

25 Years OF HELL

Alan Keenleside looks at what it takes to tackle Australia's most remote and longest-running MTB event.

Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge is an event that can't help but invoke the biblical overtones. For 25 years it has drawn adventurous mountain bikers to take on the elements in what's become known as 'Satan's Velodrome'. In this time there have been challenges from drought, flood and infernal winds, and on a more personal level, riders have dealt with boils and rivers of blood.

Somehow, after two good years of rain I expected the desert to be different this time. I reasoned rain means plants, plants means animals, animals mean dung, and dung means flies—I'd packed a fly net just in case. What I hadn't expected was for the desert to catch fire!

I checked my email before leaving Adelaide and the first message said 'Event Cancelled'. My heart sank! After a call to my support driver, we decided to head outback anyway. With a week off work, a bicycle and a 4WD stuffed with food and wine, things could have been a lot worse.

The desert is always a harsh mistress, with high temperatures, strong winds and sand storms. If the Good Book is any measure we only have hail, frogs, locusts and diseased cattle left to go. In fairness, boils and rivers of blood are part of the annual event but I'll talk about what's going to happen inside your cycling shorts later.

THE DESERT

Taking riders through one of the most remote regions on our planet, the Simpson Challenge may well be the toughest mountain bike race on Earth—I haven't done enough of them to say with any real authority. One thing's for sure, it is a tough way to earn a beer in the Birdsville Hotel, but that beer does taste very special.

The Simpson is an erg – a sand desert. It contains the longest parallel sand dunes in the world. If you look at the Simpson from Google Earth you'll see a lot of parallel lines running roughly north-south. The dunes near Purnie Bore are perhaps two metres high and a couple of hundred metres apart. As you head east in the event, they get bigger and further apart. Big Red, on the far east of the Simpson next to Birdsville, is 80 metres high and you get a couple of kilometres respite between each dune. There are about 700 dunes over the 600km course.

Sand is basically the problem—it's a large part of what makes this event so tough. As you ride east you have to climb over the dunes, and it is really hard to stay on the bike. Heading north or south sounds easier and at times it is, however you still encounter windblown sand that can be very soft.

It's an urban myth that Eskimos have 200 words for snow. Skiers learn to differentiate the soft powder from the hard ice. When riding through the desert, you rapidly learn to read the firmness of the sand just by looking at it. That scalloped bank is probably quite firm where it has been laid up by the wind. Those ripples in the middle of the track are just a thin crust over fine powder. On occasions it's better to give up on the vehicle track altogether—firmer sand but a risk of punctures. Most of the plants are dry and spiky. They will scratch your legs but are too brittle to vampire stake your tyres.



It may make the going tougher in the soft stuff, but there's nothing to stop you doing the Challenge on a traditional bike—just fit some really big volume tyres!



This race is extremely remote. The things that you rely on in modern life fall away at every turn; first shops then roads then water. Unpack your bike at Purnie Bore for the start and God help you if you forgot your pedals.

Heading north from Adelaide it's a three-day drive to Purnie. The terrain soon becomes unremitting scrub. Leaving Coober Pedy the tarmac disappears. Oodnadatta (population of 300) is the last vestige of civilisation—it's time to refuel and eat one last ice-cream. As you leave, the rocky Gibber roads hit you in a big way. Pedirka is a roofless ruin and from here the track goes downhill. With luck you will reach Purnie Bore with the 4WD intact. Here you'll find a toilet and a shower—mark them well, as these are the last buildings before Birdsville 600km and five days away.

The emptiness that is the Simpson is difficult to traverse by any means. It's a privilege to see this land. Few will see it. To make the crossing in any degree of comfort is an achievement in itself. To have the chance to ride a bicycle across it is an extraordinary experience. To stage a bike race across the Simpson is simply preposterous but that is exactly what has been happening for the last 25 years.

Anyway, assuming you can get yourself, vehicle, food, fuel, water and bike to

Purnie Bore (an accomplishment in itself), what happens at the start?

Each day at 4:30am the race director sounds his horn. Get up, eat and get ready. Don't ask why people are carrying spades by torchlight. At 5:30 the vehicles in the advanced convoy leave with the race director. Signs are placed at all turns and to mark every 5km interval—it's funny how long it can take to get from one to the next.

All riders have to weigh in before the start. This is an important safety procedure as you are also checked at the end of every stage and your weight loss is attributed to dehydration—lose five kilos and that's the end of your stage, perhaps the end of your day if you can't recover the weight. If you become dehydrated enough to need an intravenous drip from one of the doctors, then you're out of the event.

At 6:00am the race is started by the 'Grim Sweeper'. From this point you can receive no external help, only the riders can help each other. You must start with 1.5 litres of water and there are three water stops on each stage where you must refill. The water stop crews become your best friends during the race. It's a joy to see them and a sadness to return your buttocks to the saddle, but time presses.

The following convoy leaves at 7:00am, and this is the one that you need

to watch—it is led by the Grim Sweeper. Harsh but fair, he travels at a steady 12km/h looking to put the sick and weak out of their misery. A blast on the horn signals your attempt on that stage is over; relief, if only temporary. Once swept, Grim records your distance and you have a brief interlude of air-conditioned comfort and self-recrimination before being deposited at the start of the next stage. The race is won on distance first, then time.

Most days see two stages; 80km in the morning, then 50km in the afternoon. There are nine stages over five days with only a single stage on the last day to give you time to get to the pub for lunch; a very sensible idea—in Satan's Velodrome you don't want to take things too seriously.

As the challenge progresses, fatigue sets in. Hot foot, bum boils and nerve damage all take their toll but the real battle is fought in the mind. There are three things you need to get through; brains, brawn and buttocks of steel.

BRAINS

To succeed in the Simpson you need to understand what you're up against. With the heat, sand and the wind, it's a race to survive. Speed is not important; 12.1 km/h will do just fine, provided you can keep going.

You need to keep enough in the tank so that you can respond when Hell breaks loose, as it most assuredly will. In a funny way it's not the tough guys that prosper; it's the guys who can take the best care of themselves. Camp well, eat well and sleep well. Just as an old car will run for ages if you keep up the fluids, a rider needs to keep up with food and drink, not just for now but for that next unpredictable moment when things turn sour. Forget to drink and you'll leave the race quick smart.

In 1991 with temperatures approaching 50C one rider (Rob) drank 20 litres during the day and still finished 4kg lighter. That's all water. Can you imagine sweating 24 kilos of water? Can you imagine a day when you would drink 20 litres?

Aside from food and water, the bike also needs some thought. You need to deal with the weight weenie demon because in the desert, light bikes are not always fast. The course is flat apart from the sand dunes, and floatation is what you need on the sand. Big, fat, soft tyres are the answer—heavy tyres. One rider reckoned he lost an average 300 metres for every sand dune that he had to walk compared to someone who rode over. With over 700 dunes to deal with, it soon adds up. When you walk, sand fills your shoes. Your feet start to cramp and you need to stop to empty your shoes. More time lost—the sweep is relentless.

So fat is where it's at, but how fat can you go? My first attempt at the Simpson was in 2009. At the time I'd seen the Alaskan Iditasport race on the internet and paid close attention to the unusual bikes they used on the snow. They had taken to welding two rims together, creating one really wide rim that would spread their tyres out and make them fatter. Subsequently, people started to manufacture fat rims and specialist tyres to suit.

You may think that a 2.4 or 2.5-inch

tyre is pretty wide, and they are certainly a good starting point, but 'Fatbikes' take this to a whole new level. There are now a number of brands available, all built around four-inch wide tyres from Surly. For 2010 I imported a Titanium Fatback from Anchorage, Alaska.

Sure the balloon tyres are comparatively heavy, but the huge soft tyres float over sand and small stones. They conform to the terrain where narrower and harder tyres would dig in or bounce. The Fatbike is the 4WD of bikes. People think that they are single purpose machines, only useful on the soft stuff but that is not the case. They actually fare well on hard terrain too—get them in their element on the soft desert sand and they rule!

The desert is full of spiky things, so running tubeless with a good quality sealant is de rigueur. In 2009 Leon found a large thorn in his tyre but the hole was too big to seal, so he just pushed the thorn back in and rode to the finish.

BRAWN

Brawn is an obvious essential for the Desert Challenge; not in terms of speed but endurance. To keep going day after day is a big call. I use a heart rate monitor when I ride and run to provide some idea of the relative effort involved. For me, a fast half-marathon would be about 2,000 calories, a full marathon 3,500, an Ironman triathlon about 10,000.

Stage three, the notorious big dune stage with a dust storm added for good measure, cost me 5,000 calories—the same as a hilly 100km in the mountains. Later that same day the afternoon stage cost me another 3,000 calories. That's almost a full Ironman and you'll need to back it up day after day. You certainly won't be putting on weight in the Simpson!

BUTTOCKS OF STEEL

I'm sure you'd agree that finding blood and bits of skin on your chamois is not

a good sign. When I regale my fellow cyclists with stories of posterior discomfort on the Simpson they invariably give me a pitying look and launch into lengthy descriptions of their favourite seat, shorts or magic bum cream. Err, guys, that's not it.

The Simpson is 10 times, in order of magnitude, harder on your backside than any other ride in my experience. I've done eight-week cycle tours, 160km road rides, 200km off-road weekends. Nothing else touches the sides. I can afford any seat, shorts or bum cream within reason. They help to some degree but nothing really answers to the Simpson experience.

Riding a dual suspension bike in 2009 I'd blistered one bum cheek and burst the other on the first day. Things went downhill from there. By the fifth stage I was riding on two open sores. My friend was in trouble fighting the headwind so we walked for a while. In the dry wind my sores scabbed over quickly and as I bent back over the bike they ripped open—the pain was excruciating.

25TH ANNIVERSARY EVENT

Fire takes hold quickly and this year it happened late. The race director was already in Birdsville.

Fires were burning in the north of the park and strong winds were expected. The Simpson Desert Park was closed and a group of runners had been evacuated from Dalhousie Springs.

Quick thinking by the event director saw the race relocated to the gravel roads west of the Simpson. Starting from the famous Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta, the hastily planned route was to cover 600km heading north from the Pink Roadhouse with a loop taking in Dalhousie Springs before returning south to Oodnadatta.

The first night found us 130km north at Pedirka. After an attack by two billion black midges, hot winds rattled the campsite and carried in a dry thunderstorm. The following morning as we

started to ride in the pre-dawn light, you could see the sky glowing orange to the south. Lightning had started more fires, blocking our return route to Oodnadatta.


The dirt roads were hard and the pace fast. I tried to stay with the leaders on the first day, which was a big mistake. My legs were completely blown and it's hard to recover when your covering 130km of bone shaking, arse busting gravel road each day. My Brooks leather saddle collapsed under the strain—it was made with the same care and attention to detail that cost Great Britain the Empire. The morning stage on the second day was the worst for me. As far as I could tell I only passed two features in that entire stage—the start gates and the finish. It was 80km of unremitting emptiness. I haven't been so bored on a bike since I cycled the length of Belgium in the pouring rain!

Day three was better. The sun came out and there were a few hills to climb up and tear down. At Dalhousie we held an open water swim stage in the hot springs; 400m at 37°C—I came second-last.

With our route south blocked by fire we got the bad news. No racing on Friday. This year's Simpson Desert Challenge stands as the only time a car portage has been longer than the entire race. To get around the fires we had to drive north, west, then south to get to a spot that would allow us to finish back in Oodnadatta. It was around 600km and it took most of the day to complete.

In keeping with tradition there was only one stage on the final day of racing, and it finished with four laps of the 4WD circuit at Oodnadatta. Sand at last and the four dunes reaffirmed my love of fat bikes. On the first dune the traditional bikes simply disappeared. The remaining fat bikes romped up and down the dunes, at home in their natural habitat.

So what have I learnt from the Simpson? Well let me say first that the desert is fickle, it's unpredictable and uncaring. That's why it's so powerful and so beautiful and I wouldn't have it any other way. It's a life-changing event. Whether it's five days in hell or five days in paradise is simply a matter of perspective.

I like contradictions. With no people, the Outback shows us how very important friends are. People come together year after year, all drawn back to this extremely remote region. Riders become support crew and support crew become riders. For 25 years this race has been run by truly great people. Make a friend here and you've made a friend for life. It's more than a race, more than an event or a 4WD convoy; it's a real adventure. Can you make it to the end? What will happen next year? Fire, flood or hail of frogs. No one can say. One thing is certain, the race, the riders, the people will never ever give up. 

For 25 years the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge has been run as a not-for-profit bike race, with funds currently going to the Royal Flying Doctors Service. For more information on the event and how to get involved go to: www.desertchallenge.org



Fatbikes are now hugely popular at the Simpson Challenge.



Making the most of the 'weee' on the leeward side of the dunes.

Photography by David Griffin