

Finschafen

Troy, Chris and I had a few beers recently and were looking for a new destination to explore. The MMC had covered some new territory in recent months, including some amazing ridges at Erap, but we were looking for an 'adventure' as we hadn't had one for a while

"Lets Ride to Finschafen"

Our planning left a bit to be desired. We checked Google, measured where the old road should be (a bridge collapse 30 years ago is the last time vehicles drove to Finschafen).

We figured on 110-120km.

We knew that people still walked the track, so figured if we had troubles at any of the major rivers there would be some form of river craft (raft / dinghy etc.)

The way back was to be a Banana Boat (3hrs) and we assumed we'd be back in Lae by 5pm or close to on Sat

I'd told the wife and family I would be back by 5pm, I just got the day wrong.....

The day before was an all afternoon Rugby Fundraiser, Guest speaker being Aussie Cricket Legend Brad Hogg. Thus we were all a bit tender that morning, Troy more so as he had an infected leg and couldn't make it.

The 7am start became 10am (as it so often does) due to last minute work issues. Bikes were loaded onto Mal's Land cruiser to make the first 38km of gravel road easier, plus we needed to cross the Buso River which was far too fast flowing for bikes.

One 5-litre container was taken with spare fuel. A few muesli bars, two tins of beef / fish and a couple of packets of cracker biscuits completed our preparations – oh and Chris took a toothbrush, (much to our surprise, maybe he thought he'd pull a chick while on the bike).

Leaving the Buso River at 11am we were surprised to detour inland close to Bukaua. The road was in surprising good condition however and wound up and down ridges endlessly. After 30 minutes the road came out to the convergence of two large rivers - with each being 2-300 metres across.

The rivers would have proven an impossible obstacle at any other time, but as very dry we crossed okay and climbed and climbed and climbed. It was here that my KTM 350 suffered a flat tyre. Using a can of 'magic puncture repairer' we were back on the road at no time. We hit fog soon after and a quick check of the GPS showed 1000metres.

The road had dozens of tight switchback corners and there was no way any vehicle other than a 4wd land cruiser could make this trip. Another hour and a half of climbing and we come upon an excavator, bulldozer and land cruiser with a large crew clearing a landslide. Donated by the local member the foreman announced that no vehicles had used the road for months and vehicles hardly use it due to the impossible slope. This was a chance to fill more gunk into my very flat tyre as handling was now a major issue, especially in loose corners

This was 2pm and at this point we could have turned around and been home in time for happy hour at the Yacht club

We carried on.

Our first sight of villagers was close to the Bulum River. The gravel road turned into a rutted single trail and after 2km of this it descended rapidly to what we could see was a sizeable river. The Bulum River was crossed on a wooden footbridge. I didn't want to be first (in case it collapsed), but I didn't want to be last (in case it had already collapsed) but someone had to take the photos.

Mal and Chris flew over it, I was much more circumspect but threw a wheelie at the end, forgetting there was a cross member which nearly took my head off.

The gravel road started again so it was obvious that at some stage vehicle had been here (not for a few years mind you). Winding up and down the road came to a populated area and for the best part of 5 minutes we flew along on the road under a canopy of trees, with grass growing on the road and being cut. The sight was amazing.

Rising sharply again we began to get worried at the thought of oncoming rain and sure enough it arrived, making the limestone track a nightmare. Bikes slipped and stalled and overheated in minutes. My clutch overheated and combined with the flat tyre made riding difficult. A 100 metre section took 30 minutes but the rain stopped, we gathered our wits and pushed on.

Villages grew more frequent and all were amazed to see their first bikes (and possibly first white men for many children). Wheelies as usual were pulled and even Chris got applause for his

One village had what at first glance looked like a small pine plantation. Questions revealed the Pines were similar to the Pines in Bulolo at PNG Forest Products Plantations - Klinkii Pine. They grow to 50-80m and these were close to that

Sitting at 6500 feet it did look quite out of place.

Leaving that area we were happily making our way down, not acknowledging the fact that our accommodation that night was going to be cold and wet, when we were stopped by a section of the road missing.

A 2 metre sheer face in front of us (where the road used to be) led to a detour, 4 trees laid over a 6 metre gap, over large drop onto rocks.

We stopped to consider our plans. I voted to drop the bikes into the missing section of road using ropes and drag out. Chris and Mal preferred crossing the river using the trees. When bungee jumping or flying on a 2nd level airline you always tell the truth about your weight so I made it clear I wasn't getting on the logs with a bike.

As the photos show Mal and Chris launched the bikes up the sheer face with few damages. Surprisingly the Honda made it up intact (no doubt the extra weight kept it low to the ground..)

The bikes and Chris and Mal crossed the logs in 10 minutes. I got halfway across and looked down – stupid move as I was frozen. Wet boots, wet logs and certain pain below me waited. I wasn't proud of crawling the last 2 metres but I'd also experienced a fall headfirst onto rocks 5 years ago and its painful. Plus I had the camera so no evidence existed 😊

Around the corner was the sizeable village of Semgeta. A beer sign was showing as was a petrol sign. We thought it was Xmas as we knew we needed fuel and definitely beer. Sadly none had been present for a year according to our new friends. We started to conserve fuel, coasting downhill's wherever we could.

Time had slipped by and soon dusk approached. Of course in our thorough preparation we had selected two bikes out of a fleet of 12 that had no headlights (8 of the other 10 have them), nor did we have battery operated headlamps.

The Honda had a light, but a tad dim. The track conditions until then weren't too bad. Quite difficult for a cruiser to drive on, but in capable hands possible. Funny though that as darkness set in the road turned from Limestone to Clay – muddy rutted clay

Countless small crashes were had, then a couple of fairly big ones. I flew over the bars at one point landing on back and shoulder and knocking the wind out of myself, plus bruising an already damaged shoulder.

Coming around one corner in near darkness we see 30 locals pushing and pulling a single cab land cruiser using ropes and pieces of timber. He is stuck in ruts above the wheel arches.

Talking to the driver it had been his second day on the road from Finschafen. He told us it was about 90-100 km to Finsch. We were somewhat stunned. We'd already done 110 km, we had next to no fuel left and we were only halfway there.

Carrying on at a painful speed we agreed to stop at the next village for the night. The next village was close by and they sold plastic headlamps and batteries. Not believing our luck we brought 3 and after close to an hour to find the batteries we changed our mind and set off and maybe find fuel and lodgings. There was just one flaw with the lights, they were very bright but directed the light to one small target a long way ahead – no spread which we needed.

My speedo showed that in the hour after buying the lights we traversed 2.3 km. Mostly downhill and mostly unrideable in daylight. Not using the engines meant we couldn't react as quick if an obstacle came up. Plenty of obstacles did come up, ruts, drop-offs, holes, all manner of challenges. We were all exhausted as often the safest way was to stay in the knee deep ruts and walk the bike downhill.

In the distance we saw lights and after what seemed an eternity we entered a village where we were surrounded by smiling but surprised faces. Invited to leave our bikes and rest we seized the chance and asked if we could stay. Cold water was brought out (we'd had none for hours), and a few finger bananas came our way.

A long talk began between us all and the villagers were well spoken and very happy to see us. They spoke of the hardships of living there. No outside transport except once a month an occasional land cruiser as they said the road got worse downstream. A 50kg bag on the cruiser cost the locals K150 in freight – but it's often weeks between vehicles. Schools were non-existent. Development was non-existent, yet they grew rice and had a rice mill and also the area supposedly grew coffee.

We would have settled for a feed of rice and a nice cup of coffee, alas our dinner at 1130pm was 1 small can of chilly tuna and 1 small can of corned beef with 2 packets of cracker biscuits. Courtesy of my big crash the cracker biscuits went from 6 in a pack to 600..

We'd arrived at this hamlet at 8pm, after 9 hours of riding and had covered 110km, mostly uphill. We each had about a litre of fuel left, maybe a bit more in the Honda. We'd heard earlier in the day that the village of Pindiu would have fuel. If it didn't we could not get out and it would have been chopper or plane to get home.

Our hosts had given us a hut with a small fire in the centre. Mal had earlier been offered some 'medicinal rolled herbs' and was quite sleepy...and hungry. He grabbed the corner closest to the fire and also the only sheet.

Being somewhat smart Mal stripped to his jocks and laid his wet clothes close to the fire. Chris and I weren't so lucky. We had a tarpaulin for a sheet and a 1 inch thick, 3 ft wide mattress between us. Our riding gear was very damp and with the fire providing little heat we shivered

and shook. By 1130pm we decided not to keep our rations until the morning as we were all starving. One pack of biscuits was stale, one was crushed but we ate the lot and licked the can. Mal quickly dropped asleep and began to snore loudly.

Chris and I mulled our situation

No food - Low on petrol - 110km to Finsch- No way to get support vehicle up to get us

We were up shit creek in a barbed wire canoe

Talking and laughing at ourselves was the only thing which kept us warm it seemed. Our feet in riding socks were resting near the embers and not drying. We both wore our full gear except for boots and the knee braces were uncomfortable. We felt every inch of the floorboards below us. Mal would stop snoring for a while then launch into the snoring again as he tossed and turned in his silk sheet. It did provide comic relief and we threatened to bash him many times, if he snored once more, jealous of his ability to sleep in the cold.

At 2.30am we could stomach the cold no longer and grabbed Mal's lighter. Using what kindling they was there we tried to no avail to start a fire – we weren't exactly boy scouts. The wood was wet and we stopped and sulked. Chris shot upright after a while and said 'I've got my waterproof matches'. Sure enough he did, except the damp had gotten in. Luckily a few started and we used the lot to start the fire again. It smoked out the hut but we didn't care less.

It was warm. This village was at the highpoint of our trip – 6418 ft (2001 metres above sea level)

The heat was short-lived and not nearly hot enough but gave us some respite. It was at this time I felt empathy for my night security guard as time moved so slow.

Waking at 6am we assembled our gear as best we could and said our goodbyes. Mal put on his warm knee pads, his warm socks, his warm riding pants, his warm riding shirt, then put on his soaking wet boots, so we had some small satisfaction for his comfortable night

Remembering the warning about the road we slowly negotiated the first section of our unplanned day 2. Simply put we could not see how any vehicle other than a bike could have ever got up this section. Jagged rocks lined the road, metre deep ruts were everywhere and all were wet and caused us endless delays slipping and sliding.

Had we ridden this in the dark we'd have broken bones or worse.

Twenty minutes after our exit we came to a sizeable river. Thinking it was the mighty Mongi (it wasn't the Mongi, which was the next river we crossed) it had clear water, and massive rapids. It's easy to see why plans are afoot by landowners and provincial Govt to build a Hydro station on the Mongi River – the volume and flow is unbelievable and damming it would be a piece of piss

The idiots at PMG Power and in the Govt of course would never consider this; they'd rather build more diesel fired power stations or import more white elephant gas / diesel power plants from Israel. The two Gas Turbines brought in from Israel in 2015 at cost of K48M are sitting idle at the Lae Port, as they are only designed to operate on diesel for short periods (maybe someone should have told them Lae has NO LNG Plant nearby..)

Bike fuel levels were lower than a snakes ass and we were thinking we were in deep trouble, then a sign announced Pindiu, where we'd been assured us petrol was for sale.

It wasn't and we weren't happy chappies

One happy fella assured us that a businessman about 10km further down sold petrol. Most of the 10k was downhill and we coasted wherever we could. Chris and Mal were in the lead when my bike started bogging – a sure sign of low fuel, then it stopped.

KTM'S have a split tank so I tipped it over and got a few hundred ml from the right side and was off again. No more than 200 metres from where Mal / Chris were it stopped again. This time I sloshed the fuel around (it's Electronic Fuel Injection and the fuel pump sometimes gets clogged).

Starting again I arrived to see the boys smiling. I commented that they both 'looked like they'd just blown each other' they ignored my Deliverance comment and announced happily that fuel was available. We only took 10 litres at K8 per litre and should have taken more.

Roaring off, the shitty tracks became better and better. Within 10km the road widened and became limestone. Then it became wider and wider and in better condition – still deserted mind you due to no doubt the fact that you can't get past where we stayed and as such no one can reach the people.

Speeds of 80-100 km were reached and we knew civilization and a cold beer / food were close at hand. My bike conked out a few more times and unexplainably it chewed twice as much fuel as the other bikes over the last hour (will need to check the injectors)

At one point we could see the coastline and all the miserable shitty things, which we'd endured, were forgotten. Finschafen is not so much a town as a collection of small villages

We saw our first car for the day and he seemed as surprised as us.

Coming around one corner near the Braun Hospital (this was an old German settlement) we spotted a waterfall and a swimming hole.

Bikes were parked, bags ripped off and a dicey jump over the edge with full helmet and boots on was met with stunned silence by the onlookers.

Motorbike helmets float, boots not so much. I lost my helmet and there were a few anxious moments trying to dogpaddle to shore. The Butawen Falls is an incredible place, crystal clear water, and cascading waterfalls on several levels.

It was our first wash for 28 hours; and this was a great chance to refresh ourselves. It was 1130 and we still had no clue how to get home. We were also keen for a beer or 24, and food.

Finschafen has two wharfs and limited Banana boats. Quite by chance we met up with a retired teacher who's Banana Boat was aptly named 'dusty teacher' who offered to take us to Lae for the price of a small car.

Bikes were loaded and at 1.15pm we set off. We stopped at 3 well known stops looking for beer, found didly squat so carried on. The first 30 minutes I was considering an air rescue as the sea was that bad. The next 2 hours was fine, not so bumpy and our boat skipper was a gun on the controls. The last 30 minutes past Bukaua and Singaua was rough as guts.

I'd phoned my wife and daughter advising arrival at 5pm. They'd gone down to the Sopia beach to await my arrival. I saw Jade from the beach and waved and she jumped and screamed. I was so relieved and very happy to see my little princess.

We could have run out of fuel, had a serious accident, been stuck for days, the consequences of something going wrong were so high.

WE ALSO REALISED WE'D DO IT ALL AGAIN SOMEWHERE ELSE ONE DAY. While 30+ years ago somebody may have ridden a bike from LAE to FINSCH via the old coast road we've done what no one else has ever done, and it was one hell of an adventure.

Niugini Dirt / www.niuginidirt.com