



Clockwise from opposite Page: A flowery trail, Derby.

Emma Martin enjoying Kingswall descent, Derby.

The perfect set up from Drive Ride Explore, Top of the Blue Tier.



SMILES & TIERS

LONG-TIME CONTRIBUTOR HUW KINGSTON REFLECTS ON TWO DECADES OF MBA WITH ONE FINAL TRIP.

WORDS AND PICS: HUW KINGSTON

'Wipe that smirk off your face Mr Niven.' This was not the first time I'd spoken such words to Jeff, when we pulled up for a breather. The same to Emma. The same to Craig. Grins as wide as Bass Strait stretched across their faces, this time as we plummeted down toward the Bay of Fires on Tasmania's east coast. Perfectly crafted berms shimmied us this way and that, dropper posts keeping us low.

The Bay of Fires ride was our link to sea level. 42 kilometres of trail, from the near 900 metre top of the Blue Tier, it dropped us first through rainforest, similar in style to the goodness (greatness?) we had ridden in Derby the previous days. Then the landscape changed:

the soils more granular, the forest taller, more open. Climbs weaved their way through massive granite boulders, descents played hide and seek in the same way.

The Bay of Fires Trail is an honest ride, with enough climbing to wipe the smile off some rider's faces (but only for a little way). I was a little alarmed to read, in the first paragraph of the official trail description, the suggestion that as the trail has some climbing, an e-bike is recommended. Those of you who have read my ramblings in these pages for nearly two decades or entered one of the events I used to organise for just as long, will know I love a good climb, am not shy of a little effort.

Mountain Biking has certainly changed in these decades. In the early years of those events (who remembers The Polaris Challenge?) we used to get excited when we found a piece of 'singletrack', more often than not built by wombats or trailbikes, to incorporate in the course. I once even travelled to the Okavango Delta in southern Africa on the promise of riding singletrack built by elephants. The elephants delivered both trail and huge piles of dung over it. Obstacles that even the most ardent of bunny hoppers struggled to clear.

Then trail fairies started raking lines and hand-building the odd berm or two. Geez, we

would travel great distances to ride a piece of trail that had half a dozen linking berms and rave about the 'flow'.

Now of course we are spoiled and the latest place of pilgrimage is St Helens, a little town sitting just below the Bay of Fires, a town canonised by the latest work of World Trails; 70km of trails adding to their fine efforts on the Bay of Fires trail and the Blue Derby Trails. It's perhaps a miracle these trails include climbs that hardly hurt to climb. They even call them climbing flow trails.

St Helens sits in Break O'Day Council area, which must surely be one of the happiest of shire names. It gives you a good feeling just to

Below: Endless Smiles. Craig Stonestreet & Jeff Niven about to ride through the Derby Tunnel.

Bottom: Craig Stonestreet loving it on the Bay of Fires Trail.

Opposite Page: On the Bay of Fires Trail down near the coast.



see the sign, and certainly contrasts mightily with Bland Shire in western NSW. The town is right on the coast, around the huge inlet of St Helens Bay, and is renowned as the sunniest and warmest spot in Tassie.

Long popular as a coastal holiday destination, for surfing and fishing, the locals viewed with interest the total redevelopment of the little town of Derby, an hour's drive away in neighbouring Dorset Shire. A redevelopment completely driven by mountain biking. The story of Derby has been well told these past five years in these pages and elsewhere.

'Mountain Bike Trails Coordinator - Break O'Day Council, Tasmania.' I remember seeing the advert some four years ago. The job was unique in that it was the first full time position any council in Australia had offered that was 100% focused on mountain biking. Ben Pettman, a keen mountain biker with no trailbuilding experience, got the guernsey on the strength of vast project management experience in his hometown of Adelaide. The St Helens MTB Trails were, like any building

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project, all about negotiations with land managers, budgets, flora and fauna studies, contracts and more.

The first trails opened in late November 2019; The Bay of Fires Trail along with the first of a stacked loop network from the new trailhead on Flagstaff Hill. This is 7 kilometres from town but linked to it by the easy Town Trail.

2020 was, for St Helens as with the world, a weird year. Riders came before Covid came and Tasmania closed its borders. The trails, after the initial fanfare, went quiet. Quiet apart from the machinery as the network continued to be built. Then, after the early lockdown in April/May, Tasmanians travelled, and travelled in droves.

'We were so busy and so many mountain bikers came.' Meredith, manager of the brand new NRMA St Helens Waterfront Holiday Park, told me. In a leap of faith shown by many businesses in the town, the park included in the build a dedicated MTB accommodation area with bike wash, storage and more.

In a third attempt to get there in 2020, I finally rode the goodness of St Helens in

PLACES TO STAY, PLACES TO EAT, PLACES TO DRINK

Both Derby and St Helens have a wide choice of accommodation, much of which comes with bike friendly aspects such as washing areas, tools and secure storage. Many of the old houses in Derby have been converted into accommodation and new places built.

En route to Derby don't forget to call in at Little Rivers Brewery (littlerivers.com.au) for fine ales and pizza and a good yarn with some locals and to stock up the fridge. In Derby itself coffee and brekkie goes well at Two Doors Down café, while the Dorset Hotel and The Hub are great choices for a meal.

As the biggest town on the east coast, St Helens has loads of options for a good bite or a good coffee. No brewery yet.....

Bike Hire & Bike Shops

In Derby Vertigo MTB and Evolution Biking (www.ebiketasmia.com.au) both have hire fleets as well as bike gear and mechanic services. In St Helens there is a Giant Bike store (giantshelens.com) and Vertigo MTB (vertigomt.com.au) which have hire and sales.

December. It was good timing, with the last of the trails opening only weeks before. We met Ben at the very flash new trailhead early on a warm December morning.

The previous day we got a taste for the tracks with some shuttle runs from the top of Loila Tiers, provided by Gravity Isle. Old Salty Dog, Icarus, Shucka and the best name and perhaps best trail of all; Send Helens. They all start off a bit shaly and shakily on the top, looser, layer of the mountain but soon settle down into firm packed fun all the way to the Trailhead.

Ben was keen to show us the newly opened 27km Dreaming Pools ride, the biggest loop of the network and one that, with the addition of some trails back to the trailhead and the run into town, added up to a good 40km spin.

Jaws were soon aching again on an intermediate trail that kept giving to those of us who had come to worship at the feet of St Helen. A third of the way in, an insanely pleasurable descent brought us to the Dreaming Pools. There could be no other option than a baptism in the



Top: End of the Bay of Fires trail on Swimcart Beach.

Middle: Coastal rocks near St Helens

Bottom: Drive Ride Explore ute down by the beach, St Helens.

Opposite Page: Riding the plank at St Helens and the Tap & Donate scheme to help maintain the St Helens trails

crystal-clear water, beneath a little waterfall. Ben told us that later in summer, as the creek dries up, the pools are often not quite so inviting but hey, timing is everything.

The trail twisted and turned its way on down the creek, further pools offering cool dips for others who might ride that way. A stiffish climb on a fire trail felt downright odd after all that singletrack but we were soon back into it, rising to and falling through little side valleys. A long, final, singletrack climb was so tight that at one point the five of us were vertically above each other, each on a separate run of trail, separated by no more than 10 metres of vertical.

Our final reward was to leave one dream behind and, by way of another, descend Wedged In and Rock Lobster to the Trailhead. 'What did you think?' asked Ben. What a silly question.

Perfectly timed for lunch, we rode along Town Trail and then, with salt in our hair and now in the air, along the multi-use foreshore trail that takes riders straight into town. The Lifebuoy Café threw us the rescue we needed. Most excellent food and devilishly good milkshakes that could not be bettered on either side of the Tasman.

While on the important topic of food and drink, The Social is the place to be from Wednesday to Saturday for street food and craft beers.



"The trail twisted and turned its way on down the creek, further pools offering cool dips for others who might ride that way."

You know all about Derby don't you? You have probably ridden there, maybe even a few times. I may have been an early adopter at St Helens but only in late 2020 did I finally follow the masses to Derby. I felt like I knew the place well enough. The story of a down on its luck old mining town transformed by movement of dirt in another way. The epic run from the Blue Tier to Weldborough, the Derby trails - Dam Buster, Atlas, Krushka's, Roxanne, Flickety Sticks, Return to Sender, Kingswall. I'd heard the names and the praise. I'd planned trips to Derby only for those plans to be dashed on the rock of change.

It was so good to be there, better still to be in the hands of Jeff who had fallen under the Derby spell a couple of years ago and now spends a few weeks each year rotating those trails. It was a late but intense initiation for my weary bones but a most necessary and enjoyable one. It bucketed rain for the three nights, but the sun shone for the three days. The Blue Tier run to the Weldborough Hotel was sublime, both trail and pub. All those Derby trails delivered more of those smiles and, I'm happy to admit, an occasional look of terror.

Before breakfast early one morning, I rode alone around the mirror calm, black waters of Lake Derby and lazily climbed Wotcha Upta to World Trail View. The small town stretched out below with buildings old and new. There

was Tin Mountain, our very modern and bike friendly accommodation, the Dorset Hotel, the home of Vertigo, the first MTB business in town, of café's, bike shuttle businesses and more. I thought of what it would have looked like 100 years ago, even 5 years ago.

There are not many places in the world so utterly transformed by the goodness of mountain biking. When, each year, we did take that Polaris Challenge event to little towns and villages across NSW we transformed them for a weekend, and they pleaded for us to return. Regions across Australia are now more than awake to the regenerative power of the bike; both in health and economic terms. Events have driven much of this for a long time and are still important, but destination development is our current phase.

With the addition of the St Helens trails to the Derby offerings, the north east of Tasmania is very much leading the charge. I'm looking forward to being back. The Dragon Trail three-day race rides many of these trails in March. Should I?

This magazine has well documented our sport for the past 18 years, and it has been an honour to be a contributor from very first issue in 2002. This may be the last issue of Mountain Biking Australia but there is no doubt mountain biking in Australia has a solid future.

'Stop smirking I said!' 🙄

GENERAL INFO

For general information on the trails and all things related check out sthelensmtbtrails.com.au and www.ridebluederby.com.au.

Getting There & Around

The nearest airport to Derby and St Helens is Launceston with regular direct or connecting flights from most mainland capitals.

There are bus services and shuttle pick ups to/from both places. If you are planning on hiring a vehicle then Drive Ride Explore (driverideexplore.com.au) is highly recommended. This enthusiastic small business have a small fleet of 4WD utes fitted with 4 bike racks and have thought of everything with it except a cold 6 pack (yet!). You can also drop off in Hobart if you are touring further afield.

If you need shuttle services in Derby, whether to ease the climbing locally or to ride the Blue Tier or Bay of Fires trails, then Vertigo (vertigomt.com.au), Up Down Around (updownaround.com.au), MAD MTB (madmtb.com.au) can all help.

For the St Helens Trails, Gravity Isle (gravityisle.com) will get you around and also have accommodation and other tour options around Tasmania. Vertigo MTB is in St Helens too with shop and shuttles.