

The Hippie Highway (7th October, 2017) Mark Riley

The Hippie Hwy is a lovely ride through inspiring country, quaint villages, olde bridges, contented cows, white horses and Hippies in tie-dye. Ha Ha, dream on - it was a f*ing nightmare!

Audax rides are an educational experience. You always learn something new on a ride, some rides more than others. This was one of those rides.

RO Paul Witzerman is an odd creature. He (and people of his ilk, you can guess who I'm talking about) are often flying down to that exotic location Victoria. To do bike rides. (?) Because gravel and hills. (??) And I expect Paul wanted to study a certain Welsh accent as part of the strategy to develop a legendary gravel ride of his own up here. Anyhow, you cannot fault Paul's enthusiasm, he was keen to lend out his bikes, and was gutted when his (old man) knee problem prevented him from riding the Hippie Hwy this year. He was honest with his advice. That's probably enough good things that can be said. He did mention in parting "Look out for the 'hero' gravel...". Apparently, like eskimos that have 100 words for snow, people like Paul have lots of words for gravel. (It's the gravel after light rain, that gives that extra traction and bite in the corners.)

We (Nick Burnett, Roger Hawley, Ant Richardson, Mark Riley) started off with the swing along the Gold Coast shoreline. The HH follows the 6 Bumps & 1 Hill course up to the first check point at Tyalgum. I'm thinking the HH could easily be renamed 25 Bumps & 1 Hill. The Tomewin hill is still the highest elevation, but there are an awful lot of bumps, 5000m+ of them in the 318 km. And by the way, at the end of the day (night) that gratuitous 18 km becomes quite important.

The road to Tyalgum is flat (ish), but last year we did idiot pace-lining. Nice & slow this year (lesson learnt). We arrive with one and a half hours in the bank. (After a panic daylight-saving recalculation). Such a safety buffer is usually just added to as a ride goes on; but it turns out that on this ride we were under the hammer the whole day, and this margin was slowly whittled away. Nick on the other hand, had long gone.

Next came the Cadel Rd dirt sector. This is actually a very nice way to join two areas that are impossible to access otherwise. That gets a Tick. Pretty. Yep. Wadesville has a free ice water machine in the laundry room (lesson). I was sweating unbelievably considering it was such a cool day (overcast 24C max). But I was a bit disappointed that I hadn't sighted an actual hippie yet, but as soon as we enter Kyogle Rd a bike slots in behind us. It was a sweet carbon psychedelic pink number, a bearded Nimbin local with arms full of tats, I'm thinking roadie/hippie, who shared some Nimbin stories for the next 20k. He said he'd like to do some Audax rides in the future, and I swear I wasn't hallucinating at this stage.

Coming out of Nimbin, the hill up Tuntable Falls Rd was crunch time for me last year: when even Andrew Bragg's baby food couldn't revive me. I was happy to pass this point, but this is where I stopped taking pictures, it was time to concentrate on survival. We arrived at Dunoos where the shopkeeper tells Roger to not lean his bike against his shop. Roger graciously bowed to him and parked his bike elsewhere (lesson: this is called "the only shop in town").

The next checkpoint is Mullumbimby, so the course heads in the opposite direction. Because gravel. We finally get to Mullumbimby, it's dark, and we're not going to finish. Ant is frantic; his YRR is disappearing down the tubes. He scouts the pub and the quickest meal is a 30 minute wait. There's a cafe just closing up, but we manage to get some pasties quickly heated in the microwave. Sorry guys, but I'm taking a crap in the pub, Ant is pacing, Roger has found his back brake has gone. It's a fast exit from Mullumbimby because we are going up the flat of a river valley. Into the hills. And you just know it's going to get worse. And it does as we hit the "bullshit" gravel (my classification). Steep, slippery and corrugated. The power out of my legs is simply not enough to make the bike go forward, and I'm walking. Riding. Walking. Riding. Walking. It went forever.

Like coming out of bad dream we eventually arrive in beautiful, beautiful, wonderful Uki. All Garmin's are down, the cue sheet says turn left. Away from the finish. Because gravel. F**ck! (Ant). 10km Gravel (smiley face, Cue-sheet). This section was relatively benign, but it slows us down. It's impossible to work out how much time we have in our addled states (lesson: seems my phone shows Qld time if no signal, NSW time if signal). Tyalgum again, sign says Murwillumbah over the bridge, cue sheet has mostly disintegrated in my pocket, brain not functioning. We make the emergency call to the RO. Straight to voicemail, but there is no time to even leave an abusive message. We piece together the cue sheet fragments and make the frantic dash to the base of Tomewin. I'm basically an out-of-body observer at this stage; curious in a detached way to see if I'm going to make it. A very slow grind up Tomewin, and hurtling down the other side. (Lesson: with fat grippy, tyres you can go really, really fast downhill) .

At the end of the day (1:40am), we had some 50 minutes to spare, thank goodness for daylight saving. Thanks to Ant & Roger who dragged my sorry ass home, and kudos to Nick who rode most of it solo almost 2 hrs quicker. I'm pretty sure his 17h40m time for this ride is not going to be bettered anytime soon.

Last lesson: All four riders DNFed last year, all four finished this year. The difference was the weather. Last year was hot, this year we had ideal cool conditions. But that didn't stop me from dripping with sweat the whole time. My advice to all those Victorians who will be flying up to Queensland to do this legendary ride (which will now become a Permanent): pick your day & drink lots.