

# *RAILWAY* **REVIVAL**

*Whether you're a lycra-clad weekend warrior, a family with energetic kids or an older couple who likes to take things more slowly with a bit of electric assistance – there is something for everyone along the many rail trails that now traverse the landscape in every state of Australia.*

*Words* ALLISON WATT *Pics* ALLISON WATT AND SUPPLIED





**O**n any major Australia highway during the mass Easter exodus from the cities you'll see all manner of recreational vehicles heading off for a few days, and the vast majority will have one or more bikes affixed.

Almost 30 years since Australia's first rail trail - the Lilydale to Warburton Trail in Victoria's iconic Yarra Valley - first opened, rail trails have been popping up across the country, providing a new lease of life for disused railway corridors, recreation and leisure opportunities for cyclists, walkers, runners and horse riders, as well as economic and tourism boosts for communities along their routes.

Around the world, railways expanded in the 19th and 20th centuries to provide improved transport linkages and connectivity between industry and communities. As road transport improved, some rail corridors were considered surplus to need. These linear reserves lay dormant for a period until the rail trail concept was conceived and the first rail trail was developed in the USA in the mid-1960s.

As the name suggests, rail trails follow the routes of former railways. They cut through hills, over embankments and across gullies and creeks, sometimes through private property. Most have a gravel or dirt surface, some are sealed, and are great for walking, mountain, gravel and touring bikes and horses.

The Lilydale-Warburton Rail Trail opened in stages in the mid-1990s. The Victorian Government has identified a dozen corridors to be converted to rail trails, setting aside budget and establishing a coordination team.

### **Rail trails in Australia**

There are currently 144 rail trails open on the Rail Trails Australia website ([www.railtrails.org.au](http://www.railtrails.org.au)). The longest, at 161km, is the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail which stretches from Wulkuraka (Ipswich) to Yarraman.

Some trails are less than a kilometre long and will often incorporate an old rail bridge converted for use, or an old rail tunnel that has been opened to the public.

More than half of all trails are more than 10km in length and more than 20 exceed 50km from beginning to end. Many of these rail trails are in either in the process of being expanded in length or have potential to be longer.

As it was an early adopter, Victoria leads the way with the number of rail trails (47) followed by Queensland (24), Western

Australia (23) and South Australia (22) which are fast catching up.

For legislative reasons, NSW has lagged behind the rest of the country. The Rail Trails Australia website lists 35 trails in NSW, however only about 12 of those are open or partially open, with the remainder still in the planning and development stages with strong community support and involvement. For example, the proposed Northern Rivers Rail in the far north-east of the state will be 128km long when completed, will traverse a World Heritage region and pass through the centre of Byron Bay. The first 20km section is due to open in March this year.

### **Enormous effort**

Rail Trails Australia is a predominately volunteer, not-for-profit, organisation which advocates and works for the development and promotion of the rail trail network Australia-wide and supports and connects stakeholders involved in current or potential rail trails. It receives no government funding and rely on sales from products and donations from supporters to carry out its work.

Vice President of Rail Trails Australia, Steven Kaye, said planning and constructing a rail trail is no mean feat.

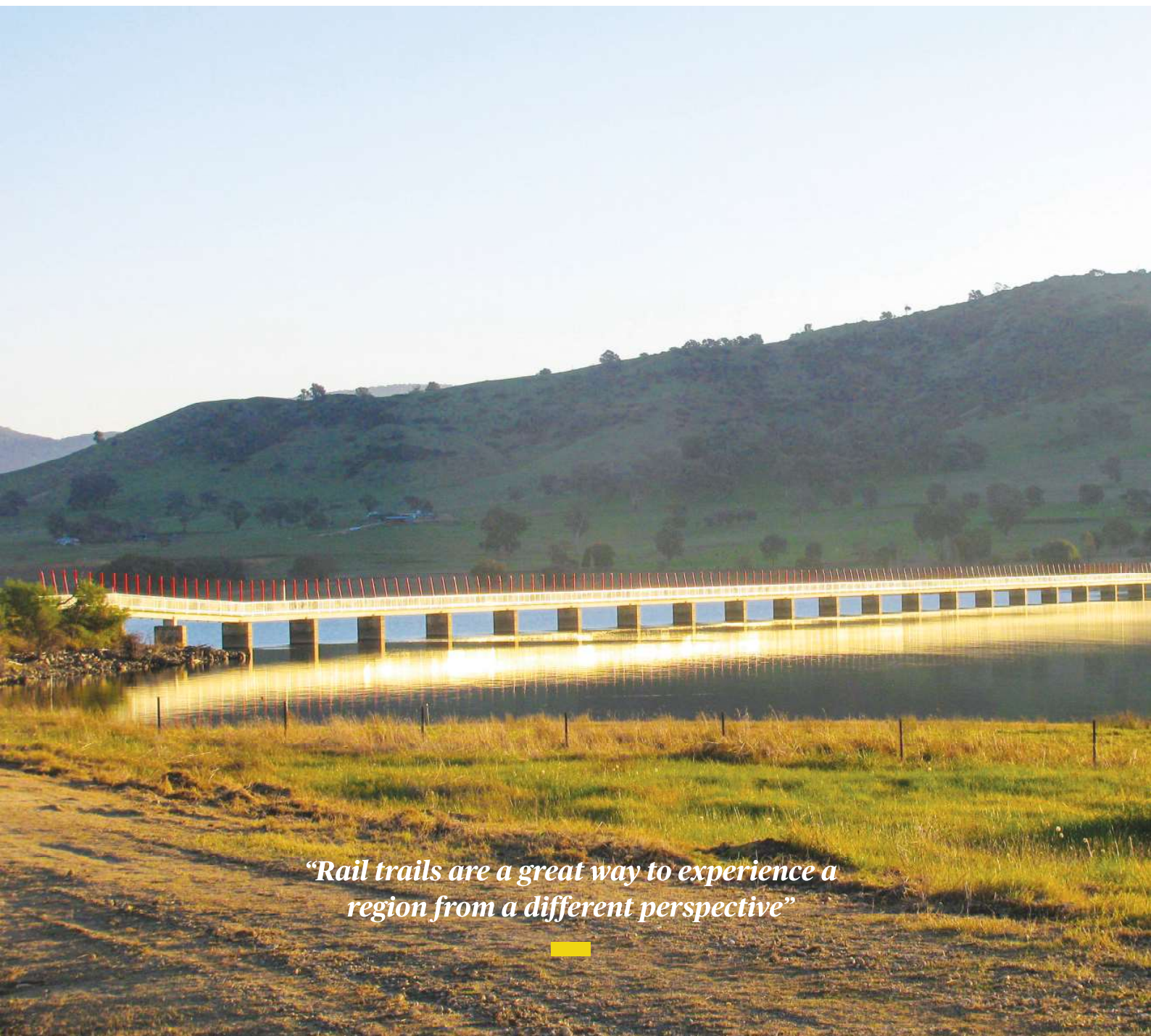
"Each new or expanded rail trail takes enormous effort by local advocates, assisted by Bicycle peak bodies and Rail Trails Australia, to lobby all three levels of government, convince adjoining landowners of trail positives and demonstrate the tourism, financial, health and liveability benefits of the rail trail," Steven said.

"Clearly the dollar cost of trail production is a substantial issue that needs to be offset. While the concept of rail trails is now generally known and accepted, the same difficulties persist as previously."



**ABOVE AND LEFT** The Sandy Creek bridge on the High Country Rail Trail, Vic (Image Rail Trails Australia); Bass Coast Rail Trail, Vic





*“Rail trails are a great way to experience a region from a different perspective”*

### **Economic boon**

While the investment in the infrastructure is costly, and the planning involving multiple councils, governments agencies and local community groups takes years, the research says that the economic and tourism benefits for towns and communities along rail trail routes is tangible.

Rail Trails Australia is acutely aware that being able to outline a trail's potential to improve local economies is critical to obtaining support. Studies have shown that rail trail visitors spend money in towns and communities along rail trails.

In 2021 Rail Trails Australia, in collaboration with Bicycle NSW and

Rail Trails for NSW, produced a video to document the local economic benefit of the Tumbarumba to Rosewood Trail in the foothills of the New South Wales Snowy Mountains. The video is available on the Rail Trails Australia website.

All business owners interviewed reported increased economic activity, not just on weekends or school holidays, but every day. In fact, nine new businesses have opened in the town as a direct result of the increased visitor numbers. Accommodation providers, restaurants, cafes, galleries and bookshops all benefitted from the spending of visitors who come to Tumbarumba specifically to ride the trail. They come to ride, they stay

longer and they come back, often with friends.

A State Government media release from 2019 reported that Victoria's High Country - home to the High Country and Murray to Mountains Rail Trails - had experienced a 40 per cent increase in cycling numbers to the region in the previous 12 months, contributing \$81m to the region's visitor economy.

### **Be prepared**

The health benefits of exercise such as cycling and walking are well documented. But for travellers, rail trails are a great way to experience a region from a different



**CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW** The opening of the Forest Creek bridge on the High Country Rail Trail; High Country Rail Trail at Old Tallangatta; Sandy Creek Bridge (Images Rail Trails Australia)



perspective, a perspective that you would never see out of the window of a car.

If you don't travel with bikes, there are plenty of local bike shops along rail trail corridors that hire conventional and electric bikes so visitors can explore the region. Electric bikes have been a terrific addition to cycling - enabling and encouraging thousands of folks to hit the trails and enjoy the fresh air and support local businesses and farm gates along the route.

If you're heading out for a ride or walk along a rail trail this Easter (or at any time) you'll need to be prepared.

Print a map from the website or pick one up from the local tourist information centre

so you know where you're going. Familiarise yourself with the distances between towns or rest stops where there are toilets and drinking water available. Also take note of the gradients and make sure you're fit enough to tackle them. For the most part, rail trails are pretty flat because trains rarely went uphill.

Take plenty of water and snacks with you to last the distance. If you are riding a bike, remember to eat and drink regularly while you ride to keep hydrated - by the time you are thirsty and/or hungry it's too late.

Wear light, comfortable clothing that offers the right sun protection - a hat and sunscreen is a given.

Some rail trails offer bike repair stations at various intervals, but it is wise to carry spare tubes and some basic tools to get you out of trouble.

If you're riding alone, let someone know where you are going and what time you expect to return - some trails are quite isolated and if you have a major mechanical or worse, a fall, it might be some time before someone finds you.

Here are some of the more popular rail trails around the country, however you can see the full list including maps and other useful information on the Rail Trails Australia website [www.railtrails.org.au](http://www.railtrails.org.au).





**ABOVE AND BELOW** The Sandy Creek Bridge on the High Country Rail Trail, Vic; There is a short section of the High Country Rail Trail from the beautiful Victorian town of Corryong



## VICTORIA

### ***High Country Rail Trail***

Location: 300km north-east of Melbourne

Length: 80km

Surface: Fine gravel, sealed

Start/End: Wodonga to Shelley

Experience history, Lake Hume (one of Australia's largest reservoirs), high timber bridges and the foothills of the High Country. The trail traverses farmland near the shores of Lake Hume and forest at Shelley, once Victoria's highest railway station.

The trail is undulating to Bullioh with some moderate gradients. Bullioh to Shelley is all uphill at the steepest gradient trains could manage. The 600m Sandy Creek bridge is a scenic landmark.



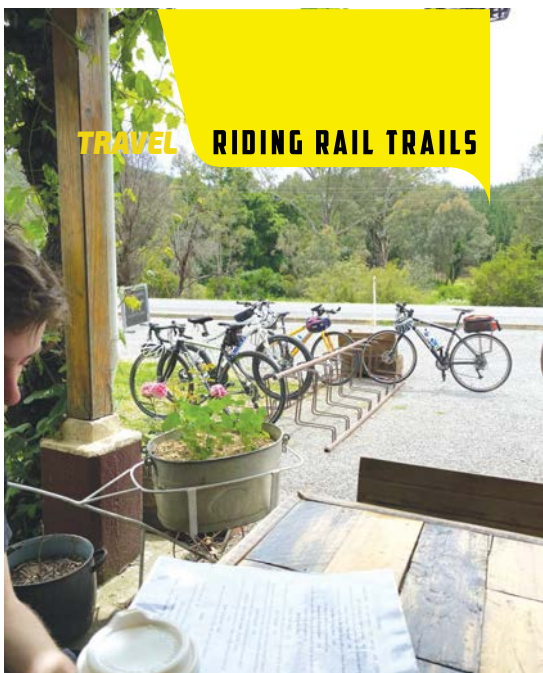
*“The trail traverses farmland near the shores of Lake Hume and forest at Shelley, once Victoria’s highest railway station.”*



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** Travare Park, Harrietteville, at the end of the Great Valley Trail from Bright, Vic; Old Tallangatta section of the High Country Rail Trail, Vic (Image Rail Trails Australia); Water station on the O’Keefe Rail Trail from Bendigo to Axedale.



## TRAVEL RIDING RAIL TRAILS



### **Murray to Mountains Rail Trail**

Location: 250km north-east of Melbourne

Length: 116km

Surface: Sealed

Start/End: Wahgunyah/Rutherglen to Wangaratta to Bright/Beechworth and Oxley/Milawa

One of Australia's best known and most popular regional rail trails, the Murray to Mountains is the perfect introduction to north-east Victoria's mountains, farmland, history, gourmet produce and wines. All three sections of the overall rail trail are sealed, and mostly flat apart from the Everton to Beechworth/Yackandandah section.



### **Great Victorian Rail Trail**

Location: 90km north of Melbourne

Length: 134km

Surface: Compacted earth, fine gravel

Start/End: Tallarook to Mansfield/Alexandra

Victoria's longest rail trail traverses undulating farmland from the Goulburn River to the high country of Mansfield. It is a good standard trail with almost 5km of bridges from which to enjoy views. It features the only tunnel on a rail trail in Victoria, and an impressive 385m bridge across Lake Eildon at Bonnie Doon.

***“The Murray to Mountains is the perfect introduction to north-east Victoria’s mountains, farmland, history, gourmet produce and wines”***



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** Sandy Creek to Tallanagatta on the High Country Trail (Image Rail Trails Australia); The Happy Valley Hotel in Ovens is a popular stop on the Murray to Mountains Trail (Vic); A short section of trail from Wahgunyah on the Victorian side of the Murray River to Rutherglen





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## NEW SOUTH WALES

### ***Tumbarumba to Rosewood (Riverina Highlands) Rail Trail***

Location: 470km south of Sydney, 460 km north of Melbourne  
Length: 21km  
Surface: Sealed  
Start/End: Tumbarumba to Rosewood

NSW's first true rail trail on a government rail corridor passes through beautiful subalpine countryside and farmland. The trail is sealed and family friendly, suitable for most types of bicycles, scooters, mobility scooters and prams. Interpretive signs along the trail explain the history of the rail line and the region. Since opening in 2020, the rail trail has been a very popular NSW tourist destination.

### ***Fernleigh Track***

Location: 135km north of Sydney, 5km from Newcastle city centre  
Length: 16km  
Surface: Sealed  
Start/End: Belmont to Adamstown

The 16km Fernleigh Track between Adamstown and Belmont on the coastal fringe of Newcastle is a high-quality rail trail running through quiet bushland and suburban landscapes. A major feature is the 180m curved brick-lined Fernleigh Tunnel beneath the Pacific Highway.

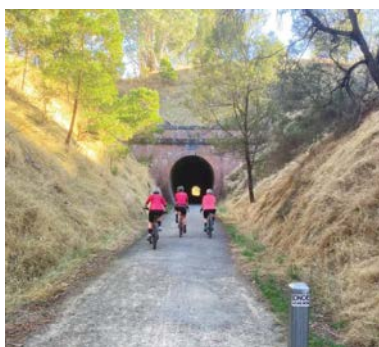
The Fernleigh Track has public transport access at Adamstown, and access points at Whitebridge, Redhead, Jewells and Belmont have car parks. It is a very popular rail trail, and a visit is easily combined with a short side trip to Redhead Beach.

## QUEENSLAND

### ***Brisbane Valley Rail Trail***

Location: Wulkuraka is 46km south-west of Brisbane  
Length: 161km  
Surface: Coarse gravel, compacted earth, fine gravel, sealed  
Start/End: Wulkuraka (Ipswich) to Yarraman

Australia's longest rail trail is gently undulating through mostly farming land in the southern section, with steeper sections and bushland in the north. Heritage-listed attractions include Lockyer Creek bridge and Yimbun Tunnel. It is suitable for multi-day tours, with options for fully supported tours and shuttles. Car parking is soon to be constructed at the Wulkuraka end of the trail. The rail trail connects Ipswich, Wulkuraka, Fernvale, Lowood, Coominya, Esk, Toogoolawah, Harlin, Moore, Linville, Blackbutt and Yarraman.



**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT** Yea on the Great Victorian Rail Trail; Cheviot Tunnel is the only tunnel on a rail trail in Victoria; Built using 675,000 handmade bricks, it was constructed to pass trains across the Black Range at McLoughlin's Gap



### ***Kilkivan-Kingaroy Rail Trail***

Location: 22km north-west of Brisbane  
Length: 89km  
Surface: Coarse gravel, fine gravel, sealed  
Start/End: Kilkivan to Kingaroy

This trail traverses undulating farmland and bushland, with several towns along the route and points of interest. The Kilkivan to Murgon section is built to basic standard; Murgon to Kingaroy 'South Burnett Rail Trail' section has a sealed surface. This trail is partially open - check the website for details.

## NORTHERN TERRITORY

### ***Darwin to Adelaide River Rail Trail***

(partially open)  
Location: Darwin  
Length: 28km  
Surface: Coarse gravel, compacted earth, sealed  
Start/End: Darwin CBD to Adelaide River

This trail follows the route of the historic former North Australian Railway (NAR); many reminders of the railway remain.

The 28km section from Darwin CBD to Coolalinga is a high-standard path that is part of an extensive network of suburban cycle paths.

From Coolalinga to Adelaide River the trail is unmaintained and gradually becomes more remote, passing through Darwin's rural area, remote farming, then undeveloped areas with a mix of Top End savanna and riparian forest.

### ***Katherine Rail Trail***

Location: Katherine, 320km from Darwin  
Length: 6km  
Surface: Sealed  
Start/End: Katherine Station to Morey Rd

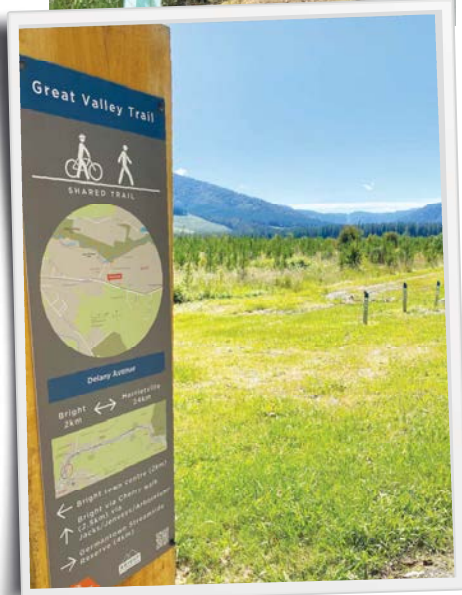
A high standard rail trail with the centrepiece of the high bridge across the Katherine River. It follows the route of the historic former North Australian Railway, where considerable effort has gone into preserving remaining infrastructure. It includes links to Katherine River cycle path and RAAF Base Tindal path, and other mountain bike tracks around the town.





## RIDING RAIL TRAILS TRAVEL

**ABOVE AND BELOW** Railway memorabilia on the O'Keefe Rail Trail in Axedale, Vic; Not strictly a rail trail, the Great Valley Trail links the mountain towns of Bright and Harrietville



***“There are interpretive signs along the way detailing the history of the original railway line and the towns it served”***

## MY SUMMER OF CYCLING

### Bright

Every time Melburnians were released from lockdown (I've lost count of how many years that was) my son and I would make an end of year pilgrimage to our favourite place in Victoria, Bright. It's a mecca for mountain bikers and roadies, and it's the end of the line for the popular Murray to Mountains Rail Trail. Because it's sealed and flat and there's lots of things to see and do along the way – cafes, pubs, playgrounds, river swimming and wading, wineries, berry and nut farms – it's very popular with families.

Each year, we'll ride the trail and stop at Myrtleford or the Ovens Pub for lunch, and always call in at Ringer Reef winery in Porepunkah on the way back for a glass of wine on the deck overlooking majestic Mt Buffalo. The short cycle from Bright out to Wandiligong for a visit to the Wandil Pub is also a good ride – if you're lucky, on the way you'll get to see the paragliders land after jumping off Mystic Mountain.

It's not technically a rail trail but the Great Valley Trail is a new section of trail from Bright to Harrietville which opened in late 2021. The 26km of new sealed shared path meanders along the Ovens River and through bush and farmland, past the trout farm to the delightful hamlet of Harrietville, where refreshments are available at the pub or a cafe before you head back.

### Bass Coast

The 23km Bass Coast Rail Trail is in Gippsland, 130km southeast of Melbourne. I did this ride with friends on a very hot summer's day starting in Wonthaggi and edging along the coast to Kilcunda where there are spectacular ocean views from the cliff top.

This is fairly easy riding, however we turned off at the bus interchange at Anderson for the 5km or so into San Remo, and there were some lumpy bits. The ocean views from the top were worth it. We decided to cross the bridge at San Remo and pedal the 16km or so to Cowes on Phillip Island along a shared trail where we enjoyed some lunch in the main drag along with thousands of others on a hot Saturday arvo.

### Bendigo

I'd heard a lot about the O'Keefe Rail Trail in central Victoria and it didn't disappoint. I rode the 23km section from Axedale to Bendigo and return on Australia Day. From Axedale it continues for another 26km to the pretty hamlet of Heathcote which is a terrific wine region. This trail traverses iron bark forests, grazing land, rivers and creek along an environment corridor and adjacent to Lake Eppalock. There are interpretive signs along the way detailing the history of the original railway line and the towns it served. There's also a couple of water fountains and bike repair stations. In the car park of the Axedale Tavern, I got talking to one of the Friends of the Rail Trail group and he was telling me about their wish to have this trail extended beyond Heathcote.

### Great Victorian Rail Trail

In February, I spent the weekend in Yea with friends to ride the Great Victorian Rail Trail, one of the state's longest stretching some 130km from Tallarook, just off the Hume Highway to Mansfield at the foot of the High Country.

A predicted scorcher of a day saw us leave early on Saturday morning for the 38km or so east from Yea to Alexandra, through the Cheviot Tunnel which is the only tunnel on a rail trail in Victoria. There are a few gentle climbs on this section, but nothing too onerous. The view from the top before the 5km descent into Alexandra was worth the effort. We enjoyed some cold ales and homemade pizzas at the On Point Brewery before the return journey.

This trail is well serviced by toilets at regular intervals, but there is no drinking water available so make sure you take plenty with you. The surface is mainly gravel although there is some sandy granite in some sections. It passes through farmland and some forested sections with some welcome shade.

Sunday morning was cooler, and we headed out in the opposite direction towards Tallarook. Again, the trail passes through farmland, and you'll see glimpses of the Goulbourn River from the many bridges that traverse the low-level crossings. If you're lucky, you'll even see an echidna or two.





*“The trail has a good gravel surface, suitable for all weather and easily ridden on hybrid or touring bikes”*

## **WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

### ***Kep Track***

Location: 39km east of Perth  
Length: 75km

Surface: Coarse gravel, compacted earth  
Start/End: Mundaring Weir to Northam

The Kep Track (formerly known as the Farming Heritage Trail) runs from Mundaring Weir to Northam, passing through the communities of Mundaring, Sawyers Valley, Mount Helena, Wooroloo, Wundowie, Bakers Hill, and Clackline. There are trail heads at Mundaring Weir and Northam, and multiple access points. Riders can park and ride from pretty much any town along the way.

### ***Denmark-Nornalup Heritage Rail Trail***

Location: 415km south of Perth  
Length: 61km

Surface: Coarse gravel, compacted earth, fine gravel  
Start/End: Hay River, Denmark to Station Rd, Nornalup

Discontinuous sections of trail through a mix of tall karri forest, wildflower-filled swampy plains and picturesque farmland. Highlights include a series of wooden rail bridges and views of the Denmark and Hay Rivers. This trail is partially open - check the website for details.

## **SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

### ***Riesling and Rattler Rail Trail***

Location: 130km north of Adelaide  
Length: 53km  
Surface: Fine gravel  
Start/End: Riverton to Barinia

Perhaps South Australia's best known rail trail, located in one of Australia's premier

wine regions - there are seven townships and many cellar doors along or near the trail. Original railway cuttings and infrastructure form part of the trail.

### ***Southern Flinders Rail Trail***

Location: Flinders Ranges, 207km north of Adelaide  
Length: 51km  
Surface: Coarse gravel, fine gravel  
Start/End: Laura/Melrose to Stone Hut/Wilmington

A trail that blends into the landscape and challenges the rider with rough sections and stony creek crossings. Complements MTB trails at the base of Mount Remarkable and surrounding forest areas. Mt Remarkable, Alligator Gorge, Wirrabara Forest and the Southern Flinders Ranges provide an imposing backdrop.





## RIDING RAIL TRAILS TRAVEL

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** The North East Tasmania Rail Trail (Image Paul Millynn); Stunning Tassie views (Images Paul Millynn)



Work will begin soon on linking sections of the trail together to create an 88km rail trail. This trail is partially open - check the website for details.

### TASMANIA

#### ***Strahan to Zeehan Road***

Location: Zeehan to Strahan, 296km from Hobart

Length: 41.8km

Surface: Sealed

Start/End: Strahan to Zeehan

The main road between Zeehan and Strahan follows the route of a former railway for most of its length. The level gradients of the road are typical of a railway. About 15km south of Zeehan, an un-signposted 4WD track leads west, close to the Badger River. This track follows the former railway easement for 5km while the road here takes to higher ground. Take care: after 5km the track stops abruptly at the top of a steep ravine, where there was once a railway bridge. On the other side, the railway continued a further 1km before re-joining the alignment of the road.

#### ***North East Tasmania Rail Trail***

Location: Scottsdale, 62km north-east of Launceston.

Length: 26km

Surface: Fine gravel

Start/End: Scottsdale to Tulendeena (Billycock Hill)

A beautiful trail with lush forest vegetation that still provides views of the surrounding mountains. The trail has a good gravel surface, suitable for all weather and easily ridden on hybrid or touring bikes. There are numerous interpretive signs to provide a background on the area and the railway. Plans are well advanced for extending the trail 42km back to Lilydale Falls, which will include a spectacular 800m tunnel. Scottsdale is also close to the world class mountain bike trails of Blue Derby. 