

Cycling the Great Alpine Road

The plan

My plan was to cycle the B500 from Bairnsdale to Wangaratta – the Great Alpine Road (GAR). The train times to and from Bairnsdale dictated I ride northwards rather than my original plan of riding south.

Both ends of the route have a rail trail so I would not have to cycle on a busy main road all of the way. Bairnsdale to Bruthen is about 22km long (the trail will eventually go to Orbost) and the Murray to Mountains (Wangaratta to Bright) trail is one of the better known trails in Victoria.

I planned get the morning train to Bairnsdale on the Monday, a public holiday, but owing to a severe low pressure system dumping a great deal of rain on Melbourne in the early hours of Monday morning I decided to delay leaving until the Tuesday. This would also be better as the Tuesday train gets in nearly an hour earlier than the Monday train which was running on a public holiday timetable.

The GAR is 307 km long so my plan – not having driven it or seen it – was to do it in three sections each approximately 100km long; Bairnsdale to Omeo, Omeo to Bright, Bright to Wangaratta. I would take a tent so I was flexible and not dependent on staying in motels. The route goes through some very remote country and there are not many towns on the way.

Tuesday – Bairnsdale to Ensay South

Lift down to Dandenong station at 8:00 am. Needn't have panicked that I was going to miss the train as we got there in time and then it was announced that it was delayed due to an incident with the train ahead of it at Hughesdale. After an hour, we were told we'd be going by coach. Not looking like a great start. Eventually got moving on a very nice coach – but it's not a train – with bike stowed underneath – nearly 2 hours late. Got to Bairnsdale just before 2:00pm rather than the scheduled 11:25am. Cycling the 115km to Omeo before dark is definitely out of the question!

In my rush to get moving I did not see any signs to the start of the East Gippsland rail trail in spite of trying various possible side roads so decided to stick to the busy main road. Its also hilly compared to the rail trail – first you climb and then descend to the Nicholson River – where there were scores of large dead fish floating on their sides – I thought they were dead Siamese cats at first glance. Then it's another climb before descending into Bruthen where the rail trail comes in from the south. I cycled it for only a kilometer or so – the surface is compressed gravel. Looks like it is a much better gradient than the main road so next time I'll spend some time finding the start of it.

Even though the route out of Bruthen is generally north and follows the course of the Tambo River, the initial 30 km or so takes a direct route across the mountains rather than following the river – there are in fact no roads following the lower reaches of the Tambo through the mountains – so there is no choice.

Leaving Bruthen you climb over a small hill to Ramrod Creek where you get a glimpse of the Tambo. From here it's a steady 10km climb through forest to a height of about 450m and then a similar 10km gradual descent to meet and, this time, stay with the Tambo. The Tambo River is magnificent. It reminded me of some of the scenes you see of the Tour de France in the Pyrenees. The road is fairly flat and there are long stretches cycling next to the river (you're on the west side of it all the way to Ensay). I spotted two bridges across it that would provide access to good wild camping spots. I was tempted to stop but felt compelled to press on. Even Swifts Creek looked too far for the day so I settled on Ensay which is 75 km from Bairnsdale (and about 45 km short of my original target of Omeo). There are many wonderfully named places along the road: 1000 £ Bend, Haunted Creek, Dead Horse Flat, Jews Pinch, Hells Gate. I wasn't feeling supremely confident about this ride, and that last name made me think twice about going on.

At Ensay South the GAR once again leaves the Tambo River taking another direct route to meet the river again at Doctors Flat. Instead, I turned left immediately after crossing the Tambo and took Doctors Flat Road along the side of the river. This is 4 km longer than the direct route but less of a climb and less traffic. I had counted 15 fully laden logging trucks going the other way by now so there had to be a similar number of empty ones heading north. There appeared to be a good few articulated trucks carting cattle north and south as well. It was now 6:00pm and I was hoping to find a good spot to camp next to the Tambo for the night. To my delight, there was a sign saying there were toilets and picnic facilities 400m down the road from the junction. I pulled in to a nicely maintained picnic area with toilet block, water and a gas BBQ – not that I had anything to cook. I immediately set up my tent and gobbled down some tinned tuna, biscuits, “mountain bread” and a litre of water. This was really my rations for lunch but there was no choice. I was tempted to cycle the extra kilometre to see what was at Ensay proper – there was a service station marked on the map – but I couldn't really see the point. I was content to be here. There was a neighbouring farm house, a few cattle in the field I'd come by and hundreds of cockatoos and galahs that were making a hell of a racket as they settled in the trees for the night.

I was woken at midnight with a number of mossies in my tent which I discovered had some holes in it. And if that wasn't enough the cockatoos started flying around and screeching at 2:30am – it was just past full moon...

Wednesday – Ensay South to Victoria Falls

Woke at 7:00am. Very foggy and quite cold, the thermometer on my watch indicating it was only 8.5° C. Had some nuts and raisins, sesame bars and more water for breakfast, packed up and headed off along Doctors Flat Road. Very quiet and peaceful. Met one lady out on her mountain bike presumably for her morning ride.

Unexpected hill at end of this road as it rejoins the GAR. Fog lifts. The map I had indicates you cross the GAR and follow a minor road on the other side of the Tambo to Swifts Creek – thereby staying off the main road – which I intended to do wherever and whenever possible. The map does not have enough detail – what you have to do is cross the bridge across the Tambo – ie turn right and head south and then you'll find Swifts Creek East road around the corner. Follow this road all the way into Swifts

Creek. The ride from Ensay South to here is beautiful – it's alongside the river and not one car or truck passed me in either direction all the way.

Swifts Creek is only a small town, but it has a caravan park, general store, post office and public phone. There appears to be no mobile phone coverage along most of the GAR so there are very useful to stay in touch with the outside world.

Bought a Gatorade type drink and headed on north. It's only 9:00am and the day is warming up. Beautiful clear blue, blue sky.

Approx 5 km north of Swifts Creek the road forks – left for Omeo, right for Bindi. You say goodbye to the Tambo here as well –the Bindi road follows it.

I knew I had to gain some altitude somewhere between Swifts Creek and Omeo – Omeo is nearly 500m higher than SC – but I wasn't prepared for it to be done in a relatively few kilometers. As you take the left fork the road begins to climb and you stay climbing until you reach the top of a plateau at least 5 km further on. I was in my bottom gear all the way and had to stop a few times. Make sure you have plenty of water on board as you need to replenish all that sweat!

The top of the climb is relatively flat – I was expecting more of a drop. By now a strong northerly wind had sprung up and I was battling not only the hills but a fierce head wind. Arrived in Omeo – which you loose too much height descending into – knowing that you have to regain it later and met first cyclist heading in other direction. Omeo has most facilities and is the biggest town between Bairnsdale and Bright. I had now decided I would go on to camp at Victoria Falls – about another 500m climb and 20 km west of Omeo for the night. At one stage on the climb into Omeo I thought I might stop here for the night and rethink whether cycling the GAR was a good idea after all.

Bought some fruit, more little tins of tuna, tinned spaghetti and other items for tonight and tomorrow. The main hotel appeared to be a motel and only advertised dinner so I bought fish, chips and a salad at a café on the main road. Saw another cyclist coming through from Mt Hotham on a well-loaded bike while I ate. Afterwards, I popped into the Parks Victoria offices opposite and learnt that rain was forecast all day tomorrow. Not good news. The staff also told me the wind had been awful on Monday when the front that had delayed me leaving Melbourne came through – it was so bad that it had stopped some of the motorcyclists going on.

The wind was picking up but at least it was helping me to some extent as it appeared to be more easterly than northerly at times as I headed west. Steep climb which saw me pushing my heavily laden bike most of the way to the top of another 5km climb. Spectacular views back of Omeo nestled in the valley below. At the top of the climb is a lookout that advertises Mt Kosciusko views. Pulled it – it's easy when you're walking – and admired the mountains. Good map showing how extensive the bush fires of a few years back were. Altitude now nearly 1200m. Unfortunately you loose quite a few hundred metres in more roller coaster rides down to Victoria Falls historic Area. Saw another two cyclists – also heading to Omeo – setting up camp just short of the lookout.

Started to rain just short of the Vic Falls turn off. Gravel road from the GAR leads to campsite after one kilometre. Raced to set my tent up – pitched it behind some trees and bushes so as to afford some protection from the wind. Got everything off the bike and into the tent as the rain looks like it's not going away in a hurry. The clouds to the west and north look very black and obscure most of my view. It's now 3:00pm. Filled up my two water bottles from the Victoria River (there are toilets but no tank water or other facilities here). It starts to rain heavily so I have to take cover in my tent as there are no covered facilities – only trees. Maybe this is tomorrow's rain a little earlier – which would please me – I'd rather it rain while I'm stopped than be cycling in the rain.

More lunch type food for dinner washed down with water. I deliberately hadn't brought my Trangia with me as I had planned to eat in town each evening. I did have a tea light with me and used that to heat the tin of spaghetti – quite amazed that it warmed it up enough to take the chill of it.

Thursday - Victoria Falls to Bright

Heavy rain continued through out the night but it stops soon after I wake up. Just the occasional splashes from water dripping off the leaves of the trees I'm camped under. Not cold either – it's 12.5 C – maybe the cloud cover has kept it warmer. The wind is still blowing strongly though. Take advantage of the fact it is not raining and get tent and everything packed onto my bike. The tent is very wet and no amount of shaking is going to dry it out so it goes away wet.

Quick breakfast of nuts and raisins and after topping up both water bottles I'm on the road at 8:15. Big day ahead – one which I'm still a little uncertain about. Its only 33km to Mt Hotham but I must have 900m to climb – which – if there are ups and downs like yesterday as well – it will be as demanding as yesterday. At least it's not raining even if the wind is blowing a gale. First climb sees me pushing the bike to the top of the hill.

After this hill however, I find I can ride in bottom gear and make slow progress against the wind. I'm doing 7.5 or 8.7 km/h according to my cycle computer with an occasional burst of 10 km/h. Better than walking pace which is only 4.6 though. The road markings change to orange lines indicating I'm in Alpine country proper. The rain returns and its driven by this wind. It's cold and quickly my socks and shoes are soaked and water is pouring off my rain jacket. Luckily I have an old cap to put under my helmet which keeps the raindrops out of my eyes. Looking around its bleak – there appears to me no colour – everything is black and white and shades of grey. I cycle past Mt Hotham airport and am tempted to seek shelter and a possible cup of coffee but it looks deserted. The road has gained orange snow poles every 50 metres or so, so it feels very alpine. I press on past some of the old huts of the high country and the Dinner Plain Hotel where a lot of cars have pulled in. Again I ignore the temptation to stop as it will be very hard to get going again. You loose a little height on a slight downhill run along here but at least it gets a few kilometers out of the way. By now I've had to put my lights on – the cars and trucks coming the other way have done so for a while now – as visibility is down to 20 metres or so at times. The wind is screaming; tugging at my helmet and threatening to blow me off my bike. Luckily it is mostly head on, only once did I have to unclat quickly and stop myself being

knocked to the ground when hit by a strong gust from the side¹. I know I'm close when I see the first car park – all deserted waiting for next winter's hordes from the city. I can't believe it when I see a sign at another car park saying Mt Hotham 3km. I know I've made it. The last few kilometers go quite quickly – I'm astonished that it's been possible to cycle most of the way from where I camped last night albeit in my bottom gear.

I pull in at the first spot and order a coffee. Its warm inside and I could stay all day but I know that I can be down in Harrietville relatively quickly and it has to be better down there than up here. I continue on and up to find a pay phone at the resort management offices. Visibility drops dramatically and I cannot see from one side of their car park to the other and I almost miss the building. Very strong gust of wind blows my bike over when I duck behind a shed for shelter from a squall of rain and hail. Get inside the resort management building – and change my socks and have lunch. A staff member from the resort allows me to make a cup of coffee in their kitchen and tells me there is a bus down to Bright at 4:30pm if I don't fancy cycling any further in this weather. I tell her I'd rather stay up here for the night than let the weather beat me.

Eventually it's time to move on. Back out into the cold and the wind. The rain appears to have stopped. Funny, I have to continue up for further than I thought before I'm at the top. I still cannot see very much beyond 20 metres or so most of the time so I have no idea how high we are or the views I'm missing. The little traffic there is doesn't seem to be going much faster than me. It is only when I've descended 400 metres or so that I get a glimpse of the views and the rugged nature of Mt Hotham. Maybe it was better not seeing what I've been cycling down (or what I was cycling up). Some of the corners are pretty hairy with the water on the road and the wind buffeting me.

At one point there is a spectacular "jet" of cloud going straight up over the road from the valley below. Walked up the big switchback hill about 10km from the top. From here it is all downhill to Harrietville. As I get down lower the wind eases back and I can feel the temperature climbing all the time. There are some beautiful fragrances on the way down – I've never smelt anything so heavenly. I stop and attempt to identify the source of the fragrance by breaking off and crushing leaves of various bushes – but I fail to find where the beautiful smell is coming from.

I "hang" on the brakes nearly all the way down – I'm worried that the 30 km of descent and 1500m drop from the top down to Harrietville will burn them out or a cable will snap but I get down without incident. The last few hundred metres into Harrietville itself is the steepest and I catch up with a cattle truck and have to drop back to 20km/h. It has taken me less than an hour to get down from the top.

It's a different world down in Harrietville – the sun is shining, there is a gentle breeze and the road descends at a slight gradient so I can peddle easily in a high gear. I don't even bother stopping – I'll go onto Bright and that way I can be in Wangaratta tomorrow afternoon – a day later than planned but happy to be there at all.

¹ The Automated Weather Station at Mt Hotham recorded a wind gust of 95 km/h at 10:50 – see attached extract.

Now I'm following the Ovens River and there is only a slight hill on the way into Bright. I find the Caravan Park just this side of town and quickly check in. I'm a bit shocked at \$24 for a site for a tidy tent, a bike and myself but I haven't had to pay the last two nights so who's complaining. Also I can have a shower at last. But my site (#113) is not very good – too much mud and too little grass and no bench or table. Next time I must find a caravan park which caters for hikers and bikers. Quite a few of my things in one pannier have got wet but the rest has stayed dry. I wouldn't have been surprised if everything had been soaked after today's weather. My shoes are still soaking so walked into town and bought myself a pair of thongs.

Moved my tent and bike to site 116 which has more grass, a pole to prop my bike up against and wooden rails that I can sit on before I headed into town for a well-earned (I think) beer and steak at the pub.

Friday – Bright to Wangaratta

Packed up, had something to eat and on the road by 8:15 as usual. Colder than I thought it would be – 11.5 C. The rail trail is in good condition and sealed all the way to Wangaratta. The upper Ovens valley is quite beautiful and it is a pleasure cycling here. I thought this would be a long, uneventful ride after yesterday but I was brought back to reality when I heard a loud bang and whoosh of air from the rear wheel between Porepunkah and Eurobin. The tyre had a little hole in it and the inner tube had split along the seam obviously because it was wearing away on each turn of the rear wheel. Looking more closely from the inside, I could see the tyre was separating around the hole. I had bought two new tyres recently but had not fitted a new tyre to the rear wheel as I thought it all looked to be in good condition. How wrong I was being proved and this stupidity could now mean abandoning my ride right here. Worse thoughts also crossed my mind of what I would have done had this happened yesterday or the day before. There was only one thing to do – patch the tyre from the inside as best I can and put it on the front. That meant taking both wheels off, which meant completely unpacking the bike. Three-quarter of an hour later I had a new inner tube on the back wheel inside the new Kevlar tyre that had been on the front. The front wheel had the same inner tube and the rear tyre patched with two self sticking inner tube patches on the inside. I didn't put the usual amount of air in the tyre as it looked horribly distorted. I considered moving everything that was in the front panniers to the rear but there was relatively little weight on the front and I decided to cycle very carefully with my weight back. I was about half way to Myrtleford from Bright so decided to press on as I knew there was a bike shop there (there was also one back in Bright – I'd cycled past it earlier – it has some very nice bikes in the window). Gingerly, I picked my way along the 20km saying g'day to other cyclists who didn't realize what a shaky setup I was riding.

With great relief I arrived in Myrtleford and quickly asked my way to the bike shop. I parked the bike outside, walked in and asked for a 27 x 1 ¼" tyre (my bike, like me, is getting on). "Don't have any, sold the last one yesterday, it'll be three days or so before we have new stock" was the reply. What now, I thought. I explained my situation and wondered how far the patched tyre would hold out – but I could see the tyre was becoming more and more distorted. The owner explained he had two old 27 x 1" tyres so I dropped the wheel out of the forks and said we will give it a go. I was happy with the result – in fact I wonder if my bike had originally had something other than 1 ¼" tyres. Makes me think I change to metric size rims some day.

I had an uneventful cycle the rest of way into Wangaratta. It's a longish, relatively flat, not very shaded ride on a good track. Quite a few cyclists out for a ride.

I'd missed the 1:15pm train and had to wait close to three hours for the 17:02pm train back to Melbourne.

Richard King, 19 March 2006

In Conclusion

Make sure you are fit. I could have been fitter.

Make sure your bike is in good condition. Double check the tyres and brakes.

Make sure you go prepared for hail, rain, sun and possibly even snow.

There is no mobile phone coverage for much of the GAR.

Make sure you have enough food to survive for 2-3 days if you get stuck somewhere

My bike

FW Evans touring bicycle, purchased in London in 1981

Reynolds 531 tubing

27 x 1 ¼" wheels

front and rear carriers; Karrimor panniers

front chain wheels: 36 and 48 teeth

rear cluster: 13-29???

Gear carried

Outer Limits Horizon 1 man tent (1.8 kg)

Sleeping bag

Camping mat

Thermals

Spare socks (including one pair with Thinsulate), jocks, T-shirt, long cotton trousers

Food for lunch and breakfast, chocolate, sweets

Water bottles (2)

Pen knife; knife, fork

Cap; rain jacket; cycling tops (2); knicks

Toiletries and sun screen

Maps; notebook, pen

Puncture repair kit; two spare inner tubes; bike pump

Rear light fixed to bike; removable front light (doubles as a torch)

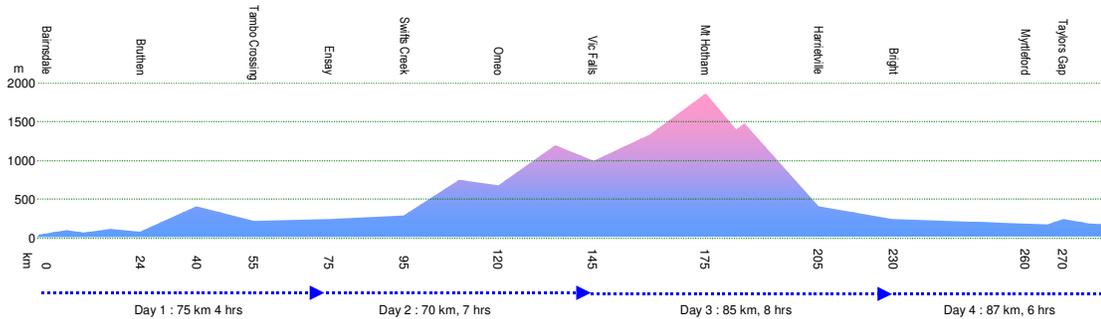
Tea light, matches (light and minimal warmth)

Loaded bike weighs approx 30 kg + me (85kg) = 115kg – triple check that back wheel

Map



Cross section



Extract from the Bureau of Meteorology records

Latest Weather Observations for Mount Hotham AWS

72 hours of data.

Issued at 10:40 am EDT Saturday 18 March 2006

[Notes](#) about the data in this table. | [About Latest Weather Observations](#)

Date/ Time	Temp	Dew Point	Rel Hum	Delta- T	Wind				Press	Rain since 9 am	
					Dir	Speed	Gust	Speed			Gust
EDT	°C	°C	%	°C		km/h		knots		hPa	mm
16/14:00	6.1	5.8	98	0.2		39	59	21	32	-	1.4
16/13:30	5.3	5.0	98	0.2		39	61	21	33	-	1.4
16/13:00	5.9	5.6	98	0.2		52	74	28	40	-	1.4
16/12:30	6.3	6.1	99	0.1		52	83	28	45	-	1.4
16/12:00	6.0	5.8	99	0.1		46	74	25	40	-	1.2
16/11:30	7.0	6.7	98	0.2		54	82	29	44	-	1.2
16/11:01	7.2	6.9	98	0.2		46	72	25	39	-	0.8
16/11:00	7.2	6.9	98	0.2		46	72	25	39	-	0.8
16/10:50	7.1	6.8	98	0.2		48	95	26	51	-	0.6
16/10:30	7.2	6.9	98	0.2		44	70	24	38	-	0.6
16/10:00	7.2	6.9	98	0.2		46	69	25	37	-	0.6
16/09:31	7.2	6.9	98	0.2		44	69	24	37	-	0.2
16/09:21	7.4	7.1	98	0.2		37	74	20	40	-	0.2
16/09:00	7.2	6.9	98	0.2		56	76	30	41	-	41.4
16/08:44	7.1	6.8	98	0.2		48	67	26	36	-	41.2
16/08:30	7.1	6.8	98	0.2		52	67	28	36	-	41.0
16/08:05	7.1	6.8	98	0.2		50	69	27	37	-	41.0
16/08:00	7.1	6.8	98	0.2		46	59	25	32	-	40.8

These observations have not been quality controlled.

Wind observations are a 10-minute average from the standard height of 10 metres.

'Dir' is Wind Direction. Direction from which the wind is blowing, reported to 16 points of the compass.

The wind gust is measured over 3 seconds.

'Tce' is a trace (< 0.1mm) of rainfall.

'Press' is Mean Sea Level Pressure. The correction from station level pressure to mean sea level pressure may sometimes use the conditions specified by the International Standard Atmosphere in the conversion process, rather than the conditions at the station at the time of the observation.

Delta-T is Wet Bulb Depression (Air Temperature - Wet Bulb Temperature).

'-' indicates that no data is available.