

# RIGHT ON TRACK

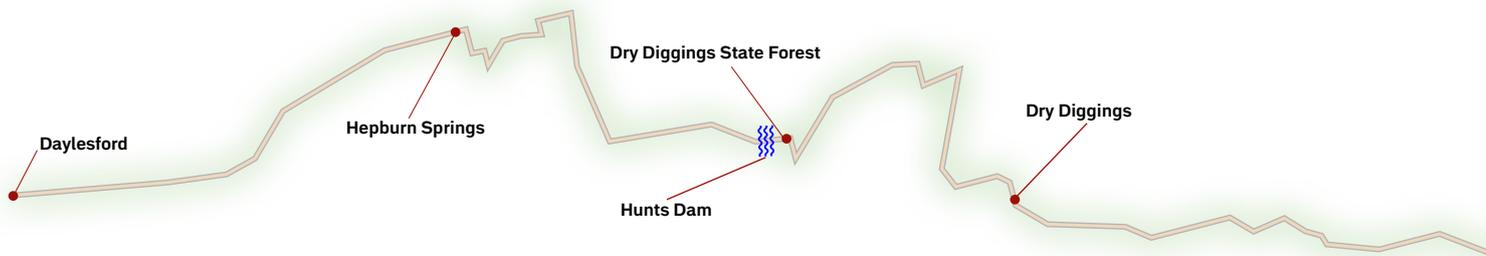


*Take a two-wheeled journey across the Dry Diggings Track in central Victoria and uncover a world of endless bushland, shimmering lakes and towns steeped in mining history.*

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Lake Daylesford (this image) offers mountain bikers spectacular views along the Dry Diggings Track (opposite).



Should *Man Vs Wild* star Bear Grylls ever hang up his army boots, I'm pretty sure my name is not going to come up as a potential replacement. I'm far more partial to a comfy bed, hot shower and cooked food than snuggling up inside a carcass in the snow with only a bag of wee for sustenance.

And right now, I reckon I'm a fair bit smarter than Grylls. I'm perched on the side of a mountain among dense box gums, with the forested ridges of central Victoria just visible through the trees. I'm in the middle of nowhere and it's up to my companion and I to find our way out of the wilderness... But, in a few hours, we'll be quaffing wine and ingesting fine delicacies like royalty.

We're riding the Dry Diggings Track, which weaves a path between Daylesford (approximately 110 kilometres north-west of Melbourne) and Castlemaine. It is

a mecca for mountain bikers and the ham in the sandwich of the greater Goldfields Track, which stretches from Ballarat to Bendigo over three sections.

And we are making it even easier by cheating slightly. The Dry Diggings Track officially kicks off in Daylesford, where the dining, spa-style pampering and accommodation options are immense. However, we're setting off from The Hide, which offers self-contained rooms on a farm located smack bang in front of the picturesque Mt Franklin. It's a little further along the track, meaning we have less than the prescribed 61-kilometre distance to cover today.

But even our shorter route demands a religious bout of carbs-hoovering and The Hide is well equipped for that, with supplies of freshly baked bread and eggs from the farm. We'll also need plenty of energy, for while the early riding

through rolling farmland is effortless, the track soon narrows and rises upwards.

The first series of rocky, twisty climbs takes us up and along high ridges and north into the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park. This area was the epicentre of gold-rush activity in the mid-19th century, but these days it's utterly deserted wilderness.

The relics of the era, however, haven't quite disappeared. Banked walls and water races (a sophisticated network that once funnelled water into this area) are occasionally visible among the box gums and dry scrub, while some gullies look like war zones due to the extensive alluvial mining that scarred the landscape.

Keen mountain bikers with single-track vision might not even notice this because the ride is involving and enjoyable. Short, sharp climbs and goat-track descents follow the initial sustained ascent, ►



(left to right) The picture-perfect hills of country Victoria; the track is marked with small signs pointing bikers in the right direction.



along with gentle zigzags through greener gullies, before rising back up and passing through the Tubal Cain mining complex, the site of more relics.

From here, it's a spectacular drop into Vaughan, which is located in a secluded haven on the tree-lined Loddon River and named after its mineral springs. The nearby private residences might lead you to think you've reached civilisation, but it's a false impression. Food isn't available here, so you'll have to make do with what's in your backpack at the great lunch spot by the river.

There's only one way out of Vaughan. It's a steep climb up the main tarmac road, past Red Knob, a prominent rocky outcrop created by the sluicing away of topsoil, a return to the forest, and another climb up to a plateau where the trees are punctuated by grassy scrub and moon-like pitted bedrock.

Through the once-bustling, now-ghostly outpost of Fryerstown, the track rises again

### *Fatigue is replaced by adrenaline as a series of sharp corners and jumps are counted off.*

towards the old Spring Gully Junction Mine. Here, ruins such as a stone-faced loading ramp (where quartz was fed into a stamping battery for crushing) and stone-walled paddock (where the mine horses were kept) attest to its significance in the area's mining history.

If you're human, your legs will be feeling a little second-hand by now, but another series of climbs onto another ridge stands between you and the end of the day's riding. Soon, the path levels out and glinting rooftops in the distance become visible, indicating Castlemaine, the first proper town we've seen in more than five hours — and the only way to get there is down.

The final 10-kilometre stretch of the Dry Diggings Track is fast and furious, tracing a serpentine path down the mountain. Fatigue is replaced by adrenaline as an

intoxicating series of sharp corners and jumps are counted off and, before we know it, we are bursting out of the forest and onto smooth tarmac towards Castlemaine's historic centre.

Within seconds of arriving in town, we're slumped at a street-side table draining a brand of beer you don't often find outside of hip inner-city bars. We're feeling a quiet sense of accomplishment as we ponder exactly which one of Castlemaine's many quality nosh options we'll be refuelling at tonight. Adventure and indulgence have never intermingled quite so effortlessly.

**GETTING THERE** To book your Virgin Australia flight to Melbourne, visit [www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com) or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia). ▶



(clockwise from top left) Cyclists enjoy a break to take in the views; the main street of Castlemaine; sweet treats at Apple Annie's bakery.



### TAKE THE SCENIC ROUTE

Feeling rather adventurous? Then try riding the full 210-kilometre length of the **Goldfields Track** from Ballarat to Bendigo. You'll need four days or more and a decent level of fitness, plus you'll have to carry everything in a backpack (including tools and a first-aid kit). Along the way, opt for beds rather tent accommodation. **Ballarat Miners Cottages** (+61 418 131 545; [www.ballaratminerscottages.com.au](http://www.ballaratminerscottages.com.au)) has handily located bases near the Wallaby Track out of Ballarat, which climbs north through the Creswick Regional Park before heading east in the direction of Daylesford, while **Country Gate** (95 Simpsons Rd, Springbank; +61 3 5334 0352; [www.countrygatecottage.com.au](http://www.countrygatecottage.com.au)) is well positioned

to accommodate you at the end of day one. Day two takes you north through the Wombat State Forest into Daylesford and day three covers the Dry Diggings Track to Castlemaine. Accommodation options are plentiful in both towns, but we chose **The Hide** at Mount Franklin (205 Saw Pit Gully Rd; +61 427 567 644; [www.thehide.com.au](http://www.thehide.com.au)) for its proximity to the track, and **Apple Annie's** in Castlemaine (31 Templeton St; +61 3 5742 5311; [www.appleannie.com.au](http://www.appleannie.com.au)) for the cyclist-energising pastries courtesy of its attached French bakery. Schedule in a rest day here to indulge in the exceptional food



on offer at establishments such as the **Public Inn** (pictured inset; Criterion Corner, Barker and Mostyn Streets; +61 3 5472 3568; [www.publicinn.com.au](http://www.publicinn.com.au)) and **Bress Wine, Cider & Produce** (3894 Calder Highway; +61 3 5474 2262, [www.bress.com.au](http://www.bress.com.au)) a little further up the track at Harcourt. On the final day's ride, the Leanganook Track takes you from Castlemaine over Mount Alexander and into Bendigo. To get you and your bike from Melbourne to Ballarat and back from Bendigo, you can take a **V Line train** ([www.vline.com.au](http://www.vline.com.au)). For more info on the Goldfields Track and its attractions, visit [www.goldfieldstrack.com.au](http://www.goldfieldstrack.com.au). 🚲

Additional photography: Alamy