

The Hippie Highway 300 8th Oct 2016 Paul Witzerman

The idea for The Hippie Highway 300 had its genesis back in November 2014. The G20 carnival was in town and I, along with Phil and Andrew, thought it would be a good time to leave town and get amongst more simple ideas and themes. Too much Global Economic Prosperity leaves one wanting, spiritually and bicyclically. We wanted to ride a ride that would be something of a salute to our esteemed world leaders, while also offering the rider a chance to reconnect with the basic and fundamental building blocks of society and community. It was time to head down to the very special corner of northern NSW that is hippie country. We rode a 200 km route through the hills and backroads, along gravel roads and bitumen tracks; many of which carry very little traffic. The countryside was lush and very easy on the eye, the cows were fat and vegan, but the riding was unusually hard. At the end of the day, we all agreed that it had been the hardest day on the bike we had ever had. And that was saying something: Each of us has done some pretty ridiculous things on our bikes. We tried to figure out what made this ride so hard. It had about 5000 metres of climbing in it, but we had each climbed those sorts of heights over a 200 km ride quite a few times. That much climbing on a 200 is always going to be hard, but that ride in hippie country was something else. We concluded that it was because most of the ride was simply up, or down. There was very little flat ground that gave the rider time to rest the mind and body. Additionally, the road surfaces were very rough. Much of the gravel was smoother than much of the bitumen. The upper body, therefore, copped quite a workout. And all those *good vibrations* took the overall fatigue factor to another level. My whole body ached for a few days after that ride. But, while I ached, I also turned around in my mind the lingering feelings had been summoned by riding through that beautiful country and by pushing myself so hard physically.

Within a few weeks, I got to thinking: If that ride in hippie country was that tough, but was also that darned good, why not put another 100 kms on it and put it on the Audax calendar? It could be a ride that sets a new benchmark in so many respects! I had a yarn with my wingman and map master, Phil, and he promptly put together a 300 km route, using the 200 we had ridden as a starting point. We assembled a crew of five and set out to test-ride the new 100 km section, from Murwillumbah out to and up and over and through the Nightcap National Park to Minion Falls and back. The whole story of that ride might be told on another day, but the short of it is that the 100 kms extra that we planned could never be part of a 300 km ride. It was a full day's ride in itself and was best suited to mountain bikes ridden by maniacs. Within a few days, Phil (who had to replace his rear rim after the 'Minion Falls ride incident') had put together a new route that included only a little new off-road work, but substantially more climbing than what the Minion Falls option had offered. We settled on a 318 km, 5500 metre climbing option that we called "The Hippie Highway." It was not possible to get that 18 bloomin' kms out of it without redesigning the whole ride from scratch. Oh well. It was installed on the Audax calendar. Phil and I rode it

in June 2016 and managed to complete it in about 18 hours. It nearly killed us both. I've done some hard rides in order to get to some hard rides, but that one was tough. I figured the ride would be doable by anyone game enough to take it on.

By October the 8th this year, five riders had registered for The Hippy Highway, including myself as a first time RO. The ride was unsupported, simply because I wanted to ride it on the day and couldn't be bothered organising support. I'd previously ridden it without support and I figured that support was not what would be required to get a rider to the finish within 20 hours. Audacity and sheer bloody mindedness was what would be required. Very Audax, indeed!

We set out from Curumbin at the ungodly hour of 5.00 a.m. and worked our way towards the first control at Tyalgum. This was the most civilised section of the ride and we all enjoyed coffee and cakes (the most expensive ever endured by a randonneur) at the Flutterbies Café. We then hit the first gravel section: 17 kms of good vibrations. It was the most gravel Mark had ever ridden, with his prior experience having been the Goat Track. He rode like a man possessed. He was on a rim brake equipped bike with 28 mm slicks. The rest of us were on gravel bikes with 32 or 35 mm wide tyres and disc brakes. Kudos to Mark: He is a hard and brave man.

The rest of the story of the ride does not need to be told in intricate detail – the ride needs to be ridden to be appreciated and understood. In short, Mark bailed at The Channon with a biomechanical problem, exacerbated by the 30 degree plus heat. Chris bailed there too, with a plethora of bike problems. They scored a lift back to Curumbin in Chris's mates' van. Twenty kilometres later, I and Phil and Andrew sat in the shade at the Dunoon general store, inhaling pies, where it was 34 degrees, contemplating our next move. Phil's face was giving away what he said next: "I don't think I'm gonna' make it." Andrew chimed in, as only Andrew could: "You know me. I'm always up for a good bail!" We decided to bail and take the easiest route back to Currumbin. 101 kms and 1600 mtrs later, we had ridden the shortcut back to our cars, with the Tomewin climb being our final challenge. All up, we rode just under 250 kms with 4400 mtrs of climbing. And we skipped the hard bit. A helluva' day out on the bike.

Next year, I'm going to promote The Hippy Highway more widely and, by then, I am sure I will be able to come up with something to sell it with. My aim is to get 10 starters and 5 finishers, with me being one of the finishers. I am sure it can be done. It is really a tremendous ride, but it requires the voluntary contribution of considerable energy (mind and body) from the rider. It traverses some truly magical country in a very special locale and completion of the ride offers a sense of accomplishment of a nature and quality rarely accessed by a rider who usually finds comfort with familiarity.