

Caressing the Rock: a tour on Norfolk Island

By Greg Hardwick

My first glimpse of Norfolk Island was a brief flash of emerald green hills through the low cloud cover. From the air it appeared as though the island's size, or lack of it, was going to make cycle touring a problem. I really wasn't in the mood to do laps and after all, riding over the same ground twice is almost the definition of that more dreaded "T" word – training. Like any want-a-be adventurer I had to have that special destination, one that presented something truly memorable.

I quickly reassured myself that some of the most memorable parts of previous tours have been the areas of forested mountain climbs, quiet roads, clean air and breath-taking scenery – the quality parts. The funny thing was, although Norfolk may not allow the quantity or distance of typical Australian rides, it certainly provides that quality - a subtle quality unique to this tiny rock in the Pacific. And what's more, riders of any ability can cover most of the island.

Situated some 1440 Km south-south east of Brisbane and only 800 Km south of Noumea, Norfolk Island has a sub-tropical climate blended with the unmistakable features of an English

country-side. A strange combination, which only helps to re-enforce the specific features of the island's history. The beauty and serenity of the island is reflected in its historic buildings, its stunning coastal scenery, and its tall and majestic pines. The history is all around, and to cycle through it in the salt laden air, conjures up images of a remarkable past.

My first idea was to see as much as I could by means of an island loop track. Only problem was, due to the island's topography most roads radiate outwards from the central township of Burnt Pine. After a little investigation, a few walking stages and an out-and-back track, I was able to find a 45 Km loop. Although not very long, this ride is never flat, is immersed in amazing scenery, and can be completed comfortably in a day without seeing more than one or two cars. My advice - leave the panniers at home, bring your favourite back pack, throw in a few rolls of film and fit the low gear ratios.

Around the Island in a day

Setting off in the early morning, a low cloud cover blotted out the island's highest peak, Mt Bates (318m). Dropping down into Kingston from Burnt Pine past the old water mill, the road quickly descends into the old regions of Norfolk's former British settlement. The

landscape is dotted with a few old stone huts, and the road is lined with pines. Kingston is well worth a closer inspection, it's a place that still echoes with its convict past.

In the warm weather the reef provides a safe lagoon for swimming and snorkelling. If you're into surfing and can convince a local you won't damage their board, a nice reef break also forms, generally in the warmer months. This is one of the flattest areas on the island, and the bike's a relaxing way to explore and take some pictures.

The road at the eastern end of Kingston makes an abrupt change, as it materialises into the first of the climbs. The one challenge of this ride is the constant relatively short yet steep climbs (a good reason to leave the panniers behind). Again the views are magnificent, only this time they're behind you. Quite a challenge to climb out of the seat whilst ooing and arring at the view behind.

Taking the right turn into Stockyard Road I ventured out to a place called Simons Water, on the east of the island – nice sunrise views. This is the only out and back part of the ride, and if you're in the mood, some of the roads that turn off towards the coast are worth a look. A gentle warning, as the laws of gravity are always at work, you'll create a few extra climbs for

yourself as the roads drop quickly down to the coast.

After returning to the original intersection I rode past the island's only school and turned right into Cascade road. This took me down to the Cascade Jetty, one of the two landing sites for anything that comes by sea (the other is at Kingston). You name it, cars, buses, trucks, they're all off-loaded from the ship into lighters, and taken ashore via what can only be described as a true balancing act of boat and load. Nearby is the Cockpit Waterfall, from which point the road turns into quite a steep and long dirt climb of 2-3 km.

Once again there is the ever present scenery, only this time there's a dramatic increase in native forests and bird life as you enter the National Park. One bird in particular, the White Turn, looks like a little angel hovering over head.

Being raised in Australia with the agro magpie I naturally took immediate evasive action (one hand waving madly overhead) until I realised these birds didn't intend to take some part of my head for a trophy. Instead, they hovered overhead like over-sized inquisitive flies. It's also a climb for those prepared to tackle some hills – I used the small chain ring for most of the climb quite comfortably even with an audience of small white birds.

The official stance on the National Park is no bikes, just walkers and horses, although I found this out after I'd ridden through the park. My advice is, take some walking shoes and dismount for this section, it's too nice a spot to see it flash past. This particular route through the park contains only 2-3km of single track. The park encompasses the island's highest peaks – so you can really get the feeling of isolation with the 360 degrees ocean views.

It's all part of the Norfolk experience - just forget about the kilometres, and absorb the quietness.

The cliff tops contain pines coated with Beard Moss, a host of seabirds and naturally that view.

It all creates a mesmerising atmosphere, which makes a nice spot to stop for a bite to eat.

The track from the national park exits at the far north of the island. There's a monument to Captain Cook, commemorating his landing in 1774. The road from here turns back inland towards the western side of the island and the almost deserted beach of Anson Bay. The advantage of a bike became obvious at this point.

It's the only way to reasonably reach Anson via the national park without covering the same ground twice. Anson Bay is a beautiful sandy beach located below a steep cliff, with access via a small walking track. If you're in the mood for

a swim then it's certainly safe to leave the bike at the top and hike down to the water.

The road from this point onwards is gently undulating, and moves southward through a series of forested valleys. The steep climbs I experienced riding into the national park were now absent, and as the day aged I was able to ride comfortably along the coastline.

This is the last 10km of the loop and if you've taken your time, you can catch one of those typical Norfolk moments – when the sun is setting. I've always taken the Norfolk Pine for granted in Australia, never really contributing its name to a geographical location, as it's so common along the Australian East Coast. Yet here on Norfolk it certainly looks at home and provides a unique foreground for the last moments of the day. I brought along my lights so I could continue after sunset back into town – it can get very dark, very quick.

Nearing Burnt Pine there was one last surprise, a surreal tunnel formed by 170 year-old Moreton Bay figs and White Oaks. The trees cut all the last available light out and make this part of the track something out of a *Hansel and Gretel* book.

A shorter ride minus those hills

If you're not into long rides and would rather take an even more relaxing approach, perhaps a shorter ride is in order. This ride covers about 20 km and most importantly avoids the biggest climbs. Starting in Burnt Pine take the Grassy Head Road towards the National park headquarters. It's a small climb and after turning left into Mission Road there's a quick descent and a nice rolling flat road which brings you closer to the intersection with the Anson Bay Road. After you turn left you'll come across the St Barnabas Chapel on the intersection to Headstone Road. Take the right turn into Headstone Road and you're on the last section of the loop road I described earlier. There are a few gentle hills but nothing too extreme, so most riders of any ability will be able to comfortably ride this section, plus you'll experience the tunnel of figs.

To avoid any of the steep climbs make sure you head back into town along Country Road before exploring the Middlegate area. Burnt Pine and Middlegate are both on the same plateau so the major climbs are absent if you ride through Burnt Pine and towards Middlegate via Queen Elizabeth Avenue. At Middlegate take the left turn at Cascade Road, which will enable a loop to be completed back into Burnt Pine via

Cascade and New Cascade Roads. There's a small climb on the first section of the New Cascade Road, but again it's nothing too extreme. This entire ride is a little over 20km and takes in much of the upper sections of the island as well as plenty of sea views. In a nice ride if you just want a relaxing day without the exertion of hill climbs.

Relaxing at Kingston

For a simple way to explore the ruins then there's no better way than by bike. Kingston is flat and the historic sites in this region can be covered in a little over 10 km. As the traffic is restricted to less than 40 km/h (the entire island is limited to 50km/h) it's also a safe place for the kids to ride and explore. Simply meander around the plethora of ruins and perhaps take a swim in the safe lagoon. Grab some info from the local tourist office and take a few museum tours. From the old watermill to the cemetery containing head stones from 1798, Kingston is a Port Arthur in the Pacific, with a dash of Polynesian influence.

A loop can be completed by taking a short cut across the ocean side of the golf course – a track that is often used by walkers. For those of you interested in riding but don't like the idea of hills

or distance, or would like to take the kids along, this is definitely for you.

The one remarkable aspect of Norfolk is not just the scenery, but the friendliness of the locals.

Always willing to share their island, they help make a unique experience even more special. In all my touring I've never really been to a place more suited to the bicycle. Lacking the great challenge of distance, the island is a place suited to anyone seeking a relaxing holiday combined with a spot of cycling. Putting it simply – soak it all up, and take in some of that untainted air – it really does wonders.

often registering a relative humidity of 80 % (average 75%). Strong winds can sometimes create a severe wind chill factor in winter (bring good quality wet weather gear).

Fact File

Accommodation: More than 44 accommodation properties. Most flights are organised with a package deal. Contact your local travel agent, or for more information visit the web site

www.norfolkisland.nf , or contact Tourism Norfolk Island, PO Box 211, Norfolk Island 2899, Ph: (int +) 6723 22147, Fax (int+) 6723 23109.

Bike Shops: One small shop on the island with bikes for sale and hire. Some parts also available, Land & Sea Tel: (int +) 6723 23418

Climate: Subtropical. Average rainfall 1328mm per year (concentrated from June to August). Temperature varies from a range of 19-28 degrees in summer to 12-21 in winter. Humidity is the controlling factor with the summer months