

TRAIL BLAZERS

STEEP DIRT TRAILS, ROCKY OUTCROPS, WATERFALLS AND EVEN CROCODILES ARE ALL PART OF THE THRILL ON TWO WHEELS »

WORDS TRACEY CROKE

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Racing in
Rotorua

Can you feel it? The rise in temperature. Hearts racing. Sweat rolling off foreheads onto flushed cheeks.

It's sweeping through Australia and New Zealand. Everyone from toddlers to grandmas are catching mountain-bike fever.

Don't worry if you suspect you've got a dose. Mountain-bike destinations have been lovingly sculpting the landscape to get every rider grinning, from novices to seasoned pros.

But what started the spread of this bug? And why is it going viral now? To truly understand the feverish ascent of this thrill-seeking fraternity, we need to pop back in time to the birth of mountain biking as a sport.

In the mid-1970s, a bunch of adventurous teens climbed a steep mountain outside San Francisco to race their pushbikes and "balloons" (cruiser-style bikes) down a steep dirt trail littered with gullies, blind off-camber corners, and, as mountain-bike pioneer Joe Breeze recounts: "the occasional cluster of head-size rocks".

What began as a few mates testing their mettle for kicks turned into a spectacle that hit the press. "California bikies are mountainside surfing" was the sparky headline credited with igniting a new worldwide sport.

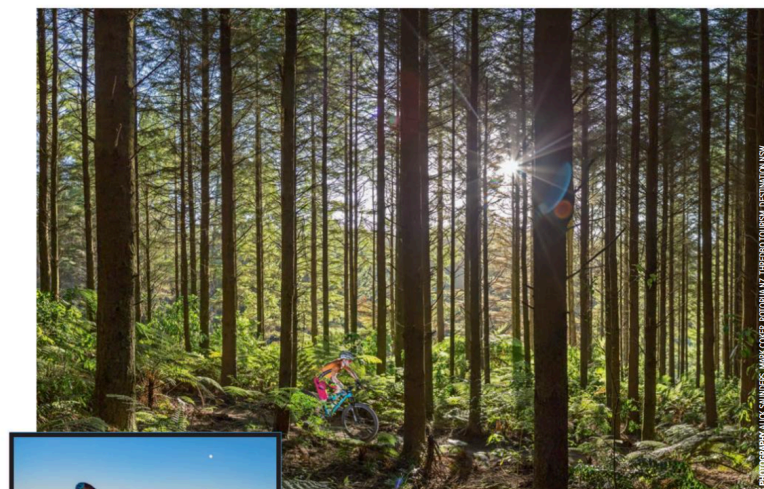
In Australia, Glen Jacobs was one of the first to catch the bug. "The trend really took off in Cairns in the 1980s with myself and a few friends taking our regular street bikes and looking for some old logging trails," Glen says. "It was really about adventure and exploring."

Exploring the wild tropics meant taking on anything in the remote rainforest: rocky outcrops, vertical drops, waterfalls and the risky

business of crashes and crocodiles.

A film the fearless friends made of their exotic antics, *Ice Cream Heads from Outer Space*, attracted worldwide attention. "They'd never seen anything like it," Glen says.

The Mountain Bike World Championships came to Australia in 1996. It was held on the steep jungle tracks that Glen and his



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This sport is for anyone with a bit of skill and fitness, who loves the outdoors



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Taking a breather in Rotorua NZ, trolls in Rotorua's redwood forests, hitching a ride in Thredbo, cyclist in Rotorua, downhill at Thredbo.



only three per cent of riders.

Glen has been a driving force behind creating fun and sustainable trails for the remaining 97 per cent. "This sport is for anyone with a bit of skill and fitness, who loves the outdoors and enjoys the thrill of the wind rushing by," Glen says.

In some cases, whole towns have grown into vibrant mountain-bike destinations, with beginner-friendly to advanced trails, colour-graded similar to skiing. On offer are skills lessons, guided trail runs, facilities for families and bike-friendly accommodation with wash and storage.

Moreover, Glen is a master of another creation that has the hardcore hooting with joy and beginners begging for more. The addictive "flow trail" is cunningly designed with multiple-choice lines and clever features that ramp up the thrill factor for the skilled – just add speed.

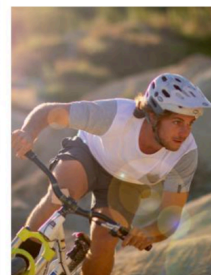
"No more forced risk or dangerous situations," says Glen, who used to ride down waterfalls for fun. "Now mountain biking is a holiday activity that the whole family can do."

And with trail destinations reporting year-on-year visitor growth, it seems the philosophy of "build it and they will come" has worked.

The days of launching an old cruiser down a goat trail are long gone, too. Nowadays, bikes are designed to suit every style of trail.

If you don't have the fitness to climb yet (or just don't fancy it), summer ski resorts have lifts and year-round trail centres run vehicle shuttles to take you to the top. Alternatively, electric bikes take the slog out of the job.

Many locations offer swanky ➤



mates forged behind Smithfield – the place they first ventured out with their childhood bikes.

Since then, the signwriter-turned-professional-trail-builder has created hundreds of trails in 20 countries with his company, World Trail. Every world cup, world championship and Olympic course in Australia has been designed and constructed by Glen and his team.

While the extreme end of the sport still captures the most media coverage, Glen is the first to point out that the segment represents

Race you to the bottom!



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accommodation, spas, massage and gourmet grub. Or book a guided trip with a mountain bike company who will organise the bells and whistles.

Whether you have been mountain biking for days and pedal for the scenery, or enjoyed decades of kicks from whipping your bike in the air, there's a high-five welcome for everyone in the towns of knobbly-tyred worship who hail nature, the gnarl and the flow.

And you might bump into Glen in Queensland on the world championship trails he carved into the mountains all those years ago. ✈

High five: mountain biking for all

CAIRNS, QUEENSLAND

Mountain bike through World Heritage-listed rainforest, tackle trails designed to challenge pros or pedal along the edge of the Great Barrier Reef. Toddlers to world champions will find plenty to explore in a region that offers 700km of documented trails, including Smithfield mountain bike park, the world's highest profile rainforest trail system. Trails sculpted out of volcanic clay twist their way through magnificent vine-wrapped jungles on jagged ridges overlooking the reef for 60km.

ride Cairns.com.au

HIGH COUNTRY, VICTORIA

Mt Buller is among a select group of mountain-biking destinations around the world recognised by the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) for offering large-scale mountain bike facilities and something for every rider. Just over three hours' drive from Melbourne, you can ride 40km of single-track including the 10km Stonefly, regularly rated one of the country's best.

Further into the High Country at Falls Creek, you can experience one of Glen Jacobs' latest flow creations.

"Flowtown" is a 6km trail of roller-coaster laugh-out-loud fun. It forms part of a 40km network through a mesmerising ghost snowgum landscape created by a succession of fires. From the flames, a unique beauty of regeneration has risen.

bikemt Buller.com.au

falls Creek.com.au

DERBY, TASMANIA

In north east Tasmania, 90 minutes east of Launceston, you'll discover mountain-bike gold. Derby is the quintessential Aussie battler story. Once a flourishing tin mining town, Derby suffered a slow economic decline. Locals who knew its

mountain biking potential developed a masterplan to create a world-class network of trails. Since the completion of 80km of single-track last year, the shuttles are packed with riders of all skill levels. Planned trails to the Bay of Fires and behind St Helens will complete a 200km network. Derby is overflowing with pride and, more importantly, people.

ridebluederby.com.au

THREDBO, NEW SOUTH WALES

Thredbo has long been a pilgrimage for summer mountain biking when ski racks are swapped for bike carriers and riders get lifted to the top of Australia. While Thredbo is most famous for its "cannonball" downhill track and star-studded festival of the same name, the resort has been expanding its trail network to compete for the trails-for-everyone crown.

Mount Kosciuszko's classic flow trail has been pumped with new features and a new 11km trail from the peak connects with the Thredbo Valley Track. This non-technical trail undulates alongside the Thredbo River roughly 20km to Lake Crackenback Resort. There, you'll find another network of beginner and family-friendly trails making the snowy mountains supercharged for all.

thredbo.com.au/biking

lakecrackenback.com.au

ROTORUA, NEW ZEALAND

Rotorua is one of only six "gold level" ride centres around the world awarded by the IMBA for "the best that mountain biking has to offer." Its ancient Whakarewarewa Forest is one of the oldest mountain bike networks in New Zealand. Its 130km of dark volcanic-soil trails weave through giant redwoods. Skyline gravity park offers a year-round gondola-assisted bike lift to 8.5km of trail with views over Lake Rotorua. With natural thermal spas to soak the quads in, it's no wonder Rotorua's other name is 'mountain bike heaven'.

riderotorua.com