

TIERS OF JOY

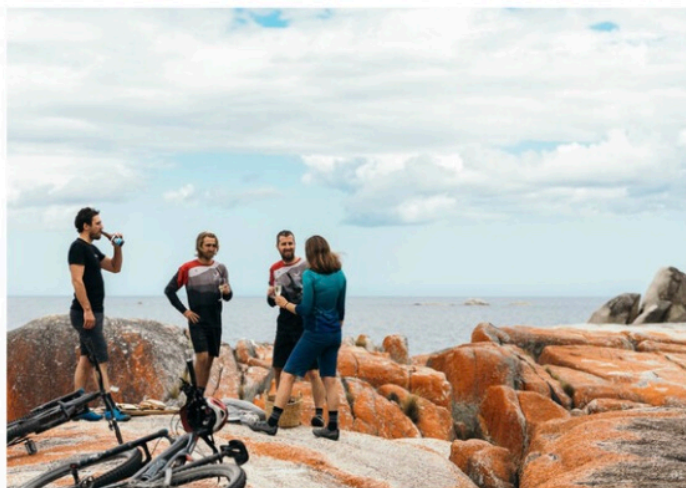
A series of world-class mountain bike trails in Tasmania's North East marries adrenaline with luxury, and has transformed a town in its making, writes Tracey Croke.

When the former mining town of Derby, nestled in Tasmania's pristine north-eastern rainforest, was looking to its future and economic recovery, it found the solution in an unlikely bedfellow – mountain biking. In 2015, the town began construction of a 125-kilometre network of repurposed tin-mining trails, creating the world's premier mountain biking destination.

The philosophy behind Blue Derby was straightforward: build accessible trails for all and they will come. And come they did – in their tens of thousands – to the largest single mountain bike project ever undertaken in Australia. Catering for all skill levels and riding styles, the project has single-handedly revived the struggling local economy, which is why the network is widely known as the 'trails that saved a town'.

It's not surprising riders flock here. 'The top' is the mighty Blue Tier plateau, a heather-blanketed, stony clearing 600 metres above sea level. From there, trails span and descend all the way to St Helens, including the new icon-in-the-making Bay of Fires Trail.

Heart-leaping rollers and sweeping corners are designed for the level of momentum that will keep you pumping and weaving through the forest, if you dare to stay off the brakes. Blue Derby's trails possess the power to make self-consciousness disappear and distort your sense of time. When this 'flow' takes over, you'll know: it feels so gratifying that your inner seven-year-old can't stop grinning.



01 Cheers to the end of a day of epic riding 02 Meals on a Blue Derby Pods Ride adventure hero local produce 03 Heading out for a day of exploration © Tracey Croke 04 Style and sustainability unite in Blue Derby Pods Ride luxury accommodation. Images 01, 02, 04 © Blue Derby Pod Rides

DESTINATION / TASMANIA

It was a kid's level of fun that inspired Steve Howell and wife Tara to create their Blue Derby Pods Ride dream: a premium, fully sustainable, mountain bike adventure based from exclusive, stilted architectural ellipses hidden deep in native rainforest. "Riding bikes and sleeping high in the trees sounded like fun to us," says Steve. "But also living life like tomorrow matters – it's totally off-grid."

The luxe touch

We have joined three other couples on this guided four-day experience that combines adrenaline with unique accommodation. The fact that you can roll from a lofty peaceful sleep and straight onto the trails – after a hot breakfast, of course – is a mountain biker's heaven. But the luxe touch isn't reserved solely for sleeping. For lunch, we're led through a secret nook to a vast rock-slab reveal and pop-up picnic. A combo of taste-bud zinging salads – poached chicken, rice noodles and roast pumpkin – is the perfect light refuel along with the boost of freshly brewed coffee.

Our biking itinerary begins with a warm-up lap from Derby town around its namesake lake. While taking us through some drills, Steve explains that most people with basic skills and fitness can ride the majority of green- and blue-graded trails on the extensive network. "Once you're okay with hopping off and walking a few tricky sections, we're going to have some serious fun," he says, setting the tone for the next four days.

The afternoon is spent cajoling each other over some mighty features, and one or two meaty climbs has the rest of my crew high-fiving me (riding a regular mountain bike) for almost keeping up with their e-bikes. Some squiggles and giggles later, the sun winks from a spaceship-like structure suspended in fluorescent ferns.

Floating pathways connect our sleeping pods and 'hub' – the architectural star attraction – where we gather to toast our day's achievements with bubbles. While Steve adds the finishing touches to our chef-prepped dinner, the mucky part of the day is washed off in enormous solar-heated, stainless-steel showers.

Back in the hub, a huge Tasmanian oak dining table has been set and laid with local appetisers

of Coal River Farm brie, hummus, red pepper dip and Fork It Farm prosciutto. A thoughtful yoga mat and roller lies at the ready in front of a wood-burning fire. Several are having a snooze on the expansive seating behind. The curious will ferret out a secret snug with a lounge bed and library behind a cupboard. The entire experience is considered, playful, sustainable and top-notch, minus the 'turned-up nose'.

The highlight of this adventure is the new Bay of Fires trail, a 42-kilometre mountain-to-sea journey. The ride starts early on the heather-blanketed Blue Tier. We gulp some of the planet's cleanest air before plunging into a fantasy world where Mother Nature is boss: granite boulders guard tunnels of giant tree ferns, branches drip with near-fluorescent moss and shards of ethereal light pierce dark volcanic dirt. Just when you think you've seen it all, more monumental boulders appear. Eventually, the trail turns sandy and teasing to the bay, where we toast a mountain-bike adventure like no other and jump in the sea with joy.

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05 Tackling epic trails © Tracey Croke 06 That end-of-day feeling © Natalie Mendham 07 Big smiles all around © Tracey Croke 08 Hanging by the main hub © Blue Derby Pods Ride

