

Where it all began: Glen Jacobs in his sacred place riding the trails of his Smithfield "backyard"



THE DREAM WEAVER

Meet the quintessential Queenslander who's put smiles on millions of faces around the world... and created one monumental mountain bike legacy in the process

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I am standing in the forest that was the ignition point of mountain biking in Australia with the man who ignited it – Glen Jacobs.

"Come down here," says Glen, "I want to show you something special." He leans his bike on a tree and gestures me to do the same.

I wonder what "special" might look like in a habitat the world's most renowned naturalist picked as his favourite place? Sir David Attenborough, who has explored more nooks than most over his 70-year career, describes Far North Queensland as "magical".

I've been spending the day with Glen riding the volcanic clay trails of Smithfield Mountain Bike Park, which twist through the world's highest profile rainforest. It's a

60-kilometre trail network hemmed in by the jagged ridges that overlook the Great Barrier Reef. It's also Glen's baby, his backyard and "it's where it all started," he says.

The "all" he's talking about is a world-class mountain bike destination in a lush bio-diverse world like no other with mountainous jungles, 800 different rainforest trees, 1200 species of flowering plants – some which existed when dinosaurs stomped the earth. And it's crammed with curious creatures that – as Sir David points out – live nowhere else.

It's perhaps surprising to some that a mountain biking nirvana exists among this World Heritage-listed paradise. A day riding with Glen has taught me mountain biking in the Tropical North is much more than just an activity. It's a culture embedded in the psyche of the region.

Google Glen Jacobs and you'll find words such as "innovator", "visionary" and "pioneer". He's also a world-famous mountain biking legend who founded "freeride" – an extreme style of riding which meant taking on anything the environment threw at you. In The Wet Tropics, that included jumping escarpments, riding down waterfalls and dodging crocs.

It would be easy to write off Glen and his friends as a bunch of reckless teenagers but when you scratch the heady surface, this unruly crew had more in common with Mr. Attenborough than you would think.

Thrill-seeking adventures were equaled by the excitement of being in nature and exploring their magical land, which inspired the movie Avatar. Among poisonous snakes and excruciatingly painful stinging trees, they discovered, cleared or built hundreds of trails, albeit regularly leaving behind chunks of flesh and "puncturing a scrotum" in the process.

Their legacy: today, 700km of recreational trails for every level of rider stretch all the way from Cairns to the Cassowary Coast. Now thousands of people can enjoy the wonders of their backyard.

As we walk and talk more, Glen explains that his wild-child antics with mates is ironically where he found his calling to build what he calls, "The Rolls-Royce of trails" – sustainable purpose-built trails in harmony with the environment. His innovative trail design, in demand throughout the world, has been shaped by lessons from the harshest of teachers – mother nature.

"Trails in Queensland have to be built to withstand thrashings from storms, cyclones and half-metre wallops of rain," Glen explains. The huge water drains he worked into his designs also ramped up the thrill factor and drew world-wide attention.

In 1996, the first Mountain Bike World Championships came to Australia. It was held on the steep jungle tracks Glen and his mates forged behind Smithfield. As a professional trail builder, Glen has created hundreds of trails in 20 countries across the globe with his company, World Trail. In Australia, every World Cup, World Championship and Olympic course has been designed and constructed by Glen and his team.

Right on cue, we arrive at the foot of Glen's latest heart-thumping creation, which has been built for the return of the World Championships to Australia this year. I



The magical Milla Milla falls is a film location favourite

stand agog at the series of monster rollers that will launch the world's best mountain bikers 25 metres or so down the track to a superhuman landing.

"Whoa. That is special," I say. But that's not the special Glen wants me to see. "Oh no, that's not it, down here," he says pointing at a dainty ribbon of dirt, which dips and weaves through dappled vine wrapped trees. Confused, I follow him down the aptly named 'Vine Trail' - one I imagine Mary Poppins would be in her element riding.

Glen, who is now in his late fifties, holds out his hands in a semi plea, his eyes ablaze with the excitement of a 20-year-old. "Look at this place," he gestures, "This is one of our oldest trails. We haven't touched this trail in 22 years and it's still the same. Pristine. Never worn. Never changed. No erosion."

Suddenly, as if by magic, late afternoon sunrays pierce the dense canopy and singe the gray hair poking from the

sides of his helmet. It's like someone from above wants to highlight his words.

That's when it strikes me the "special" he wants to show me is the way his craftsmanship works in his place of worship. "You see," he says, now with head-a-glowing, "If you build the trails right, they work with nature... and they last."

FROM SMALL ADVENTURES...

Like most kids Glen had a bike. The difference was where he took it. "In the 60s, we lived near Cairns but way out in the bush. Trails from the back of the house led to school or the shops, but I made extra that would loop around to a waterfall and all these little places of interest." Glen found fun in discovering places. "I wanted to make my own little adventures," he says.

Glen's wanderlust spirit came from being "mesmerised"

by his grandad's stories. After the first-world war, his grandparents settled on a farm in the Ather-ton tablelands near Milla Milla Falls. An Aboriginal tribe who lived by a creek regularly took his granddad hunting and gathering food.

"One day, the tribe took my granddad on a trail over the Palmerston range, 20 or 30 kilometres to Innisfail. He found seashells and yams way up high in the rainforest because for thousands of years, Indigenous tribes had walked down this trail out to the coast and traded foods. That's when I first dreamt about making trails through the rainforest. I was seven years old," Glen says.

As Glen grew up, he followed in his grandfather's 'footsteps' on his bike. His adventures got bigger. He built bridges over creeks where crocodiles basked and rode along mountain ridges. And just like his granddad, Glen made friends on the way with the people who had forged those trails throughout history. "They laughed at this silly fella who used to ride his bike all the way through the bush to hang out and go fishing," Glen recalls.

TRAILBLAZING

When Glen moved to Smithfield in the late 80s, Mountain biking was in its budding days, sprouting as a sport in various locations around the world.

The young and free-spirited were modifying postal bikes or beach cruisers and testing their mettle on the steepest bike terra incognita they

could find. In the case of Glen and his friends, that meant riding near-vertical jungle cliffs. "We used to say if a tree grew on it then it was rideable. We loved riding waterfalls, rock slabs, tiers and drops." They didn't know it at the time but they were defining a style within a new sport.

Glen recounts "There was mountain biking in Australia before us but they didn't take it where we took it. We were the first of the 'free riders' daring each other to take on challenges in the natural environment. To prove their stake, the fearless friends made films of their antics."

The Kuranda Scenic rail journey is an iconic attraction in Cairns, which chugs its way up to the Macalister Range and mountain village of the same name, passing by waterfalls tumbling forever into infinite ravines. "Imagine that with a bike flying over it," says Glen.

"One of the boys jumped over the train from one side of the cutting to the other, probably 15 metres."

The resulting film 'Mudcows' was an international cult hit which sold throughout the USA. "They'd never seen anything like it," Glen says. It put Australian mountain biking on the world map.

EVOLUTION

In 1990, Glen became president of Cairns Mountain Bike Club. Still, the core of Australian mountain biking wanted to belong to something deeper, something that set them apart from the rest

GLEN'S INNOVATIVE TRAIL DESIGN, IN DEMAND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, HAS BEEN SHAPED BY LESSONS FROM THE HARSHTEST OF TEACHERS - MOTHER NATURE



Glen shares his love of the Wet Tropics with the author

of the mountain bike world, which reflected their bond with the rainforest and Aboriginal tribes.

The tribes of the rainforest speak of a mountain devil, a mythical rainforest tiger, called 'Minjin' in local language. Minjin would feed on the souls of those who were lazy and slept too long. The "Minjin mountain bike tribe" was a fitting name for a band of brothers who worked tirelessly to forge a path for others to enjoy.

A Minjin amulet was created and awarded to a select few local and global do-gooders. "They had to be doing something outstanding for mountain biking and for people," explains Glen.

That philosophy has carried through to this day. The latest Mountain Biking do-good example is the revival of a town in Tasmania. In its

heyday, Derby, in the northeast of the country, was home to 3,000 people and one of the world's richest tin mines. The closure of the mine in the 1940s turned Derby into a ghost town. Just two years ago, it had a population of 150 people.

Locals, who knew the mountain biking potential, developed a bold plan to create a world-class network of trails in the giant fern forest surrounding the town. With the support of council and a regional development fund, Glen and his team at World Trail completed 80km of purpose-built singletrack in 2015.

Now, each week, hundreds of mountain bikers pour into Derby and the surrounding villages needing somewhere to eat and sleep after big days out on the trails. The council estimates 30,000 riders a year are contributing about \$15 million

to the shire's economy.

After decades of depression, Derby has reinvented itself as Australia's first mountain biking town, changing the history books and prosperity of the locals.

Despite all that, Glen admits the reputation of those heady days travelled with them through time. "People say mountain biking is dangerous and erosive. That's understandable. In the 90s we pushed it. We wanted to be the most extreme." But that was 30 years ago. Mountain biking has evolved. "These days it's mostly about riding trails, enjoying the outdoors and going on adventures."

In his advocacy role, Glen spends time enlightening authorities about the sport. "Unfortunately, people who don't understand mountain biking think it's all about the trick and extreme stuff. Today that's a tiny 0.3% of riders. It's like saying that everyone who drives a car just wants to drift."

Glen was one of the first to understand the need of purpose-built "trails for all". Today, mountain bike destinations offer beginner-friendly to advanced trails; colour graded similar to skiing.

"We know from bike sales figures that 15 – 20 percent are advanced black trail riders. Around 80 percent are green and blue trail riders, which are beginner to intermediate," he explains.

Reports from destinations in Australia show the average mountain biker is likely a 40 year-old professional who enjoys being out in nature on specifically designed trails with a group of mates or the whole family.

Glen continues. "Mountain bikers are always banging on

"WHEN PEOPLE FINISH THEIR
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about the environment because they're out there so much. And when you engage with the environment you stand up for it."

FEELING THE FLOW

It was Glen's "trails for all" philosophy that birthed his signature "flow trail": A trail with a design wizardry that allows a child with basic skills to whoop along with joy while still testing the mettle of the experts – just add speed.

When he designs a trail, he imagines what the rider feels, predicts what speed they are going and then pins the trail with little flags to get that arc to arc feel through the environment.

"How many tracks have you been on where it stops and jerks because you've got to drop from 30 km an hour to five? he asks. That's bad design and that's what causes erosion. We want you to keep your momentum going and keep pulling that energy through with you. A flow trail is never steep or extreme. It can be ridden by all skill levels and on any kind of mountain bike."

He adds, "We build trails that last for a long time and give people an exceptional experience and we have never ever deviated from that at all. I'm really proud of myself



Big fun burns: Feel the wind rushing by on purpose-built trails of Atherton bike park

and everyone who works with me at world trail because they have kept that close to their hearts and it's all about the people who ride them who want to experience something really wonderful out there."

THE ULTIMATE DREAM

Glen's dream has always been to show the world the beauty, unique lifestyle and culture of his home.

That dream will be realised with a new long-distance trail that will weave between the Daintree Rainforest and the shores of The Great Barrier Reef.

The proposed 70-kilometre "Wengetti Trail" will be a multi-day mountain biking or hiking adventure from Palm Cove all the way to Port Douglas with accommodation on offer in the towns, eco retreats, campsites and on-trail huts along the route.

"We've started the design and are looking at starting construction by 2018," says Glen.

Cairns council and Douglas Shire Council are working with Glen on the new national icon set to be a global attraction pulling in an estimated \$18.3 million per year for the local economy. But to Glen, it means much more than that.

"The beautiful thing now is that mountain biking is coming back around to people who want to go on adventures. It's for anyone who loves the outdoors and enjoys the thrill of the wind rushing by."

"I've been doing this since I was a kid. It's just something that comes naturally and I love it. I want people to feel exactly what I feel – flowing trails that float through the bush that are fun to ride whether you're an expert or beginner. When people finish their ride and they come out with a smile, I know I've done my job."

"That's the dream. It's my whole life. And I'm putting it into a trail."

It's a dream that started on his bike as seven year-old all those years ago. W

CONTRIBUTOR

Tracey Coke is a travel journalist addicted to roughy-toughy off-track adventure and galavanting on her mountain bike. Her quest for a good travel story has involved venturing into post-conflict Afghanistan, searching for rideable mountain bike tracks in the Ethiopian Highlands, being rescued by nomads in Kyrgyzstan and having her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov.

