

FEEL THE FLOW

In the forests of northeast Tasmania, mountain biking is reviving urbanites and saving a struggling town, writes

Carolyn Beasley

Flow is this mental state where you jump on a bike and all your troubles go away," says Steve Howell, my guide. "It's a really focused Zen spot and it happens when you're challenging yourself, testing your skills. By the end of this trip, I hope you're starting to find it."

I'm in Derby, in northeast Tasmania, on a three-day mountain-biking adventure. Guide Steve and his wife Tara own the Blue Derby Pods Ride, an all-inclusive luxury experience that makes it possible for anyone, even novices like me, to feel the thrill of mountain biking, and hopefully, the Flow.

Our day started in Launceston, where we were collected by Steve and assistant guide Des Tarlington for the hour-and-a-half drive. The quaint town of Derby nestles in a mountainous valley, moulded by the town's tin-mining history. The tracks are known as the Blue Derby Trails and were designed by Glen Jacobs of World



Trails. Since officially opening in 2015, Derby has rapidly become a mountain-biking Mecca.

Last year, the elite Enduro World Series returned to Blue Derby for the second time in three years, the only place in Australia to have hosted a leg of this event. Before setting out, Steve provides a Mountain Biking 101 lesson, including the basics of riding postures. Cycling across a suspension bridge, we circumnavigate an easy trail through tree ferns around pretty Lake Derby. The trails are graded like ski slopes, with green runs being the easiest, blue for intermediate and black for the advanced riders.

We hit the forest on the green trail called Axehead, up the Cascade River valley, stopping at Tasty Trout Falls, where tannin-stained water tumbles through ferns, boulders and pools. On a wide granite shelf in a riverbed, Steve and Des produce the first of many gourmet, locally sourced meals, and we picnic on substantial salads, organic peanut butter balls and coffee from a portable press, all served without a skerrick of disposable plastic.

Steve directs us to an unmarked track, and hidden in the forest is our home for the next two nights. Accessed via boardwalks, four double



The Derby biking trails, and pictured below, The Hub dining room. Photos / Blue Derby Pods Ride

sleeping pods remind me of timber-clad space ships. They are curvaceous, and slim supporting legs let them float among the trees.

The pods operate off the grid, with electricity generated entirely by solar panels. The bathrooms offer odour-free composting toilets and piping hot showers from rainwater tanks, with a view of a mighty white gum.

The Hub is our dining and lounging area, a masterpiece of understated timber and glass, where a cosy fireplace and a deck with inviting bean bags are perfect for a post-ride beer from Little Rivers Brewing Co. An open kitchen allows us to chat with Steve and Des as they prepare hearty and healthy meals, such as local lamb

idea of conscious living, an ethos that involves questioning everything, including buildings. "Why do houses need to be square?" she asks.

During construction, most vegetation was preserved, with branches held out of the way with ratchet straps and later released. Even boulders were cordoned off, so as not to damage mosses and lichens.

The town of Derby has needed to think differently. From the trails, you cannot miss its tin-mining history, one trail following an old mining tunnel right through a mountain. Tin mining ceased here in 1948 and while forestry activities continue, they are vastly reduced. With employment drying up, anecdotes abound about houses that were almost given away as residents left the town. To discover more history, I visit the Derby Schoolhouse Museum.

Virginia Valentino, the museum's co-ordinator, explains the mountain biking has reinvigorated Derby. "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."

The energy arrives in the form of around 40,000 visitors a year, and the main street today is filled with ventures cashing in. Sitting outside a charming cafe, I see car after car roll into town sporting flash bikes on the roof. Bike hire, bike washes and bike transport all flourish alongside gourmet pizza and renovated accommodation cottages. In front of the shops, a bike-hanging rail supports bikes by their seats, like horses of the old Wild West, tethered at a saloon.

Nature has benefited from mountain biking too, with some sections of the forest bordering the Blue Derby Trails now protected. This is welcome news for Tasmania's unique and rare species such as the spotted-tailed quoll, eastern barred bandicoot and the Tasmanian devil. A favourite nature immersion for many riders is the Blue Tier trail, a grand descent to Welborough through ancient myrtle and towering tree ferns, starting from a lichen-covered sub-alpine plateau.

Last November the Bay of Fires Trail was opened, a 42km track linking Blue Tier to the coastal town of St Helens and a new network of trails. Back on Blue Derby, I follow Steve and Des, puffing up the intermediate Long Shadows trail through tall blackwood and white gum forests.

Finally, it's time for descent, and I coast through the granite boulders and open forest switchbacks of Flickety Sticks. Suddenly, I realise I'm getting it, as banking around the berms becomes more natural, and utterly exhilarating.

Focused in the moment, I have no thoughts of the world outside this forest. I grin as I pedal on, rolling with the Flow.



CHECKLIST

A three-day experience with Blue Derby Pods Ride starts at \$1825, and includes all equipment, two leaders, meals and drinks, accommodation, and transfers from Launceston.

bluederbypodsride.com.au

GETTING THERE

Jetstar, Qantas and Virgin all fly from Auckland to Hobart, via Sydney or Melbourne.

ragout with herb and quinoa salad and choc-chip fermented butter cookies with coconut icecream for dessert.

Being off-grid does not equate to hardship, and feeling stylishly cradled in nature is indeed luxurious. In the bedrooms, the oversized bed stretches the width of a large window, and warm air is ducted in from the woodstove. From my pillow, I marvel at the bright night sky before physical fatigue and generous Tasmanian hospitality have me snoring until morning.

The next day, Tara explains the pods are designed to nestle into the landscape. "We went to the architects with a rounded model made from a cereal box and toothpicks for legs," she laughs. Tara and Steve are driven by the