

A Hack's Guide to the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge

By Tim Grimes (Rider #7).

Day 4, 11.30 am. Temperature about 45. Location, somewhere in the Simpson Desert. 5K from the finish of the stage and with an hour to get there, I sat down under a tree and told myself I had had enough, I was pedalling no more. I decided there that there were two types of people in this world, those of us who pedal the Simpson, and sane people.

Roll back 10 years to the bloke who sold me my first mountain bike and suggested I should ride the Simpson Desert Challenge. You know who you are Sturdy, thanks a freaking lot! So I shelved the idea and the bike, both gathered dust for eight years.

Roll forward to 2010 to when I started pedalling, but sensible stuff, on roads with thin-tyred bikes and coffee shops. Where I could ring my wife to pick me up in my own personal sag-wagon. Till the fateful day I took my dusty Kona down from the hooks and took it on holidays for a taste of some off road action. No sooner had the smile sprung on my face from riding (let's face it off-road is sooo much better) than the challenge slipped back into my consciousness – c'mon, ride the Simpson Desert, how hard can it be?

And so a hack cyclist with only 2 years riding and a worn out 10 year old Kona decided to tackle the Simpson. Lucky a few things changed, like my bike (blessed be the fat tyres, for they shall float on sand) and my training level. Of course the training in Melbourne winter is just like the Simpson, except I traded mud for sand, and hills for dunes, and freezing cold for stinking hot. Still, how hard could it be, right?

Just the simple logistics to get to the start were frightening. Bike, check. Spares, one mountain of them, check. Food, similar mountain, check. Car, fuel, water, radio, riding gear, support crew. To hide costs from wife or come clean and admit them all? (I went for a half-way situation, like ripping off a band-aid slowly. I don't recommend it.)



So when I finally rode my first bit of sand on my Pugsly (blessed be the fat tyres, for they shall float on sand) in the first leg of the first day, my initial feeling was a sense of massive relief that I had actually made the start, and turned a pedal in anger. I fairly belted over the first dune. "Ha, that all you got" I told the Simpson. No it wasn't, and she made me pay.

My goals for the event were meagre. Base goal – finish 50%. Best hope – finish 75% and at least one stage 100%. Primary focus – don't make a fool of yourself.

I actually did dance a little jig at the first water stop on day 1, I had achieved something. And when I made the half way mark of the first leg, I was happy. Keep this up I told myself, and you may no look like such a dick after all. Of course when I finished the whole stage, man I was feeling good. Lunch, eat, drink, eat some more, drink even more. Look at bike, decide it can look after itself. Too soon it's time to start second leg, but my legs still wanted to turn over and the bike still wanted to go faster than Sweep, so at the end of day 1 I was 100% for 2 stages.

Massive cramps on night 1 reminded me I was just a hack. I read a lot about cramps, doctors will talk about salts and hydration, but athletes will tell you to train harder.

Day 2, same as day 1, just a bit stiffer, a little bit harder and a little bit slower. But still Sweep was struggling to keep up with me and first the morning stage and then the afternoon stage passed without being caught. At the end of day 2 I had 260km under my belt and had almost made my base goal. And I was still sitting at 100%!



Took a while to recover that night, felt so tired I was nauseous and couldn't eat or drink – not good when you've dropped 2.5kg over the day. Medics had some good drugs and someone nearby cooked some bacon. One of these two things worked and my appetite returned with a vengeance. Unfortunately so did the night cramps.

Day 3 and morning stage was pretty easy with a big leg around a salt lake. I took a photo at the 25km mark as this was the ½ way point of the event. I had made my base goal and I was still 100%. This hack was feeling good. Except my bum. 5000 corrugations so far and no suspension seat post. Note to self for next time.

End of morning stage and I got to feel the real Simpson. Big northerly head wind and hot. Damn hot. Actually had to get off my bike at the 70k mark and walk a bit. Throwing water on myself didn't cool me down as the water on my bike must have been hot enough to brew tea. Struggled into the lunch stop about 20min in front of Sweep. Too hot and not enough time to recover. But still 100%.

The afternoon stage killed me. I wasn't recovered; I hadn't cooled down or replenished the energy from the morning. I was a hack. Old, slow, unfit. The first water stop beckoned me to stay, but the medics kicked my arse and told me to go. I limped along riding at walking pace and bastard Sweep finally had his moment at the half way point.

The next day started cool and flat. I took off with the leaders into a head wind and thought I'd try to stay with them. What a thrill riding with these elite athletes. Sure I ran into all of them as I struggled to maintain constant pace, and caused a 4-bike pile up of riders behind me (sorry guys), but I kept up with these guys until the 35k mark. I even took the front a couple of times. Wow! But the pace of my start blew me up and we hit the sand again, and the sun came out in earnest and my puny legs struggled to maintain any pace in the soft dunes. And so at the 65k mark, with 5k to go and an hour to get there, I sat down in the shade of a tree and swore I was done with this insanity.

So what happened? Well, the low point of my ride was also the high point, as over the dune came the medics in their green van, with cold water for my parched throat and a size 10 boot for my bum. They actually told me to keep going with the words, and I quote, "You will not die." And so I did, and finished the stage.

And while I was swept once more, I also completed two more stages and finished 91%. And I rode into Birdsville the next day with 15 new mates, in the presence of talented riders and elite endurance athletes who let me feel like I belonged in their group. And all the support crews and all the medics and water crews and sweeps and directors from the race cheered, and I got to have a beer from the Birdsville Hotel.

And you know what? It was good.

F***ing good!