

from
Bairnsdale to Warrandyte
in Five Days



Don and Douglas took advantage of a rare five day window of perfect weather to cycle over the alps and back home in mid March 2015. A congenial trip, in stark contrast to Richard's 2008 exploit which featured camping and 95 kph wind gusts on Hotham.

This brief summary of events was suggested by Alex as a potential reference.

Don Macrae

23rd March 2015

The trip was inspired by a perfect weather forecast for the entire journey and entirely planned by Douglas – I merely hooked on. We both took our road bikes and carried credit card tour stuff in back packs. My pack weighed 7 kgs at the outset but I could have reduced that and definitely will next time. Certainly I'll leave out the bike lock, saving an easy 600 grams!

Wednesday March 11, to Bairnsdale

I rode in from Warrandyte to Southern Cross station to catch the 1:15 pm train. I found the going so tough I doubted I could do the trip, I seemed to be struggling all the way, the whole trip seemed uphill. Almost missed the train. When I got there I discovered the back brake was rubbing on the rim, so that was pleasing! I'd swapped out my new aero wheels with their 22 mm tyres for my old ones with the 25 mm Contis and made a hash of brake adjustment.

Train got to Bairnsdale at around 6:30. We'd pre-booked at a Motel chosen pretty much at random on booking.com, the Kansas City Motel at 310 Main Street. Completely basic but quiet and \$90 for the twin room. Dinner at the nearest pub.

Thursday March 12, Bairnsdale to Swifts Creek

106.5 kms, 1,251 m elevation

Very pleasant, easy day. We took the East Gippsland Rail trail to Bruthen, and I recommend it. I assume you have Google Maps so you can find the start of it! The photo on the previous page is from the rail trail bridge over the Nicholson River. Later on it makes its way beside the Tambo River until diverges at Bruthen, at which point you take the Great Alpine Road.



Old railway bridge in Bruthen



Banana on the Tambo

Stopped for coffee and cake in Bruthen, otherwise had the occasional banana stop, and a memorable squash at the old Ensay pub:



There is not a lot of accommodation at Swifts Creek but we had booked at the Albion Hotel, which, it turns out, has a ‘motel unit’ down the street. Very country, and just terrific. The hotel restaurant quite fancies itself, and we agree. We both had an ‘Ensay steak’ – this is cattle country - washed down with local shiraz and followed by pavlovas! Does it get better than that? Can’t remember what the break up was, but dinner and accommodation came to \$199 for the two of us.

Friday March 13, Swifts Creek to Harrietville

113.2 kms, 2,548 Elevation

We had a massive breakfast with eggs and bacon etc, cooked in our room from supplies bought at the IGA the previous evening. Didn’t get away till about 9, just wore my wool jersey, as a I did for the entire trip. We just plugged onwards and upwards, stopping occasionally for a banana or not. We also stopped for coffee at Omeo and Dinner Plain.



Banana stop



Atop the big H

Weather is everything on this ride. I've ridden up Hotham from Harrietville several times, mostly in Alpine Classics, but this was only the second time I'd descended to Harrietville. On the previous occasion it was raining and visibility in the fog was about 5 metres. At one point I almost collided with some bushwalkers who were crossing the road, big surprise for all. Not a pleasant experience. This was much better. Very beautiful, isn't it? Would not like my brakes to fail on The Meg, however.

We'd booked in at the Harrietville Hotel Motel from Swifts Creek. Very satisfactory, pool, biggish room, decent restaurant. \$135 for the twin room.

Saturday March 14, Harrietville to Whitfield

123.9 kms, 843 m elevation

Our favourite Harrietville coffee and breakfast establishment showed no signs of opening at 7 am, and neither did anywhere else, so we set off for breakfast in Bright, although not till after 8. Still, it was nippy, coldest temperature we'd yet experienced. But all I needed was my rain jacket over my long sleeved wool jersey. Breakfast was at Café Velo, and most enjoyable it was. Quite busy, which was good to see.

The obvious way from Bright to Whitfield is via the Snow Road through Oxley, and that may be the best option – in retrospect – but we fancied riding via Lake Buffalo, having seen images of it decorating the weather forecast on ABC TV. So at Myrtleford we turned left into the Buffalo River Road. Very pleasant, recommended. You then cross the dam wall and continue towards Dandongadale – what a place name!

But..at some point you have to take a right and proceed along a dirt road over a range, which I think might be called the Black Range, but who cares what it's called? There were two candidate roads: the first one was called the Lake Buffalo Whitfield Road, which sounded good, and the other one was the Rose River Road. But Douglas's researches had suggested the former was rough as guts, so we opted for the latter, the Rose River Road. Well, this was a bit of an adventure. Not really a great drama, but not ideal on a road bike. You needed to concentrate all the time because it was covered in stones of various sizes which you'd rather miss, and the corners tended to be covered in several inches of very fine dust, which you hoped were not concealing sharp things. I'd rather not think of what this road would be like in the wet. There wasn't a lot of traffic, just the occasional car or ute, and you could tell the locals because they slowed down so as to minimize the amount of dust they threw up.

Pretty country though, and I'm not sure I wouldn't choose that route again, in preference to the main road. That's me. Douglas was adamant he will never ride it again: he got almost grumpy.



Lake Buffalo



Dusty banana stop

Got onto sealed road just before Cheshunt and tooled on to Whitfield. I don't think there's a lot of accommodation in Whitfield, and the pub had no vacancy, as we discovered the night before when we attempted to get a room. But we did find a B&B called 'Jessie's Creek Cottage', which, so the lady said, 'had a cancellation'. It was \$175 for the night, but that's for the two of us – and included breakfast. The breakfast makings were delivered the night before by Carla – Carla Pizzini, of Pizzini wines, the local winery. Eggs, bacon, baked beans, cereal, milk, juice, bread, jam...

One of the attractions of Whitfield for me, other than the fact that I had never been there, despite having grown up in Wangaratta when the narrow gauge railway line

from Whitfield, terminating in Wangaratta, was still in operation, was that my friend Peter Hinrichsen had enthused about the cuisine at the pub.

So upon rolling into town we called in, thinking to book a table. So I clomp into this place, helmeted and a bit dusty after the Rose River Road, and ask for a table. They look at me and ask do I want fine dining or a pub meal? Fine dining, of course, says I, and leave to check in to Jessie's cottage.



Jessie's Cottage backyard with
bike wash hose and thumb



The Grand Depart

We return at 7 for the meal, possibly feeling a little under-dressed. The meal was delicious. Three courses, each a work of art, washed down with a bottle of Pizzini's Sangiovese, an excellent wine. There was a sommelier, imported from Italy, and he washed out our glasses with the wine, to 'get rid of any napkin taint', he said. Delicious, did I say that, but .. manifestly inadequate. A miniature meal. On the way out I asked for some chips at the bar, but they had nothing, so we were still hungry. And it cost \$183 for the two of us. Ain't life grand!

Sunday March 15, Whitfield to Alexandra

132 kms, 1,466 m elevation

After our big Jessie's breakfast, set off around 9 for Mansfield. Beautiful climb out of Whitfield up to a big forested plateau. Long descent into Mansfield, quite a bit of traffic but still nice riding.

Lunch in Mansfield. Delicious Mediterranean toastie. Set off along the Maroondah Highway. Long, straight, lots of fast traffic, yuk, yuk, yuk. We persevered for about 30 kms, then diverted to the Goulburn High Country Rail Trail at the point where it crossed from our left to the right of the highway.

Progress was slower and riding required more concentration because of the gravel surface, but it was preferable to the highway, just.

A bit beyond Yarck the highway continues on towards Yea, and there's an overpass where the Maroondah Highway passes over the road to Yea and the rail trail. Our task, from the rail trail, was somehow to get up to the Maroondah Highway to Alexandra. This was a simple matter of clambering up an embankment, passing bikes and climbing over a high fence and clambering up another embankment.



Banana stop on the rail trail..

Anyhow, onward along the highway to Alexandra. Less traffic, nice country ride. The most notable incident was on entering Alexandra when Douglas came close to death on the bumper of a pickup. I was behind him and the driver was still in a state of shock when I passed, saying "I didn't see him".

Checked in at the Alexandra Motor Inn, booked through booking.com, \$130 for the double room. Clean, nice beds, pool, quiet. Nice meal at the pub for a lot less than the fine dining at Whitfield.

Monday March 16, Alexandra to Warrandyte

107 kms, 1,536 m elevation

Beautiful ride over the Black Spur, nice pizza at the Innocent Bystander – washed down with an Innocent Bystander Sangiovese. Nice, but not as good as the Pizzini.

Then we're in home country, so nothing more to say really.

End Note

First, the weather. The good thing about being retired is that you can time your ride to coincide with good weather, which we succeeded in doing.

Next: equipment. No problems, not even a puncture in 600 kms. Oh, except that my Garmin Vectors dropped out in the dust on the Rose River Road.

Lastly: We both plan to investigate different saddles!