

Mutiny on The Bike Show

Not your typical mountain bike event, that's for sure... **Huw Kingston** took some time out from the mainland bustle to ride the inaugural Tour de Norfolk.

How could I miss a race where the first stage was 'The Kingston Critrium?' Just 12 of us lined up on the start line. On one side the crumbling walls of the old penal colony, on the other the ocean crashing onto rocks. Stage one, a fast paced 20 laps around the historical buildings; part on blacktop, part on dirt totalling 30km. Whilst the world was focusing on a little bike race in France, an exclusive gathering were battling it out in the Tour de Norfolk; the first bike event to be held on Norfolk Island, an Australian Territory some 1,600km east of Sydney and 1,100km north of Auckland.

Norfolk Island was discovered in 1774 by that busy bloke, Captain Cook, who named it after The Duchess of Norfolk. That link took me back into history.

Too many decades ago, as 'Head Boy' at school (I peaked early), I got to dine with the Duke of Norfolk wearing the first and last suit I ever owned! The island was first settled as a penal colony and that awful period haunts even today in the historical precinct of Kingston. But Norfolk Island is probably best known as the place where the Bounty mutineers finally settled in 1856, years after the penal colony was abandoned.

Now the 5km by 8km island is home to around 1,600 people, with its own parliament and an economy reliant on tourism. Ringed by cliffs split occasionally by beautiful beaches, the island rises to 321-metres and there's not much flat country. It's up or down on the 70km or so of roads and tracks that crisscross the lush, green landscape. Much of the island is farmland with the Norfolk Island National Park forming a large forested area. Sensible laws (or lack of them) mean things like seatbelts and bike helmets are not mandatory; a refreshing change from the legislation loving mainland Australia. And cows have right of way on the roads!

The fact that Norfolk was putting on a MTB race highlights the increasing profile of mountain biking and the belief in it as a driver for tourism. Hadyn Bell, a former NZ junior track racing

champion and operator of a mechanical repair workshop on the island, was the enthusiast driving the event, and was well supported by tourism operators on the island. From the moment we bumped down onto the airstrip, the riders from Australia were given the warmest of welcomes. Flight schedules meant we were to spend a week on the island, even though the actual event was over in two days. This gave plenty of opportunity to ride and explore. A loop of 45km or more can be done around Norfolk on rough sealed roads and dirt tracks. Great cafés and restaurants abound. Driving technique on Norfolk features having one finger permanently going up and down atop the steering wheel in friendly acknowledgement of all oncoming cars, bikes and pedestrians whether known or unknown. The incidence of index finger RSI on the island must be huge!

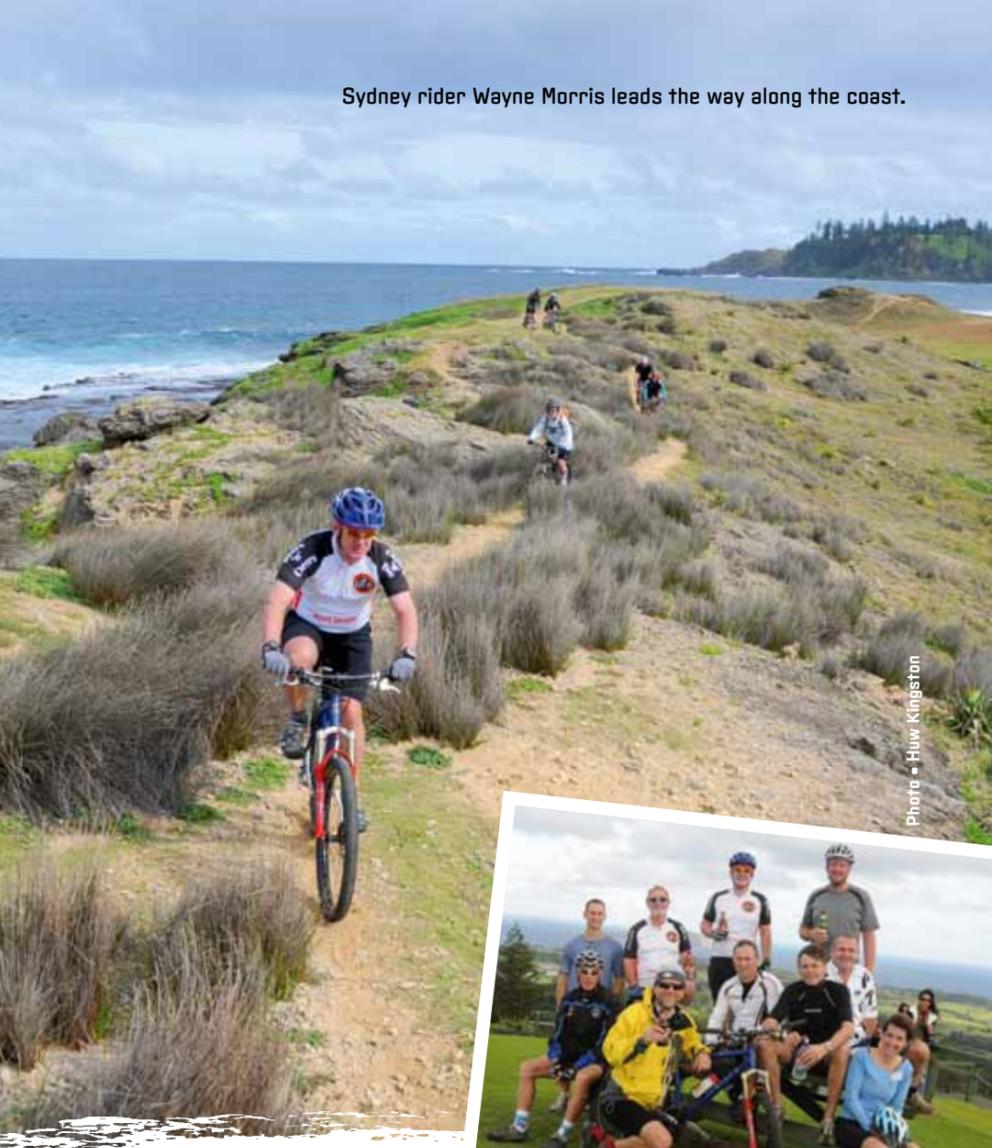
A great bunch of enthusiastic locals raced some or all of the four stages. Richard Cribb, a super fit plumber riding an ancient and crappy old Diamond Back, showed that what you ride is immaterial. Richard was the strongest rider but had to miss Stage Two with his four-year-old's birthday party rightly taking priority. Malcolm Rundell interrupted his squash training for the Commonwealth Games, to hammer a few stages. And it was great

to have some of the island teenagers in the mix.

Stage Two was the Surf to Summit, an 8km, 300 metre vertical grind to the top of the island. The final summit climb in the National Park was horrendously steep but the top of Mt Pitt rewarded with 360 degree views right around the island and across to the neighbouring, uninhabited Phillip Island. Murray Prestney, from Brisbane took out the stage win; a win celebrated by all riders with a cleansing ale on the summit.

The TV in the corner of the cabin had SBS doing a feature on the catering for TDF riders; how team chefs took over hotel kitchens or trucks were converted into full commercial kitchens, catering to the dietary whims of the world's leading riders. Meanwhile, the international contingent of the TDN, all four of us, tucked into a fine bowl of pasta prepared by Diane, Murray's wife. Murray added a few more spots to his King of the Mountain jersey as he slurped on the tomato sauce.

Stage Three was originally to have taken place on the network of trails in the National Park forest zone, a mix of native Norfolk pine and introduced eucalypt plantation. This was going to be the main 'real' mountain bike stage. Sadly however, due to late lodgement of the permit application, the stage had to be



Sydney rider Wayne Morris leads the way along the coast.

Photo = Huw Kingston



Photo = Huw Kingston

Celebrating the end of Stage 2 up on Mount Pitt

changed. The NP on Norfolk is managed by the Commonwealth, a strange anomaly, and the bureaucrats in Canberra needed more time to consider the application. This was a great pity as the forest trails have a lot of potential for riding. The stage was moved to Cockpit on the north side of the island for a few loops featuring a long dirt climb before a super fast, rough descent back to do it four more times. Richard was back, fuelled by fairy bread, and took out the stage.

The final 17km stage was a road based figure of eight starting and finishing on the main street of Burnt Pine, the commercial centre of the island. We headed south around the airport, passing under some huge fig trees and above the cliffs; back into town to loop north for a fast finish into town. Murray burnt me off easily enough, giving me my third bridesmaid's position in a row.

The presentation dinner had everything. Medals, certificates, shirts, speeches, great food and wine, local crafts as prizes, guests of honour, thankyou's. It seemed everyone got something and the spirit of the night reflected that of the week. I'd gone knowing one other rider and left knowing the whole field, as well as a good chunk of the population of this friendly island. Every event, large or small, easy or tough, has its beauties. In

this case, the Tour De Norfolk was just like a small group of mates in a stunning location having a week of fun rides and races.

There is much potential on the island for the 2011 event; to use a lot more of the tracks and trails across the island including of course, the national park trails. Some great mountain bike routes can be put together by linking parks, reserves and farms along with the winding island roads. Already plans are afoot for this to happen. The Norfolk Island Government are very keen as are the local businesses. It's certainly a great location for a family holiday combined with some riding and racing. This year's flight scheduling did not allow for New Zealand riders to come over for the event but this will change in 2011. Keep your eyes on www.tourdenorfolkisland.nf and head over for some biking bounty. 

Huw Kingston would like to thank Norfolk Air, Governors Lodge and The Travel Centre for making the visit possible.