Taken over the town, it has. Half of us have had to sign non-disclosure agreements," he confided, before going on to tell me the number of bikes and cars being used and destroyed, filming locations, and a substantial portion of the plotline.

After brekkie we ride to some old stockyards, where a riders' briefing is called. We're told there's to be 'minimal silly-buggers' while out on the track, and then about the drinks situation. Soft drinks on the ride are free, but beer is \$2 a pop, and only mid-strength XXXX Gold is available. This is the club's safety policy to limit drunkenness on the ride. Classic!

We get underway; the first leg of the ride across an expansive rocky plain. The hardened leaves of mulga and similarly tough Outback plants whip my arms as I try to weave my way through the pack of riders to the front. Dipping through dry creek beds and racing around off-camber corners as I try to keep up with Channo, these speeds are nothing like the tight singletrack I'm used



Andy Caldecott's old steed, 'Ange's Kitchen', sits proudly in the Channing's living room.

"We're told there's to be 'minimal silly-buggers' on the track, and that only mid-strength beer is available at morning tea and lunch as a safety precaution."

to back on the East Coast.

Pulling over on the top of a rise for a photo of the emptiness and dust, a few others stop for a breather. "Bloody tough hill, that one," someone says. I look around, trying to discover what he's talking about, but can't see anything. He then points to the incline we just rode up, as I ponder how accustomed you get to the terrain in your own backyard.

I scoff my lavish lunch in the shade, then do the rounds to check out the steeds people had brought along. There's a range of modern enduro machines, the odd KTM

690, a two-stroke motocrosser, and plenty of trailbikes that had seen a number of Anabranche rides. An old XT500 Yamaha is half torn down in an attempt to forge a make-do air filter. But to my complete surprise, I spot a little TT-R90, complete with semi-automatic transmission, parked next to a WR-F. No-one had any cause for complaint about doing it tough now!

Back on the road, Channo leads me through some prime station tracks, before the going tightens up and the size of the sand dunes increase. Some crests are tall, providing a view over the next few dunes and giving you



THE ANABRANCH ROUTE

The annual Anabranche ride, held in November each year, heads south from Broken Hill in NSW's far west about 200km towards Mildura to the Anabranche. The river is a breakaway section of the Darling River. Next year is the ride's 40th anniversary and is set to be a cracker.



Spectators watch on as the delightful combo of man, dirt bike and clay pan come together in perfect harmony.



MR ANABRANCH JAYDEN SUTTON

The Mr Anabranche gong is awarded to the rider who puts in the most stellar effort over the weekend, whether that be for their antics on or off the bike. Nominees are voted for during Sunday lunch, and the trophy is a three-foot tall man made from old broken bike bits, cobbled together with a MIG welder. The only condition for accepting the trophy is that it must remain on display in the incumbent's living room for the entire year, before being brought back for the following year's ride. This year, the trophy was handed to Jayden Sutton, who rode his Yamaha TT-R90 the entire 422km without complaint. A deserving recipient!



the confidence to click up another gear through the swail and jump the following peak. Confidence in my borrowed KTM 525EXC grows, and I begin to lay it down further in the deep sandy corners. Looking down at the instrument panel, my average speed reads more than 70km/h.

As the sun became low in the sky, we finally reach a massive dry claypan the size of several football fields. As the organisers went to arrange our campsite, 60-odd bikes were unleashed, and before long there were unofficial competitions running for the longest wheelies and stoppies, or burnouts for the less skillful.

I set my swag up on the shore of the Anabranche river – flowing for the first time in countless years – then strip off and head in for a dip. The water is just what I need after a long day in the saddle, and I shed a few kilos of dust into the current.

What happened after dark on the Anabranche ride could fill this entire magazine, but the principle is much the same as a rock ‘n’ roll tour – ‘what happens on Anabranche

stays on Anabranche’.

However, once in a while on the evening news or in the local rag, you hear of injury caused by a ‘campfire incident’. I always thought I could sympathise with the victims of these stories, having burnt my pinkie finger in a fire when I was six years old. But how wrong I was – now I know exactly how campfire incidents are caused. Luckily, no-one was badly hurt, and most make it to bed before sunrise.

The next morning, we’re all feeling worse for wear. I eventually drag myself out of my swag, enticed by the wafting smell of bacon and eggs. Filling my stomach, I’m not exactly looking forward to the 220km ride home, but am looking much fresher than most. We load the 10-tonne truck full of swags, fuel up, and get under way.

By mid-morning the dust is excruciating, making its way inside your goggles and scratching your eyes to shreds. The group settles into a rhythm and spaces out, but overtaking is near-impossible. An early lunch is called at the site of an accident – surprisingly the only major injury of

the trip, and the conversation turns to riding gear. “I wear Shift because they make pants in size 40,” one bloke says. “That’s nothing,” says another, “AXO goes up to size 42!”

As we home in on Broken Hill, I have a moment of trailriding nirvana. Riding directly beside Channo in our own wheel ruts, we powerslide and brake in harmony as a storm rolls in from the north, creating a brilliant yellow and orange sky as the sun sets, and I hope we’re still a long way from our destination.

After a 30-second shower each and some fresh clothes, we head back to the clubhouse for a celebratory beer or three. A deserving Mr Anabranche receives his trophy, and the night whiles away as we watch the classic film *On Any Sunday*.

Channo drops me at the airport at an uncivilised hour the next morning as we make plans for future rides, both here and on the East coast. To get me home after the best weekend in a long while, I ask for a double-shot macchiato from the airport cafe, but the response is “What’s that, love?” 📷

“We powerslide and brake in harmony as a storm rolls in from the north, creating a brilliant yellow and orange sunset.”



The aftermath of a big night around the fire on the banks of the Anabranche River.



ANABRANCHED BY THE NUMB3RS

- 7 - 50L Beer Kegs • 350 - XXXX Gold Cans • 64 - Riders • 1 - Mr Anabranche • 300 - dollars worth of soft drink
- 2 - hospital visits • 422 - kilometres travelled • 4 - hours sleep on average • 77.2 - km/h average speed • 47 - sand dunes crossed