

WHEEL WORLD ADVENTURES

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HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Cycling holidays represent the very essence of travel, a chance to slow down the pace and immerse yourself in the local culture. Taking a year off work to plan an epic adventure from Vienna to Vladivostok is not for everyone, so for the rest of us a week or two on a guided bike tour is an attainable escape. The bikes are provided while your luggage travels in a support-vehicle, which doubles as a people-mover when the going gets tough.

You can cover a lot of distance on two wheels, and every kilometre is a chance to meet new people and make a new friend. At the end of a day's ride you'll want a comfortable bed and a hot shower, ready to start the next section. Most bike tours include a few buses or planes to cover the big distances, so you can save your pedalling for the scenic routes.

Start gearing up for adventure straight away by taking advantage of Victoria's world class trails, catering for every level of skill. And the only guide you'll need is at the bookshop.

Two Wheel Touring

You don't have to be Lance Armstrong to complete a cycling tour of France, or any other part of Europe. Exodus has been specialising in well organised and carefully graded tours for over 20 years, and caters to a wide range of fitness levels. Mountain-bike treks and off-road adventures are designed to get you into the wilderness and back home again. Days on the trail are complemented by rustic accommodation in small towns.

Traditional road tours still top the list, and why not when you can hop on a ferry in Croatia, ride across an Adriatic island and spend the night in a charming pension by the water. The pace of cycling is very relaxed, which is just as well because the wine and seafood up and down the Dalmatian coast is too good to rush.

If jungles and rivers are more your style then Grasshopper Adventures can get you cycling through remote roads in Laos. Ride sections are broken up with relaxing stays in small villages, visits to temples and a river journey down the Mekong.

First time travellers to Asia will find this country inspiring, while anyone who knows South-East Asia will be amazed at the unique charms of Laos and its people. There is no better way to experience Laos than from ground-level, greeted by waving children and smiling farmers along the roadside.

Laos – 14 days of Indochina from \$1950: www.grasshopperadventures.com

Croatia – 8 day tour of the Dalmatian coast starts at \$2050: www.exodus.co.uk

Coming Down the Mountain

Next time you visit Tasmania it's worth heading up Mt Wellington so you can ride back down it again. Island Cycle Tours not only supply the bike but a helmet, gloves and a warm jacket. It can get really cold up on the mountain at any time of year, but the views coming down are delightful as the alpine flora gives way to the forest.

The last section of the ride heads off-road for about 5km before heading back into the city and a hot latte by the waterfront.

Visitors to Norfolk Island can mountain bike from summit to sea, beginning with the scenic views at Mt Pitt before heading downhill through the National Park. Forest trails provide excellent bike access and plenty of shade from the sun.

Once you hit the ocean you are greeted with spectacular views of the northern coast, and a well earned picnic lunch courtesy of Tropical Adventures Norfolk. For a more physical challenge you can continue the ride along undulating coastal reserves to finish in the south of the island for a swim at Emily Bay.

Tasmania – Mt Wellington Descent costs \$65: www.islandcycletours.com

Norfolk Island – \$55 for a half-day adventure: Tropical Adventures Norfolk, phone (+6723) 23208

Taking up the Challenge

Bicycle tours are not just environmentally friendly, they can be charity friendly too. RAW Travel organise fund-raising challenges that bring together like-minded people and sends them to exotic destinations. Group sizes are typically

larger than a regular cycling tour, catering to a wider range of abilities and all in the name of helping communities and charities.

RAW Travel's range of Open Challenges are available to anyone and this year they have added northern Vietnam to their challenges. The hill-tribes north of Hanoi offer a very different experience to the more conventional Hanoi to Saigon route, starting in the rice-paddies of Mai Chau and climbing through the cool mountain air en-route to Sapa.

The next departure on November 10th will raise money for several charities, covering a distance of 525km in 11 days. The journey costs \$2020 including a donation: www.rawtravel.com

Closer to Home

Victoria offers some of Australia's best options for bicycle holidays, so you don't have to travel far from home to enjoy a unique adventure by bike. Julia Blunden's latest edition of Bike Tours Around Victoria highlights the state's abundance of great trails and variety of conditions. Coastal, mountain and open plains all feature in the guide, and range from flat and easy to hilly and challenging. Victoria has got the lot.

Julia's pick of the bunch is the Murray to Mountains Rail Trail; nearly 100km of dedicated cycling path with plenty of B&B's along the way plus the Bus-a-Bike service to help you get home again.

Bicycle Victoria provides a wealth of resources to anyone who wants to get more involved in cycling around Melbourne or the state. They also organise the annual Around the Bay in a Day and the Great Victorian Bike Ride, both of which are ideal events to help motivate you to get pedalling: www.bv.com.au

Rail Trails is an excellent website that lists detailed information about former railway lines across Australia that now serve as cycling and walking tracks: www.railtrails.org.au

VicRoads offer interactive and downloadable bicycle maps via their website which gives cyclists in the city and rural areas better information about bike friendly routes: www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/Home/BicyclesPedestrians

See the Other Side

City bicycle tours are designed to appeal to people who don't ride everyday while revealing the character and charms of the destination. Budapest is a great city for cyclists, offering dedicated bike-lanes and an abundance of highlights within a short ride of each other.

Yellow Zebra Bikes begin their three hour tour on the Pest side of the Danube, visiting historical haunts and tree-lined avenues, and finish across the river among the lavish buildings of Buda Castle. Aside from being great way to see the sights and learn a little history, you quickly learn your way around the city too.

Bangkok by comparison seems at first the worst place in the world to get on two wheels, unless you're doing the "Bangkok Unlocked" half-day tour with Grasshopper Adventures. This unique experience is the result of an Australian bike-nut who has lived in the city for seven years and refuses to go anywhere in Tuk-Tuks.

The route utilises river walks, narrow back-streets and pedestrian bridges to avoid the main roads. It's a very local perspective on Bangkok, featuring exquisite temples and authentic markets that you won't find in any guide book.

Bangkok - \$40 for the half-day: www.grasshopperadventures.com

Budapest - \$40 for three hours: www.yellowzebrabikes.com

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