



# Saddling up to help others

A TASMANIAN WITH A  
 PENCHANT FOR HELPING  
 OTHERS IS CYCLING AROUND  
 AUSTRALIA TO RAISE MONEY  
 FOR MENTAL HEALTH  
 RESEARCH AND AWARENESS.  
 TIM MARTAIN REPORTS

**R**OSS Andrewartha thinks he might be technically classified as a vagrant these days but he likes it that way.

"I've always had this idea that I wanted to ride my bike around Australia and everything just sort of aligned for me, I guess," he said.

"The project that employed me finished up in June this year and this bike ride had come up, so now I'm riding around the country with pretty much all my worldly possessions in bags on my bike.

"I got to a time and place in my life where I wanted to do something for the community."

The Tasmanian is one of a team of riders circling the country for the Rotary Great Australian Bike Ride, raising money for mental health research and awareness campaigns.

The former assistant district manager for the Huon district with Forestry Tasmania, Andrewartha joined Rotary while working in the Solomon Islands for the past four and a half years as part of a forestry management project, alongside traditional landowners and community forestry groups.

During his time living in Honiara, Andrewartha — who has a masters degree in tropical forestry — became heavily involved with other community projects.

Being a keen cyclist, he started teaching the locals to ride and when he noticed what strong swimmers they were — with unconventional swimming styles — he also started giving them swimming lessons.

Soon he was training them to be

triathletes and preparing them for the Commonwealth Games.

"It was a fairly intense place to live, when I moved to Honiara the Solomon Islands were just coming out of a civil war," he said.

"So riding was an opportunity for me to have a little bit of time out, time for reflection and to lose a bit of weight."

When his job finished in June Andrewartha found himself at a crossroads, wondering what to do next, and decided to make the most of the opportunity offered by the Great Australian Bike Ride.

"I'd always wanted to do a big ride like this and thought I'd regret it if I didn't take the opportunity to do it," he said.

"I had never been to Western Australia before, even though I've been around the world a couple of times, and this was a fun way to see parts of Australia I'd never seen.

"And on my mum's side I have a few family members who have had dementia and Alzheimer's, so there's a personal side for me as well."

Andrewartha joined the riders in Darwin, the seventh of nine stages in the ride, and will follow it through to its finish in Melbourne on October 10, racking up an impressive 9817km in the saddle in 15 weeks.

"The group dynamics are just amazing, we've got such a diverse group riding together from a vast range of different backgrounds and everyone is chasing their own personal goals," he said.

"One bloke lost his wife to cancer, everybody has a personal reason, a story, for doing the ride — you don't sit

on a bike for 240 days without a purpose to it.

"And I'm the baby of the group. I'm the youngest at 52 and a lot of the others are in their 60s."

For most of the distance travelled along the desert highway of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, the riders and their support drivers camped out in tents, only shifting to motels and roadhouses as they entered cooler parts of the country further south.

"We've been home-hosted whenever we've passed through a town with a Rotary club, we've stayed in roadhouses, in a couple of weeks we'll be sleeping in a convent and tonight there's 16 of us sleeping on a river boat," Andrewartha said, calling from Renmark in South Australia.

"South of Perth the weather has been pretty miserable so we're happy not to be sleeping in tents any more."

Crossing vast tracts of open road, such as the Nullarbor Plain, the riders have had to come up with novel ways to entertain themselves.

"There is one section of highway 146km long without a single bend or corner, so all you can really do is turn the iPod on, share jokes and play games like 20 questions to keep yourself amused," Andrewartha said.

"We also had a mock wedding by the side of the road one day, soon followed by a mock baptism, because it was a shotgun wedding, after all.

"The off-road antics have definitely been the highlight, I think."

Finding himself between jobs and