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Scenic spin's no pushover



Rolling hills ... the hilly roads around Daylesford are a challenge.

The promise of a relaxing spa keeps Susan Bredow pedalling as she battles the elements on a four-day cycle tour.

The first briefing note of the first day is breaking news. The Clunes Bakery at which lunch is to be held has blown up. Well, not exactly blown up, as it turns out, but the power is out. It could be worse. The fuses blew after our lunches of crusty filled rolls and sweet slices were made.

While my feet haven't yet touched the pedals to begin a four-day weekend cycling the delightful country roads around Daylesford, the thought of coming that close to missing lunch has weakened my resolve. I accept an offer of a lift to the top of the first hill and conserve the energy it would have taken to ride a road that climbs more than 250 metres in less than five kilometres.

A little more than an hour's drive north-west of Melbourne, the mostly rolling hills of this part of Victoria are a cyclists' dream. Riding the quiet roads through scenery of lush green grass, shady gums and grazing animals brings an almost intense appreciation of the area. It's a way of slowing down to smell the roses and, after a few days, it leaves all the senses heightened.

On a bicycle you are travelling no more than 100 kilometres a day but you take in much more than if you drive the same roads in a car at 100km/h. There's an intimacy with nature that cannot be had flying along in an airconditioned cocoon. Physical exertion adds to the experience and there is great satisfaction in pushing up hills and whizzing down the other side.

After depositing me at the top of the hill, our hosts, Phil and Susan McDonald, of All Trails Bicycle Tours, drive off in the van to mark the day's route with arrows made by sprinkling flour at critical junctions. This Hansel and Gretel method is remarkably effective as neither the strong winds nor the soaking rains that follow manage to remove the flour markers before we need their guidance.

As a backup, each of the 30 riders in our group packs a comprehensive day map. There's no need to carry much more as the McDonalds and the bike mechanic, Ben, are never far away in the two support vans.

The 90 kilometres of narrow, undulating roads on the first day are indicative of what we will find during the four days. Despite it being a long weekend with lots of people in the area to enjoy the local fine food, wine and spa treatments, there is surprisingly little traffic.

Without other distractions, we are left to relish the verdant farming land with dogs barking behind gates, cows and horses staring over fences. Most of the plump sheep have their heads down grazing. Recently shorn alpacas look supercilious in their reduced state.

We have morning and afternoon teas on the side of the road. At each stop Susan sets tables with her homemade biscuits, muffins and cakes and fresh fruit and drinks. There's plenty of water for those who need to replenish drink bottles and stools to rest weary legs.

All breakfasts, lunches and two dinners are included in the trip and we eat well.

We are on our bikes before 8am and on the second day it's raining and blowing a winter chill. With his relentlessly positive nature and sense of humour, Phil passes it off as a heavy mist but there's water dripping off my helmet and my shower-proof jacket isn't keeping out the wet. For the first long hour we plug towards the thought of morning tea.

The wind is wicked and at tea we find shelter on the lee side of a great old oak.

A few riders have already declared a lay day and others pack it in here and climb in the van. I put on an extra layer and head back onto the road for the best leg yet. My frozen hands and feet thaw as the rain eases and the temperature rises a couple of degrees to 7.5. The best thing, though, is the wind is blowing from behind and the gradient is mostly downwards. We fly to Newstead at speeds of up to 30km/h and arrive an hour too early for lunch.

Our bedraggled group sniffs out the excellent coffee at the Dig Cafe and we warm up until it is time to go outside again to eat a picnic lunch.

By now a weak sun is forcing its way through the heavy clouds, it is warmer and there's a big decision to make. The next leg to the spa town of Hepburn Springs is hilly and the riding will be into a strong head wind. It's blowing 25km/h with no sign of fizzling out any time soon.

The alternative is a nice, warm ride in the van direct to the mineral spa. I visualise myself in the back of the van but then change my mind. There's plenty of time and, what the hell, I've come to ride.

At the end is a float in a warm spa and a delicious massage. There's five kilometres to go back to Daylesford but, warm and dry, I load onto the bus.

Over dinner at the lovely Mercato in Daylesford, stories of the day are filled with heroic feats of incline scaling, victory over the horrid elements and those heavenly massages.

The wind whining in the chimney as we go to sleep doesn't sound good but the forecast is for better weather tomorrow.

Come Monday and the rain has stopped but the temperature feels freezing. It's actually six degrees. I get the van to the top of the hill but still manage a 70-kilometre ride day. Morning tea is at Trentham's old railway station, then it's downhill with a tailwind to lunch at Kyneton. We're so cold we are happy to go indoors to eat pies for lunch even if it is only 10.30am.

In the afternoon the rolling hills turn roller-coaster. I get off and push up one steep incline, while Jacquie pushes to the top on her bike and declares a flat tyre. We sit in the grass on the side of the road and watch as it is repaired.

The highlight of the day is when we spot two wedge-tailed eagles soaring high above a hill.

The road from Kyneton back to Daylesford is hill after hill and it's deeply rewarding to finish.

Dinner at Frangos & Frangos cafe is good crispy pizzas with beer and wine, then rhubarb crumble and bread-and-butter pudding.

On day four, our last, breakfast at 7am is less well attended and the number of riders starting the day is down to 11. The plan is for a shorter ride of 60 kilometres through the Hepburn Regional Park and back to Daylesford for lunch.

I get a lift the first 10 kilometres, which are once again challenging, but start the day riding downhill, which is not conducive to warming the body. My ears, feet and fingers are frozen. And it's raining again.

However, the ride up Spargo Creek Road is a delight and soon I'm distracted by the native bush and pine forests that lead to beautiful wide open countryside and past a lavender farm.

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