



BLUE DRAGON SLAYING

Flirt with Kate Reed, drop Ben Lomond, marvel at the Irish Dog Carrier, and go cleat to claw with the Blue Dragon...it's all happening, out on the trails of North-Eastern Tasmania.

On our final night of this particular riding adventure in Launceston, me and my riding buddy, Dave 'Romeo' Rome, spot a little kid on a mini-motorbike. He's waiting at a major intersection, headlights off but helmeted, as if he's shrunk in the wash. It's about 10pm, he's about five, and anywhere else in Australia it'd probably turn heads. But this is Tassie, and it seems the most normal thing – just like the falling-apart Torana that wants to race us around the next corner; the unidentifiable, golf-ball-sized stinging insects in the bush; the gloriously untouched pizza makers at country pubs ("A mar-ga-ri-ta? Now, what is that?"); fields of swaying opium poppies; and the super-challenging, world-class riding. Mountain biking mainlanders, prepare yourselves: the island state is a world away from home.

FLIRTING WITH KATE REED

Fresh off the Spirit of Tasmania, after an hour and a half riding the Kate Reed Recreational Reserve, I've broken a pedal. The delay costs us our freedom – the caretakers have locked the boom gates and we've trapped ourselves in the grounds of the Tasmanian Institute of Sport! It seems that the gates are open only during business hours. We should have



RIDE:

Kate Reed Recreational Reserve – tucked behind the Tasmanian Institute of Sport in Prospect, a suburb of Launceston, this playground is accessed through a business-hours boom gate, with the trailhead in the last gravel carpark up the hill from the main road.

Mountainbike Tasmania – Ian Ferrier and his crew can run a range of rides to suit all levels of derring do, and are happy to dispense trail advice too – Mountain Designs, 120 Charles Street, Launceston; (03) 6334 0988; www.mountainbiket Tasmania.com.au

The Blue Dragon Challenge – top-notch riding across the stunning Blue Tier: chilled-out camping never more than a cooe from the pub; and a hundreds of friendly local bikers to introduce you to the scene, this two-day event organised by elite riders Ben Mather and Rowena Fry has it all – www.wildwheelpromotions.com.au

noticed that every other rider had entered vehicle free... After some uncontrollable giggling, we realise we might spend the night in the car, and ring the local police station: "No idea how you're going to get out of there, love," comes the matronly voice from the comms centre, "But I'll call you back." It's about then that we decide to go cross-country. There's a sketchy route down the hill to the highway – Subaru Forester GT clearance being a minimum for this manoeuvre – and we're mightily relieved.

Kate Reed Recreational Reserve on Launceston's edge is a network of singletrack so dense it's like one of those intensely tangled knots you get in a headphone cable. You follow one thread, and just about everywhere you look, there's another one branching off. Fortunately it's right between two main roads, so you can't get too lost. Bear in mind though that there's no water or facilities of any kind, so bring what you need along.

It's generally winding singletrack, with the odd overgrown access trail running through it all. It's all evolving and ad-hoc. We ride the occasional well-worn-in berm, and spot a big tabletop or two in a well-groomed set of jumps, and loop around through chainsawed logs, along a couple of boardwalks, and into clouds of butterflies. Ah, Tasmania.

DROPPING BEN LOMOND

Looking down Tasmania's second-highest mountain, Ben Lomond, from the top, it's hard to believe that the compress of intestinal firetrail switchbacks called 'Jacob's Ladder' is actually real. With soaring dolorite cliffs behind, and an endless view down the mountain in front, it's got to be one of Australia's most stunning firetrail descents. This is problematic if you can't peel your eyes from the spectacle – it's very fast, and in places sheer-sided and slippery.

The best way to do Ben Lomond (the bottom is about 45

minutes from Launceston) is with a local, and Ian Ferrier of guiding crew Mountain Bike Tasmania runs the best ride. Tailoring the outing to the skill of the group, he can either keep you on the open firetrails, or divert onto near-virgin stretches of steep loamy singletrack and rocky, rutted 4WD trails, as he did with me and Dave, along with guides John Braid and Ben and James McArthur.

After stepping down the ladder, it's around 7km of fast, loose, firetrail, followed by a mixture of singletrack and neglected access road. Deep ruts and bigish rocks make their presence felt, to me anyhow – before I know it, I've planted my face in the dirt, and gingerly rolled onto my back in time to watch an elephantine mosquito drink from my leg and my deflating rear tyre blow bubbles through the remnants of the last creek crossing. Ergh.

About 15 minutes later, after a rocky descent, the new tube flatted, and by tube number three, the whole group got involved in the pumping. It so happens you need higher than normal pressures in Tassie. Shortly after, with John riding near me, he noticed that the rear tyre was flat again. The moral of the story, apart from running higher pressures it seems, is to run good tubes. It seems my spares were a bit past it.

The next section was a two-part harmony of grippy, worn in cross country racetrack and roughly cut hillside trails, where the steepness of the terrain meant plenty of off-camber riding. They'll be properly ready in a year or so, once some weather and tyres have bedded everything down. The final stretch cut through thigh-high-grass, skirting farmland, and involved jumping a few fences – Ian's got all the private property issues sorted for his groups.

All told, it's around 26km from the top of Ben Lomond back to the road, and depending on rider ability, it could take anywhere from one and a half to two and a half hours.

After washing the trail out of my elbow and off my face



back in a bathroom in town, it was time to drive an hour and a half to the Weldborough Hotel, our next digs, the country pub that proudly hangs on its wall the Irish Dog Carrier. It was the eve of the Blue Dragon Challenge.

SLAIN BY THE BLUE DRAGON

The Irish Dog carrier is an all-iron contraption, comprising a banded metal muzzle welded to a long, U-shaped bracket, with a long, thick hand-operated, drill-bit facing inward at the other end. At the top is a handy carry handle. At this point it's pertinent to note that, just as an Irish Dog Carrier shouldn't really be used to carry a dog (it's more useful for barbecuing them), a singlespeed hardtail is not suited to actually riding Tasmanian trails. Unfortunately my riding mate, Dave, missed the memo and had turned up to Tassie on a one-g geared wonderbike. The riding was enough work on my happily geared, four-inch dualie but Dave has already been riding his tricked out Ibis Tranny in hilly-as-hell Tasmania for two days, and the heaviest two are yet to come. As Dave was about to find out, all the coloured drivetrain spacers, carbon bits and titanium bobs in the universe aren't going to help when you're climbing a total of 1250m in 52km with 33:17 gearing.

The first stage of the Blue Dragon Challenge (Derby to



01. The lower slopes of Ben Lomond – a spectacular 26km loop from the top of the second tallest peak in Tassie.
02. Get ready for high speed switchbacks! Jacob's Ladder.
03. There's plenty of riding around gorgeous Launceston.
04. Suffering in the heat of the Blue Dragon.



Derby loop) was an inferno, by Tassie standards. In low-to-mid 30s, on almost totally exposed trails, with that much climbing, it was seriously tough going. For the 282 riders (all riding in pairs, male, female and mixed) who competed (100 up from last year), it was brilliantly rewarding too – after the first 17km of the course, all uphill, we found ourselves on the roof of it all. The bright gravel firetrail edged by tall purple trigger flowers in fields of shrubbery, all backgrounded by the blue sky and fringed by mountains. The view alone made the climb worthwhile, and the descent sweetened the deal. One rather hairy section saw a drop in altitude of about 150 metres over what was only a couple of hundred metres of course (many of us were reduced to walking). The rest alternately rocked and flowed over rough, rutted trails and smooth gravel turns, linking with dark, loamy forest trails, and then an awesome singletrack drop down through the rainforest, to the excellently stocked feed station – I rapidly ingested two handfuls of Jelly Beans, a banana, a heap of watermelon, a litre of water, and two of Dave's highly caffeinated energy gels.

This all kept me upright until the 10km-to-go-point at which deliriously dry (despite having drunk five litres), I had an intense craving for fish and chips. And the thought of possibly eating them, along with some serious encouragement from Dave kept me going. As it happens, he says pushed me as soon as he knew that if I fell over and died beside the side of the road it was only a 20-minute sprint for him to tell someone to come out and get me. Charming.

I managed not to flat the entire course, but Ian of Mountain Bike Tasmania had warned, in light of my deflation issues out at Ben Lomond, that we'd see frustrated riders at the bottom of every rocky descent dealing with rapidly deflating wheels – sure enough, we kept leapfrogging an otherwise speedy team who had six or seven flats over the course of day one of the race and elite rider Niki Fisher blew her tyre, only 10km from

RETIRE:

Arthouse Hostel – Backpackers with a difference, this brightly outfitted, upbeat accommodation is reasonably priced and biker-friendly, with a plenty of overnight parking and a gear shed out the back – 20 Lindsay Street, Launceston; (03) 6333 0222; www.arthousehostel.com.au

Weldborough Hotel – The way country digs should be; warmly hosted by a wonderful young couple, Marty and Sue, you'll never be more than a few steps from the bar (Bulmer's and Boag's on tap), and some truly excellent brownies. Counter meals are great too. Plenty of camping out the back; recovery drinks for sale; riders are super welcome and there are even packed lunches available – 12 Main Road, Weldborough; (03) 6354 2223; www.weldborough.com.au

01. The Irish Dog Carrier. Promise us you'll never use it to carry your dog.
 02. National Champ, Rowena Fry; stalwart of the Tassie scene and race organiser.
 03. Getting wild at the Kate Reed Reserve.
 04. Nothing better than pairs racing; suffer and celebrate with a buddy.



REFUEL:

Burger Got Soul – perhaps the funkier burger joint in the country, with oodles of meaty and vege options, and particularly delicious, fat chips – 243 Charles Street, Launceston; (03) 6334 5204
Fresh – by far the coolest eatery in Launceston, this vegetarian café does brilliant breakfast and lovely lunch, as well as Friday night dinner – 178 Charles Street, Launceston; (03) 6331 4299

REPAIR:

Sprung – downhillers and boutique bikers best stop in to chat with Rob Potter at this tucked-away treasure trove for the low-down on the best kit available – 6 Powells Arcade, 125 St John Street, Launceston; 0407 324 566; www.sprungmtb.com.au
Rapid Cycling – Blue Dragon organiser Ben Mather's latest venture is set to become a central aspect of the Launceston mountain biking lifestyle, and was set to open just after our visit in January – Cornwall Square Transit Centre, 12-16 St Johns Street, Launceston; (03) 6331 1311

the finish. Her teammate, James Williamson, sprinted to the end of the course, picked up a wheel, and sprinted back to meet her 2km from the line, just as she reached the asphalt. Mechanical failures were not uncommon, as were physical meltdowns. One rider broke his derailleur, and had his teammate tow him in on the last few kilometres with two tubes rigged between seatpost and handlebar, while the St Johns Ambulance picked another up after losing his lunch due to exhaustion. The 48km second stage on day two (Weldborough to Weldborough loop) was even more demanding, despite the much cooler, overcast conditions, proving to be a highly technical mountain bikers' course, sorting the roadie wannabes from the dirt-loving fat-tyre riders. This was best evidenced at the first feed station, at 13km, which closely resembled a warzone. The shell-shocked walking wounded; bloodied knees and shins. Wide eyes. Bulging veins. The en masse aftermath of communal adrenalin dump. All those who made it were audibly in awe of their own ability to make it through the ride. Some bananas were being eaten very, very slowly. Trails were closely grown with ferns and criss-crossed with slick roots, forming tricky obstacles on corners with limited visibility. Throw in some fist to toaster-sized rocks and random, loose patches of sand, and you had a minefield or a theme park, depending on how your day panned out. Most lead riders, with the exception of maybe the top five, would have been riding in granny for much of the climbing. And had it rained. Because of the extreme level of difficulty, a number of teams chose to take a 20km shortcut from the second feed station. Despite the potential for carnage, the worst injury of the day (and the event) was an agonisingly dislocated collarbone, by a rider more upset by the fact that he'd lose out on participating in the upcoming Wildside, than by the structural damage to his body.

After 100km of riding, it was a pair of local riding rockstars, John Darcey and Nic Morgan, in the 'Young Guns' division, who were the fastest men of the event, in a blistering time of 5:16:05 (2:32:06, day one; 2:43:59, day two), appropriately receiving pimpin' gold Adidas sunnies for their efforts. The fastest ladies were Su Sprott and Mel Weber, in the 'Mid-Lifers Female' division, in a time of 7:24:07 (3:27:44, day one; 3:56:23, day two); while the speediest mixed team was Jody Bush and Ben Osborne, in the 'Young Guns Mixed' division', in a time of 6:42:48 (3:14:27 day one; 3:28:21, day two). Full results and event info available at www.wildwheelpromotions.com.au

Ultimately the second year of the Blue Dragon Challenge, was a hearty showcase of the best riding in the northeast of Taswegia, over and across the spectacular Blue Tier. But it was preaching to the converted – the overwhelming majority of pedallers were local, with only ten interstateers in attendance. But the secret's now out, and word of the Blue Dragon has hit the mainland. If you're keen to take on the Dragon, just make sure you sharpen your lance - she's not an easy beast to slay! **AMB**