

Tim Emons (leader)	Honda CBR1000	Bill Simpson	Suzuki GSXR1000
Misho Zrakic	Honda CBR1000	Duane Rafferty	Suzuki GSXR1000
Ben Warden	Honda CBR1000	Marc Marais	Kawasaki ZX10
John Rousseaux	Honda CBR1000	Mark Copeland	Kawasaki ZX10
Pina Garasi	Honda CBR600	Michael Henriksen	BMW R1200ST
Dennis Lindemann	Honda CBR600	Rod Merrett	BMW S1000RR
Matt Considine	Honda CBR600	Rob Langer	KTM 990
Pierre Ong	Ducati 1098	Tony Ripepi	KTM 990

I thought my heated grips were malfunctioning as I made my way from home early Saturday morning, such was the unexpectedly warm weather. I slotted in behind Marc Marais on Wellington Road, and he led the way to the Berwick meeting point. As it turned out this would not be the only time Marc was ride leader for the weekend...

Billy had already arrived from Geelong, and the parking area at the back of the servo gradually filled up as the rest of the group arrived – all except for Peter Jones and Dennis Lindemann. A quick check with Ben revealed that Peter hadn't paid, and was probably not coming, and his place had been filled last night by Tony Ripepi, a friend of Rob's. Dennis just scraped in before we set off.

We followed the freeway all the way to Longwarry, waving to the usual camera car as we passed, then warmed up our tyres on the Old Sale Road and Willow Grove twisties before our first short break in Tyers. It was here that Ben added fuel to the concern already smouldering in the back of my mind that maybe I had miscalculated the mileage remaining in my rear tyre. I tried to shrug it off and convince myself that it should cover the remaining 1,000km...

The high risk road to Toongabbie was dispensed with without incident, and we wound our way around Lake Glenmaggie, still looking great with plenty of water. As we cruised along the straight roads near Boisdale I was busy daydreaming, reflecting on the perfect conditions, enjoying the scenery and sunshine, when I was suddenly jolted back to attention by an oncoming Police 4x4. Surprisingly, the driver didn't take any notice of us and continued on his way.

As we refuelled in Briagolong, Ben suggested that as we were making such good time, we'd be able to fit in the full loop to Omeo instead of the planned shortened version. Never one to argue with making a ride longer, I agreed that we should do it, the only downside was the thought that extra km's would mean I'd have to ride like a granny to make my rear tyre last the distance for the whole weekend. The conditions were just too perfect to let the opportunity pass, so I asked Ben to lead the next leg to the lunch stop in Bruthen while I shot off to Bairnsdale for a new tyre.

I didn't waste time Googling for phone numbers to confirm if any bike shops were open, or if they had any sportsbike tyres, I just took off and gave it my best shot to get to Bairnsdale as quickly as I could, trying to leave as much of my old tyre behind as possible.

In the meantime, Ben dutifully led the troops onward, along the intended route, ignoring all of the "road closed" signs they encountered, eventually being forced to stop at a three metre gap in the road where an old bridge was in the process of being replaced. The route was backtracked, the offending road bypassed, and the Bruthen lunch stop was attained.

I, meanwhile, had pulled into the first bike shop I saw (KTM / Suzuki dealer), and managed to find two rear road tyres amongst the many racks of knobbies. I settled on the only 190 they had – a Pirelli Diablo Rosso Corsa. One of my favourites!

Lunch was over by the time I arrived in Bruthen, so I fuelled up and grabbed a ham and salad roll from the bakery for later, then made some lame excuses about taking it easy for a while as I scrubbed in the new tyre.

These were the first real corners for the day, and I thought I was setting a decent pace, but I was clearly still daydreaming, as before long I was saw a flash of green Kwaka blasting past, followed closely by an orange one! Marc later claimed he only passed me as he thought Ben was still leading

(even though he'd passed Ben not far back...). I chased for a little bit, but my head didn't feel up for it yet, so I waved Misho past, not wanting to hold anyone back on such a great stretch of road. Misho had Pina riding pillion on the back, taking advantage of the adrenaline charged 200km loop, leaving her bike back in Bruthen.

I was waved back into the lead when the road straightened out again, and turned left at Swifts Creek, heading up through Cassilis. I was just getting into the groove, as I approached a right hander and felt the rear zigzag gently side to side under brakes. Had my new rear lost air? Nope – fine gravel spread all over the road! This continued for a couple of kays, bringing the pace down a little. We re-joined the Great Alpine Road, heading towards Mt Hotham for a short blast up the nice sweepers to regroup at the “chocolate lookout”.

I wasted no time in digging the salad roll out of my bag and tucked in as my stomach had been complaining about the lack of food since breakfast. After a visor clean and a group photo we took off back down the hill, and passed through Omeo where Pierre had already re-fuelled the Ducati, as he discovered last time we came this way that it wouldn't quite make the loop on one tank.

This is the point when the planets all slipped into alignment for me – the roads were in perfect condition, the weather was perfect, the gusty wind had died down, new tyre well scrubbed in, food in my belly giving me new-found energy, mind focussed... I tried to keep the pace relaxed in the earlier, open section to bring the group together, but as we progressed into the good stuff I couldn't hold back any more, and proceeded to thoroughly enjoy myself.

A quick glance in my mirrors revealed a couple of bikes had joined me, but I didn't waste valuable time trying to figure out who, and returned my attention to the road ahead as I was enjoying myself too much. We blasted along, corner after corner, making the most of this brilliant stretch of road with a big smile of contentment hidden inside my helmet.

Somewhere around 70km after leaving Omeo I noticed I was on my own and backed off, then pulled over, turned around and backtracked with a growing feeling of dread. Clearly someone must have crashed, but who, where, and how bad? I got a shock when I came across the appalling sight of what was left of Pierre's beautiful 1098 smashed and battered, resting against a rock face opposite a tight, double apex left hander. Thankfully, Pierre was up and about, in much better condition than his bike, but clearly in pain. Ben had already assessed the situation, and was preparing to pillion Pierre the remaining 24km into Bruthen to find a hospital. I went on ahead to find the nearest hospital was a further 25km in Bairnsdale.

I think everyone took a share in Pierre's pain over the loss of such a well-loved bike, but as if to rub it in, we arrived in Bruthen just as a large group of Ducati's were preparing to take off up the road we'd just come down.

As our newly formed incident recovery team “Bill and Ben” delivered Pierre to the hospital in Bairnsdale, I led the remainder of the group onward, taking Ben's advice to detour around the bridge works, and reached the holy Dargo Road.

Duane found his way through the pack to join me on our final 60 odd km blast along this glorious twisty road, the low sun in our eyes adding to the challenge at times. Once again, we found ourselves sliding around in gravel through the 13 esses section – got to love these un-posted roadworks... Back into the grippy stuff, we made the most of the last corners for the day, and pulled up outside the Dargo Hotel. The rest of the group arrived over the next 10 minutes or so, and most enjoyed a cold beer in the late afternoon warmth outside the pub before claiming their beds at the three houses Ben had arranged for us.

“Bill and Ben” arrived before long, relaying amusing stories of their trip after the tall, redheaded nurse had taken Pierre away to stop him from bleeding on her nice clean floor. Along the way they had encountered Tony on the side of the road, covered in blood! It turned out that he'd simply pulled over with a blood nose. After assisting him, they continued down the road to find Dennis had suffered a low speed crash in the un-posted gravel section. Both wheels let go at the same time, and he'd gone down, the engine case protector and Oggy knob doing a fantastic job of saving the rest of the bike from damage.

Once again, “Bill and Ben” were put into action, and re-fitted Dennis’ visor to his helmet with silver tape, and got him going again.

We regrouped at the Dargo Hotel later for dinner where, as usual, the food was great, as was the company, sharing many stories and laughs as the evening progressed. Some disappeared to the comfort of beds and couches in their houses, the rest returned to the traditional John Rousseaux fire pit at the “Up River” house.

Once again, Ben waited the tables at the general store in the morning, delivering coffees and bacon and egg rolls, then took lunch orders for those wanting more variety than we’d get at the Licola store later in the day.

The weather was kind to us yet again, and we blasted back down the previous day’s corners on the Dargo Road and Beverleys Road for fuel in Briagolong before skirting around Lake Glenmaggie once more and onto the Licola Road. I got spooked early on here, as it seemed almost every third tight, blind corner I tipped into had a 4x4 aiming at me, taking up half of my lane. Most of them managed to abruptly swerve back on to their side in time, but one towing a caravan didn’t give an inch, and had me using the very edge of the road to squeeze through.

I was overly cautious entering all blind corners the rest of the way, but we still had an exhilarating ride, all the way to the dirt on the Wellington River, then back to Licola for lunch.

After the break, we tackled the Licola Road in the opposite direction, then made our way to Tyers for fuel, where Michael appeared to have forgotten how far his side panniers stick out as he wheeled his bike past mine. The pannier hit my helmet where it was hanging on my mirror, and it rolled around on the brink of falling off, but somehow balanced there long enough for me to save it.

We’d made such good time to Tyers I decided to add a detour via the fast sweepers up to Rawson, then down through Erica before hitting the Willow Grove twisties to regroup in Willow Grove and say our goodbyes to Rod, Duane, Dennis and Tony who were all heading home via Powelltown. I led the remainder of the group for a final spirited blast down the Old Sale Road, Crossover sweepers, through Jindivick and Longwarry North for the last, sedate stretch of freeway to the official finish in Officer.

Thanks to all for coming out on this fantastic weekend ride, thanks Ben for arranging the houses, serving breakfast, and dealing with the incidents, and thanks to the rear riders. I hope to see Pierre back out on the road on another exotic machine soon, and hope Bianca can find it in her heart to give Dennis another chance, and let him sign up for the next Dargo weekend in December...

Tim Emons