

GLOUCESTER TO BEROWRA – 20 to 28 March 2004 A Novice in Adventure-Land – Bruce Hackett

It was a big decision for me to join the 2004 RTA Big Ride. I had thought about it in 2003 when the ride was from Warragamba to Cootamundra, and still doubted whether I had the fortitude and stamina to cycle 500 kilometres in nine days. As things turned out, the cycling was the easy part.

Having booked into the ride, I was fortunate in that Ray and Geoff offered the loan of a tent and sleeping mat, and on the Pleasant Hills trip Ray gave me a tent pitching demonstration. I practised at home and found I'd forgotten most of Ray's instructions, but eventually did get the tent to look like a "home away from home".

Our hired bus called for me punctually at 1700 hours on Friday afternoon, and we set off in high spirits. After a stop at Cowra for dinner and to collect some more adventurers, we arrived at the Bathurst campsite at about 2200. Here I discovered that tent pitching in the dark is a whole new ballgame. But with Gordon's help I eventually got settled, and in spite of the traffic noise from the nearby highway and the general anticipation of what was to come, did manage to sleep a little.

Next morning we were away by 0800 for a picturesque run to Gloucester via Bell's Line of Road and the Newcastle Freeway. After unloading our bikes and collecting our pink wristbands and ID cards, I actually succeeded in selecting my spot and "pitching" my tent all by myself. That evening, and most evenings, there was a live band and party in the licensed Brasserie and next morning after a breakfast at 0600 we climbed on our bikes for the 72-kilometre ride to Tuncurry. That night there was some rain (125 millimetres) but not enough to dampen the spirits of 1000 cyclists who cheerfully set off over the Wallis Bridge and along the Lakes way to Bulahdelah, trusting in our escort of police motor cyclists and St John Ambulance vehicles to look after us. But it kept on raining, and in a situation which one rider later compared to the *Titanic*, the event was halted under police direction and the whole 1000 cyclists and their bikes were bussed and trucked into Bulahdelah (women and children first) where the scheduled campsite was completely flooded. However the Bulahdelah people rallied, the local sawmill stopped work for two days to allow their premises to be used as a kitchen and Brasserie, and in what was nothing less than an amazing feat of logistics, indoor accommodation was found in halls, garages, churches and private homes for all 1000 cyclists and support staff for two nights and an unscheduled rest day. Most of our group and some others were housed in the Old Courthouse, an imposing building which is now the town's museum. The place could have been haunted, but if it was, only the benevolent ghosts were abroad on the nights we were there.

On Wednesday the weather cleared and we were bussed and trucked to Raymond Terrace for the bike ride to Newcastle the same day and another (scheduled) rest day. After these experiences the rest of the trip proved something of an anti-climax, but the ride out of Newcastle along the Fernleigh Cycle Track and through the Munmorah Reserve to Bateau Bay was relaxing and enjoyable. Saturday was filled with nostalgia for me as the ride was around Tuggerah Lake and Kanwal where I used to holiday as a boy. Then it was all virgin bush, but now it is completely built out, and scarcely recognizable. The infamous "Dog Trap Road" lived up to its reputation, but eventually we reached our campsite at Mt Penang, appropriately once a home for delinquent boys, but now parkland with an eight million dollar water garden. On Sunday the ride from Mooney Mooney Ridge along the old Pacific Highway and down over the old Hawkesbury River Bridge was an exhilarating finale to an exciting and challenging holiday.

Next year the ride is from Kosciusko to Sydney. Details are as yet unavailable, but it is pretty certain that I'll be lining up. At least this time I'll know how to pitch a tent.