



RIDE

In Tasmania's north-east, Alexis Buxton-Collins combines the region's world-class drawcards

of epic mountain biking, hearty food and fine wines.

DINE

OR

Photography by Adam Gibson



“In 2014, Derby was a ghost town,” says Steve Howell. “Peak hour was when the publican crossed the road with her sheep and you could only get coffee a few days a week.” Less than a decade later, the main street has three busy cafés slinging alt milk lattes and I count dozens of cabins, cottages and camp sites along the banks of the tranquil Ringarooma River on the land of the Pyemairrener peoples.

This former tin mining town in north-east Tasmania is an unlikely spot for a revolution but the Specialized Stumpjumper mountain bike that Howell, owner of Blue Derby Pods Ride ([bluederby.podsride.com.au](http://bluederby.podsride.com.au)), helps me pick out before the 90-minute drive from Launceston hints at the impetus for Derby’s revitalisation. Today, 100 kilometres of purpose-built trails wind through dense myrtle forest around the town and since the network opened in 2015, the world’s best mountain bikers have twice named this their favourite place to ride. Crucially for me, the trails cater to the hardcore and riders whose only experience is urban bike lanes.

The green, blue and black markers mirror the signs on a ski slope and for every double-diamond “Detonate” or “23 Stitches”, there’s a gentler option. Over four days,

the Blue Derby Pods Ride is my window into this ruggedly beautiful terrain.

**Listening to Howell talk about “flow” is like watching an old VB ad.** “Musicians can find it, artists, hikers, even someone reading a book by the fireplace – you can get it in a lot of ways,” he explains. “Flow is when you’re so lost in the moment that you look at your watch and wonder where the time went.” The key, he tells me, is to create an environment that balances comfort and challenge. It’s why I spend the first morning learning to trust my dual-suspension bike, which rolls smoothly over roots, rocks and puddles as long as I keep my nerve, before white-knuckling down a blue run.

When I return to the same trail on day two, I’m comfortable enough to notice the temperature drop as I plunge into the thick undergrowth and see gardens of mauve foxgloves and discarded mining equipment hidden in the ferns beside the trail. Instinctively I drop my seat and stand on my pedals in anticipation of each descent, Howell’s voice a calming presence that alerts me to each upcoming challenge as he follows a few metres behind. As my grip on the handlebars relaxes so does my mind. For a brief

**Dense forest surrounds the 100 kilometres of Derby trails (above); pod accommodation along the track (right)**



moment I give myself over to the ribbon of chocolate-coloured dirt that unspools ahead of me, less a trail than a river whose current propels me forward. This must be flow, I think, simultaneously excited that I've reached this transcendent state and frustrated that I've broken the spell by naming it.

**At its most extreme, mountain biking reminds me of skydiving.** My body seems to swell with every heartbeat as I greedily take in lungfuls of fresh air. But as I adjust to the sensory overload, scattered images begin to form. For 42 kilometres I've been following a trail that drops precipitously into wet forest rich with mountain ash, continues along looping switchbacks through dry open woodland and flattens out into fragrant coastal scrub filled with tea tree and black peppermint gum.

When I emerge at the coast I'm both mentally and physically exhausted but immensely satisfied. The rest of my group (we are five riders) are already sitting on a beach of white sand when I arrive and a glass of bubbly is pressed into my hand. "When I'm happy, songs just come into my head," says Karen, a remarkably energetic 58-year-old who learnt to mountain bike in her forties. "Today it was *Free Fallin'* by Tom Petty."

**"The builders thought we were crazy when we asked them not to step on any rocks,"** says Howell as he shows me around our home base. But that attention to detail is typical of "the first and only five-star mountain biking experience in Australia". Mossy rock gardens out the front of the four pods make them look like they've been in place for decades and because the nearby trees were strapped back rather than cut down during construction, they've sprung back to envelop the structures. Solar panels provide most of the power, while waterless composting toilets ensure there's enough rainwater for a hot shower when we roll up at the end of each day. Howell and his partner, Tara, have even teamed up with Greening Australia to provide carbon offsets for all trips.

Up at the communal hub, I warm myself by the double glass-fronted fireplace and grab a Little Rivers Dark Lager from the help-yourself bar fridge. Walking through a cupboard door I find a hidden reading nook beside a picture window and



Local seafood is served for lunch on the Bay of Fires trail ride (opposite); a suite at the Stillwater Seven hotel in Launceston (above)



watch wallabies and superb fairy wrens jump through the underbrush.

The timber-filled communal area is a place to refuel for the next challenge. At each meal, cultured sea salt butter and salt dug from a local mine set the scene for hearty feasts that lean heavily on local produce. But it's the feast that awaits at the end of the Bay of Fires ride that lingers on the tastebuds: zingy flathead ceviche, buttered garlic scallops camouflaged in a bowl of baby Dutch cream potatoes and a rich salad laden with thick slices of octopus caught less than a kilometre away.

**My minibar has enough pinot, syrah and single malt to stock a small wine bar.** A balanced breakfast at the downstairs restaurant means ordering a cold-pressed green juice and a spicy sheep's whey vodka bloody Mary. Stillwater Seven (hotel.qantas.com.au/stillwaterseven) in Launceston is a place that encourages indulgence and after four days of riding, the property's Finer Things package is a chance to slow down and meet some of the best local food and drink producers. Within minutes

of finishing breakfast, I'm sipping basket-pressed pinot noir with a winemaker. "This reminds me of Northern Switzerland," says Matthias Utzinger as he gestures at the broad sweep of the Tamar River below his Utzinger winery in Legana. "You don't have the massive mountains but it's green and lush, with lots of hills." At our next stop, Turner Stillhouse in Grindewald, California expat Justin Turner makes American-style whisky from sweet yellow dent corn and spicy rye, and gin that adheres to a simple rule: "no lemon myrtle or peppercorn". Instead, he flavours his gin with rose petals, lashings of citrus and warming cardamom.

The fertile Tamar Valley is so blessed with small producers that I barely have time to put on my seatbelt between stops. After lunch, it's a short drive back to Havilah wine bar in Launceston for a zippy pet nat and crisp pods of fritti Romani. A dozen wines by the glass showcase small-scale producers and as I work my way through the list, I reflect on the varied states of flow that Steve Howell described. You can find it treading the boards or strumming some chords. Riding downhill flat chat or sipping pet nat. You can get it any old how. Matter of fact, I've got it now. ●