

FEATURE

GOURMET TRAILS

The rise of the foodie biker

BY RICHARD CORNISH

ROLLING down the hill on my mountain bike on the old railway line, the air is full of scents of the countryside. Eucalyptus, fresh rain on stone, sweet waves of wild honeysuckle. It has been many years since I rode the 39-kilometre Lilydale to Warburton rail trail that has been billed Australia's most popular two-wheel weekend adventure. Back in the pre-kid days seven years ago, we would ride the byroads, exploring the countryside, meandering along river and streams, long roads and short, river flats and hills. We were paid-up townies with a mission to find the best coffee and the choicest bakery. We had cash to splash, but dressed in regulation bike gear we were often shown short shrift. Once, buying a bag of cherries from a roadside farmer, his few snide comments about men in tight shorts made it clear that we were not welcome. As foodies on wheels, perhaps we were before our time.

Times have changed. There is money to be made from the touring cyclists — a truth that business and government can no longer ignore. Foodie cyclists are well-educated, well-to-do, well-connected and they also get hungry. They will pay for fine food and wine and for good coffee — and they want to be treated with respect. These bike riders are not the more conspicuous packs of MAMILs — Middle-Aged Men In Lycra — who whoosh along Beach Road but are more likely to be professional women, couples with kids and groups of young professionals. Their two-wheel playground is the 2800 kilometres of bike paths and trails in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. "They are after great escapes," says Mike Sabey, publisher of *Bike Paths and Rail Trails*, a guide for lifestyle bike riders.

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MIKE SABEY

"People want the safety of bike paths and trails. They want the serenity of riding along watercourses, whether it be riding around the bay or along the Yarra and creeks that intersect Melbourne," he says. "They don't want to ride the roads. They want secluded tree-lined escapes. And they want decent food and coffee at the end of the ride." This is becoming easier to find but not everywhere.

"There has been an explosion of bike riders in parts of Victoria," says Bicycle Victoria's Garry Brennan. "And it has been rapid. In some regions businesses have woken up to providing services to riders. But the change is in no way uniform. Society takes time to adapt because change, such as a sudden increase of bike riders in a country town, can be scary."

The region to first embrace this group has been north-eastern Victoria. A bike trail built on old railway lines from Wangaratta to Beechworth, and continuing to Bright, was initiated in 1997. Other trails in the area now connect Rutherglen to Wagunyah, Wodonga to Tallangatta. A 2009 La Trobe University survey, taken on the trail during the Easter long weekend, shows that the average rider spends about \$244 a day on food, transport and accommodation.

A long weekend can see nearly 10,000 riders taking to the track, pumping more than \$2 million into the local economy.

Next month Tourism Victoria will begin spruiking the region's bike infrastructure nationally and to the rest of the world as a ride-and-eat destination. This is based on the quality of the 50 cellar doors, cafes, restaurants, farm gate businesses and specialty food stores either on the trail or a short ride from it. The three local municipalities the trail traverses have joined forces to fund a full-time cycling tourism officer. Even V/Line has acknowledged the growing demand for bikes on trains.

In central Victoria, the trail from Bendigo to Axedale is being extended to the wine-making town of Heathcote, with plans to link it to the East Kilmore railway station. The Upper Goulbourn Valley is also set to become a prime bike destination with construction started on a 134-kilometre trail from Tallarook to Mansfield via Bonnie Doon.

"Food is as much a part of touring as the actual riding itself," says Steve Collins from Milawa Tours. Six months ago he and his wife Kerri branched out and developed a cycle touring arm to their business. "Bike touring is going to be huge and I didn't want to be five years down the track wondering why I didn't get in earlier," he says. The Collinses have spent well over \$100,000 on a mini bus, bike trailers and advertising overseas. They plan to buy another bus shortly. The clientele they are anticipating are middle-aged riders and younger families. "They want to see the country at a comfortable pace," Collins says.

Other businesses committing to bike-touring are Beechworth operators Bridge Road Brewers, Beechworth Larder and Penny-weight Wines, which have bought bikes with

Picture: Simon Schluter; styling: Emily Ward; hair and makeup: Julie Provis; model: Emily from Giant; hat by Watson Michel and lace shirt by Anne Fontaine, both from Christine; Willow pleated skirt; bike shoes from Melbourne Bicycle Centre; Pranam; bicycle by Papillonaire.

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