

CHANGE IN GEARS

Mountain biking is gaining momentum as an accessible and surprisingly mindful sport, with Australia one of the world's most exciting and prestigious destinations for the sport, writes Tracey Croke.

To the casual observer, mountain biking appears to be a risky activity dominated by 'rad' youths flying down rockfaces in Robocop-worthy safety gear. But let's dispel the greatest myth of this fun-charged sport: these superhuman daredevils represent less than one per cent of participants.

The majority of mountain bikers – around 80 per cent – would be classed as intermediate. Typically, he or she is a high-earning professional in their mid-40s, who, more than likely, has family responsibilities and little interest in flashy trophy scars.

When you see the extreme imagery, it's hard to believe there is a tranquil side to the activity. A good thing to know from the get-go is, the vast majority of mountain bikers just want to get in the 'flow' – the state of mindfulness achieved when

brain, body, trail and bike sync into a transcendent dance through the forest.

Master trail builder Glen Jacobs has spent his life creating these rhythmic ribbons of dirt through some of Australia's most stunning landscapes. Predictability is the key element in his 'trails for all' networks, which blend harmoniously with the environment to achieve this state of flow.

"How many times have you been riding and the tracks are all rutted going into the corner? That's bad predictability. It's been designed wrong," Jacobs explains. "Good predictably means keeping momentum. That's where the flow energy comes from. We design trails to pull that energy through with you. That's your reward."

Jacobs and his company World Trail have been a driving force behind creating rideable trails for all: beginners to experts, cruisy crews to racy riders, downhill demons to families. "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," he says. "It's all about wanting to experience something really wonderful out there."

A Tasmanian mecca

Blue Derby, the largest mountain bike project ever undertaken in Australia, is one of World Trail's finest flow examples. A custom-built, 125-kilometre single-trail network through Tasmania's postcard-worthy wilderness, it caters for all skill levels and riding styles and has single-handedly revitalised the struggling local economy.

Authorities invested \$3 million repurposing a honey pot of old tin-mining tracks into top-notch bike trails that weave through the giant fern-laden rainforest of the state's northeast. The Blue Derby network was an instant hit attracting mountain bikers from near and far, who pump more than \$20 million a year into the region, cementing Derby as Australia's first mountain biking town.

A boom in the activity over the past few years has driven trail investment in

every state and territory, chasing the coattails of Derby's stratospheric rise. Authorities have learnt that mountain bikers will go to great lengths to find trail nirvana. Bikes are also becoming a more common sight in idyllic country retreats as groups seek backroad weekend getaways in exclusive private estates such as Ooralba in the rolling hills of Kangaroo Valley, where shared national park hiking and biking trails can be found within a 15-minute drive.

The not-so-hardware

Mountain bikes have also come a long way since the '80s when gutsy guys and gals diced with life on dodgy modified beach cruisers. These days bikes are fitted for the bumpy off-road job with full – front and rear – suspension; the 'squish' factor that keeps you flowing over roots and popping off rocks with control, as opposed to being pinged from tree to tree.

If you see yourself progressing to more gnarly trails with tricky features, then a longer-travel, squishier bike is a must. Fully capable mountain ebikes (pedal assist, not electric) are appealing if you're concerned about your level of fitness and want to take the challenge out of tough climbs. However, new riders should bear in mind that while an ebike will help ease your ascent, they won't magically furnish you with the skills to come down.

You can pay anywhere between \$4,000 and \$20,000 for a full-suspension trail bike that will allow you to explore more technical, tougher trails and keep up with you as you progress. At the top end, you'll get a pro-level model with the strongest, lightest and latest components.

To get started, book a couple of lessons, either locally or at trail destination centres. A good coach will have you tackling obstacles you never imagined from the outset. They'll squash your fears, fill you with confidence and have you flowing around intermediate trails in no time. And as international borders open up, you'll have a whole new off-track world to discover by bike. ♦



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