

THE GOLDFIELDS BY BIKE

As we crest the steep climb up Mt Alexander, vista upon vista opens up around us. Looking back along the horizon, we're able to spot the dark green patch of trees on Mt Franklin, which we'd only just ridden past the previous morning. With our ride's progress laid out before us, we were met with an overwhelming sense of achievement; one you don't really get from sitting inside a car.

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During the first week of spring, two friends and I set off from Southern Cross train station in Melbourne to embark on a three-day mountain bike ride through central Victoria.

Starting from Ballarat, we made the 190 kilometre off-road journey along the Goldfields Track, passing through historical gold rush towns including Daylesford, Hepburn Springs, and Castlemaine, before finishing at the track's end-point in Bendigo.

Previously known as the Great Dividing Trail, this epic journey was once trekked by the tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants who arrived in search of fortune during the gold rush era of the 1850s.

It has since remained a popular walking track for hikers and history buffs, but in recent years there has been a significant push from local tourism operators to open the track to cyclists.

In 2010, the trail was rebranded as the Goldfields Track, and a new committee was setup to develop, manage and promote the route. Over the past five years this has led to track upgrades including improved signage and the addition of specific sections that separate walkers from mountain bikers. Tourism operators are also on board, with a number of bike-friendly accommodation and service options popping up en route, making the proposition of riding the entire track length more attractive than ever.

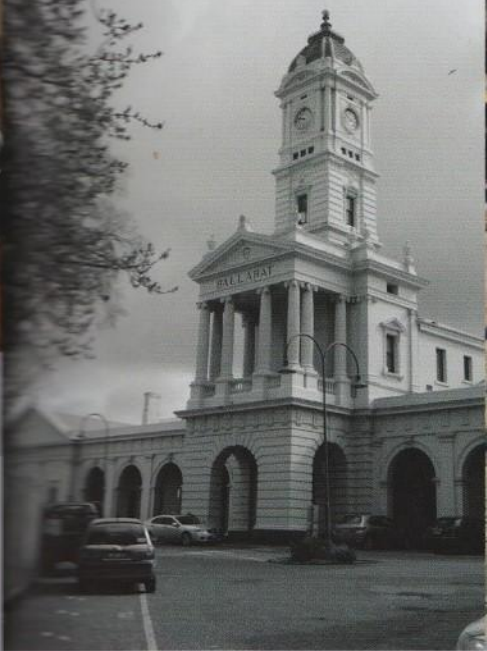
And attractive it most certainly is. Taking riders along the beautiful rolling landscape that is the Goldfields region, the journey offers a mixture of dirt roads, 4WD tracks, and a plethora of fast and twisty singletrack to discover. Not only is it a whole load of fun, but riding on two wheels also means you can cover a lot more ground than those on two feet. Throw in some hidden culinary gems along with the rich gold rush history, and you can see why the Goldfields Track has been awarded with state significance.

One of those tourism operators honing in on the Goldfields Track is Andy Bos of Tread Harcourt. Tread is a new cycling-centric food and accommodation venue located at the base of Mt Alexander. In addition to running the café business, Andy and his partner Paula Ewing also offer up guided cycling trips, as well as a pickup and drop-off service along the Goldfields Track.

For most cyclists of average fitness, Andy recommends breaking up the Goldfields Track into three days, with around 50-70km of riding each day. You can take it easy and use the whole day to soak up all the sights and sounds along the way, or you can hammer out each day's riding in less than four hours if you're feeling particularly sprightly.

How you plan out your trip is also entirely up to you. For the more adventurous out there, you can tackle the Goldfields Track self-

Chocolate Mill DAY TRIP



supported by making use of the campsites along the way. We decided to travel lighter though, and instead took a more civilised approach to our trip.

We spent the first night at the Continental House in Hepburn Springs. Despite rolling up to the front gate covered in dirt and sweat, our hosts Veronica and Steve welcomed us into their 1920s style guesthouse like family. You can BYO and utilise the commercial kitchen, or like us, you can be treated to a beautiful homemade breakfast and fresh coffee.

Just around the corner is the Hepburn Bathhouse and Spa, where the mineral hot pools proved to be just what our weary bodies needed after a long day of riding. We also enjoyed a hearty pub feed at the Old Hepburn Hotel, which offers up country-town charm and a courtesy bus ride home that our legs appreciated dearly.

Our second night was spent at Tread Harcourt, where the lodge-style accommodation and onsite café are perfectly tailored towards cyclists. The dedicated space for bike washing, repairs and secure lockup is also a huge plus for riders travelling with their pride and joy. We made use of Andy's gear transfer service, which meant we had fresh clothes to change into at the end of each day. With Andy taking care of logistics, all we had to do was enjoy the ride.

There are plenty of riding highlights all throughout the journey, including a high-zoot downhill gully section just past the extinct volcano that is Mt Franklin. Gently banked corners propel you from left to right in quick succession, in a stunning display of natural flow. Then of course there's the Poverty Gully water race trail; a 10km rock-laden descent that spits you into the outskirts of Castlemaine.

If you're not too busy grinning from ear to ear on the trail, there's a wealth of natural

beauty to take in too. Riding along the southern face of the Great Dividing Trail takes you through the Wombat State Forest, where the lush green surrounds make for an immersive environment. And for those who are looking to earn some more vertical, the optional road ascent up Mt Alexander will provide you with stunning views of the fruit orchards around Harcourt and beyond.

But riding the Goldfields Track isn't just about the yahoos. We indulged in many culinary delights along the way, with zero guilt encountered thanks to our calorie-burning efforts on the bike. The curious Chocolate Mill just outside of Daylesford is definitely a highlight, and the exquisite Belgian chocolates were much appreciated at mid-morning on Day two.

For something more substantial, make sure you check out the Public Inn at the Old Castlemaine Fire Station. For the craft beer lovers, the rotating tap list will keep you happy, and the rustic menu puts the spotlight on local produce of the season. Keep an eye out for special events that showcase beer, wine, food or all three. Their sister-café, RePublic, operates next door, and is a regular pre and post-ride hangout for local cyclists.

If you're looking for an alternative to beer however, put aside some time to visit the cellar doors of Bress and Henry's of Harcourt. Then put aside some extra time...

As it currently stands, the Goldfields Track is one of the best multi-day mountain bike rides in the country. There is great depth to the journey, with plenty on offer aside from just good riding. However you choose to explore the Goldfields by bike though, you'll be rewarded with a unique and unforgettable perspective of the region.

Head to www.GoldfieldsTrack.com.au to start planning your trip. ■

