



HIGH COUNTRY ADVENTURES

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Prior to this past spring, my only real experience of having ridden bikes in the Falls Creek area was having started and finished a few Peaks Challenges there. Yep, a big ol' road ride. Along with memories of stunning Victorian High Country vistas, clear mountain streams and long, demanding climbs I was also gifted a curiosity for what may lie a little further from the beaten tracks. If you've ever driven or ridden Bogong High Plains road between Mount Beauty and Falls Creek you'll certainly have noticed the number of gravel roads that wind their way into the hills from the main thoroughfare. But where do they go? Who built them and why? And, the question that had me most curious, can they be linked up into an interesting bikepacking trip that also includes some of the area's purpose built mountain bike trails?

FACT CHECKING AND SECOND GUESSING

I was with this last question firmly in mind that I and my partner Tina headed to Mount Beauty to kick off a short but challenging overnigher taking in a true mix of backcountry exploring and pure mountain biking. Along for the ride was my close

friend Leo who, despite living an eight hour drive away in Sydney, finds it extremely hard to say no to interesting adventures.

Day One started with a short car shuttle up the hill to just below the gates of the Falls Creek resort. As we were in the area in the short window between white and green seasons we had the road to ourselves for the drive and, with the windows down, the sounds of running water and of birdsong put a smile on all our faces and we headed up the hill. Being in between seasons also meant that the properly warm weather had not quite arrived and as we reached our planned starting point, at Mount Mackay Powerstation road, we caught glimpses of snow on the peaks above. We all knew that's where we were heading and there was certainly some second guessing of gear choice going on.

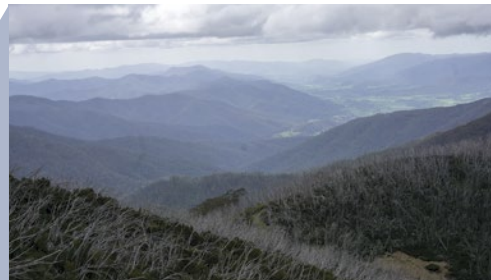
On that note it's worth mentioning that, regardless of what time of year you plan to ride in the Victorian High Country, if you are heading out for more than just a few hours it's worth packing for all kinds of weather. If you're planning to spend the night under the stars it pays to carry a down jacket and a warm sleeping bag at all times

of year.

With the car unpacked and snack stores double checked and we were off. And up. The first few kilometres were a relatively relaxed warm up as we followed a sealed road to the small Mount Mackay hydroelectric power station. It was immediately clear though that not many vehicles ever venture further than the station as it proved to be almost a portal to the backcountry. The trail instantly became overgrown with grass, not enough to really slow you down but certainly enough to instil a feeling of remoteness and of exploration.

We soon reached the crossing of Pretty Valley creek, a fast moving and icy stream around thigh deep for Leo and Tina. Obviously unrideable it was a shoes-off wading affair. It was quite obvious that the water had been snow not long ago, and by half way it was hard to properly feel the rocky bottom with rapidly freezing feet. For the most part we made it across no problem, though Tina did have herself a short mid-stream sit down that left her wringing out her shorts in the sun on the far bank.

From the stream our trail climbed gradually for



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DIY HIGH COUNTRY ADVENTURES

If you’re looking for interesting riding outside that of the regular trail park vibe, and want to experience some proper wilderness, backcountry riding without being too far from facilities then I highly recommend a trip to the Falls Creek and Mount Beauty area. It also rarely gets above thirty degrees at Falls in the summer time so if you’re feeling the heat and need an escape, get up there. There really is something for everyone.

Take your time to plan a route and use a proper navigation device – like the Garmin eTrex 30. Better yet, take a topographic map and compass and know how to use them.

Be aware of how much food you need, and pack accordingly. Minimise wrappers before you go, to reduce the waste you need to carry out.

Take more gear and more spares than you think you will need.

Send your route plan to a friend, and check in with them before you go and once you’re back.

Don’t send things blindly – you’re in the backcountry and who’s to say what’s on the other side of a water bar? A little bit of caution goes a long way.

the next couple of hours. Our midday push was highlighted by views across the valley to Mount Bogong, the constant sound of running water from temporary snowmelt waterfalls and the ever present sound of frogs. Occasionally we’d turn a corner to find a deer grazing the lush grass that was our trail and their almost seal-like barks startled us as much as I’m certain we startled them. Then it was time for lunch.

FUELLING FOR ADVENTURE

As soon as Leo had confirmed he was coming on this trip knew one thing was certain – he’d be carrying some good food. In a previous bikepacking article I wrote for AMB you might recall a member of our party decided to bring a 5kg butterflied shoulder of pork on a trip. That was Leo, and today was no exception to what is becoming a rule if not folklore. Proper Italian provolone cheese and cacciatore salami with some celery to munch in between.

I think when those that haven’t done a lot of bikepacking imagine the experience in their minds, the focus is a bit too much on the riding. No, you won’t be railing berms way out in the backcountry beyond the purpose-built trails. But what you will be doing is discovering, by bike, some amazing places you may otherwise have never seen and spending some great moments in those places with people that are important to you. Even if it’s just sitting around eating cheese, these are memories that will stay with you forever.

NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

It was obvious to all of us that we were climbing into some dense, dark cloud and as we made the turn onto the renowned Fainters Track we saw our first proper amount of snow. Fainters is most well-known as a loose and long backcountry descent from Falls Creek to Mount Beauty but if you like climbing, which we all did, you’re in for a treat. The closer we got to the cloud line the better the views got. Firstly across to Mount Bogong, then across the entire Kiawa Valley, the town of Mount Beauty far below us. These are sights that would be hard to take in when descending. The focus required to stay safe on the boulder strewn and high consequence Fainters simply wouldn’t allow you to fully take in the majesty and raw beauty of the area. We were feeling pretty lucky.

This was until we reached our first, long snow drift. While it made for great photos and we all have a story to tell, hiking your bike across a 100m wide snow drift is a bad idea and I don’t recommend it. The good news is that during green season this shouldn’t be an issue but if you do come across one, hiking below it on firm ground is worth the extra time it’ll take you to reach the trail on the far side. Conditions continued to get worse

as we reached the highest point of our trip at just over 1800m. Visibility dropped to around thirty metres and Fainters Trail was no longer discernible. If it wasn’t for my Garmin eTrex 30 we might have been in a spot of bother but, zooming in to five metres, we followed the pink line on my screen through snow and ice as it began to descend toward our camp for the night at Tawonga Huts.

Multiple stream crossings and runoff from snow everywhere saw us reach our camp in the late afternoon light, damp and exhausted. But what a camp spot. Tawonga Huts is nestled on a small plain at around 1700m on the slopes of Mount Jaithmathung with stunning views across to Falls Creek. The grounds feature a large clearing, obviously once used to corral horses, and a number of historic huts. We took the opportunity to eat our dinner and sit by a fire in one of the larger huts but slept in our tents. There’s also a quite new pit toilet, also with a good view, that was a nice surprise.

CRISP IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

As I said earlier the temperatures up here can do just about anything and a solid five millimetres of ice on my Big Agnes tent made me thankful we’d all packed our warm bags and insulated mats. The nice thing about being up high though is you don’t have to wait long to be in the direct sun as there’s no pesky mountains around delaying the warmth of sunrise. It wasn’t long until we were packed up, had brekky in the sun basking in the glorious views and were on our way. After the climbing of the first day we were very much looking forward to the high plains sojourn that would be our morning, before a LOT of descending.

The Bogong High Plains area is nothing short of stunning, especially on a bellbird clear day like the one we’d been gifted. It’s also a region packed with historic huts and it was our goal for the morning link up as many as we could, rating them along the way, before lunch in Falls Creek.

Pretty Valley gets its name for good reason and we stopped multiple times on the way down the fast and open descent to drink in the views and share a Snickers. There was also one snow drift, flatter this time, that we had all tried unsuccessfully to ride. From here we climbed across to Bogong High Plains, past the absolutely stunning Cope’s Hut and joined the Langford West Aqueduct Trail. Aside from being the first piece of truly flat riding on the trip so far, the aqueduct trail was also the most visually compelling. Two lightly worn tyre trails, separated by grass made for individual, side by side singletracks. Crystal clear water flowed by on the left while the views off to the right into the Omeo valley were the best



of the trip by far. The trail also took us to the gorgeous Wallace's Hut where [yet another] laughter filled snack break was enjoyed. From here we had the option of a longer loop via Fitzgerald's Hut into Falls Creek, but lunch and a beer was calling and so at Langford Hut we jumped back on the main road and wandered into town.

The tarmac didn't last long as the Falls Creek trail network has spread right out the edges of Rocky Valley dam. And when it's a choice between tarmac and singletrack, well, it's not really a choice is it? The flowing and gentle green trail of Induction was easily rideable with full bikepacking loads, with just a couple of sketchy moments, and took us most of the way into town. A great way to finish a morning's ride.

Despite being between seasons, Falls Creek still had plenty going on to keep hungry riders happy. Stingray restaurant in the heart of town served up some great burgers, sweet potato chips and local beers and Foodworks was open for bulk snack replenishment. A relaxed meal in the sun and we were ready to wind our way back down to the car on some singletrack.

If you're planning to ride these trails with some bikepacking gear on then don't ride any black trails. Otherwise, everything is quite manageable with some care and incorporating this some proper trail riding into a bikepacking trip really sealed what was already an amazing weekend. We had the fortune of being able to leave the bulk of our gear in town and explore the network properly, unloaded.

We wound our way right to the top of Falls along Generator, encountering some more deep snow along the way. From there we took Lorna's Link across to Frying Pan Spur which is a MUST ride if you are in the area. Hugging the ridge, with 360 degree views, Frying Pan is laugh out loud fun without being so technical that even early intermediate riders wouldn't have a great time. The much rougher and challenging High Voltage brought us back into town through deep, switchback berms and some amazing rocky flow.

And then, with gear back on, it was time for Flowtown. And wow, what a trail! Winding from the Falls Creek Village down to the edge of the resort Flowtown is deep brown loam carved into perfect rollers and berms and snakes it's way down into the valley. The only effort one needs to apply is some brakes as Flowtown seems to generate momentum for you and before you know if you're blissing out and having to back it off a little to stay in control. This trail would be pretty cool on a trail bike, but it must be the most perfect piece of singletrack I've ever ridden on a loaded bikepacking bike and made a perfect finish to one of the best weekends ever.

