

# Discovering OZ

## Riding the High Country

BY CHARLOTTE FRANCIS  
PHOTOS BY CHARLOTTE FRANCIS  
AND JOHN BURGESS/DATAMAJIC

**A**n invitation to ride pillion as part of a rally from Melbourne and back, over the Australian Alps, was an offer I simply couldn't refuse.

It all started with an innocent visit to my hairdresser, Kelly. She told me that her dad, Warren, was organizing a reenactment of a 622-mile motorcycle rally called Over The Australian Alps. Known as OTAA for short, the first event was organized by the Harley Club of Victoria and took place over Christmas 1927. The 80th anniversary trip was inspired by the discovery of an old tarnished trophy at a garage sale in suburban Melbourne. The trophy had been presented to a Bill Grinham for achieving the highest aggregate total of points that first year. Among other items in the sale were a photograph album and a printed itinerary of the 1927 rally. Give or take a few amendments, the itinerary provided a ready-made template for Warren's reenactment.

It sounded like the adventure of a lifetime. How could I say no? Never mind that I was a virgin biker — riding a Yamaha moped with a top speed of 30 mph back in the 1980s doesn't count — and had none of the right gear.

"No worries, mate," reassured one of the organizers, Olly, when we met for a vetting session over a café latte in downtown Melbourne. Olly had not only invited me to ride pillion on his mean black machine, a Harley-Davidson Street Glide, but had also rustled up a helmet and gloves. The rest I

Outside Ryan's Hotel,  
Traralgon



**Bill Grinham (front left) with girlfriend Annie in sidecar and members of the 1927 Harley Club of Victoria.**

managed to beg, borrow, or steal in a range of sizes from large to superlarge.

### Day One

On the morning of the big day, I arrived on Elizabeth Street, Melbourne's motorcycle mecca, to find roughly 50 bikes lined up in a glittering parade of polished chrome. Looking, but not feeling, the part in my borrowed Harley-Davidson leather jacket, I hung around nervously while my travel companions gave their beloved machines a final buff with a cloth. Then it was time to go. The street reverberated with the rumble and roar of Harley engines as members of the Grinham family wished us farewell with a wave of the OTAA flag.

We created quite a stir as we struck out in convoy along the Princes Highway (M1) toward Gippsland in Victoria's southeast corner. My flimsy scarf streamed unglamorously in the wind, and I began to regret the open-face helmet as the unseasonably cool rain needed my face. But compared to the hardship endured by our forebears, we've got it easy with plush seats, stereo systems, GPS, and mobile phones, not to mention asphalt roads and big, powerful engines.

In 1927, 42 riders took 12 days to complete the 622-mile round trip; the roads were pretty rough in those days and often just dirt tracks. In 2008, 53 riders and 10 pillion passengers participated, with some joining us for the Friday to Monday roundtrip and others doing a truncated weekend version. The youngest participant, riding pillion with his father,



Leaving Bairnsdale in convoy.

was 12, and the oldest must have been in his late sixties, but I was too polite to ask. Dixon travelled all the way from San Francisco to participate; Di and Selena, co-owners of a women's clothing company, Bikiechic, came down from Sydney; and "Doc" came over from Adelaide.

By lunchtime, we arrived in the country town of Traralgon, once a stopping place for drovers during the Gold Rush. Across from Ryan's Hotel, with its Victorian iron-lace balconies and ornate balustrades, the local Apex Club put on a barbecue for us, or, more accurately, a sausage sizzle, as we Aussies refer to a hot dog barbecue with coleslaw and salads. I'm not normally partial to such delicacies, but the hot sausage tasted remarkably good, and after half an hour and a quick leg stretch, it was back in the saddle.

Notwithstanding a bum-numbing jolt from riding at high speed over a pothole, we arrived in one piece in Bairnsdale, gateway to the Victorian Lakes region, about at 4 pm. I'd clocked up my first 172 motorbike miles — and had sore hips, a pounding head, and a wind-burnt face to prove it — but I felt marvelous.

Dinner at The Club Hotel in Bairnsdale was not only reasonably priced, but excellent. Dishes such as salmon with wasabi mash and fragrant Thai chicken curry complemented standard pub fare such as steaks and fish and chips. Over dinner, Darryl Woodhouse joined us. Darryl's grandfather, Ivor Dennis, was the first Indian Motorcycle agent in Australasia with premises in Main Street, Bairnsdale. My knowledge of Indians is limited to the story of Bert Munro as portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in the film *The*

*World's Fastest Indian*, so this was a fantastic opportunity to learn more. We also got to admire one of these special bikes up close; Darryl and his father have restored a 1928 Scout 101.

The alcohol and conversation were still in full flow when I headed back to my motel room later on, head still buzzing with the roar of engines.

## Day Two

After a group photo in Main Street, the site of a former motorcycle repair shop, we headed up to Buchan Caves on the edge of the Snowy Mountains. The temperature in the narrow passages of the limestone caves was an ambient 62 degrees Fahrenheit with 95 percent humidity, and I wished I hadn't layered up so much against the morning chill: I was clad in Gore-Tex gloves, thermal top and leggings, a fleece, and waterproof trousers two sizes too big.

Ear plugs out and cigarettes extinguished, our guide Daniel led us down Royal Cave, first discovered in 1910, and we oohed and ahhed our way through a den of weird and wonderful shapes, from organ pipes to squid, brains to iced cakes. Dan explained that the glittering flowstone formed by the water leaving crystal calcite deposits on the rocks is known as fairy dust — hence the name of the first cave discovered in 1907, Fairy Cave. Thinking of the name, I wondered if Fairy Cave had ever experienced such a profusion of leather, tattoos, and facial hair. "All this exercise is a good excuse for another beer," joked one of the riders as we admired the shimmering calcite pools, gravity-defying helictites with noodle-like filaments, and



Underground in Royal Cave



**Riding through fog and rain over Mount Hotham.**

beaten a retreat, though, and as we moved off after lunch, our road captain Trevor put on his fluorescent jacket to lead us through the brooding fog up Mount Hotham. I felt lucky to be in such safe hands; these guys have got years of riding experience.

The sun half broke through the fog and clouds, making the road steam and mountain views flicker in and out of focus. We stopped at the Mount St. Bernard lookout to take photos and admire the view, which is all

the skeletal remains of an ancient, one-toed kangaroo.

Emerging from the caves, king parrots swooped between gum trees, and I noticed the caroling of the Australian magpie, so much more melodic than its raucous European and American cousins. As we followed the Buchan River down to the foothills of the Great Dividing Range, cockatoos screeched overhead and galahs flew, flaunting pink underbellies. I was getting into the swing of this al fresco travelling.

Bruthen is a refueling and refreshment stop. Tempting homemade cakes and pies were offered at a local store, but we needed to keep moving. The Great Alpine Road starts gently enough, and we passed over Tucker Box Creek and Haunted Creek, the patchy sun dappling gray-green gum trees. The temperature plummeted and fog descended as we negotiated the bends up to Dinner Plain, a stylish, purpose-built village. Leaning in toward Olly's back, I gritted my teeth against the lashing rain and my increasingly stiff hips. We arrived in time for a late lunch at High Plains Lodge, where we thawed out in front of the fire with bowls of soup.

We were now in ski and snowboarding country. High Plains Lodge is open all year and caters to skiers in winter and bikers in the summer. Summer seemed to have

the more magnificent in the shifting light. "Stiffler" (I learned that bikers are big on nicknames) opened his arms wide to embrace the elements. "There has to be a God up there," he said, taking in slate-gray skies, fire-ravaged snow gums, lichen-covered branches, and distant hills. Stiffler (real name Pete) followed the rally in a white Mustang, which he won in a raffle; no wonder he believes in God.

Melbourne's fabled four-seasons-a-day obviously applies to the mountains, too; descending via Harrierville into Bright, it was summer again. Nestled in the Ovens Valley, Bright has an impressive avenue of European trees and is famous for its colors in the fall.

We'd had a long, hard, and exhilarating ride, but, after checking in at the motel, I put my hand up, volunteering for more. A few of us took off up to Mount Beauty, where we admired fog-free views of Mount Bogong, Victoria's highest peak. Returning in the early evening to Bright, kangaroos were grazing in paddocks, real ones with three toes.

### **Day Three**

The next morning, Sunday, we lined up for a group photo outside the Alpine Hotel on Anderson Street. I admired Kendal and Wendy's 1946 Knucklehead with its tractor-style seat. "The

**Line up in Bairnsdale. The building featuring a candle logo was originally a motorcycle repair shop.**



bike has a rigid frame and the suspension is in the seat, which is why it goes up and down like a pogo stick,” explained Kendal. The Knucklehead is a 1200cc bike and at a steady 55 mph keeps up with the bigger 1340-1600cc engines. “Pretty good for a 62-year-old bike,” Kendal said proudly.

Doc invited me to have a ride on his CVO known as Orange Betty. It felt as roomy as a chariot and purred contentedly as we follow a disused railway track — now a cycle path linking Bright to Wangaratta — past tobacco fields, wineries, and lavender farms before he opened up the throttle, and we sprinted down the Hume Freeway (M31) to the Glenrowan turnoff.

A 6-meter statue of Ned Kelly clad in homemade armor, rifle at the ready, greets visitors to this otherwise unassuming small town. Celebrated by some as a folk hero, Irish-born Kelly and his gang were notorious bushrangers on the run from the forces of the law. On Saturday, June 27, 1880, the Kelly Gang seized 60 hostages at the Glenrowan Inn. The story of the siege and Kelly’s arrest is told in an animated extravaganza at Ned Kelly’s Last Stand in the Tourist Centre. It’s like Disneyland meets the Wild West in a bizarre mix of computerized voices and sound effects, from out-of-tune fiddles to snoring drunks and barking dogs. The madness and mayhem end in gunshots, and, in a final twist, a disembodied Ned Kelly addresses the audience from beyond the grave.

I emerged from clouds of dry ice to find most of my companions propping up the bar at the Glenrowan Hotel. There was a bit of time to kill before a fundraising auction for the Quadriplegic Association, so Olly and I ordered an \$8 (AU) plate of roast lamb, and he tested me on my bike knowledge. I recited the names of bikes I learned to identify: Sportsters, Roadsters, Knuckleheads, Ultra Glides, Road Kings, Heritage Softails, and Night Trains, not forgetting Orange Betty.

We spent our last night in Benalla, and, after dinner of tough steak with good chips at the Royal Hotel, we stretched out our last evening into the small hours with the help of storytelling sessions and a bottle of vodka in the motel car park. But it wasn’t quite over yet.

## Day Four

Summer was back with a vengeance the next morning, and, as we crossed over on country roads to the Yarra Valley, we passed through a drought-stricken landscape of dried-up lakes, and parched and dusty paddocks. We bypassed the region’s many wineries, stopped for morning coffee at the historic Delatite Hotel in Mansfield, and then for lunch in the small town of



**Black Spur Drive.**

Alexandra before we hit the magnificent Black Spur Drive just south of Marysville.

Dwarfed by towering mountain ash, we zigzagged our way down to Healesville, negotiating bend after bend of luscious green tree ferns, perfectly framed in dappled light. The warm, woody scent of eucalyptus was intense, and, when we stopped for photos, the call of bellbirds echoed across the treetops. Now I understood the sign I saw in the bar at Dinner Plain: “Only motorcyclists understand why dogs stick their head out of car windows.” **RB**

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[www.ParkWeb.Vic.gov.au](http://www.ParkWeb.Vic.gov.au)

**Ned Kelly’s Last Stand**  
The Glenrowan Tourist Centre  
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