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A ride among the vines

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The Shiraz Trail, McLaren Vale, South Australia

How delightfully civilised it must have been to hop on a steam train in Adelaide and chug along the Fleurieu Peninsula to the McLaren Vale wine region. Sadly, this service ended in the late 1960s but the section between Marino Rocks and Willunga has since been repurposed as a beguiling 37km cycling route called the Coast to Vines Rail Trail.

Aspiring Tour Down Under entrants can tackle the whole thing, but for the rest of us the 7km between McLaren Vale and Willunga is more achievable. Known

as the Shiraz Trail, it's flat, scenic and peppered with cellar doors. One can start at either end (or do a return loop); I begin in Willunga so I can check out its farmers' market, which is held every Saturday from 8am to 12pm. After feasting on an extravagant amount of cheese, almonds, pastries and sweets, I'm fuelled up to go.

Equipped with a stylish two-wheeled cruiser from Hither & Yon, a cellar door on Willunga High Street, I make my way to the trailhead by the old Willunga railway station. It's one of several disused stations along the route transformed into convenient rest areas.

After skirting Willunga golf course, the eucalypt-lined trail plunges into wine country. Occasionally, I pass a verdant pasture dotted with sheep and llamas (llamas protect the lambs from foxes) or a gently swaying field of wheat, but mostly it's a mesmerising procession of vineyards. It's glorious cycling – easy, scenic and car-free.

The most taxing part of the ride is deciding which wineries to visit. At the Battle of Bosworth, you can try the preservative-free Puritan shiraz made from organic grapes. At Hugh Hamilton Wines, you'll find 270-degree vineyard views and cheekily-named labels such as The Floozie (a delicate sangiovese rose). Detour onto McMurtrie Rd and there's a collaboration between

boutique labels Lino Ramble, Sherrah and Bondar, who are championing lesser-known varieties such as nebbiolo, nero d'avola and bastardo (yup, that's a grape).

I conclude my adventure with a tasting back at Hither & Yon with Malcolm Leask, who started the label with his brother Richard in 2012. They're among a new breed of "young-gun" vintners who are experimenting with regenerative farming practices and more interesting new varieties. It's a taste of where the region is heading – away from traditional grapes such as shiraz and towards lighter, more drought-resistant Mediterranean varieties. Who knows, perhaps one day cyclists will be able to tackle the Bastardo Trail.

NEED TO KNOW

- Hither & Yon in Willunga can supply bikes and maps. hitherandyon.com.au
- Coast & Co hire out electric bikes from Primo Estate. coastandco.com.au
- There's a wide range of cafes and restaurants in Willunga and McLaren Vale, plus several enroute, including Oxenberry Farm and the excellent Salopian Inn. oxenberry.com; salopian.com.au mclarenvale.info



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A vineyard tasting at Hither & Yon at Willunga, South Australia.

Rob McFarland is a Sydney-based travel writer who loves cycling almost as much as he loves wine.