



ROCK AND ROLL

A festival on wheels, the Great Victorian Bike Ride requires stamina just for the socialising

ANDREW FENTON

HIT THE ROAD

Big hill climbs in the Great Vic Bike Ride are kept to a minimum; a tent city springs up each night.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED

Wally Sharpe is 73 and hasn't missed a Great Victorian Bike Ride in 32 years. Wally is a born adventurer – in his younger days he completed more than 600 skydives and BASE jumped off the still under-construction Rialto in Melbourne.

But by 1986, the Cranbourne resident was looking for a new challenge. A friend invited him along on the third Great Victorian Bike Ride – the annual 500–600km mass cycling journey through the state.

"I thought what can I do that's more dangerous than skydiving? Guess what – riding a bike!" chuckles Wally over a beer in the Great Vic campsite's dinner pavilion in Yarrawonga.

"I pulled a steel bike out from under my sister's house with one brake on it. It was rusty and weighed half a tonne but I rode 600km on it."

Wally and I are among the 3000 or so riders on the 2018 ride, which spans 540km from Bright to Benella, taking in Beechworth, Milawa, Tallangatta, Rutherglen, Yarrawonga and Glenrowan.

It feels more like a travelling festival than a bike race. Attendees get three healthy and delicious meals a day, luggage transfers, individual shower cubicles, staff who'll put up your tent each night (for an additional fee) and heaps of entertainment options, from live music to stand-up comedy and an outdoor movie theatre. "It's the most social week of the year," event publicist John Myers promised.

With more than three decades behind it, the Great Vic now runs like a well-oiled machine, with a new tent city springing up each night before being torn down and shipped on 50 semi-trailers to the next town to do it all again.

The whole thing began as a "one off" ride from Wodonga to Melbourne in 1984 organised by the Bicycle Institute of Victoria (now Bicycle Network). Attracting more than 2000



HIT THE SACK

riders, it was so popular they did the same route again the following year.

Richard Marshall, who operates the All Trails luxury accommodation package for riders who don't like roughing it, attended the first event as a 14 year old.

"It's changed immensely," he says. "Back then all you got was breakfast and a tent space. The campsites were just football clubs and there were no toilet trucks or shower trucks."

Although they still go through 1000 litres of beer and wine every night, the festivities have toned down a bit from the early days. "It wasn't the riding that killed you, it was the partying every night!" Wally Sharpe recalls.

The 2018 event combines two of my favourite things – cycling, and Victoria's amazing high country. Jam packed with wineries, craft breweries and cute tourist towns, the fields and rolling hills give way to mountains every which way you look. Riding through it immerses you in the sights

and sounds in a way driving can't match. And as it turns out, the actual riding isn't as difficult as you might expect, thanks to clever route planning that minimises the number of big hill climbs.

Unfortunately one of these, from Myrtleford to Beechworth, is on day one. It's one of those hills you're sure will end just around the next corner, but when you get there, there's always another corner. I finally make it to the lunch stop and slump to the ground, exhausted. When I finish my chicken wrap, I steal a glance at my watch – it's still only 10.30am.

This becomes my daily routine. 1. Wake up at 7am. 2. Push everything in my tent into an enormous duffel bag and load it on the luggage truck. 3. Realise once again that everyone else got up at 5.30am and 70 per cent of the camp has already been dismantled. 4. Set off and pass endless numbers of riders before getting to the "lunch stop" at 10.30am.

ESCAPE ROUTE

GREAT VICTORIAN BIKE RIDE

The 2019 ride, from Robe in South Australia to Torquay in Victoria will run Fri, November 22 to Sun, December 1.

Early bird prices, available until August 5, start at \$1149 for adults, rising to \$1999 for a package that includes a tent, long-term car parking at Torquay, transport from Torquay to Robe, and a jersey. All tickets include meals, camping spot, showers, luggage transfers, on-route mechanical support and entertainment.

greatvic.com.au

5. Finish the ride and collapse exhausted in my tent around noon or 1pm. But no pain, no gain, and I make a few personal bests, including the longest ride I've ever done – 102km in a single day from Tallangatta to Rutherglen. I'm rewarded with a day off in Rutherglen, spent kayaking down the Murray with other riders.

The highlight of Rutherglen though, is spending two nights in a hotel on the All Trails tour.

It's hard to express the sheer unadulterated luxury of a couch, an air conditioner and a queen-size bed after a week of camping.

While I pass up the chance for a complimentary massage, and I don't need anything fixed by their mechanic, I do head out for dinner and drinks with the "luxury" riders.

Glynn Williams from Geelong, is on his ninth Great Vic with All Trails.

"I love the camaraderie," he explains. "I normally go to camp for dinner and I still meet up with the

same people I met the first year, who are camping." But Glynn won't be camping any time soon. "No, we've talked about it, but after All Trails it'd be very hard to go back."

By the second last day, my lack of training and bad habit of "making time" by not stopping to rest enough has caught up with me. It's my personal nadir. A 95km journey on a hot day from Yarrawonga to Glenrowan, over a steep hill in the Warby-Ovens National Park. I survive by blasting loud music as motivation and calling my girlfriend for emotional support. By the end of the ride I'm absolutely shattered and spend the afternoon sitting under a tree recovering while staring blankly into the distance.

The route for the 2019 event is announced during the ride. This year it's bigger and better – 10 days and 652km, from Robe in South Australia to Torquay on the Great Ocean Road. They're billing it as "Our Greatest Great Vic Ever".

There are also two five-day options available – Robe to Port Fairy and Port Fairy to Torquay.

My first Great Vic winds up with a leisurely 52km ride back to Benalla where I'd parked the car. There's a real sense of personal achievement from riding so far – and a surprisingly diverse group of riders manage it. Kids under 10 and octogenarians complete the ride. Eighteen-year-old Catherine Nitz does the entire route on a unicycle.

I'm also hugely impressed with Wally's ability to return year after year. But there's something that's been niggling at him – he's still a couple of rides behind the undisputed leader, Harry Sheldon's record of attending every ride since 1984. "I'm waiting for him to drop off his perch so I can take his crown!" he laughs. "Only problem is, he's seven years younger than me!"

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF BICYCLE NETWORK