

Simpson Desert Bike Challenge
PROMOTIONAL PACK

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



THE EVENT

The Simpson Desert Bike Challenge – it's the ultimate adventure race.

On an average day in the Simpson Desert the temperature will rise from below 5 degrees to over 40 degrees Celsius. High winds and sandstorms travelling at over 50 km/hr add to the experience. Throw in over over six hundred sand dunes, camels, dingos, and vast salt pans with no food, water or civilisation in sight and the Simpson Desert is one wild place. Then add fifty intrepid cyclists racing for 580 kilometres across the Desert and what you have is the ultimate adventure race in Australia.

For those who crave the challenge of adventure racing, the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge is the ultimate. For the past twenty years, riders have lined up on the start line at Purnie Bore on the western edge of the Simpson Desert with the goal of reaching the legendary Birdsville Hotel in outback Queensland in one piece.

Throughout five days of searing heat, insurmountable sand dunes and countless pedal strokes, the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge is a huge mental and physical challenge. Very few actually complete 100% of the race, but the lure of adventure and the beauty of the Australian Outback continues to draw athletes from across the country and around the globe each year.

The race has been staged every year since 1987 and usually runs from the end of September into early October. The following document outlines how you can become part of this extraordinary event.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



THE ATHLETES

It's all on for young and old racing the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge.

The youngest competitor to have completed the race was 16. The oldest competitor was 80. The Simpson Desert Bike Challenge attracts athletes from across Australia with a predominant representation from South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and the ACT.

The average competitor is 33 – 38 years old, resides in a city, has a history of involvement in sport and recreation and has an element of expendable income in order to incur the expenses associated with participation in an event of this nature.

SDBC participants are among the ever growing number of athletes who are seeking participation in non-traditional, experience based sporting activities. They are not "extreme" athletes where the inherent element of risk is primary. They are everyday individuals who have set themselves a challenge, have been training hard and are looking to find something within themselves and escape from the normality of their everyday lives.

The race pushes many physical and mental boundaries and gives these athletes the fuel and the fire to achieve something that many people would see as being unachievable. These athletes are looking for a sense of satisfaction, the setting of a milestone and a significant achievement in their life.

While the athletes are competing against each other, they are also a source of encouragement and support. During each stage, no outside support is allowed for riders. If a bike breaks down or a rider is feeling tired, the only person they can rely on is themselves or another rider.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



EVENT FORMAT

While the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge is indeed a race, it is probably best described as a test of survival and tenacity.

Very few athletes can expect to tame the elements of the Simpson Desert each year and only the fittest and strongest athletes will complete 100% of the race.

The event is conducted over nine stages, comprising five morning stages of approximately 80 kilometres each and four afternoon stages of approximately 50 kilometres each. Morning sessions start at 6.00am with afternoon sessions departing camp at 2.00pm. An average day at the SDBC goes something like this:

TIME	ACTIVITY
4.30AM	Riders and Crews are awoken by the Race Director (not a popular guy!)
5.30AM	Support crews and official vehicles depart and travel to the stage finish.
5.45AM	Riders weigh in with Race Director
6.00AM	Morning stage commences
12.20PM	Morning stage cut-off time
1.30PM	Support crews and official vehicles depart and travel to the stage finish.
1.45PM	Riders weigh in with Race Director
2.00PM	Afternoon Stage Commences
6.00PM	Afternoon stage cut-off time.
7.30PM	Evening briefing and results announced.
9.00PM	Generators and lights switched off.

This program is followed each day, except for the final day of the race where only a morning session is conducted. The event starts at Purnie Bore in South Australia and travels along an eroded track called the Rig Road. The finish of the event is the legendary Birdsville Hotel in Outback Queensland. The start of the event is approximately three days drive from Sydney and the finish is a further two days return to Sydney. Travelling to and returning from Adelaide and Brisbane is generally 2 – 2.5 days each way.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



EVENT FORMAT

Throughout the race, riders must maintain a minimum speed requirement of 12 km/hr across the sand and desert tracks.

Should riders fail to average this speed, they will be caught by the pursuing Sweep vehicle and transported to the stage finish. Riders are not disqualified from the event if they are caught by the Sweep, however they will incur a time penalty and cannot qualify for 100% completion of the event. Water Stops providing water, shade and medical assistance are located every 20 kilometres along the course.

During racing stages all riders are completely self sufficient. Each rider has a support crew, who transport all water, food, cycling equipment, camping gear and any other items during the event. On average a competitor will consume approximately 100 litres of water throughout the race.

While the SDBC may seem to be an extreme event to many, it is not classified as an extreme sport. The nature of extreme sport is that where the element of risk is the primary factor. While elements of risk are evident in the SDBC, they are not the sole reason for participation. With this in mind, the SDBC has strict policies on fluid consumption, weight loss and fuel intake. A team of doctors travel with the event in its entirety, with the Royal Flying Doctor Service also available in the case of emergency. Riders failing to meet the strict standards applied by the race management incur time penalties and even disqualification.



SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



MEDIA

Some Media think that we're a little strange.

Key media coverage has seen the race featured in articles in Australian Mountain Bike Magazine and Inside Sport, with a tremendous response from interested participants and supporters of the event.

Previous managers of the event, Synergy Sports, have produced a one hour documentary of the 2004 race for distribution.

Outside of these key elements the race has also had support from R.M. Williams Outback Magazine, the Adelaide Advertiser, regional publications in the Northern Territory and South Australia, and Sydney Metropolitan papers including the Northern District Times and the Southern Courier.

The event is also heavily supported by the cycling, mountain bike, and adventure community across the country. This support comes through industry sites and associations such as cyclingnews.com, Cycling Australia, ExplorOz.com and the South Australian Tourism Commission.

While the location of the race does restrict the amount of media coverage, freelance journalists and photographers often participate in and record the event for distribution to national and international media.

The event website (www.desertchallenge.org) is live throughout the year and features a comprehensive analysis of the event in addition to tips for completion of the race. This site is linked to prominent cycling and mountain bike sites throughout Australia and receives solid traffic throughout the year.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



CHARITY

It wouldn't be as much fun without such a great cause.

With the event being a true blue Australian adventure, it would seem natural that riders in the SDBC also support those a little less fortunate.

The event was originally created as a fundraiser to assist those with a spinal injury, with donations made to Paraquad Associations in each State. A change of race management in 1995 led to a long term association with Queensland's Paraplegic Benefit Fund, which remained in place until 2006.

In 2007 the Paraplegic Benefit Fund relinquished control of the event which is currently organised and operated by a registered not-for-profit association – Desert Challenge Incorporated.

The Simpson Desert Bike Challenge supports **4Wheels4Sean** – a charity widely supported by major Australian cycling bodies including the Bicycling Federation of Australia, Mountain Biking Australia, Cycling Australia and BMX Australia. **4Wheels4Sean** has evolved from an initiative by cyclists to raise funds to purchase a specially adapted vehicle for Canberra cyclist Sean Fitzgerald who became a quadriplegic following a mountain biking accident in 2001, and now aims to provide assistance to cyclists severely disabled as a result of a cycling accident.

Riders take it upon themselves to gain individual sponsorships from families, friends and work colleagues and raise funds for **4Wheels4Sean**. This is not a compulsory exercise however many athletes and volunteers choose to undertake this activity as it provides another element to the race and an additional level of satisfaction to their participation.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

2004 Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge – Race Report
Copyright Trent Taylor

The Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge can not be described as just another bike race. It's the ultimate cycling adventure in Australia.

To stand at the start line of the Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge is an amazing experience. Put aside the 580 grueling Kilometres that lay ahead of each rider. Forget that it's only 6.00am and the sun is already belting out an unbelievable heat. It's taken each rider and their crews over three days just to get to the start line. Put simply, the race is held in the middle of bloody nowhere.

Purnie Bore is where it all begins. The name sounds pleasant enough. A hot water spring in the middle of the Simpson Desert. Should be a great place for a relaxing camp fire and gazing into the amazing desert sky. Not today.

Looking over the start line you gain an appreciation for the diverse range of people that have accepted the challenge of tackling all that the Simpson Desert can throw at them. There's Adrian Laing, a pro-rider who is using the race as preparation for a fifteen day race to be held only two weeks after the event. There's 50 year old Kim Proctor. An outstanding road cyclist who only one month ago jumped on a mountain bike. His power and prowess on the bike will earn him the tag of "old fox".

36 year old Marea England from Canberra provides the colour. A first time rider, she makes sure she will not be forgotten in a hurry. Her strength on the bike is only upstaged by her array of crazy get-ups. There's a matching gold halterneck top and skirt on Bond Girl Wednesday, Little Red Riding Hood on Storybook Thursday, Fishnet stockings and g-string leotard on what else but Fishnet Friday. Her outstanding ride earned the right to wear a wonder woman outfit on super-hero Saturday. The desert does strange things to people.

At the other end of the scale there's Gill Plastow. At 60, Gill sets goals that most people half her age wouldn't even contemplate. Last year she walked from Alice Springs to Adelaide. This year she's back in the desert to go one better than her first attempt in 1997. Next year she's walking from Alice Springs to Adelaide. Shady Hills nursing home won't be seeing the name Gill Plastow on the registrar anytime soon.

As each rider collects their kit bag at registration, you can almost tell what kind of week they will have. Some, like Adrian Laing, approach the race in a business like manner. Done the training, the bike is ready, race plan in tact. All should go well.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

Some approach the race with hesitation.

John Petersen knows what lies ahead. Six times he has approached the start. Not once has he crossed the finish line at Birdsville with 100% of the race completed. "This year should be different". For John, an aircraft engineer, preparing his bike is a work of art. Tyre pressure is right. Front brake nice and firm, rear brake little looser. Rear shock dust cover in place. "Best to keep it simple in these conditions" is the advice from "Peto". "Plenty of things break out here. If you can't fix it quick smart, you're buggered."

Support crews play an amazing role in the event. For Peto there's Mother Lofty (a six foot tall goliath who plays a parental role), Dave "Chicken Leg's" Stewart, an Australian based in Hong Kong who makes his way back to the desert for each year's race and the young fella Robin, who's more interested in trying his chances with the limited female wildlife who have ventured out to the race this year. (His efforts with the ladies earned him the nickname "blowfly" for his sheer persistency). These guys know how to have fun and have all the gear to make it happen.

Resourcefulness is not high on the agenda though. Meals are entertaining. 10pm – dinner time. Frozen casserole - won't thaw out. What do you do? Hack at the bastard with pocket knives and every bike tool that can be found. 11pm. Dinner's served.

For these guys, it'll be a long week.

The race is not just about the riders though. It takes a unique individual to inflict this kind of pain on another person. Some can sympathise, others try to imagine what it must be like. "Bean" is the race director this year. He's a six time rider who made it to Birdsville with 100% beside his name in 2001. With this goal achieved he now watches others chase their own dreams.

Noel is the "Bastard Sweep". His job is to travel behind the pack and pick up any rider who fails to maintain the minimum speed of 12 Kilometres an hour across the sand dunes and cavernous downhill sections. He's not a popular bloke amongst the riders and is often the brunt of many a practical joke.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

The punters were very creative this year.

Custard and dust on the gates into stockyards. Marshmallows and honey on top of the Kilometre markers to ensure they are well and truly covered with ants when it comes to collection time by the Sweep. He will have his revenge throughout the week. Although this year, he will be less busy than others.

Back at the start line, there's two minutes left to the race begins in earnest. A voice in the crowd is heard. "This is the best you're going to feel for five days. Soak it up". He obviously knows what lies ahead. 12 months of preparation have come down to this. The gun goes off and with it the pack heads over the first sand dune and into the distance. Five long days lie ahead for each rider.

Day one is a morning stage of 77 Kilometres and an afternoon stage of 41 Kilometres. It's also set the tone for the rest of the race. Adrian Laing is a class above. While most push their already weary muscles up each sand dune, Adrian races up each dune with the enthusiasm usually reserved for a young child who has just got their first bike. Adrian is 34. He still loves his bike.

Day one claims only two victims. Gill Plastow manages to complete 56 Kilometres of the first stage before being caught by the Sweep. Sergeant Alan Aitken, riding in his Police Blues is arrested by the Sweep at the 63 Kilometre mark.

Usually the desert is a harsh place. Temperatures of up to 45 degrees Celsius are not uncommon. This year is a little different. Ominous clouds hover above and the cover of sand appears to be a little lighter this year. It is decided that a recent cull of wildlife has enabled vegetation to grow and the sand is more stable. Whatever the reason, the riders welcome the conditions with open arms.

This soon changes as the heavens open and the skies lay down more rain than the desert has seen in years. The desert is not an ideal place to be in a rainstorm. Aside from the fact that tents begin to leak and bikes often take the place of people under the shelter, there's the very real threat that we may be stuck in the desert – for weeks.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

The Simpson Desert is surrounded by clay pans.

It's 11pm on the night of day one. Serious decisions are being made. Any more rain and the clay pans become impassable. Options are assessed. Officials determine whether we are in a food drop zone. We're not. The weather report from Alice Springs base is not good. Three days of rain. The decision is made. We're out of here at first light.

As always the camp site is woken at 4.30am by the screeching sound of the morning hooter. Waterlogged bodies emerge to see the dark clouds replaced by dazzling stars and an extremely muddy ground. The first session of day 2 has been cancelled and crews travel ahead to ensure that we are out of harms way.

After assessing the road conditions, day two is compacted into one 80 Kilometre stage. Day 2 morning is notorious as the toughest stage of the event. The transfer of the event has meant that 40 of the toughest Kilometres of the race have been wiped out. Last nights frowns have been replaced by a warm glow over the field. 100% completion is now a very realistic goal for most riders.

Adrian Laing continues to dominate. His speed is simply amazing, with an average speed of 29.76 Km/H across the sand dunes. Kim Proctor is beginning to handle the mountain bike as if he was flying down the Pyrenees on his road bike. He maintains second place with another solid performance.

Peto is towards the back of the pack. He has faded badly in the last stages of the race in previous years and is leaving plenty in reserve this year. Gill Plastow completes the stage well ahead of the sweep. Her goal of 100% completion is gone, but she looks very strong.

The serious struggle of the race gives way to humour each night and the ritual fines session. No-one can escape the elements in the desert. The race raises money for the Paraplegic Benefit Fund. The fines session ensures plenty is raised. For the crew of rider 14, two flat tyres and no compressor sees them pumping their car tyres with a bicycle track pump. An impressive feat, but it does not escape a fine and laughter from each of the crews. There's the group who failed to bring enough water into the desert and were forced to drink the free supply of Red Bull and High-5 for three days. Sleep was not an option for these guys.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

Then there are the first timers in the desert who experience a rapid learning curve.

After a day or two, they soon learn that taking a leak into the wind is not the best way to keep your shoes from getting wet. Every day there's a great story and the fine sessions are a great way to momentarily forget the pain that has passed and the pain that lay ahead.

Day's 3 and 4 go according to plan although two flat tyre's sees Adrian Laing relinquish the first and only stage win to Kim Proctor on Day 4. His superior riding over the previous days ensure that he still has over an hour in hand.

The massive sand dunes now give way to salt lakes, clay pans and mile after mile of corrugated ruts. Sore butts are the order of a day and the lunchtime camp begins to resemble a bunch of wild west gun slingers, walking with knees wide apart and slightly bent so as not to upset a tender posterior. The medical team swings into action and it's a mix of sheep's fat and Vaseline all around as groans of pain, turn to tears of joy and relief as the secret bum mix begins to work its magic.

For Marea England, the race is just too much fun! Crazy get-ups and an "easy" track means that she is set to complete 100% of the race on her first attempt. For the seasoned competitors in the pack, they are quick to assure her that she has picked a good year for her first attempt at the race. Bean is mortified. "It took me six attempts to get it right. She's going to do it first time". The rapid change in the conditions of the track this year has got him thinking about 5am sessions again.

The rain has had another impact on the race. The Inside Track into Birdsville is quite a scenic ride and helps ease the pain of four days on the bike. The torrential rain on day 2 makes sure the inside track is still impassable and riders are forced onto the outside track to compete with the rocks, mud and the inevitable onslaught of road trains for the final stretch into Birdsville.

When the morning hooter awoke on Day 5, over 90 percent of the field was only 80 Kilometres away from completing 100% of the Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge. Sure, conditions had played their part in proceedings, but each of them had still ridden 439 Kilometres across sand, mud and rock to this point. This final stage was an eighty Kilometre dash into Birdsville along the Birdsville track.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

Day 5 morning is a jovial affair.

The pain and suffering of the past mornings have given way to an air of expectation and the knowledge that in around 5 hours, it will all be over. The mood in the camp is high and Sergeant John Holstein decides that now is the time to conduct the obligatory nude ride through the camp.

While it was a little cold (no-one needed a temperature gauge), his little trip was extremely well received and made for great conversation as the pack set out one last time. Day 5 is a celebration. If the last day of the Tour De France is a ceremonial ride with champagne being drunk in the middle of the pack, the last day of the Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge is about who can be the biggest joker.

This year, there were grown men wearing sequin riding shorts, water pistols attached to camelbaks and of course, Marea England was dressed as wonder woman much to the delight of the predominantly male pack. The creative blokes at the aid stations also decided to get involved in the antics. The final "Aid Station Ahead" mysteriously developed a "Get L" in front of it. I'll leave the rest up to you, but by looking at the quality of the ugly buggers at the aid station you can guarantee that there weren't too many takers.

Adrian Laing is outfitted in the lead riders jersey for the final time and almost looks a little out of place amongst the characters in the back of the pack. "Do some tricks for the cameras today mate" was the call. I can ride fast, but I sure as hell can't do tricks" is the reply. This was later clearly evident.

Riding with the main pack, John Petersen was in the process of realizing a dream. If you ask him why he keeps coming back to this race, he can't quite explain it, but he says if he doesn't complete 100% soon, his girlfriend won't be there to greet him home for much longer! "This is a dream come true for me. My race plan has been a little bit different this year, and no matter whether the conditions have played a part I finally have 100% beside my name".

The final stage of the Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge is almost a surreal one. For more than five days, civilisation has been an afterthought, yet Kilometre markers begin to appear on the roadside and the Queensland border is suddenly upon you.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

The Birdsville Hotel is an oasis.

To get almost anywhere in the Australian outback, you have to go through Birdsville. And if you go to Birdsville, then you go to the Birdsville Hotel. This year, the race officially finishes at its doorstep. Support crews and officials have traveled ahead of the riding pack and quickly begin to establish priority at the finish line. The bar at the pub is also not a lonely place as crews take advantage of the 10am opening time to ensure that their voice boxes are well and truly lubed for the hours or cheering that lay ahead.

It wasn't long before the first beers were served that Adrian Laing experienced something that he had almost forgotten. Bitumen. There is approximately one Kilometre of tarred road in Birdsville. For someone who has just spent five days on sand and corrugations it can feel like heaven.

The ever resourceful event crew assembles the finish line (a roll of 3 ply Sorbent) as he steams down the last metres of the race to take first place. 22 Hours, 9 Minutes and 59 Seconds. With an average speed of just under 24 Kilometres an hour many feel that he would have taken the race record if the full distance was covered.

Adrian is ecstatic. So he should be. He just crossed the Simpson Desert on a bike.

As the hours pass, riders continue to stream in as the locals, the crews and the odd mangy dog welcome each and every rider in as if they had won the race. It must be a special feeling finishing this race. You get that notion by the sense of absolute satisfaction that comes across the face of each rider as they hop off the bike one last time. Kim Proctor takes second place and Carl Barrow, a Canadian living in Alice Springs shows what a bit of bush conditioning can do to take out third place.

An amazing camaraderie is developed throughout the race. Gill Plastow is closing in on the finish, but the Sweep is also closing in on her, fast. Six riders head back down the Birdsville Track to bring her in. With three Kilometres to go she has picked up the pace again and she will soon cross the finish line as every rider had done before her. Gill competes in this event as a tribute to her son who died of heart disease when he was just fifteen. There is absolutely no doubt about the size of the heart in this amazing lady though as she completes 95.95% of the race.

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



STORYTIME

At 11.46am on Saturday October 4, the final rider of the Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge crossed the finish line.

Over five days of pain, suffering, heartache and joy, the Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge has been described as a spiritual experience. Hours on end of isolation give way to plenty of time for thought. It is as much an emotional battle to find that strength within as it is to keep those legs crunching down on each pedal.

The afternoon celebration at the pub is a time for exaggeration of stories, recognition of the support that each and every one of them received and also time for reflection on one of the most amazing adventures in Australian sport. The Simpson Desert Cycle Challenge is held in October each year. For many, next October can't come soon enough.

2004 Trent Taylor

SIMPSON DESERT BIKE CHALLENGE



FURTHER INFORMATION

To enter or find out more about this extraordinary event,

check the website www.desertchallenge.org

Or email admin@desertchallenge.org
