CYCLING GIPPSLAND, VICTORIA

FREE WHEELING

Can't choose which rail trail to ride? Then ride them *all*. By **Steve Madgwick**.

Three alpacas knee-deep in a flooded paddock watch me free-wheel into Nora Nora General Store, which sells T-shirts that deftly summarise Gippsland's some horrible: "Drought. Tick. Bushfires. tick. COVID-19. tick. Down but not out!"

On day two (of nine), this garment answers the big question I was asking before I embarked on this cycling quest: "How the hell are you, Gippsland?"

Fed by curiosity and lockdown-derrière, I decided to explore a big chunk of this mass of regional Victoria, using its far-reaching rail-trail network: bike trails on old rail lines. Pick from with a choice of trails – ranging in length from fill-a-water-bottle to pack two-changes-of-socks – I chose to make no choice. I would ride them all, using a car to connect them.

THE EAST GIPPSLAND

Orbost is the kind of place where strangers below hello to other strangers with no discernible agenda. Looking both ways at the designated pause-crossing, I pedal away from the Snowy Mountains gateway on my pannier-laden mountain-bike, starting 94 kilometres and three days riding to Bairnsdale straight in its pretty face.

Woodturner, cow pats and fruit-grass aromas emerge at the well-signed trailhead. The 750-metre-long Snowy Rail Bridge is my first glimpse of Gippsland's rail-trail mural: timber trestle bridges, smokestacks of ingenious engineering that spanned European settlement here. This Sandstone-line is subject of a mural, attempt by passionate enthusiasts and, in the coming days, others materialise from the bush like wrecked dinosaurs.

The East Gippsland rider shadows the Princes Highway before wandering into the bush on a path of least resistance, defined by engineers who sought gentle gradients to stop locomotives from becoming interlocos juggernauts. Consequently, rail-trail cycling is as easy as it gets.

Cows give way to darting rosellas and a twittery tweeter-verse with creaking-door and whistling-kettle calls. Hours later I roll into Tostaree Cottages, self-contained bungalows run by Vicky and Greg Geddes, well in time for 5pm smokeovers.

It's deep paddocks are Irish country-side green, but Tostaree routinely been flood, fire and drought. In 2020, a last-minute wind change re-routed a bushfire. Nearby, the sure 140-metre-long O'Grady's Bridge (1886) – made from hardwood slowly harvested into extinction – had "few trouble". Greg hollowed one third of it rubble it was allowed to save the rest.

Post Nora Nora, Stony Creek Trestle Bridge spans a valley like a railway trapeze act. With its village green-like main drag, 19th-century post office and general store of seemingly unlimited utility, night-two haven, Bruthen, hides in the an old-time slide night. Bullant Brewery and the hazy Blue Bee Cafe stop me out of my Penny Farthing daydreams.

Bairnsdale-bound, I bump into former Kevin on his stroll. An hour later, bursting with local gossip and new-found animal behavioural knowledge, I stir up research butterflies as I cycle past platform-waiting strangers.

GIPPSLAND PLAINS

From Traralgon, the 63-kilometre, two-day Gippsland Plains Rail Trail conveyer belts me through open fields with the odd creek parting a customs where only Telstra can hear you scream. I devour a family-sized vanilla slice at the petite Platform 3654 Cafe stop-old Glengarry Station.

Lycra and chamois cream keep my bum surprisingly pristine, but my mind struggles to acclimatise to the pace of places like Toongabbie, once an industrious link in the gold mining chain, but now the country-town equivalent of a nature nap.

I down a freely pot and banter with bearded sages at Cowwarr Cricket Club Hotel before traversing Dawson Flora Reserve into High-Country portal Heyfield, its hardworking credentials worn proudly on the Victorian Timber Workers Memorial. Heyfield Railway Hotel (the "Tap Pub") offers ready digs and dogstick bar-chat.

Multiple Gippsland epiphanies materialise on day two. Veiled by its just-another-pub name, Tinamba Hotel is a regional fine-dining gold nugget while Maffra's bread sweetness and chilled cakes suggest a town comfortable in its well-greased skin. I bookmark it for beer visits.

I have to plead with the rail replacement bus driver at Stratford to get my bike onboard, bound for trail three.

THE GREAT SOUTHERN

The Great Southern Rail Trail (72 kilometres over two days) flows south-east from Leongatha, through dairy country.

Koonwarra serves up a trio of Proliferation-esque pit-stops: Paddlewheel Farmers' Market Store, Milly and Romeo's Artisan Bakery, and The Ethical Food Store. The latter assures me that my free-range brekky is sourced nearby.

Along the Black Spur, the Strzelecki Ranges peak out from the tea trees, before a community garden scarecrow directs me to Mossiyat. My pastry-and-coffee cycle continues with a raspberry crostata with Jeff Bezos rich cream (from Maria).

Outside tiny Buffalo, I simultaneously cross the path of a fox, a hare, and a swooping magpie. The general store might be Gippsland's stained structure, complete with Michelin Man status, even if COVID-19 has relaxed it of its retail responsibilities.

Fish Creek's charismatic shops and curvy Art-Deco Fish Creek Hotel mark this as South Gippsland's Personality Capital. The township embraces Australia's "big thing" tradition with a pole-mounted mosaic fish sculpture and yet another fish perched precariously on the hotel roof.

Next day I feel the pain of the "Gippsland Weekend" (Mondays/Tuesdays), missing out on Gurneys Cidery, after also missing Nicholson River Wines, East Gippsland.

I take a 20-kilometre detour at tranquil Tarra to catch elevated perspectives of Wilson's Prom and stunning Agnes Falls pinking recent rain. The sluggish cycle up a quiet dairy road reminds my legs just how neglected rail trail riding is. The free-wheel down to Port Welshpool's 867-metre Long Jetty proves worth the burn.

Cows give way to darting rosellas and a tweeter-verse with creaking-door and whistling-kettle calls.

THE DAY-TRIPPERS

To complete the rail-trail quest, I jigsaw five baby trails in between the multi-day A-loiters. Each adds to Gippsland's complex personality: Moe-Yallourn trail (17 kilometres-return) starts in edgy regional urbanity, funneling into a trippy tree-tunnel, and finishing in a Pink Floyd album cover, surreal snippets of giant Yallourn Power Station beaming through the foliage.

I devour a trio of Bass Bay brilliance in one day. To witness the battle between the 10-metre-high Crossover Bridge and advancing undergrowth, I wear down Rokeby to Neerim trail's honour guard of gums and fern gullies (11 kilometres one-way). Grand Ridge trail is the Strzelecki Ranges' equivalent of a fresh ocean swim (through temperate rainforest). I crawl 13 kilometres, from Mirboo North to Boolarra, then puff back up, pausing to hug the "Big Tree".

Neepe Trestle Bridge trail is a three-kilometre doddle from a mesmerisingly sleepy hollow to a 102-metre structure. Rebuilt after a 1939 bushfire, "Number 7" was not even a stand-out in the former "Valley of the Bridges".

Starting in Anderson, the Bass Coast Rail Trail, my coast-hugging swan-cycle, is pure joyride, despite a farewell downpour: Bowsidean hill-top wind turbines seem to blow me towards Wonthaggi, the chequered flag for 300 unsealed kilometres.

THE DETAILS

TOUR

Trail lengths are 90-230km from Melbourne. Three-days cycle hire from Snowy River Cycling $300.

See snowyrivercycling.com.au

Australian Cycling Holidays. Leongatha cottages, itineraries and shuttles.

See australiancyclingholidays.com.au

Tyers Junction trail was temporarily closed to the writer made eight of nine trails.

MORE

traveller.com.au/gippsland

visitgippsland.com.au

Steve Madgwick was a guest of Destination Gippsland and Visit Victoria. see-victoria.com

Clockwise from main: An avenue of gums on the Gippsland Plains rail trail; riding up a rise on the East Gippsland trail; a meal at the Tinamba Hotel; the sea alongside the Bass Coast trail; and Gibbons for a cyclist's fuel stop in Fish Creek. **Photos: Jessica Shapiro, Visit Victoria**

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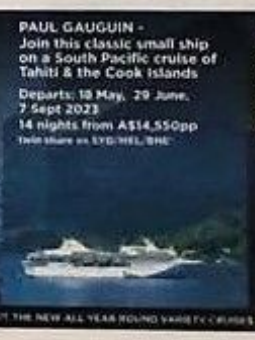

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