

The Great Tasmanian Bike Ride

Early in February (2007) around 150 West Australians, including a strong contingent from AOA, took their bikes apart, packed them into skinny little boxes and shipped them out to the airport to have them dispatched onto flights to Tasmania.

The bikes, (and their riders), were off to join around 850 others of all shapes, sizes, ages and abilities from all over Australia and New Zealand to participate in the 2007 Great Tasmanian Bike Ride as organised by Bicycle Victoria.

“Why?” you may well ask. I asked myself that too, ...on several occasions, along with “How?”

After seeing the route profile for the first time, “How” was I going to get enough training during a Perth summer to ride over 450km up and down hills twice as high as any around Perth. “How” was I going to take my bike apart and get it into a bike box. Even more importantly, “How” was I going to get it back together again without risking some form of catastrophic structural failure out in the wilds of a non-tropical island far away from home? “How” much fun would it be really, being an enthusiastic “off road” cyclist to be riding on the road with traffic in cold wet rain all day.

Very soon it became “Why” was I getting up at 4.30am and setting off in the dark to ride 80kms through the hills. (To answer the first “How” question of course). At least there were some bonuses to be had; seeing the sunrise and spotting wallabies, snakes and other wildlife around Canning Dam very early in the morning. Perhaps even getting a little fitter.

Our grueling training schedule had alerted me to the need to make several modifications to my bike to make it easier and more comfortable to ride, including fitting the most expensive seat in the shop. Finally, the day of departure loomed near. To answer the second “How” question, I took my bike to my friendly bike shop and had them pack it for me. When I got it back, I took it back out and photographed it every which way so I would be able to repack it later!

And so we found ourselves at the airport. And a few hours after that we found ourselves at Melbourne airport packed into a tiny little airplane musing on the struggles of the flight crew as they wrestled with the tide of bike

boxes that had drawn up alongside. It was obvious that they weren't all going to fit and some were going to have to go on a later flight. We wondered whose bike it might be still sitting on

the trolley as it was being pulled away.

My misgivings about forthcoming weather prospects were realised in full as we descended through rain to land at Launceston airport. After a flurry of activity to sort out transport options, we soon found out that the familiar looking box left on the trailer at Melbourne was the one housing

Sarah's bike. It would be sent over the following day. Just as well we had decided to go a day early!

“First rain in months,” said the taxi driver as we made our way to our accommodation.

“Yeah sure,” I thought to myself. It was raining again at the official start of the ride. Those that had camped overnight at the Aurora Stadium were cold and wet already. We were later to find out that one hapless rider had slipped and fallen right at the start line and had been unable to continue. A huge disappointment I would imagine. I was somewhat speechless when a number of riders ahead of me pulled in to the first bakery, just 500m into the ride!!

After a long steady climb though the suburbs of Launceston, we soon found ourselves heading north east on a long steady climb in rural Tasmania. Our first campsite was to be the Pipers Brook Vineyard, 50km away. It rained on and off for part of the way and then cleared for the afternoon.

Hats off to the excellent organisation provided by Bicycle Victoria. Having organised rides like this for nearly twenty years, they have it down to a fine art. A fleet of trucks and other vehicles ferry the luggage, food and the camp around. Toilets and showers are also on trucks. There were mobile dishwashing stations, cafes and pizza vendors following along. All sorts of people on all sorts of bikes participate.

Judging by the variety of shirts being worn, some people participate in them year in year out.

We arrived at Pipers Brook early in the afternoon, and after helping to unload the truck, we set up our tent in the paddock that was to be our home for the night. Then we headed off to the winery for the afternoon.

After photographing a spectacular sunset, we had our evening meal at the Café de Canvas, listened to the evening briefing, and then prepared for an early night.

Entertainment in the form of a band or other event was provided every night as was an outdoor cinema featuring recent release movies.

Day Two took us 72km up and down hills to Branxholm via a morning rest stop at Bridport which provided us with our first glimpse of the sea. It was also where I found a very aggressive ant which threatened to terminate my ride with its strategically placed bite. As if there was not enough scheduled riding to be done, from time to time the Ride Guide suggested a side tour to a place of possible interest and on this day it was to Ledgerwood where a stand of trees, planted to honour WWI heroes had been carved into statues. This was because the trees which were ageing were in danger of falling or having to be cut down and this was a way of preserving both them and the original purpose for which they had been planted. As a bonus, we got to ride along some very pleasant minor country roads and came out at the top of a hill on the original cycle route.

Unfortunately, that night's campsite was on the other side of the very steep valley in which the town is located.

I had originally expected **Day Four** to be the worst as it featured not only the highest climb, but also the longest distance. Instead, Day Three, Branxholm to St Helens, took that dubious honour. It too, was 72km but also had a climb of 450m over 15km. "There is a spectacular view to the east coast from the Little Plains Lookout at the top of the day's climb," promised the Ride Guide, but as much as I looked, I couldn't see more than about 50 metres through the fog and the rain that had opened up with a vengeance as I approached the summit.

I couldn't enjoy the down hill following much either as the road was wet and slippery and my hands were so cold, I had to stop and warm them so I could work the brakes.

All that before lunch. It could only get better, couldn't it? Afraid not!

Shortly after lunch, Sarah skidded on a ridge near the edge of the seal and crashed onto her shoulder. She seemed okay after a few minutes so we carried on, and again, it was an early afternoon arrival to the campsite.

By then the rain had fortunately cleared and as we hung our wet items of clothing out to dry we had our picture taken for a local newspaper. The next day we became nearly famous throughout Tasmania. As any AOA president would of course, I was wearing my AOA polo shirt!

By now Sarah's shoulder was demanding attention and she decided to withdraw from the ride. After a flurry of phone calls, she had changed her flights (for a price) and arranged transport back to Hobart. When, in the morning it wasn't so bad, she decided to take a rest day and in the meantime cancel all previous arrangements. The airline charged even more to put her flights plans back to the way they had originally been (that's the spirit of Australia for you!), and she got to ride in a bus instead.

Back on the road (St Helens to Bicheno 81km) it was not as bad as I had feared. The rain had stopped and once I had reached the summit there was a very pleasant section even before the long windy down hill which could be enjoyed this time as the road was dry. When we got down to the flat there was a strong tail wind. I can now mention that certain savvy members of the ride, who had studied the Ride Guide map carefully, had noted that they could bypass aforementioned hill by riding around the coast without incurring any significant penalty in terms of extra distance. Sadly, I was not one of them.!

At Bicheno by the sea, Sarah & I happened upon an intriguing little aquarium featuring sea horses and other fascinating marine life housed in a non-descript shed. Well worth the mere \$3.00 entry fee.

We were looking forward to **Day Five**; a short 45km followed by **Day Six** – Rest Day! Sarah decided that her shoulder was well enough to give it a go. By now we were well practiced at packing up and getting on the road by 8am, quite some time after most of the rest of the camp I might add, and this day was no exception.

We arrived in Swansea around lunchtime and spent the afternoon sampling local wares.

We spent our rest day exploring the Freycinet Peninsula.

Bicycle Victoria had organised buses so we spent the day walking first to Wine Glass Bay, then crossing to the other side of the peninsula for the return leg.

The following day it was back in the saddle, another short day — just 56km to Triabunna! After the long days that had gone before, we were feeling a little underdone with these shorter days. However, as a consequence, we were able to get into Triabunna early enough to organise a trip out to Maria Island, which was once a penal colony, for the afternoon.

If we felt underdone over the past few days, **Day Eight** was to restore normality. It was 78km to Richmond, with a 350m hill in the middle somewhere. In fact, there was both a “Break Me Neck Hill” as well as a “Bust Me Gall Hill” along the way. I did notice the sign, “Hey folks, Richmond’s just a mere 13km from here” or words to that effect pointing down a road to the right at one point, but dutifully followed along the prescribed route which took us to Sorrell first before heading back and over yet another steep hill to the other end of the “shortcut”.

By now you might have noticed that I haven’t mentioned *rain* for a few days. The challenge now was a minor heat wave. Getting over this last hill was a real feat of endurance as the heat very quickly saps one’s strength. They are not big on air-conditioning in that part of the world and the challenge was to find somewhere cool to spend the afternoon. There was nowhere really. Through the afternoon we got to visit a few of the local attractions including the historic Richmond Goal. The good folk of the town happened to put on a street party the night we arrived so there was live music and a real carnival atmosphere in the streets that evening.

All too soon it was the last day. Richmond to Hobart, 29km. Cresting the very last big hill, through the suburbs of Hobart, onto the Intercity Cycleway, then suddenly up over a little rise and around a bend and the finish line was right there. Such was the organisation of Bicycle Victoria that a cheer squad greeted each rider as they crossed over. A little sadness that it was all over but a great deal of satisfaction in having taken on and completed such a significant personal challenge.

Dean Craig (AOA President 2005 –2007)



Maxine dishing it up to a hungry biker



Only thing left to do thereafter was to enjoy a celebratory dinner with fellow AOA conquerors!