

# In at the DEEP END

It was an erratic journey through tough terrain, ancient landscapes and was a food-lovers' paradise. I came across the kindest characters and developed a new respect for a discarded bike.

WORDS Tracey Croke.





**T**HE LOW SUNLIGHT glinted through the giant gum trees casting long shadows on a gruelling day. With pit-low concentration, I really didn't fancy an inaugural lesson in night riding.

The heat had taken its toll on everyone and what we thought would be a final breezy seven-kilometre descent into Wilpena campsite, was rudely interrupted by a five-metre lump of rock that appeared twice its size in my jaded mind. The trail disappeared into it like a bad joke, which even the irrepressible among this tour-cycling crew didn't find funny.

I vaguely remember many months ago when I thought it was a dazzling idea to take on the 900 kilometre Mawson Trail - Australia's longest according to Bike SA - as my introduction to unsupported tour cycling. Somewhere between a bottle of Shiraz and oblivion I slurred to Paul "Letzzz go". It's amazing what you think you can do with a skin full of South Australia's finest.

For me, it was an easy sign up seeing as though Paul would be lugging our survival essentials on a Bob trailer leaving me to pack the overflow in a couple of panniers.

Invited Dom and Michele, who I originally met on a bike and latte social ride in Brisbane, had clocked up roughly 7000 kilometres on custom-made bikes. They spoke of Rohloff enclosed gear systems, Kevlar tyres and other out-of-my-depth lingo.

They roped in Jenny, an even higher mileage amigo they met while cycling unsupported through South America. We mentioned the trip to a couple of mountain bike mates, Thomas and Walter (also virgin tour cyclists like us), and soon there were seven people of five different nationalities, living across three countries, boarding with bike boxes to Adelaide.

I thought that my carbon framed soft tail with brain was far too prissy for this trip, so my master plan culminated of sticking a pannier rack on my old hard tail mountain



bike. I had discarded her into the corner of the garage after I figured no one would want to part with good money for the weighty well-worn model which cost less than a 1000 bucks brand new many years ago. I tarted her out to anyone who was game for a go until I decided to take her on the most challenging bike trip I had ever attempted.

"Maybe there's a reason the Mawson trail maps start in Adelaide and run into the outback," joked Paul as he, Thomas and Walter tried to see the funny side of heaving the first of seven bikes, each laden with an average of 25 kilos, up the steep sharp rocks. At this stage, we weren't even sure if we were still on the route.

The logic of starting the trail in the deep end had got lost after eight hours on a vertical learning curve. It would've been understandable had we reached the back-to-front decision after researching the prevailing wind or the topography of the trail, but we hadn't.

If you follow the official maps (all nine

of them) right way about, the trail passes through the wine regions of the Adelaide Hills, the Clare and Barossa valleys in the first few days. The truth was, we didn't trust ourselves to stick to the 75 kilometre per day average needed to complete the trail within our two-week time frame. With only two rest days built in, we figured if we were going to stumble over some world class Shiraz, it was better to start in the Flinders, finish with charged flutes and fantastic trail memories behind us.

Hedonism took over at the top of the rock once we could see a trail marker in the distance. Exhilaration replaced exhaustion and a second or possibly third wind kicked in. I giddied along on single track zipping between the trees, now hardly noticing the panniers, which felt cumbersome at the beginning of the day and had flipped me off a few times.

It was a first day full of thrills and spills, excitement and head spinning lessons. I had

Held up by the herd.



hot food and sleep within my grasp when Jenny's whole pannier rack flopped into the creek in front of me and we came to a halt once again.

The mistakes and breakdowns were already in double figures and (reassuringly) not all down to the virgins among us. It was soon a return to smiles all round when we found a dusky Wilpena campground at the end of the single track. Alas, the joy of night riding would be saved for another time.

#### INTO THE FLINDERS

The Mawson Trail is an outback-to-city bike adventure named after the Antarctic explorer, Douglas Mawson. It takes in the most spectacular regions of South Australia, says Trails SA, including the ancient landscapes of the Flinders Ranges, which first sparked Mawson's fascination with exploration and petrology (the study of structures and rocks.) The connection of little-used country roads, farm tracks, forest fire trails and single tracks, is a journey of changing landscapes reflected by the varying climate on different sides of the ranges, which all added to the beauty, the challenge and the fun.

We pedalled through the fossil-littered sea beds of ancient gorges, climbed over arid ranges, thundered down hills through dry rocky creek beds, rolled along lush valleys and lingered in the divine wine regions.

A war of attrition began when rain turned parts of the dusty clay trail into a sticky fudge. The clay built up on the tyres and jammed the wheels. We cleared it just to go another demoralising 20 metres before getting stuck again. Sometimes it made sense to find another way.

At times, the stifling daytime temperature which can exceed 30 degrees even in the

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springtime, plummeted to single figures after sunset and we all made good use of our down jackets.

Not many people do the whole trail but a guess would be 20 or 30 a year according to Jim from Genesis Tour and Charter, who drove us into the flinders to spend our first night at Alpina Sheep Station near the start of the trail.

#### THE FIXES

The trail isn't known to many folk of the tiny remote communities it passes through, so it's not surprising that some wondered what dragged in seven people with an amusing array of saddle sore galls and "funny twangs". It served as a starter to meet the local characters who - after having a good laugh - were happy to help us out of a few fixes.

Alpina Sheep Station owners Dave and Sally came to the rescue on the first night when one of the crew forgot fuel. Our

agreement that each person (or couple) should be self-sufficient went out of the window on night three, when we discovered two of our five stoves didn't work properly. The obvious lesson is test everything first unless you don't mind sucking the starch out of dried pasta or chomping on cold grainy mashed potato.

Some rainwater tanks are marked on the route but it doesn't mean there will be anything in them. "Did no one tell you never to come into the outback without your own water?" a woman in a converted bus asked laughing before cracking into her own huge tanks to give everyone an ample supply. Being the butt of the joke was a small price to pay to avoid dehydration.

My personal gratitude goes to a kind character called Ken. The man with a van drove Paul and I 50 kilometres from Burra to Clare when injury took me off my bike for a day. "I don't take money for helping people



INSET: A Thorpy Kun: Three cornered Jacks caused trouble's minutes on this page. In part it was necessary to carry food and water for two days (photo credit: Jenny Nicholson)





Fading light and time to bush camp

out," said the brown snake bite survivor. He only took cash after we insisted several times. His priceless stories, unquestioning generosity and kind character will fondly feature in our travel memories.

#### THE FOOD

The best nutritional and psychologically uplifting trail sustenance differed from person to person and sparked heavy debates.

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It generally boiled down to some form of heavily preserved or rehydrated gunk.

Having said that, boiled eggs and mayonnaise were a food chart topper among the crew. Avocados, which travel surprisingly well, were my personal favourite for slapping up a fast and fresh-tasting on-the-go snack.

It wasn't all gruelling when it came to the grub. We found some food gems in the tiny remote towns along the trail including some tucker we hadn't tried before. "The quandong [wild peach] pie we found in the Northstar pub in Melrose was a standout," said cake addict Walter.

In the slightly larger heritage town of Burra, Pablo, owner of The Pacore Negro (Black Sheep), made us enormous, crispy base Roma style pizzas in his traditional wood fired oven, and once we reached

last supper in Adelaide before going our separate ways once again.

The trail had taken its toll on our collection of bikes - broken spokes, brake springs, pannier racks and countless punctures. I was hosing the dirt off the old girl when it dawned on me that she had endured almost 800 kilometres of bone-shaking terrain without one single complaint; not even a puncture. In the bright sunshine, I suddenly saw my dated mountain bike in a different light. I was proud of the cheap old tart.

What do you think of our Cab Sav? asked Holly at the Rockford cellar door. "We think Cab Savs get overlooked in the Barossa," she added.

"It's got a great finish," I replied, signing the shipment back to Brisbane.

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

##### HOW TO GET THERE

Genesis Tour & Charter runs a service from Adelaide to Blinman (with a change of operator at Parachilna). Total cost one way per person with bike is \$155. [www.genestours.com.au](http://www.genestours.com.au)

##### WHEN TO GO

The trail is open all year round, however the months of January to March can be fiercely hot and are best avoided. [www.southaustraliantrails.com](http://www.southaustraliantrails.com)

##### WHERE TO STAY

There are campgrounds along the trail but facilities vary widely and we had to carry enough food and water for two days on remote parts of the trail. We took accommodation in some towns (when available) and between us, stayed in a mix of accommodation including a sheep station, a bunkhouse, a converted schoolhouse and a winery.

##### MAPS

Maps available from [www.bikesa.asn.au](http://www.bikesa.asn.au) contain trail overview, scale 1:75 000 with terrain profile and legend, distance indicators, campsites, town information and facilities.



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