

There were only a couple of river crossings, but they were doozies!

2011 VICTORIAN **KTM DEALER RIDE**

A Twisting Tale

TASMANIA IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT TRAILRIDING DESTINATIONS AND KTM MAKES SEVERAL OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST TRAILBIKES. TBAM FLEW INTO LAUNCESTON TO RIDE WITH THE VICTORIAN KTM BLOKES, AND HOO-HAA! WHAT A RIDE IT WAS!

Some rides kick off with strange omens. A black cat here, a smashed mirror there, a nasty rash on the ballbag the night before...those kinds of things make you wonder what the future might hold. For the sixteenth annual Victorian KTM dealer ride, hosted by Otway Off-Road Motorcycle Tours and new outfit, Dirt Trax Tas, TBAM had a couple of uncomfortable little prods from the fickle finger of fate leading up to the ride.

First up was a cancelled flight that, of course, meant a drama with a connecting flight from Melbourne to Launceston. Fortunately, the Launceston flight was delayed – allowing more drinking time for the KTM crew – and things worked out pretty well.

Then, wandering off the plane to look for the TBAM Ogio bag, the first face we saw was Jeff Leisk.

We don't know how youse feel about riding with people the calibre of Jeff Leisk, but knowing the 1989 Motocross GP world champ runner-up was a starter made us a little fretful. "What kind of pace is to be expected?" we were forced to wonder.

Fortunately, TBAM has ridden with Jeff on several occasions and his incredible politeness seems to keep him happily pacing along with the pack. His presence causes no intimidation at all.

But then the second face clicked into focus.

Shayne King. The 1996 world champion. And then V8 Supercar driver Greg Murphy, a four-time winner at Bathurst.

"Gulp," we gulped, our sphincters trembling and an unpleasant odour wafting through the crisp Tasmanian air. What the hell had we signed up for?



The riding was nearly all fabulous single-track, and anywhere things might've been a bit dodgy, the Dirt Trax guys had done their preparation.



IN THE DETAIL

Fortunately, the group of celebrities – including 1970's motocross legend and natural gentleman Allan McCarthy – were surrounded by 50 or so “normal” riders – that is, they seemed normal enough as they piled on to the bus at the airport. The requests for the bus driver to stop at the first bottleshop came thick and fast as the orderly but unkempt group filed past, and although it was late, everyone was loud in their claims about how busting-ready they were to get started in the morning.

The requests for a bottle-o began to sound a little anxious as the lights of Launceston faded in the rear window of the bus. The driver did his best, but in the north-east of Tasmania, around midnight, the Devils rule, and the hoped-for refreshment stops proved to be barricaded against the threat – the threat of thirsty KTM dealers, that is. The Tassie Devils aren't much of a problem.

It was a sober, and perhaps a little sullen, crew that disgorged from the bus on to the path outside the pub in Scottsdale in the early hours of the morning. With luggage collected and claims made of future drinking exploits, the crew headed off to the supplied accommodation, ready to face the rigours of the ride, now just a few hours away.

TRANSPORT SECTION

An interesting situation arose when the bus arrived to pick up the riders later that morning. The idea was to bundle everyone up and run them out to the Dirt Trax headquarters about 15 minutes out of town.

Running the lads out of town was probably a good idea, but 60 blokes with gear bags take up some serious room, and the smallish bus that turned up was obviously not going to do the job. The driver volunteered his own ute, which was loaded to the gunnels with gearbags and riders, and both vehicles lurched out to where the bikes waited.

Then they lurched back again, because all the riders and gear still couldn't fit in.

But only an hour or so later the whole crew was kitting up in a big shed alongside where 50 or so KTMs, a couple of Husabergs, an Husqvarna and one or two Yamahas waited.

After a quick briefing everyone mounted up and headed out for what would turn out to be one of the best guided trail rides TBAM has ever had the good fortune to attend.

PLANE SHAME

From the outset the trails were soft, sweet and loamy, with maybe the occasional run of sand. Some rain leading up to the ride had the surfaces in perfect shape for roorting, and the boys took full advantage.

Dirt Trax Tas had sorted out some truly fabulous

riding, and although it was a mix of open dirt road and single trail, the emphasis was heavily on single trail, a great deal of which they'd cut in themselves.

TBAM has done a lot trail tours, and we're fairly used to the way tour operators work. They'll lead you through some challenging stuff, and when your heart's thrashing hard against your rib cage and you're having trouble drawing a breath, the tour will pop out onto an open dirt road and allow you to recover.

Not the Dirt Trax boys!

If you want to ride with these guys, bring your A game.

TBAM was on the verge of a thrombo – and fairly confident of emerging from the tight, single-trail bush at any moment – at least half-a-dozen times that first day, only to have the single trail wind and turn its roosty way for another heart attack and four respiratory failures before there was any relief. The conflict between being on some of the most fabulous riding we could imagine and desperately needing either a break or some first aid was very marked.

Fortunately, we had to stop and take a few photos now and then (it's not that we needed to stop, but we had responsibilities, after all).

The trails just went on and on and on, and every turn of the wheel was a fabulous progression through sensational country and brilliant riding.

We were going to blast on up the front to see how Leisky and Kingy were going, but we didn't want to get stuck as a cornerman, so we hung back.

Otherwise we'd've been up there for sure!

The big feature of the morning was a challenging hill. It was steep, snotty and nasty, and we really wanted to have a crack at it, but we were there to work, dammit! We furiously pushed our ambition to one side and stood there on the shitty slope taking pics of the lucky buggers who did have a go.

Not too many made it up. Of the high-profile guys, King blasted to the top, and Otways legend Con Thermos made it look easy on several different bikes.

We just wish we didn't have this heavy responsibility to our work.

SAND WITCH

The afternoon held a special treat as Cory Harris and Stuart Worker – the two main men at Dirt Trax Tas – led the group on to the beach and 60 mad-as-cut-snakes riders put their brains in their bumbags and went spak.

There were some momentous deeds on those sandhills with blokes leaping, roosting, falling and stalling all over creation. Climbing the tallest dune became crazier and crazier until, striving for excellence, a bike and rider hurtled up the dune and then up a near-vertical face to where the cheering spectators had foolishly assumed they'd be safe on a grassy knoll.

Of course, once one bike had achieved it, plenty of others had to have a go, and the hillock was soon deserted, except for the odd KTM or two hanging on the brink with a panicking rider clutching to one 'bar.

The play of the day went to Brendan Sweeney. After sizing up a smallish lake at the bottom of the dune, he launched a banzai attack and, at several billion kilometres per hour, attempted to aquaplane across the surface.

He almost made it, too. Almost.

BEER O'CLOCK

From the beach it was not far to the finish of the first day at Bridport. Fatigue began to show on some riders, with Greg Murphy seen to have his Husaberg hanging in, or caught up on, various trees

and branches beside the deep-sand track.

The resort at Bridport turned out to be very luxurious, and as the lads settled down for dinner Dirt Trax's Stuie provided some entertainment by swinging off the second-storey verandah of the restaurant to retrieve his Chapstick from the fronds of a nearby palm tree. Nobody's sure how the lip balm came to be there in the first place, and perhaps it'd be better not to ask.

The tally for the day included a broken leg for one of the Tasmanian guys (not one of the Devil Trax guys), a flat on Murph's 'Berg, and 130km of fabulous trail covered.

There were plenty of dealers represented, but there seemed to be a long-standing competition between “the Warnambool guys” and those associated with Bolton Motorcycles. After this first night's dinner the challenge was thrown out and \$150 offered if Dave Wood of the Bolton's crew could manage to woof seven dessert pies in four minutes. Woodsie not only scarfed the pies, he gallantly threw the \$150 on the bar on the final night.

We wipe away a misty little tear just thinking about the depths of selflessness in such an act. >

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The final section of trail on the final day was amazing. Fabulous, damp, roost-worthy forest the whole way.

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HAPPIER CLIMBS

The second day dawned to the sound of rocks being lobbed on to the roof of Con Thermos' cabin.

That must've been fairly annoying at dawn when the ride wasn't due to start until 8.00am, but we're sure Jon Page had his reasons, and we won't do on him.

Despite some fairly raucous behavior the night before, the whole group appeared hale and hearty as the ride set off into the cold, Tasmanian rain. Local knowledge assured everyone the rain would pass by mid-morning, and so it proved. In fact, the rain turned out to be welcome. Had there been any possibility of dust, that morning drizzle made sure it was well under control.

Scorching and weaving through sandy, sweeping, hand-cut trails, the already fabulous ride seemed to do the impossible: It got better.

This was where the virgin trails the Dirt Trax guys had prepared really shone, and the riding was truly superb. Back and forth the trails wound until all were confronted with the day's challenge hill, which turned out to be far more achievable than the hill of the previous day. Unaware it was the challenge hill, TBAM hurled the mighty KTM 250EXC-F into the fray, and we would've blasted straight to the top, only we had to make sure we got a few pics, so we cunningly fell off right at the best possible spot for photos, and generously let Corey and Stuie take the bike the rest of the way (just so's they could feel good about themselves, y'know?).

As it turned out, stopping for pics had a few hazards of its own. Shits were trumps as demented riders hurled bikes at the slope where there was no real "line". Brendan Sweeney, fresh from his aquaplaning experience of the previous afternoon, roosted full-throttle to the top, but we don't think he should be given the hill. Using TBAM's photographer for traction seemed like cheating, we reckon.

SHALLOW VICTORY

The afternoon threaded its way through some glorious old-growth forest, winding and weaving alongside crystal-clear streams under the lush forest canopy. Mossy logs were the order of the afternoon, and TBAM found them intensely interesting. So interesting in fact that we jumped off the KTM and lay down on several of them to make sure we could get a really close look.

The highlight of the afternoon was a river crossing which was just deep enough to be a little tricky. By the time the first 40 bikes had been through it was just deep enough to swallow a small West Indian coral island, and several of the later riders came to grief (much to the glee of those waiting and watching on the far side). The go was to edge into the water using the line the knee-deep cornerman was pointing out. That was the go, but the fun was in giving the wrong directions to someone from a rival outfit, and much hilarity ensued.

One that backfired was when, mischievously, someone called out for Brett "Sack" Downey to barrel in full-throttle. Sack, enjoying a good joke more than most, obliged, and hurled his 450 in with the throttle wide open. After much gulping, glugging and spraying prodigious amounts of water far and wide over the assembled watchers, it dragged him up the other side to appreciative laughter and applause. >

Around 60 Victorian KTM dealers and their closest mates. What a crew! They were fast buggers, too.



DIRT TRAX TAS

Stuart Worker and Cory Harris are passionate about riding and passionate about Tasmania, and with the number of trail tour companies operating in Australia these days, we'd normally wonder about the future of yet another fledgling outfit.

But these guys have some of the most amazing, flowing, continuous, awesome trail we've ever seen, and if they can let people know that, the outfit will be a success in a big way.

On top of the sensational riding, they even have the support of a transport outfit that'll get bikes to and from the Aussie mainland at incredible prices.

They certainly have TBAM's stamp of approval. Check 'em out at www.dirttraxtas.com.au. You won't regret it.



We asked Leisky to caption this pic and he emailed back: "Grumpy old men". From left, Jeff Leisk, Al MacArthur, Darryll King and Greg Murphy.



The interesting thing was, seeing Sack do it that way, the riders behind him assumed that was the go, and before you could say, "No, you wankers! It was a joke!" there were half-a-dozen bikes full of water being up-ended on the bank with large quantities of Tasmanian aqua pura being pumped and drained from their innards.

Good times.

POUNDING THE PUD

The Mount William Lodge at Gladstone was a welcome sight through the light rain as the group closed the second day. The temperature had dropped and, purely for its restorative and medicinal warmth, the guys set off to the nearby pub to consume first-aid levels of alcohol before returning to a sensational dinner capped off with a hand-made, chocolate, self-saucing pudding.

Even as we write this, the thought of that pudding puts a lump in the TBAM's nylons (the front, not the back of the nylons).

It was that good.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

Day three kicked off in bright sunshine as the riders again threaded their way along some fast single-track.

How much single-track can these Dirt Trax guys possibly have?

More than we've ever seen in a single ride, that's for sure.

And when we say "single", we mean single. The third morning had a longish section where the bikes only just fitted between the overhanging shrubbery. The 'bar ends were brushing the light, whippy branches for friggging ages and ages. It was spectacular.

More winding, forest single-track didn't surprise anyone at this stage, except perhaps Leisky, who – according to Greg Murphy – was sane all morning, but then suddenly decided to race with Kingy, resulting in a twisted knee and some ribald comments from the Kiwis.

Jeff was up and running again in short order and the ride continued on to an amazing lunch at a scout camp in the middle of nowhere. Fatigue was beginning to take its toll on both bikes and riders by this stage, and a couple of each were unable to continue. Evan Theodoru had the misfortune to be running up the front of the pack when he slid into an unseen log and crushed his finger.

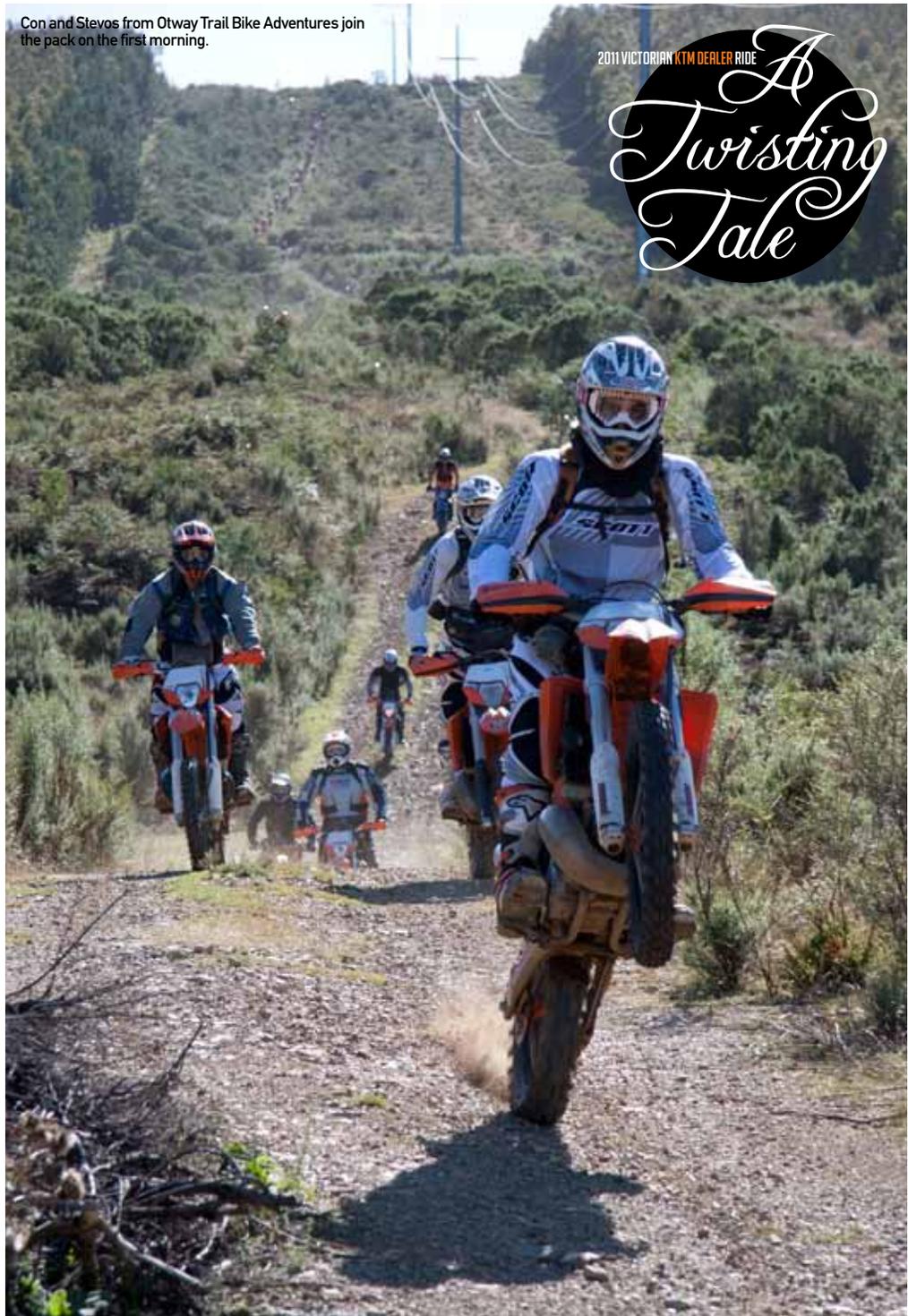
Nasty.

But from an enjoyable lunch of pies, pasties and sausage rolls it was a straightforward afternoon blast back to Scottsdale.

Of course, it was about 99 per cent single-trail. The Dirt Trax guys reckon roads of any kind, dirt or asphalt, are for sooks.

The final section of trail was possibly the best and, if it can be believed, was even more awesome than the awesome trail we'd all been on for the previous two-and-a-half days. Winding along the hillsides under a heavy forest canopy, the wet, slippery clay and luscious greenery offered the perfect finish to a truly sensational ride. ■

Con and Stevos from Otway Trail Bike Adventures join the pack on the first morning.



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KTM 250EXC-F

TBAM was rapt to be included on this ride, not least because KTM offered up a 250 EXC-F as a camera bike.

The tiddler four-stroke was a bike TBAM hasn't had much to do with over the years, but having experienced this one, that might have to change in future. What a bike!

A 250cc four-stroke having a gentle power delivery won't surprise anyone, but the KTM raised our eyebrows with just how much power it offered, and how broadly that power delivery was spread. In the sand on the beach it was very reluctant to stall or to stop pulling, and once we woke up to what the motor was trying to tell us we wrung its neck and let it drag our slow and sorry bums up hills, through the deep sand, up, over, and around everything these amazing trails had to offer. The bike is light, nimble, and an unbelievable pleasure to ride.

Even on the transport sections – there weren't many, we admit – the little four-stroke tiddled happily along at 90kph or so, and it felt as though it was doing it easy.

In fact, we'd have to say, "Doing it easy," is how this bike felt in all situations all the time. It was an absolute pleasure on a trail ride like this one.

