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It's seen better days, this road that winds ever on

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Almost 30 years ago, an editor told me to team up with a photographer and go for a very long drive. Australia finally had a sealed road around the nation's mainland. Highway 1. A tarmac road. All the way around.

Imagine it: 14,500 kilometres. The distance from Perth to London. Why, Route 66, the old Main Street of America, from Chicago to the Californian surf, was only 4000 kilometres.

We had to drive Australia's Highway 1 to report that it really was there.

It took a couple of months. Jon Beale filed pictures and I sent stories every day.

The Canberra Times Bicentennial Journey, our newspaper called it, for it was 1988: 200 years since Europeans came to stay, or invaded, depending on your point of view.

Such an adventure. Heat and dust in the north, cold and floods in the south. Endless miles of roadkill, termite mounds and mirages; landscapes and seascapes and sunsets to set the heart pounding. Nights lit by so many stars it seemed the sky was ablaze.

We met people with stories of sadness and joy, of triumph and tragedy, of relentless boredom and too much excitement. We rolled out swags in the bush, hired rooms at flyblown country pubs and enjoyed soft pillows in the occasional five-star establishment.

The highway barely deserved the name in parts, but what we set out to discover turned out to be true: 200 years since white settlement, the whole thing was sealed, linking just about every populated place in the nation, and you could drive it in an everyday passenger car.

I was set reminiscing about that monumental circuit by stories that have begun appearing about a project under way to seal a track known as the Outback Way, which will join up with other roads to create a link from Perth to Cairns, cutting clean across the great isolation of Australia's inland via Alice Springs.

The Outback Way itself extends 2800 kilometres from Laverton in Western Australia to Winton in central west Queensland. Only 1100 kilometres of it is bitumen. The other 1700 is pretty ordinary dirt, sand or gravel with teeth-rattling corrugation and bulldust holes that could very nearly swallow a car. Enthusiasts call it Australia's longest shortcut, but every time it rains, the road closes for an average of three days.

The federal, Queensland, West Australian and Northern Territory governments have stumped up about \$75 million and another \$100 million has been promised for sealing more of the track, but at somewhere between \$300,000 and \$800,000 a kilometre, a ribbon of tarmac stretching diagonally across Australia seems a long way off. Yet it fires the imagination. All those tiny and isolated settlements finally linked.

In a country as large and sparsely populated as Australia, roads have always been a big deal. Political careers and entire governments have risen and fallen on the state of the roads.

But here we are, 28 years after we celebrated finally encircling our nation with a strip of pavement, and in too many places in even well-populated districts roads are falling apart.

Back in 1988 as Jon Beale and I entered Victoria from South Australia, our long trip almost over, Highway 1 was the Princes Highway. It was well made and well maintained and we cruised across the border, heading towards Portland.

Take that same stretch today and you'd be in danger of knocking a wheel off in a raggedy-edged pothole. The speed limit on sections of the open highway has been reduced to 60km/h.

Hundreds of heavily laden log and woodchip trucks ply the south-west's highways each day, heading to and from the busy port of Portland. They have been pounding the roads and breaking them up for years now. Council workers patch the worst spots, but it takes only a few days for the patches to break up, too.

Warwick McEachern, general manager of Portland Bus Lines, which runs school buses throughout the district, instructs his drivers to travel slowly because the roads have become dangerous. Jack Penny at Trident Tyres says the business does a brisk business replacing tyres and wheel rims destroyed by the roads. Yes. By Highway 1.

Like everywhere in Victoria, voters in the far south-west are about to elect a new shire council – the Glenelg. Every candidate lists "better roads" in their campaign material. They all know federal and state funding hasn't kept pace with anywhere near the need.

The problem, you might guess, is that Glenelg Shire is in blue-ribbon Liberal territory. The federal Liberals know they'll never lose the seat down there – Wannon – and the state Labor government knows it won't win the seat of South-West Coast.

So these days they don't try too hard. A couple of months ago the state government gave the shire \$44 million for road maintenance . It sounds quite a lot. It's not. Up the road between Geelong and Colac, in the much more marginal seat of Corangamite, both federal and state governments have been pouring hundreds of millions into duplicating a 60-kilometre stretch of Highway 1.

When it's done, it will have cost about \$600 million. That's about \$10 million a kilometre. The roadwork won't extend beyond Corangamite.

Back in 1988, Highway 1 meant something exciting: a decent road for all Australians. It was a while ago, of course.



The Princes Highway near Portland, now damaged by heavily laden log and woodchip trucks.

Photo: Glen Watson