

A ride through the forest

Anne Young finds that you don't have to be super fit and well equipped to experience the delights of the Munda Biddi bicycle trail.

A CHANCE remark at a party and I found my vague idea of some day riding the Munda Biddi bicycle trail (Nyoongar for path through the forest) solidifying into a plan.

The trail, due in Collie by spring this year, will traverse 900km on its completion at Albany in 2005. We departed from Dwellingup, the current southern end, the following Saturday.

Two children rode BMX bikes. One had a splendid mountain bike but was hampered by an arm still fragile from a recent break. The other child braved the day on a "deadly tready". The adults were all equipped with mountain bikes.

As I filled our backpack with food, rudimentary first-aid articles, puncture kit and — reluctantly, because they were heavy — four water bottles, I envied our companion family their panniers and bike-mounted bottle-carrying sprigs. (Mental note: must get some.)

The map, which uses a 7.5 to 1 vertical exaggeration "to simulate the rider's experience", indicated a level beginning. Nevertheless, I was quickly reduced to an aching, panting caricature of myself. (Mental note: seat height is on a par with pumping tyres in the how-to-survive-a-day's-ride index.) I wondered what state I'd be in after 28km.

We rode past leafy apple and stone-fruit orchards. The muffled, irregular boom of gas guns set to frighten birds heightened the stillness of the forest. Old railway formations, a reminder of when timber was brought from the forest into the mill towns such as Marrinup and Dwellingup, echoed through the deep furrows of Alcoa's rehabilitation.

As we cycled through shiny-trunked trees, I gave thanks to the creator of the bicycle — the ultimate way to view such country quietly and at a speed that allows reasonable coverage. We laboured up the road beside the power line. Most of us dismounted on the approach to Grey Road to navigate the loose gravel, embedded rocks and ruts. BMX 1 and 2 shot down, taking the bottom corner sideways. We doglegged off Grey Road on to attack that treated us to a view of a huge convex spread of granite rock covered in lichen. We wound around the hill looking across to the canopy on the opposite slope.

More than once I caught myself grimacing with strain and cursing my lack of fitness. I was kindly reminded that time was immaterial, that we were there for enjoyment. Part of my enjoyment arose from imagining myself sprawled on the ground at Oakley Dam. To lighten my load, I plied people with food and drink at every opportunity. (Mental note: take an airy sponge, not dense fruit-filled chocolate slice. At least it wasn't iced.)

On one incline it seemed likely that my bike would slither to the bottom if I let go of it. Thinking I might too, I removed my shoes and struggled with out-turned

feet and gripping toes up the hill. That 7.5 to 1 was looking pretty accurate.

Before our first crossing of Scarp Road, we passed through a plantation of Tasmanian blue gums, a buffer for Alcoa. Their trunks and the ground bristled with spikes of discarded bark.

Slow, fat drops of rain began to fall as we reached Oakley Dam. They were a relief after the morning's exertions. The adults spread themselves gratefully on a rock rendered snug by our fatigue. The children played along the concrete edge of the dam. We had lunch with a commanding view over the coastal plain.

At Alcoa the lights were on, the vast brown ponds still. There was no noise and no movement except smoke issuing from high, thin pipes. Rob told of the time he camped there, strung up in his hammock in the cusp of forest and farm, hill and plain, his slumber marred only by the frequent calls that drifted up from the Alcoa loudspeakers.

A couple of us secretly felt we could happily finish at the dam but, alas, our vehicles were 10.5km away.



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It was another long haul out of Oakley but, as always, the contrast of the downhill stretch was exhilarating. The adults trailed the children and were picking up speed for the hill ahead. Then we saw gesticulating children and abandoned bikes. BMX 1 had run over a snake. The child was unharmed and the snake appeared so. Flicking its tongue, it unbound to the edge of the road and made a graceful exit. It was our second sighting of a wild creature other than birds — I had earlier ridden alongside a wallaby.

At 4.38km from the dam (yes, the maps are precise), we entered the Marrinup arboretum. Established nearly 30 years ago by Alcoa and CALM, it features a variety of eucalypts with name plaques. It was an easy, extraordinarily scenic route from there to our rendezvous.

We looked along a valley and expressed our amazement that people would bring their old clothes dryer all the way out there to dump it. That and a pile of plastic soft-drink bottles were the only rubbish we encountered.

Our final leg down to Del Park Road was a delight. A narrow trail of deep brown, moist earth through closely packed jarrah, bracken, zamia palms and other understorey plants, it was the quintessential munda biddi, an enchanted end to a magical ride.

(Mental note: cycle the rest of the Munda Biddi to Mundaring.)