



“sKILLING TIME”

Written & photographed by Clive Ward

Experienced trail bike riders will tell you there's nothing that compares with going bush for a weekend with a bunch of mates and Killing Time riding trail bikes, but the question arises, “how does one become proficient enough to ride safely and

confidently in the bush” if you're a beginner or coming back to trail riding after many years off a bike (you know Wife, House, Mortgage, Kids)

For many, its go buy a new bike and get straight out there with mates who've been riding for years, fifteen minutes into the ride your wondering what sort of crazy people you have for friends and they can't understand why your whining about going through thigh deep rivers crossing, sailing off massive rock drop-offs and fanging up gnarly rocky hills. “The hard stuff yet to come” they sing out.

Well at last there is someone bridging the gap. Bruce Hancock from “Watagans Trail Bike Tours” are offering one day “Trail Skills Courses”. I tagged along recently to check out exactly what's on offer.

Bruce starts off with a basic briefing of what's going to be covered during the day, followed by some sound advice on how to prepare your bike and yourself for a real trail bike adventure. He covers bike maintenance, spare parts to carry, tools required and what you will need in an emergency. Tossed into the commentary are some funny and also very serious recollections of misadventure he's experienced during his many years of running trail bike tours.

The next step is to get into it and only five minutes into the ride is where the first lesson begins. We are faced with a rocky uphill section of trail, with several choices of path up. At this point Bruce stops the group and we all walk up the hill, Bruce explains the correct approach and talks about the correct technique required, he then demonstrates the task at hand and then stops and talks about it all over again as his two assistants Chris and Rossco also demonstrate the correct technique. Then it's your turn. Chris and Rossco take their positions where then can assist should you get into trouble and Bruce talks each rider through. One by one everyone makes their way up. Sure there are a couple of people that don't get up first time, there's the odd broken indicator lens and deflated ego as well, but help is right at hand. Each person will be advised of what went wrong, why and most importantly “how to do it better” followed by lots of encouragement to have another go. We then move on to the downhill section and the process starts again. After each section, there is a few more km's of trail section, to have a breather and practice what you've just been through, every half hour or so we stop and try something new, skid braking into corners, log hopping and balance secrets. Before too long we've covered 70 kms and the lunch stop is a welcome relief. The support vehicle has moved ahead and the BBQ is already served. Food, drinks and fuel is supplied as part of the day's ride.

The afternoon ride starts similar to the morning, more demonstrations and more techniques to learn, U turns on the spot, railing berms and jumping erosion humps. The afternoon also takes us into some single tracks where you get to practice all the tasks again in some real bush trails. The day finishes off with some harder trails, each one pushes the rider past a point that they would not have felt comfortable attempting before the start of the day. As each rider successfully tackles each section, you can see the growth in skill and confidence. Even though everyone's tired they are all buzzing about the days riding. “When can we do this again?” I hear one say, “when's your next day tour Bruce?” Unfortunately the day has to come to an end, we stop back at the cars and Bruce goes through a quick debrief over a beer. Everyone's looking forward to a hot shower and their next opportunity to get back out there and do it all again.

Watagan Trail Bike Tours offers one day skills courses as well as one, two and three day tours in the Watagan mountains on the NSW central coast and also in the Bulahdelah & Myall lakes region. View the ride calendar at www.trailbiketours.com.au or you can ring Bruce on 0417 411 154