



THE TRAIL TO AXEDALE

Follow Petit Pixel as she wanders the streets of her hometown Bendigo, photographing and writing about the people, places and food she finds along the way. You can read more on her website www.petitpixeldesign.com/blog or join in the conversation on Twitter via @petitpixl

Bonfires and sparklers...the water slide at Arakoon...the river that connects sprawling paddocks...all memories that take on the kind of golden glow that only nostalgia can provide. I have fond memories of Axedale.

My primary school had about 30 kids total. Sweet as that may be, even when the reluctant preppies were recruited, we didn't have enough kids to round out a full team for a game of anything much other than Kick The Can. I think this is why Group Days were invented, where little pockets of rural schools would join together for larger activity days.

Our school had a fierce rivalry with Mandurang, but Axedale was one of my favourites to visit. Their school was almost three times our size and far enough away to

seem slightly mysterious. I remember going on camp, making damper, and beginning a friendship that continues 25 years later.

And so, long after family homes were sold and university in the city beckoned, I decided to revisit the little hamlet of Axedale just outside of Bendigo. To remember and rediscover.

If you're up for the scenic route, the O'Keefe Rail Trail is a great way to meander your way from Bendigo to Axedale. The sandy gravel trail runs for about 19km, and because it was a railway line in the late 1800s, it's beautifully flat and easy to walk or ride on away from traffic. In some stretches you're covered by the dappled shade of towering gums, and others the track follows the fence lines of expansive green paddocks...from

which inquisitive cows may lazily follow your progress. I will admit the cows weren't the only inquisitive ones as I did enjoy how in places the trail takes you close enough to check out properties and houses along the way.

If you let your imagination wander (because you'll have time to do so) you could easily picture a custom homestead nestled amongst the country side...something worthy of a visit by Kevin of Grand Designs because that's how my imagination rolls.

You'll be crossing roads in places, but everything is very well signed so even for the directionally challenged like me, you're not going to get lost. As a backup, I was tracking our progress on Google Maps because sometimes it's nice to know how far



you have to go. Keep an eye out for wildlife; we stopped to allow an Echidna on a mission to cross the path, but mostly just take in the beautiful open spaces and fresh air.

When you're ready for a break, there's a bridge crossing at Axe Creek with seating...and I just so happened to have packed an apple berry tart for just such an opportunity. But save the majority of your appetite, because when you get to Axedale, there's a good old-fashioned country pub waiting for lunch.

The Axedale Tavern has been on my radar for a little while. I remember back in the day it was where everyone from the surrounding properties would meet for dinner. I'm guessing the tradition probably still stands with the current community. Recently I've heard of people driving from Bendigo more than once to experience the same country vibe, so I was interested to check it out. I loved how the building itself looked traditional and from the outside... squint and you can imagine a few horses tied up out the front at the end of a long day. The inside is divided up into lots of nooks and corners, so almost everywhere feels a little cosy. It's a pretty big menu full of classic country pub fare that including local wines.

In addition to café style slices, I always love it when there's a separate menu for dessert. The kids will enjoy choosing from a sundae menu that includes a Paddock of Poop or the Pretty Princess... and there's a playground with plenty of outdoor seating too, which proved popular on the sunny afternoon we were passing through.

The Axedale Burger and Drakes Steak Sandwich were firm favourites at our table, as was the shared Warm Flourless Chocolate Cake with Espresso Ice Cream and coffees.

If you've got time up your sleeve, take a moment to check out the rest of the town. The community market includes a sweet selection of homemade slices and jams displayed on gingham tablecloths, pre-loved books or toys, and local arts and crafts. The last time we visited Axedale was for a wedding at the little bluestone church perched up behind the pub, the kind of spot where the horse next door was curiously overseeing proceedings from his side of the fence.

The oval at the primary school hosts drive-in movies, and a gallery is now housed in the former Cobb & Co stables. There's a project under way to rejuvenate the Axedale River Reserve for locals and visitors

alike, particularly those arriving by rail trail, including an art installation to represent the local platypus population.

So, if you've happened to arrange a car trip for you and your bikes back into town (and who could blame you after a laid back lunch with a glass of wine), you could take this opportunity to drive a little further afield.

Rivergate Winery, Three Farmers Barbed Wire Art, and Bridgeward Grove Olives are just waiting to be discovered. It's obviously that the community spirit in this lovely little country town is not only well and truly alive, but is thriving. I'll be the first to admit that it's all too easy to find yourself gravitating towards the fast pace and instant options available in our lives these days. But there's something about taking the time to ride somewhere, to rest and have a conversation along the way, to indulge in comfort food, to explore. To just be.

Visit axedalevictoria.net for news and information about the town and future of Axedale. Maps and information about the O'Keefe Rail Trail can be found at Bendigo Information Centre. Links to all of the above can be found at pettixel.com/bendigo-mag. ■