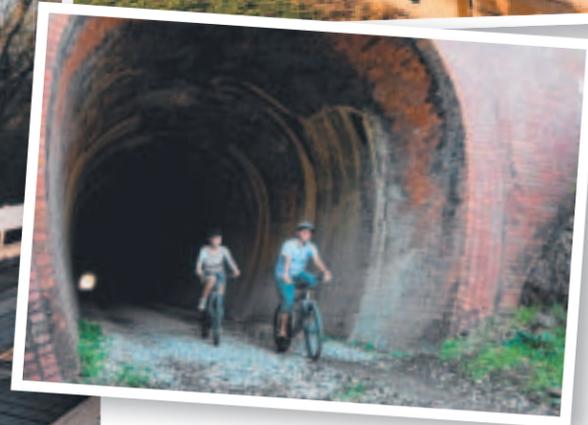


# Fit and on track



Fuelled up and ignoring an optional spur to Alexandra that leads off the main trail, we head off on the next stage of the ride which eases across the Goulburn River floodplains. Mounds of soil and timber slabs remain from the route's old wooden bridges, many replaced by new structures as part of the rail trail development.

Young cattle shelter under one bridge, but livestock aren't the only animals along the trail. We see a robust young wombat striding into the undergrowth and cameras come out to capture an echidna — for once unworried about curling into a protective ball. Birdlife is abundant; magpies swoop from the trees, and the screech of sulphur-crested cockatoos is ever-present.

The air is fresh and scented with eucalyptus. But conversation that had flowed so easily between riders throughout the day slows into a headwind, and we're all happy to see Cheviot Tunnel uphill in the distance, looking like the entrance to a Hobbit home.

The interior, lined with more than 6000 bricks shaped from local clay, is dark and cool and refreshing. From the tunnel, and after a bite of afternoon tea, it's an easy downhill cruise into Yea, where the trail ends at historic railway station building which is now a tourist information centre.

Railway workers were once accommodated at a historic hotel building across the road. Now the boutique Peppercorn Inn, tonight it's providing a shower, a hearty gourmet dinner and a comfortable bed for cyclists who will rise refreshed for another morning in the saddle.

Joining the chain gang on the High Country Rail Trail is a joy, writes **SUSAN BUGG**

**I**T'S all downhill to Yea." Five words to bring relief to a tiring bunch of cyclists with almost 60km in their legs and after the last 8km up a steady incline that wouldn't ordinarily present much of a test on the pedals except for a stiff headwind.

We've arrived at Cheviot Tunnel — a historic landmark 10km outside Yea on the Goulburn River High Country Rail Trail — where a restorative banana, chocolate muffin and cool drink are waiting, along with a short lesson on Victorian transport in years gone by.

For 130 years, passenger trains and goods wagons carried people, livestock and timber through the 200m-long tunnel on their journey from Tallarook, south of Seymour, through to Yea and on east to Mansfield at the base of the High Country.

The line closed in 1978. But as on many former rail routes, steam trains, sleepers and rails have made way for smooth bitumen and gravel pathways to take in the rolling countryside and distant hills by foot, horseback or by bike.

The Goulburn River track opened last year and, at about 130km, it can stake a claim as the longest continuous rail trail in Australia.

With small townships and roadside car parks along the way, it's little trouble to pack the bikes and kids into the car for a day trip out and back on a section of the track. But for ease, comfort and companionship, we are in the company of Phil and Susan McDonald from AllTrails Bicycle Tours on day two of a two-night, three-day supported ride along the entire length of the rail trail.

Phil's pedalling started way back, and he cycled on a penny farthing from Adelaide to Melbourne to celebrate the Bicentenary in 1988, and followed it up with a 15,000km ride around Australia.

He and Susan established AllTrails 15 years ago and arrange cycling holidays, including accommodation and food, for large and small groups around Australia and internationally.

"Most of the cyclists are 45-50 or over and like to be looked after," Phil says.

This rail trail ride is more relaxing than some of their other expeditions which include 2500km from Brisbane to Cairns and rides from Melbourne to Mount Kosciuszko. Phil says the beauty of rail trail riding is the sense of being away from all the traffic, "just floating through the country". "And all off-road is just terrific, riding in twos, talking to one another."

On a road nearby, Phil and Susan's colleague Ben is

## THE DEAL

**THE TOUR**  
AllTrails is running a Goulburn River Rail Trail Tour from April 13-15. \$1250 a person twin share including two nights' accommodation, two dinners, two breakfasts, morning and afternoon teas. Bus transfers extra. Maximum group of nine.

**THE TRAIL**  
The Goulburn River High Country Rail Trail runs 134km from Tallarook, an hour's drive north of Melbourne, to Mansfield/Alexandra.

**ONLINE**  
alltrails.com.au  
goulburnriver  
valley.com.au

driving a van that's not only carrying luggage and bits and bobs for keeping bikes in working order, but the all-important cups of tea, fruit and Susan's homemade muffins for afternoon and morning tea.

After a 24km ride from Mansfield the previous day that had ended crossing the 380m span over Lake Eildon's northern tip, the day begins at Bonnie Doon. Even after recent dry weather, the water storage levels are at 80 per cent and add to the serenity that the Kerrigan family of *The Castle* loved about this quiet boating and watersports hamlet.

The surrounding hills are parched now, and about 16km down the trail we cyclists are dry, too. Ben has set up a morning tea stop, camping stools and all, at Merton. The town's old railway shed and platform is nearby in a privately owned paddock, tended only by cattle chewing on grass and staring at passers-by.

Another relaxed 18km and we roll into our lunch stop, the tiny town of Yarck. Bikes leaning against the fence, it's into the Giddy Goat, a colourful cafe with a covered courtyard, a tempting array of homemade cakes and a friendly kelpie happy to take any leftover bits of burger off our hands.

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