

The Outback Odyssey, - is it Right for You?

So – “What’s it like? Will I cope? Will I enjoy it?” These were the questions that I asked myself before deciding to join the 2015 Outback Odyssey, and the purpose of writing this piece is to answer those questions for others who may be considering the ride in the future.

“Will I cope?” Yes. If you sign up for the ride, you will not be the least fit. You will not be the oldest. But I assume here that you are signing up with the knowledge of what riding 75km or more on dirt roads in a day is like, and have the imagination to string 12 of these days (with some rest days) together in your mind.

Of the 170 riders on the tour, I’d guess an average age of 55 with a mode a little over 60. It suits fit retirees. There were also young guns, middle aged couples, blokes taking two weeks off work, and so on.

As a bloke of 53 years, I was about average age. I had a reasonable riding base, and trained by riding three times a week on a mixture of bitumen and dirt for between 30 and 60 km with about 1000m of climbing each ride. I did not find the Odyssey arduous, and was able to finish within the first one-third of the group each day. A large proportion of the riders have done it before, which says something. Some I spoke to were back to complete a ride they’d failed previously. Others were just back because they liked it. A large number came from interstate, but very few from overseas.

So what of the routine? Think “school camp” and you’re close. You will become used to queuing or you will go mad. Expect to line up for your first trip to the dunny of a morning, line up a few times for the different parts of your breakfast, and then line up to wash your dishes. All this before getting on the bike. The other major line-ups occur for showers, bike cleaning, dinner (three line-ups) and washing up. Some people take this in their stride, some are edgy; nearly everyone behaves well.

The venues are typically footy clubrooms - with the travellers’ tents going up on the oval - or caravan parks. Thus there is often welcome access to clubroom or park showers. The group is accompanied by a semi-trailer kitted out with dunnies and showers for men and women. If this facility has to bear the brunt of 170 riders’ needs with no other support, the results are less than salubrious.

The tour is organised by a few BikeSA employees and a team of volunteers. The volunteers, by the way, are terrific. They are skilled, experienced, and patient with the sometimes trying requests of the riders.

On the road you will be supported. Marshals ride among the group to help with fixing flats and minor mechanical issues. There is a mechanic on hand who carries spares on the Trail and effects repairs at the end of each day.

I expected to average 15km/h, and this turned out to be pretty accurate. This meant I was among the earlier finishers, typically around 2 pm, which reduced the need for queuing. I felt sorry for the riders who would arrive at camp sometime after 4 pm, when I was already showered, had cleaned the bike and was enjoying a quiet beer in preparation for dinner. There are a number of places where riders can opt not to camp, but stay in accommodation either in the caravan parks or in the towns. Those I spoke to that did this enjoyed their break from the routine, and BikeSA was helpful with collecting their luggage and generally making this option work for them. Another option - the one I selected and can recommend – was “deluxe camping” where BikeSA supplies a tent and

pitches and strikes it for you each day. There were a few teething problems with some tents leaking in the early stages, but this option removed a deal of hassle and gave me an extra hour or so a day to relax.

The more I came to see of the BikeSA organisation the more I came to appreciate it. While there were hiccoughs, the riders' safety was paramount. The volunteers were mostly old-hands who had their routines and techniques well refined.

As the ride progressed the ritual of queuing seemed more normal, and one's navigation through it more natural. It is also possible to take time out from the routine occasionally by skipping dinner and eating in the town. When I did this I found there were a few others who had the same idea.

The mood of the camp was dependent largely on the weather. We had bad weather to start with, and as that improved the collective spirits lifted.

One thing worth mentioning is the lurgy that ran through the camp. A lot – and I mean a lot – of people got a nasty cold/cough either during or just after the tour. I had it for the last few days and it was bad, sapping all my reserves. I felt like I was swallowing razor blades while riding. I don't know if anything can be done with so many people in such close quarters, but having someone coughing on your breakfast is not a good start to the day.

The Mawson Trail is comprised mostly of made dirt roads. There is some unmade vehicle track and a couple of sections of single-track, but I would not call it an "off-road" ride. Of 170 riders, more than 160 had mountain bikes with at least front suspension. I had a rigid-fork tourer, fitted with fat off-road tyres (26 x 1.9 inch) and that was fine.

It's not like the Kokoda track – there are many ways you can reach your destination. Indeed many of the less physical riders chose to skip bits of the Trail and ride sections of bitumen to the destination depending on the weather and how they were feeling. This seemed a sensible way of approaching it.

My approach was to aim to ride at about 70% of my maximum effort, leaving a reserve for bad weather, breakdowns or illness. This worked well. My reserves were used up on the windy and muddy days, and when I became sick at the end, but I never felt that I would not make it.

My main reason for undertaking the Odyssey was to complete the Trail and learn what it's like. Being from Adelaide it was easy to visit lower sections, but I felt that I could not do the upper sections without support. Joining the Odyssey allowed me to finish the Trail in one hit, with a minimum of my own preparation. I'm glad I did it. I loved the riding and the country, and the experience was great. It was my first BikeSA tour, and I was very impressed with the way it was handled. It's easy to find small niggles, but to do so misses the point that this was a good value, large scale tour organised by a relatively small organisation that relies on volunteer support. If you go in with the right attitude you'll be fine. You will find yourself with a group of friendly, cooperative people who are there to enjoy a great experience together.