

# highs and lows

In northeast Victoria, where the landscape is dominated by mountains and vineyards, there's only one way to get around. And that's on a bike.

Words **Carrie Hutchinson**

A bicycle is the only way to experience the best of Victoria's High Country and its many wineries.





Say the words ‘the sounds of summer’ and there’s nary an Australian who wouldn’t instantly think of cicadas.

You rarely see the little varmints, such is their quality of camouflage, but their mating calls indicate warmer days have finally arrived in the southern hemisphere.

Scientists think they gather together and sing to avoid predators – the collective decibels produced are both painful and confusing for birds, spiders and bats who would otherwise feast on their crunchy carcasses.

As we pedal through a gully not far from Beechworth, the noise from the cicadas is almost deafening. They are, after all, the loudest insect on Earth.

There’s no need for the cicadas’ call, however, to know summer has well and truly arrived. It is still relatively early in the morning but the temperature has already spiked into the mid-30s.

Normally, the Tour de Vines crew travelling through Victoria’s High Country for a weekend of rail trail exploration would partake in a leisurely lie-in and breakfast. Not this morning. When we’d gathered the previous evening at Bridge Road Brewers for a meet-and-greet fuelled by pizza and beer, a group decision had been made: we’d leave early in an attempt to get a decent chunk of the day’s 43 kilometres done before the mercury reached 40°C.

Our other concession to the heat is four of our group of six, including Tour de Vines owner and the weekend’s guide Damian Cerini, have decided less pedalling and more cruising might be the order of the day.

We’d gathered at the Old Beechworth Gaol, adjusted the seats and taken our e-bikes for a test ride around the car park. After all, this weekend isn’t about how fast you ride or who makes it to the next destination first; it’s about enjoying the landscape, meeting new people, eating well, tasting the local wines and breathing in the fresh air. Even more so on this weekend, just weeks after Melbourne finally came out of another lockdown.

As we depart, cruising slowly through the still-waking town, cockatoos feasting on ripe cherry plums form a screeching guard of honour overhead. This first stretch, once we pass the old Beechworth railway station, is all downhill, with the King Valley spread out all around us. Golden fields are dotted with huge cylindrical straw bales. Cows lift their heads as we





Ride right up to the cellar door.

pass. The group soon spreads out, each person travelling at a speed to suit their fitness.

At a drink stop at Everton Station, a group of MAMILs – middle-aged men in lycra – breezes past in a peloton. A few minutes later, a young guy on a bike laden with what seems like all his earthly possessions rolls slowly towards us. He stops to ask how much further till Beechworth.

“It’s not that far but it’s all uphill,” one of the guys answers with a shrug.

Our lone traveller has come from Wangaratta, some 27 kilometres down the track. He looks wrecked, and there’s still another 15 kilometres – all of them in full sunshine – to go before he reaches his destination. He takes a swig from a water bottle and lifts his hand in a limp wave. We’ve only got water and essentials in our panniers (our luggage has gone on to Myrtleford in a minibus), but I’m already grateful for the e-bike decision.

There’s a map on the wall, showing all the directions you could explore. This particular trail, Damian explains, opened in the early 2000s, following the routes of a number of past train lines that moved everything from humans and gold to other precious resources.

The section between Myrtleford and Bright – the part we’ll be riding tomorrow – once transported timber, while it was a tourist train that rolled between Bright and Mount Buffalo; both closed in the 1980s. This is already Australia’s longest sealed rail trail, but an extension from Beechworth to Yackandandah is due to open at the end of 2021.

“Before we head off, I need to tell you about the wildlife,” says Damian, as we’re sticking bottles back into bags. “There are lots of echidnas in the next section.” This piece of information elicits a few oohs and ahhs.

“Once we cross over into the Alpine Valleys there’s an explosion in the numbers of kangaroos.” He pauses for a moment: “But one thing to watch out for is snakes.”

After a long winter, the reptiles love the heat that comes off the sealed trail and often lie across it, soaking up the sun.

“You won’t see them till you’re on top of them so don’t brake and don’t swerve,” he warns. “Just go straight over the top of them.”

As we ride on, down through Tiger Alley, it takes me a moment to realise that the person who knocked up the sign on a tree probably wasn’t warning about roving Richmond football fans.

The leg from Everton contains the one and only proper hill of the journey. It’s a long climb up a gradual hill then a steep final push to Taylors Gap. We’ve been told to go at our own pace, to stop for water if needed and to stay at the top under the shelter until everyone regroup.

I’ve tucked myself in behind Rick, one of the men who’s chosen to do the hard work on a proper bike. He’s going at quite a pace, so I push a button and add a little more grunt to the e-bike’s muscle. Then we hit the big hill, so I turn the bike up to full power. Rick’s up off his seat and putting in the big



Damian Cerini of Tour de Vines.



The town of Beechworth retains much of its gold rush era charm.



A berry cup at Buffalo Berry Farm.

ones; I rotate the pedals about seven times to reach the top. Easy does it.

Taylors Gap has quite a history. There was once a hotel here where stage coaches would stop to change horses on the way to Beechworth. In 1878, Ned Kelly and his gang escaped through the gap after they’d ambushed the police camp at Stringybark Creek. All we’re escaping today is the heat and, as the group reassembles, we take to the shade.

Of course, one of the greatest aspects of the Murray to Mountains trail is the feeling of freedom, as the wind rus... Just kidding. It’s actually that this is a wine region and dotted along your path, whichever town you’re heading towards, are a number of cellar doors.

We finally meet a tiny echidna – she ignores us and heads to a burrow – just before pulling into Gapsted Wines, home of a cheeky little prosecco and an array of other Italian varietals I can’t wait to try.

The staff have saved us a table on the edge of the terrace, overlooking the vines and in front of an enormous misting fan. We’re far from the only ones here. There are groups lying on the lawn, people with kids and dogs, and others seeking out respite from the heat.

A little wine tasting is rolled out, including a glass of the limited-release saperavi, as well as a grazing plate of local cheese, dips, olive, pickles, chicken and bread. It’s enough to get us back on the bike, but thankfully not enough to impair riding skills.

The roll into Myrtleford is short and sweet. We drop the bikes at the motel and wander into town to taste what’s on offer at Billy Button.





The group make their way to the next winery.



The group gathers after a pumpkin seed tasting.



Wine barrels in the cellar door.

Winemaker Jo Marsh uses grapes from across the Alpine Valleys, but to keep things simple this cellar door has opened on the edge of town. We're welcomed into the air-conditioned space and are soon sipping on arneis, tempranillo and an interesting chardonnay mistelle that was created using the only grapes that could be salvaged after the previous summer's bushfires.

The next day dawns bright – appropriate since that is the name of where we're heading – and not nearly as hot. The mercury is going to max out at just 25°C, which is far more civilised.

Today there are also plenty of places to visit along the way. Just out of Myrtleford we stop at Pepo Farms, where Sharan and Jay Rivett grow styrian pumpkins, an heirloom variety from Austria and Slovenia, whose seeds can be eaten without being processed. We taste roasted pumpkin seeds, along with ones that have been smoked, dipped in Cajun spices or coated in chocolate.

Which is a shame because we've only pedalled on for a few minutes before arriving at Buffalo Berry Farm, where the berry cup has tayberries, boysenberries and blueberries, with soft serve and berry syrup. Like complete troopers we reluctantly force them down.

If you've never visited this part of northeast Victoria, it is beautiful. The landscape is lush, there are old tobacco drying sheds near

olive groves, and the trail follows the fast-flowing Ovens River as it weaves through the countryside. And, at decent intervals along the whole route, there are excellent wineries.

At the Ringer Reef cellar door, high on a hill outside Porepunkah, I ask Damian if that's why he chose this particular trail to launch Tour de Vines about 15 years ago. The company has since added winery routes in South Australia, NSW's Mudgee region and Hawke's Bay in New Zealand, among others. "It's really about the trails," he says. "It's just fortuitous that they also tend to be places with wineries."

After lunch, we stop on the river's edge in Porepunkah among the picnickers and watch what seems to be half the townsfolk splashing in a huge waterhole. We've only just got on the bikes again when we arrive at the big 'Welcome to Bright' sign. We weave through the traffic and down to Howitt Park, where the minibus awaits to ferry us back to Beechworth.

Beneath the trees, ice cream in hand and surrounded by kids roller skating and family groups congregating, it's hard to believe that just a few weeks earlier I had only been able to travel five kilometres from my home.

The sun is dipping in the sky and its rays filter through high branches. There's no sound of cicadas; instead their song is being drowned out by a band playing outside Bright Brewery. It's the perfect ending for our long ride, and a great start for the summer to come.

## GET PLANNING



### GET THERE

This ride starts and ends in Beechworth, in Victoria's High Country. The town is a three-hour drive from Melbourne, and accessible by V/Line's train and coach services via Wangaratta. You can also organise a transfer from the airport at Albury.



### STAY THERE

The first night's accommodation at the comfy, cosy Armour Motor Inn is covered in the cost of the tour. If you want to extend your stay to explore Beechworth, it's handily located within walking distance of everything in town. Queen rooms start at AU\$139 a night.

[armourmotorinn.com.au](http://armourmotorinn.com.au)



### TOUR THERE

Tour de Vines's small group tours are an easy way to get into cycle touring. Everything is pre-booked, bikes are provided, luggage (and any wine you buy) is transferred along the route and a transfer is provided back to the starting location. The two-day Murray to Mountains Rail Trail tour starts at AU\$479. The company also offers group tours around Australia and internationally, as well as self-guided itineraries.

[tourdevines.com.au](http://tourdevines.com.au)