

GOING WILD

Going with the flow down Derby way

More than just a mountain-biking challenge, the Blue Derby Trails are proving to also be an unlikely saviour for a Tassie town in economic decline.

Story by Carolyn Beasley



The Blue Derby Trails, in north-eastern TAS, wind through diverse forest habitats and past relics of Derby's tin-mining days.

*On 4 April 1929 in north-eastern Tasmania
the waterlogged wall of the Briseis Dam catastrophically
failed, sending a 30m-high rush of water down the
Cascade River valley.*

The dam provided sluicing water to one of the richest tin mines of its day. Without warning, the mine was flooded, 14 lives were lost, and the unsuspecting town of Derby was changed forever.

The Briseis Mine later reopened, but would never attain its former prosperity, and in 1948 it closed for good. Forestry provided employment for many during the following decades, but with the demise of timber company Gunns Limited, and changes to Tasmania's forestry policy, employment opportunities in this sector today have vastly reduced. Derby needed to reinvent itself, and what followed in 2015 was a seismic shift.

Today, as I arrive in Derby, 95 kilometres north-east of Launceston, I pass cars with fancy bikes standing proud on rooftops and gentrified workers' cottages advertising no vacancies. Lean, and clad in quick-dry clothes, the tourists here congregate in small groups at outdoor tables, sipping lattes or eating wood-fired pizza. Their trusty steeds of choice, mud-caked mountain bikes, hang by their seats from a steel rail beside the footpath. The scenery, the town, the lattes are all lovely, but make no mistake – these tourists are here for just one thing, mountain biking.

CROSSING THE ROAD, I'm startled by an unexpected sound. "Yeew!" yells an enthusiastic teenage boy in a full-face helmet. He's careered out of the forest and, together with his friends, is hurtling down a steep street towards me. Stepping aside and consulting my map, I see this is the end of a mountain-bike trail. Finishing at the historic Derby Post Office, the trail is cleverly called Return to Sender. It's one of many that start and finish in town and constitute the Blue Derby Trails – 125km of purpose-built bike tracks.

The vision for the project came from the local Dorset Shire Council. Derby provided the perfect terrain and basic infrastructure, which meant the council could tap into the Tasmanian government's strategy to promote cycling tourism.

Initially, the trails cost about \$2.3 million to develop, with the local council and state and federal governments all contributing. The council has since contributed \$700,000 more to develop further stages.

The mayor, Greg Howard, considers it a modest investment for a very significant return. "In 2018 mountain biking brought about 30,000 visitors to



Derby Schoolhouse Museum volunteer Virginia Valentino (above) has converted her family's historic house to accommodate mountain bikers. She grew up in Derby, where mountain bikes now often hang along a steel rail (below), as cyclists drink coffee and browse the shops.



ride the trails," he says. That brings, Greg estimates, \$12–15 million to the north-eastern region annually, with flow-on economic benefits felt by neighbouring towns, including Branxholm and Scottsdale. Additional millions flow to the wider Tasmanian economy as the cyclists add on other destinations.

Before opening Blue Derby, the region struggled for employment options. "Over a 6–8-year period we lost a vegetable factory, two pine sawmills and a milk factory," Greg says.

He estimates that 900 jobs were lost, including those in the timber industry.

PHOTO CREDITS: PREVIOUS PAGE: ADAM GIBSON / COURTESY BLUE DERBY PODS RIDE; THIS PAGE: CAROLYN BEASLEY

The newly opened St Helens Mountain Bike Trails, on TAS's east coast, include 10 stacked loop tracks of varying difficulty, some suitable for the whole family.



To date, Blue Derby has generated about 100 part-time and full-time jobs. For some youth in the municipality unable to find a job in forestry or farming, this provides a welcome opportunity to remain in the region.

The sentiment is echoed by Virginia Valentino, a long-time local and coordinator of the Derby Schoolhouse Museum. "In the old days nothing happened in town," she says. "Today, there are people in the park, kids out riding. Having seen this town sink further and further down, I love the energy that it's brought."

There has been a roughly six-fold increase in property values during the last decade, due to the biking boom. "A lot of locals decided to cash out of their houses," Virginia says, explaining that for older people that has meant the option of moving closer to medical facilities. "But the [local] community misses them."

One of the reasons Derby's trails are doing so well is their high-quality design. With the sport of mountain biking growing throughout Australia, trails are being built in many regions. Dorset Shire Council wanted Blue Derby to be world-class and hired the esteemed Australian company World Trail for the design. "We also have the gold standard for maintenance because [the] council does it all," Greg explains. With three full-time staff and \$200,000 per year allocated to the job, maintenance is taken seriously here.

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employment options.*

The proof of Blue Derby's success is evident, being the only place in Australia to have hosted a leg of the prestigious World Enduro event, which it has done twice in the last three years. In 2017 one of the trails, Detonate, was voted the best in the world. With the trails being adored by pros, I set out to see if they could be tackled and enjoyed by a beginner such as myself.

BIKE HIRE AND BIKE shuttle services are available in the town for independent travellers, but my group of five chooses a totally immersive experience, spending three days on the Blue Derby Pods Ride. The company offers a full-service package that includes all equipment, food, drinks, accommodation and transport from Launceston. All levels of riders are catered for, which is good news, because I'm counting on a lot of hand-holding.

My tuition begins with owner and guide Steve Howell explaining the basics of technique, including postures for descending and how to raise and drop ►



▼ **This trail through Derby tunnel** (below), originally built by a tin miner to remove waste rock, is among many signs of how mining shaped the landscape.

▼ **Switchbacks built along the Bay of Fires Trail** (bottom) help riders to traverse steep, open forest terrain that'd otherwise be almost impossible to ascend.



FACT

The population of Derby has fallen from a peak of more than 3000 people during its heyday as a tin-mining town in the 1890s to fewer than 200 today.

▲ **The 42km Bay of Fires Trail**, which is part of the recently opened St Helens Mountain Bike Trails, starts on the Blue Tier plateau and links to the Blue Derby Trails. Riding the Bay of Fires Trail takes about four and a half hours.

the luxurious pneumatic seat. The trails have colour markings like ski runs, with green for the easiest, blue for intermediate, and terrifying black runs for the experienced and fearless. As we try out a beginner trail, Steve explains that mountain biking here is beyond merely cycling and thrills and he hopes I find something more – an experience known as *flow*.

“Flow is this mental state, where you jump on a bike and all your troubles go away,” Steve says. “It’s a really focused Zen spot and it happens when you’re challenging yourself, testing your skills.”

I follow Steve onto the trails proper, adjacent to the town and ascend the gentle green trail called Axehead, past tree ferns lining the Cascade River as it cuts down the mountain past the tannin-stained but clear waters at Tasty Trout Falls. From the trails, it’s impossible to miss the town’s tin-mining history and how it’s shaped the landscape. Steve points out mountains that have been half washed away by sluicing with high-pressure water, and we follow one trail right through a mountain along an old mining access tunnel.

Forestry has shaped the landscape too, and, as we ascend the trails, we see areas where regrowth vegetation is dominated by Tasmanian blackwoods and other acacias, pioneer species that settle back into an area after disturbance.

Now mountain biking is shaping the landscape. The trails traverse a mix of Crown land and forestry coups, the latter being managed for the state government by Sustainable Timbers Tasmania for forestry purposes.

Mayor Greg says that in planning which coups are to be logged, Sustainable Timbers considers the visual amenity from the trails, ensuring a vegetation buffer always remains.

It’s a cooperative approach that recognises the value of both industries to the region and is also welcome news for any wildlife that may inhabit this piece of forest, such as the spotted-tail quoll, eastern barred bandicoot and Tasmanian devil.

Coexistence and conscious living are fundamental to the philosophy of Steve and his wife, Tara, in developing their mountain-biking business. They strive to

The Blue Derby Pods Ride itinerary

This three-day ride can be adapted for the preferred challenges of you or your group. With two guides and up to eight riders, you can choose to split up for sections on any given day. A standard itinerary might look like this.

Day 1

Collected in Launceston by your guides, you’ll be fitted for bikes and helmets before a 90-minute drive to Derby. By late morning your guide will have run through a skills session and an easy lap of Lake Derby. Then it’s over to the trailhead and main Blue Derby Trails. Ascend via the Long Shadows blue trail, then choose to head down the berms of Flickity Sticks to settle in at the architecturally designed accommodation Pods, or climb further to Flickity Sticks Upper, for a longer descent.

Day 2

Opt for the green Sawtooth trail before taking the 350m-long Derby Tunnel, built by a tin miner in the 1880s; then join Berms and Ferns, a rollercoaster of tree ferns and viewpoints into town. The more adventurous can choose the long ascent to the ridgetop, descending via Return to Sender, traversing rocky slabs for a rendezvous and coffee in town.



The Hub is the communal area of the Blue Derby Pods Ride accommodation, and riders will find it easy to relax here after a day of exertion.

FOR MORE INFO:

ridetassie.com/blue-derby-maps

bluederbypodside.com.au



descending over boulders, or Detonate, one of the world’s best.

Day 3

With the bikes in the trailer, it’s a one-hour drive to Blue Tier, the highest point in the trails network, where lichens cover the ground. Climb a granite tor for views over mountain ranges to the coast, which can be reached via the new Bay of Fires Trail. The Blue Tier descent takes several hours, through ancient myrtle rainforest, under giant tree ferns and past streams frequented by platypuses. Finish with a riverside picnic lunch near Weldborough, before returning to Launceston.

After lunch at the Pods, afternoon options include Dam Busters, to circumnavigate the Cascade Dam (formerly the ill-fated Briseis Dam); or, for the advanced, there are black trails such as Trouty,

The world outside Blue Derby melts away and I know I’m feeling ‘the flow’.

make everything adhere to this ethos and, on my first day riding, I’m served a gastronomic picnic lunch in a river valley, featuring local produce, hearty fresh salads in waste-free stainless-steel boxes, peanut protein balls and fresh coffee made in a portable press.

Puffing after a decent uphill slog, we finally turn downhill onto the Flickity Sticks Trail, and I follow Steve’s tips, banking around the berms (embankments) and switchbacks, proceeding tentatively at first.

As my confidence grows, my mental state shifts from slightly anxious to simple concentration, and, as the sparse eucalypt forest whips by, I find myself smiling, even yahooping a bit. The world outside Blue Derby melts away and I know I’m feeling ‘the flow’.

UNEXPECTEDLY, STEVE exits the main trail, and we enter a secret grove among white gum giants. A curved timber building comes into view and I’m told we’re home. The Pods, our accommodation complex, opened deep in the forest in 2017 and operates off the grid, with electricity generated entirely by solar panels. The bathrooms have odour-free composting toilets and solar-heated hot showers supplied by rainwater tanks. Despite its off-grid status, this is a luxurious forest experience.

The first building we explore is The Hub, for dining and lounging. Minimalist design and huge glass panels draw attention to the forest outside, where a deck with comfy bean bags invites us to savour a post-ride Tasmanian beverage. An open kitchen allows us to chat with Steve and co-guide Des Tarlington, as they prepare gourmet three-course meals from the produce of the surrounding countryside. As the evening chills, we’re lulled into a torpor by the cosy slow combustion fireplace.

The four, strikingly curved, double sleeping pods are raised off the ground on legs, minimising their

PHOTO CREDITS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JASPER DA SEYMOUR, ST HELENS MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS; CAROLYN BEASLEY; JASPER DA SEYMOUR, ST HELENS MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS

PHOTO CREDITS: BLUE DERBY PODS RIDE



◀ **The Bay of Fires**
Trail finishes on the famous coastline at Swimcart Beach, not far from the town of St Helens.

The idea of mountain-bike tourism is catching on throughout Tasmania.

footprint. During construction, most vegetation on the 1ha site was preserved, with the buildings slotted in among existing trees. Branches were held back with ratchet straps and later released for an instant effect of being cradled in the trees. From inside my pod, a huge window immerses me in branches dripping with lichens. A jumbo bed adjoins the glass and, before sleeping, I soak up the starry sky from my pillow.

Tara explains that even the architecture of the pods was designed to promote conscious living and a reconsideration of the status quo. “Why do buildings need to be square?” Tara asks, and I realise she’s a person like many in Derby, who prefers to think quite outside the box.


The idea of mountain-bike tourism is catching on throughout Tasmania. An hour from Hobart in the Derwent Valley, the privately owned Maydena Bike Park opened in 2018. This gravity-based park with 62 trails built across an 820m-vertical rise has trails that run from green to double-black and pro levels.

Near Derby, the newest kid on the mountain-biking block is the east coast town of St Helens, where late last year, the local Break O’Day Council opened the first stages of 110km of trails including 10 stacked loop trails on the edge of town. The crowning glory is the 42km Bay of Fires Trail, which links to the Blue Derby Trail system. This epic ride starts on the subalpine plateau of Blue Tier and descends through myrtle rainforest and open woodland, emerging at Swimcart Beach on the famous Bay of Fires coast.

The council hopes mountain biking will attract 26,000 extra visitors a year and reports that more than \$15 million in investment has occurred in St Helens before the trails have even opened. The Big4 St Helens Holiday Park has installed a bunkhouse for travellers seeking budget share accommodation, with a communal camp kitchen and bike wash facilities. A new NRMA St Helens Waterfront Holiday Park has also been built and two major accommodation facilities are being upgraded. A major bike retailer has opened a shop, with Vertigo MTB from Derby soon also opening a branch.

BACK IN DOWNTOWN Derby, I’m pedalling along the path by the gurgling Ringarooma River, marvelling at how much a town can change. I think of the devastation that occurred right here in 1929, when the torrent from the Briseis Dam was so powerful it reversed this river, forcing it uphill for 10km.

The flooded mine itself has become Lake Derby and today families on bikes cross a suspension bridge to potter around on beginner trails. And, if mayor Greg Howard gets his way, the mine’s green cliff top will one day be the starting point for a zipline.

At the asphalt pump track local kids are zooming around and practising jumps as groups of parents take turns riding the Blue Derby Trails. I hold my breath as a two-year-old girl on a balance bike flies down the face of a jump, and my heart is in my mouth as she lands it, laughing. She’s obviously done this before, and, growing up in Derby, she now has mountain biking in her blood. Her generation can look forward to a sustainable future, riding high on the mountain-biking boom. 

▶ **TO WATCH A VIDEO** of the Blue Derby Pods Ride see australiangeographic.com.au/155