



An important rail line for transporting passengers and cargo from 1882 to 1970s, the old Tallarook to Mansfield line sat fallow after its closure until the decision was made to turn it into a rail trail for cyclists, walkers, and horse riders, in 2004. Now it's a popular tourist drawcard that sees hundreds of cyclists ride it in its entirety each year.

Where Is It?

The Great Victorian Rail Trail, formerly known as the Goulburn River High Country Rail Trail, is situated in North Eastern Victoria.

It runs from Tallarook, just off the Hume Highway, south of Seymour, to Mansfield, to the west of Mt Buller – gateway to the ski fields, according to the locals.

How Do I Get There?

If you start at Tallarook, it's approximately a 1.5-hour drive from Melbourne along the Hume Highway. Mansfield is situated about 2.5 hours from Melbourne.

I caught the Seymour V/Line train from Southern Cross Station to Tallarook. The journey takes just over an hour, and most train services have bicycle facilities on-board.

When Should I Visit?

Autumn and spring are the best times to visit. I visited in late summer and receives some unpleasantly hot weather. I would imagine sections of the track become muddy after rain.

Where to Stay?

The Great Victorian Rail Trail is suitable for all sorts of bicycling tourers – credit card tourers and the self-sufficient alike. Generally, you'll have a town to stay in each night. Most towns offer a range of accommodation options. These are the accommodation options I observed in each town:

- **Tallarook** – Pub, bush camping, bed and breakfast
- **Trawool** – Motel
- **Yea** – Pub, motels, caravan park, bed and breakfast
- **Molesworth** – Pub, campground
- **Alexandra** – Pub, motel, caravan park, bush camping, bed and breakfast
- **Yarck** – Pub, bed and breakfast
- **Bonnie Doon** – Pub, caravan park, bed and breakfast
- **Mansfield** – Pub, caravan park, resort, bed and breakfast

If you're willing to get off the track a bit, there are many other bush camping options available in and around the Lake Eildon National Park.



Where To Buy Food and Supplies?

The major towns along the trail have supermarkets of varying sizes, including Yea, Alexandra, and Mansfield. The smaller towns have general stores, some have service stations. There are some fine bakeries along the routes, and loads of great places to get a good cup of coffee.

Mansfield Coffee Merchant, Yea Emporium, and Hock The Ruby where my favourite places to grab a coffee.

Here's a more comprehensive rundown on the type of resupply points and businesses available on the track:

- **Tallarook** – Pub, cafes, general store
- **Trawool** – Cafe/restaurant
- **Yea** – Supermarket, cafes, restaurants, pubs, takeaway shops, butcher, bakery, service station
- **Molesworth** – General store, pub
- **Alexandra** – Supermarket, cafes, takeaway shops, butcher, bakery, service station
- **Yarck** – General store, cafes, pub
- **Merton** – Service station
- **Bonnie Doon** – General store, pub, restaurants, service station
- **Mansfield** – Supermarket, cafes, restaurants, pubs, takeaway shops, butcher, bakery, service station

Places To Stop For a Rest

There are plenty of places to stop for a break on this trail. Some spots are designated and sports shelter, seating, and a long-drop toilet. Sometimes the call of a big gumtree is enough. Make sure you carry enough water to get to the next town as while most of the toilets have a small rainwater tank the water isn't suitable for drinking, and maybe empty anyway. (On my trip in February 2016 all of these rainwater tanks were empty, so I couldn't even use them to wash my hands.)

See the map below which shows all the former station sites. Most of these sites have rest facilities, and there is also a shelter and picnic table at Merton Gap and Eglinton Cutting – two of the best views on the entire trip.



Ideal Credit Card Bicycle Touring Itinerary

Credit card cyclists are those that set off with very little gear, maybe a few changes of clothes, toiletries, and a few bits and pieces, and stay in motels or cabins each night, and eat out at restaurants and pubs. Here's my take on the ideal itinerary for the credit card bike tourist that wants to ride a section of the rail trail over 4 days:



Day 1

Drive or catch the train to Tallarook first thing in the morning. Grab a coffee at Hock The Ruby and lunch in Yea. Cycle to Molesworth (56.2km). Stay at the Molesworth Hotel Motel. Have dinner at the pub.

Day 2

Cycle from Molesworth to Mansfield. Grab a takeaway breakfast at the Molesworth General Store - or let some muesli bars tide you over until you get to Yarck (11.8km) where you can enjoy something a little more substantial at the cafe. Stay in a cabin at a caravan park or motel in Mansfield. Dine out at one of the pubs or restaurants.

Day 3

Grab a nice breakfast of bacon and eggs at one of the cafes in Mansfield. Cycle from Mansfield to Alexandra (72.7km). Grab snacks and/or lunch at Bonnie Doon, Merton, or Yarck. Stay in a cabin at the caravan park or motel in Alexandra. Dine out at one of the pubs or restaurants.

Day 4

Cycle from Alexandra to Tallarook (73.1km). Grab breakfast at a cafe in Alexandra. Stop for lunch in Yea. Arrive in Tallarook late afternoon for a beer at the pub before catching the train or driving back to Melbourne.

Tallarook to Mansfield and Back Again in Late Summer

As I pushed my bike up to the front of the Tallarook Hotel two well-watered gentleman stumbled out. "It's closed, mayttttee" the locals slurred as they unwisely stumbled to their cars. "I've got a booking, it's fine" I told them as I tiredly pulled my phone from my pocket to inspect the time. 11:16pm.

Today was a long day. It started at 6:30am, as I cycled in the still darkness through the backstreets of Adelaide to catch The Overland train to Melbourne. An eleven-hour train journey was followed by a two-hour delay in Melbourne, giving me enough time to sink a hearty burger and slurp down a few pints of lager.

I was tired and just wanted to sleep, but there was still an hour of train travel to be beared, up the Seymour line to the sleepy village of Tallarook.

But this wouldn't be last of my journey along railway lines - I was about to embark on a weeklong cycle up The Great Victorian Rail Trail to Mansfield and back again.



I had no idea they grew wine grapes in the area. These vineyards are just out of Tallarook.



Setting off

Next morning, the first day on the saddle, was off to a slow start. I slept in and wouldn't make off until midday. No matter, *I'll make it a short one*, I assured myself. *I have plenty of time*. A big breakfast at Hock The Ruby had me feeling I was in trendy Fitzroy, not a little rural town where dusty utes are the norm.

I was to learn that this part of rural Victoria was in no way caught behind the times, and was well up with my inner city tastes.

Good food, craft beer, and great coffee were found wherever I went. But not while feeling commercial or overly touristy. The towns largely support the communities, and the nature is pretty raw. Very raw in places.

First day in the saddle

The first day, indeed, was a short one. From Tallarook it was a pleasant downhill along flats of the fast-flowing Goulburn River, before it retreated and made its way past the old stations of Trawool, Granite, Kerrisdale, and Homewood.

The trail surface mainly comprised granitic sand up until Homewood where it gave way to chert and become a decidedly more difficult surface to ride on with a fully-packed touring bike with fairly slick 32mm tyres.

Bill Power, the owner of the Tallarook hotel, commented on my tyres as I set off, telling me they'd be a little uneasy on the sandy stretches. I found it to be quite the opposite - I thoroughly enjoyed the granitic sand and found the chert that made up most of the track beyond Homewood to be really hard going. All part of the fun, right?

I can proudly tell you I only nearly had one spill the entire week. I ducked into the Trawool Resort to grab a bottle of orange juice - a carb-loving cyclists best friend! As I was returning to the track via the gravel carpark I took a corner a little too tightly for my heavy bike. A sheet of gravel slid out from underneath me, as a couple of lunchers looked on, and I ended up under the bike.

I didn't so much as come off the bike, as slowly place it on top of myself in a controlled manner with lots of swear words. I was fine. The bike was fine. We all had a laugh and I went on to think, 'What an embarrassing story that would have made had it been worse. One mishap on the track. In a carpark buying orange juice.' Onwards...



That dark grey gravel is the chert substance I have been whinging about. Beautiful view though, right?

Homewood to Yea

From Homewood it's a slow climb up to Yea. The rough surface and headwind made it slow going and I arrived exhausted, after only 40km, around 4pm. With no bush camping options near town, I opted for a night at the Yea Holiday Park. Not a bad choice, either.

Self-sufficient campers enjoy a multitude of places to pitch a tent along the banks of the Yea River. The only thing that let the place down was its proximity to the Melba Highway which was alive with traffic well into the night.

Dinner was my favourite Back Country Cuisine Thai Chicken Curry and instant mash potato. Yes, this is a plug. It's actually delicious. Try it for yourself.

As I cooked dinner a German couple who arrived in a campervan started to chat. They had intended to tour the south-east of Australia, from Brisbane, on their motorbikes.

One of the bikes carked it, it was going to be too expensive to repair or replace, so they resorted to completing their trip in a camper. They didn't seem pleased but were happy to be in a warm climate.

Sleep came easily on a cool, still night.

The next day

Time to climb. From Yea, the trail winds through farmland, well away from the road, before making its way up to Cheviot Tunnel. The climb is gradual and scenic. Seeing the little dark blip of the tunnel entrance on the hillside was a relief. It meant it was downhill for the next several kilometres.

The Cheviot Tunnel was completed in 1883 and is constructed from approximately 675,000 handmade clay bricks. 130 years later, it is still in remarkable condition.

At the insistence of some locals I met in Yea, I turned my bike light on as I cycled through the tunnel and could make out the old lantern hooks used during construction, on the southern wall. Visible for the bird crap underneath them - they're a popular perching spot it seems.



The mighty Cheviot Tunnel. Well worth the long, slow climb. Look at those bricks.

Descent to Molesworth

The descent down into Molesworth was pleasant. The track surface was sandy once more and was nicely shaded by terraces of trees, removing the pinch of the late morning sun.

A quick break for lunch, and I was on my way to the site of the old Cathkin station, then onto the old spur line down into the village of Alexandra, or Alex' as locals call it.

It's 14km from Cathkin, along the branch line, to Alexandra. It's mostly gradual uphill on a chert surface, before you break out from the cutting right next to the Maroondah Highway, which reveals superb views of the township, the Cathedral Ranges to the south, Lake Eildon National Park to the east, and Kingslake, which was devastated by bushfires in 2009, way off in the distance.

As this trip was to be part camping, part credit card touring, I decided Alex' was a nice place to get a motel for the night. Slack, I know!



The view over Alexandra. Those ranges in the background yield to Lake Eildon further to the east.

Heading off again the next morning

Remember that lovely descent into Alexandra I told you about? Well, going up it was the way I would be starting my day today. My fitness had improved a lot, despite only having 80km or



so under my belt, so the ascent was easy going and before I knew it I was back at the spur lines junction with the main rail trail.

Today was going to be a long day. I would be riding from Alexandra to Mansfield – 79km and the longest climb of the trip. And what's more, the mercury was set to hit 35°C.

From Cathkin, it's all uphill for just over 20km to Merton Gap. Despite the ascent and again, the trail surface, this was one of my favourite sections of the track. It starts out running alongside the Maroondah Highway, though the tiny village of Yarck, before retracting inland through tracts of native woodland. Rolling hills all round. And the last of the Goulburn Valley. The climb begins gradually before becoming steeper, with more ups and downs, as you curve back onto the main road, prior to the final stretch of the gap. It's important to stop and look behind you as you approach the cutting. The views over the valley and the ranges beyond are stunning. It's at this point you start to realise how far you have come.

A quick descent into Merton for a bite to eat and toilet break and it was on to Bonnie Doon. I challenge any Aussie who has seen the cult Australian flick, *The Castle*, to say, read, or hear the name 'Bonnie Doon' and not break into song:

"We're goin' to Bonnie Doon. We're goin' to Bonnie Doon."

Riding to Bonnie Doon

It was nice riding into Bonnie Doon. Mostly flat with a bit of decline if anything. It passes through lush farming country, with the odd herd of cows or sheep to keep you company. Old Landcruiser utes swish by on the road, their kelpies in the back. The hills widen from the valley as you approach Bonnie Doon, telling you that Lake Eildon is near.

First you pass Brankeet Inlet to the north, which at the time of my trip was long dry. I spotted what I thought were clouds of smoke ahead. What could that be? Something was moving on the ground. I pulled aside and lay my bike against a wire fence. A farmer is herding his sheep. They're running like mad through the dry lake bed and kick up dust as they go. What an unexpected sight.

The track eventually drops into Bonnie Doon. I contemplate spending the night here but didn't like the look of the caravan park. I top up my water bottles out the front of the servo, douse myself in a couple of litres, and marvel at the sweat crystallised on my merino tee. I phone ahead to a caravan park in Mansfield and advise them that I'll be there around 6:30pm. I look forward to a beer and meal.



The car bridge over the Bonnie Doon arm of Lake Eildon. According to locals, water levels were apparently very low in all of these arms, but quite healthy in the main part of the lake.

The final 20km's

The final 20km takes longer than expected. I'm clearly fatigued and the heat has gotten to me. Everybody I meet along the way think I am mad doing 79km in the heat. I vow to take the next day off, with temperatures forecast for 39°C, rather than do a side trip up to Mt Buller.

The highlight of this stretch is Mairdample. Situated to the side of the track is a gazebo for shade, and an esky attached to an honesty box full of cold cans of soft drink, and a supply of

cold water. A cold can of lemonade is just what I need. I empty what would have been about \$6 of change into their jar as a sign of my gratitude. Puttering into Mansfield at around 6:45pm, I won't make the supermarket to get some provisions for dinner. I'm chuffed by this - a pub meal it will be!

I've completed the Great Victorian Rail Trail. All 157.1km of it, including up and back the Alexander branch. That was fun.



Finished!

Accommodation after a long ride

Accommodation this night was the Mansfield High Country Caravan Park, right in town. Despite its central location, the unpowered tent sites were quiet and pleasant. Dinner was a protein-filled marinated lamb salad and a few pints at the Delatite Hotel at the end a rather hot and tiring day. Despite night-time temperatures in the high 20s, I slept well.

The next day I explore Mansfield and rent a cabin with an air conditioner. I've never been one for the heat, and today is hot. Problem is, the next day, when I'll have no option but to get back on the trail, it's due to be 38°C.

Travelling back to the start - the highlights

I won't share the full story of travelling back to the start, but I will share with you some highlights (and lowlights!) The 67km ride from Mansfield back to Molesworth was hell. Half the day I was accompanied by a thick northerly headwind and 38°C temperatures. It was a tough slog.

However, the aches and pains and overheating soon went away when I pulled into the Molesworth Recreation Reserve campground, my resting place for the night.

Situated on the banks of the Goulburn it was a magic place to camp. I could have stayed a week.



Camping at the Molesworth Recreation Reserve. Dirt cheap, at \$10 for an unpowered site, and oh-so peaceful and idyllic. My favourite camping spot of the trip.

Molesworth to Tallarook was a gentle ride and allowed me to appreciate the scenery that I had a few days earlier cycled away from. The upper reaches of the Goulburn is a stunning, rugged sort of place. With wooded hillsides, and sharp little escarpments of granite popping out here and there. It looks like it would be a beautiful place to hike someday.

It was early afternoon on a Thursday as I pulled into the main street of Tallarook once more. In 5 days, according to the Strava app, I had cycled 280.3km. To be sure, that's not a huge number of kilometres, but with a heavy touring bike, average fitness, high temperatures, and that bloody chert, it was a challenge.

Final thoughts on my trip

No doubt, after riding the Great Victorian Rail Trail I have a taste for this kind of exploration. According to Rail Trails Australia, there are over 130 rail trails across Australia. They



contribute greatly to tourism and local communities. This trail also represent a healthy way of exploring the outdoors while being inclusive of cyclists, walkers, and horse riders of all levels of fitness and abilities.

What's more, they show you a perspective of Australia that has been observed and appreciated for many hundreds of years.

Update 12/07/2016: Added more information on the rest stops, food options, etc. Added 'Ideal Credit Card Bicycle Touring Itinerary' section.