

Down & out **DOWN UNDER**

We sent blogger **Felix Lowe** to the Tour Down Under with instructions to capture the colourful underbelly of the event. Here's his report of **podium girls, bad tattoos and swearsy television commentators**

Words and Pics Felix Lowe





André Greipel's power contrasts with Lauren's elegance



Greipel was a regular visitor to the winner's rostrum



Above: Jens Voigt nabs a cheeky cuppa

DOWN UNDER CLASSIC, ADELAIDE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

André Greipel's thighs are enormous. Three of Lauren the blonde podium girl's legs would fit inside one of his, and there would still be room for a couple of bidons. The German has just won his second Down Under Classic, the Sunday evening circuit race in Adelaide that acts as a warm-up for the Tour Down Under. The locals love Greipel, the only non-Australian to win this 51-kilometre leg-stretcher, and Greipel loves Australia.

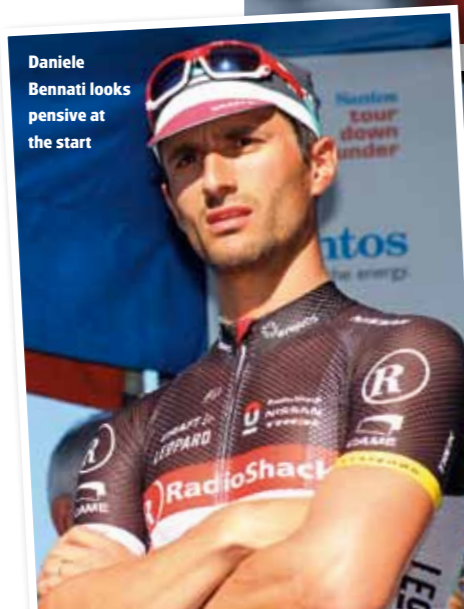
I flew into town a day earlier just in time to see Stuart O'Grady lead out his GreenEdge team-mates at the Australian outfit's kit launch.

"I don't know about you guys but we feel we look pretty good," said veteran sprinter Robbie McEwen, partially convincingly, ahead of his last TDU before retirement. Stuffed with free sushi and mini-burgers, I managed to corner home favourite Simon Gerrans, who exclusively informed me that the returning Alejandro Valverde "will be a real threat".

Having checked into my hostel (even cycling bloggers are feeling the pinch in 2012) I wandered over to Bicycle Express, a bike shop where the Vacansoleil team were doing a meet-and-greet. While signing autographs, Romain Feillu told me he rejected Mark Cavendish's much-publicised claim that he's kamikaze defending his reputation with a simple: "For a sprinter it's normal to be a bit crazy." He also jested that GreenEdge had offered Vacansoleil a 1,000-euro bribe to gift them Sunday's curtain-raiser.

Greipel's Lotto team were clearly not party to any backhander: reunited with lead-out man Greg Henderson, André the Giant made light work of the final bunch sprint, winning at a canter. Sitting next to me in the press area at the finish line was none other than five-time Tour de France champion Eddy Merckx. I asked the Belgian his tip for the day, and he hadn't been the only person to suggest Greipel would be the favourite. But his prediction for the overall in the TDU was more leftfield: "O'Grady. It will make a nice story, no?" Five Tours or not, he's clearly lost his marbles.

A better prediction comes from TV commentating royalty, Phil Liggett, who later — in the comfort of the media centre's free bar at the Hilton Hotel — tells me his tip for the GC is Gerrans. Liggett and his trusty sidekick Paul Sherwen earlier compered the team presentations in central Adelaide. But what do they think of Greipel's thighs? "Ridiculous. He's a monster," says Liggett. "F***ing huge," adds Sherwen, adding his own insight. **Down Under Classic winner: André Greipel (Ger) Lotto-Belisol**



Daniele Bennati looks pensive at the start



King of commentary Liggett grills Edvald Boasson Hagen



Left: Another great TDU gets the thumbs up



Bottom left: There was a real buzz around Adelaide's city centre Classic

REST DAY, ADELAIDE CARDIGANS AND COFFEE

There's a buzz around Adelaide, with amateur riders gathering outside the Hilton, the base for all teams (and reputable reporters) during the race. Back from its short winter break, there's a distinctive beginning-of-term feeling within the peloton: lots of back-slapping, joking and laughing, but also trepidation.

I get a tip-off that RadioShack are putting in an appearance at Bicycle Express before their 11am training run. My source proves trustworthy, and when Jens Voigt saunters in asking if he "could steal a coffee" I'm the only media around.

It's an ideal chance to ask the old boy about those grey cardigans at the official team launch. "Jesus, what was that? Whose idea was that? That guy needs to be fired. Cardigans for me are just the symbol for average, leanness and boredom," rants the young-at-heart 40 year old.

On returning I see sun-blushed Dutch duo Wouter Mol and Kenny van Hummel loitering outside the Hilton, eyeing up two women. "The people here are so nice, relaxed and open," says Kenny. He says it's his first time in Australia and he's bent on seeing a wild kangaroo.

"Tomorrow will be different. Greipel can be beaten," promises the towering Mol, whose job is to lead out van Hummel. Despite crashing out on lap five yesterday, the diminutive van Hummel dismisses my claim that Greipel is too strong a match for anyone. "I'm not afraid of his body or anybody," he stresses.





Left: Assan Bazayev reaches for yet another bidon

Below left: Robbie McEwen prepares for the start of his final home race

Top right: GreenEdge's Leigh Howard wears his heart on his sleeve and his name on his back

Middle right: The support crews hard at work in the bush

Bottom right Oscar Freire rode a solid race and took his first stage win for Katusha — must be the brown bananas

Below right Another happy fan receives the Thomas squiggle

STAGE ONE, PROSPECT-CLARE, 149km
BIDONS FOR BAZA

You want water? Ask for Assan Bazayev, the Kazakh water-carrying domestique extraordinaire. It's 42°C on the road and we're almost out of liquids after just 45 kilometres of the flat opening stage. Owing to the heat and a blustery headwind, the pace is slow, as a break of four carves out a 10-minute lead.

For Astana, it's a quiet day. I am riding in their support car alongside Italian team manager Guido Bontempi and Belgian mechanic Perry Moarman. We speak French, although the team language is Italian (riders are only required to go to Kazakhstan for very special occasions, or if they're really in serious trouble).

Pocket-rocket Bazayev, who has an ornate 'B' tattooed on his neck, is ever-present off the back of the bunch, fetching water for his team-mates.

Despite the fierce heat, wiry Francesco Masciarelli is free from any discernible signs of perspiration when he drops back to the car for a mechanical issue. When the Italian crashes 35 kilometres from the finish, there's more blood than sweat.

To pass the time we talk about Alexandre Vinokourov, nursing himself back from injury for one final season



(Guido fears he won't be strong enough for a Tour swansong). Perry is amazed that a country so arid can produce decent wine; we stop for a call of nature; Guido drives like a lunatic; Baza diligently picks up bidons.

With little going on in the race, the most lasting memory of my day with Astana will always be the quality of their sandwiches. Lovingly prepared by the soigneurs, loaded with ham, cheese, avocado, salad and mayonnaise, it's not only tasty but also Greipel-esque in girth.

Asked to predict the stage winner, Guido says: "Greipel, then Petacchi." An hour later, Greipel indeed takes the

downhill bunch sprint ahead of Alessandro Petacchi after both riders avoid a nasty spill inside the final 800 metres, apparently caused by my Vacansoleil pals, Mol and van Hummel.

On the long transfer back to Adelaide I chat to Michel Cornelisse, the Vacansoleil manager. We talk about Johnny Hoogerland ("Cycling needs more riders like him"), Cavendish ("First look in the mirror, then say what you have to say") and shamed former Vacansoleil rider Riccardo Ricco ("Never met him, never want to. He's sick in the head").

Stage winner and race leader: André Greipel (Ger) Lotto-Belisol

STAGE TWO, LOBETHAL-STIRLING, 148km
BANANA DRAMA

After such a promising start, things were destined to go downhill. Tuesday's Astana club sandwich set the race food bar high — and my hopes take a nosedive when I climb into the Katusha team car, which smells of cigarette smoke. The offender is clearly not healthy-looking manager Dimitri Konyshv, a former stage winner in all three Grand Tours. I suspect taciturn Yuri, the coughing and spitting mechanic in the back seat, who communicates with me through a series of shrugs, taps and grunts.

Things look promising (albeit confusing) when Yuri hands Dimitri a thick sandwich moments after the start in the pretty agricultural town of Lobethal (famous for its apples, hay and horse manure). But when I'm tapped on the shoulder, there follows no sandwich. Instead, Yuri thrusts a brown, battered and bruised banana into my hand which, being the guest, I feel compelled to eat. This is a low point.

As with Astana, Italian is the common language at Katusha, although Dimitri and Yuri mutter away in Russian (probably about the tall Englishman) throughout the stage. The sight of Robbie McEwen dropping off the back on an early climb sees Dimitri pull alongside his old friend and wind down his window. The two exchange pleasantries, before McEwen curses: "Motherf***er,

I can't do it any more. I'm too tired."

McEwen and three GreenEdge team-mates finish 13 minutes off the pace, but winner for the day is the unfancied Tasmanian Will Clarke of minnows UniSA-Australia. Clarke had outwitted an indecisive peloton after breaking away at the start with new race leader Martin Kohler (BMC).

As the riders unashamedly strip off in the finish area, it's a great chance to get up to speed with the latest in cycling body art, whether I like it or not.

Some riders' ink is sentimental, (Greipel has the names of his daughters, Anna and Luna, on his forearm); some are simplistic (Bazayev's 'B'); some are gap year-y (the Chinese symbols at the top of Thomas de Gendt's spine); some are just plain narcissistic (quite why Leigh Howard sees the need to have his own surname emblazoned across his back is beyond me); and some aren't even tattoos (van Hummel's gashed knees).

Tour de France director and debonair Frenchman Christian Prudhomme doesn't strip off, preventing me from glimpsing the butterfly I believe he has in the small of his back, but he is wearing some fashionable Ray-Bans as he's welcomed to the stage alongside Merckx. Paying a fleeting visit to Australia, Prudhomme says he hopes to see in July the same kind of audacious attack as Clarke pulled off today.

Stage winner: Will Clarke (Aus) UniSA-Australia

Race leader: Martin Kohler (Swi) BMC





Left: The Lotto team lead Greipel to yet another stage win

Below left: Wouter Mol: No stranger to a big breakfast

Top right: The scorching heat became oppressive at times...

Middle right: ...well, for some, anyway

Right (main pic): Stirring views of Adelaide from Anstey Hill

STAGE THREE, UNLEY-VICTOR HARBOUR, 134.5km RED HOT DUTCH

“Reminder to riders: no urinating in public near families or children.” Despite this crackled early warning on race radio, numerous riders are nipping down tree-lined streets for a pee moments after the start in the affluent suburb of Unley. No Vacansoleil riders, however: they are busy setting the pace.

“Vacansoleil is on fire!” exclaims the team’s manager Michel Cornelisse, my host for the day, before telling me how much everyone would hate him if he organised the race: “It may be hot and early in the season, but it’s WorldTour — it should be hard. Climbing Willunga Hill twice for stage five is great, but if I had it my way, they’d do it four times.”

Try telling that to a battered van Hummel, who’s in good spirits at the start (yesterday was the first day he didn’t crash) but is still struggling for form. He’s seen a koala while out training and he’s held a tame joey, but still Kenny hasn’t spotted that elusive wild roo, despite all the roadside signs. He’s even wearing a special Skippy bracelet on his right arm as a lucky charm.

It’s the right day to follow Vacansoleil, who have young Belgian Thomas de Gendt in an early four-man break. “Thomas is on fire!” shouts Michel as he hits 100 kilometres per hour while devouring the five minutes of open road

between the peloton and the leaders. “Michel, it’s too fast,” warns mechanic Klas in the back. “They must give us slower cars then,” replies Michel.

Having de Gendt in the break was always the plan, says Michel, producing a piece of paper with written tactics as proof. Apparently de Gendt had a “serious breakfast” this morning (later I learn from the rider himself that this consisted of “some pasta, a few slices of ham with cheese, and cornflakes with milk — but that’s nothing, Mol had double”).

Talking of food, after my Katusha lunch debacle things are looking up as Klas announces there’s some “good s**t” in the food bag, handing me over a musette filled with sandwiches, sweets and chocolate. “Why do you think I’m so fat?” grins Michel while parping the horn at spectators. Moments later he is warned — for a second time — about his driving by the commissaire. “They don’t like me today,” he laughs.

I’m completely won over by the friendly vibe at Vacansoleil, Michel’s frankness and the team’s attacking ethos. Even Michel’s kamikaze driving is endearing.

Although the break is swept up before the finish, de Gendt picks up the climbers’ jersey, the white jersey and enough bonus seconds to rise to fourth in the GC. Greipel — who else? — takes his third win of the week.



Later, as luck would have it, I find myself strolling along the beach with podium girl Lauren, an occupational therapist from Melbourne. I ask the 23-year-old veteran of three Tours Down Under how she keeps a smile while having to kiss a sweaty Teutonic sprinter on a near-daily basis.

“André’s nice to kiss,” she reveals with a smile. “He always wipes himself down and his cheeks are very clean. You’d think the riders would smell, but they don’t. I’d be covered in sweat after just riding up the street.”

I’m covered in sweat just thinking about it.

Stage winner: André Greipel (Ger) Lotto-Belisol
Race leader: André Greipel (Ger) Lotto-Belisol



STAGE FOUR, NORWOOD-TANUNDA, 130km KATUSHA HAVE LIFT OFF

A double booking in Sean Yates’s diary means my planned lift with Team Sky is off and I’m left to fend for myself. I pal up with Aussie photographers Peter and Dane and, after a tip-off from local reporter Simon, we forgo the stage start and drive straight to the first climb of the day.

Anstey Hill isn’t categorised, although its winding steep bends are the closest I’ve seen to Alpine roads all week. Sweeping views back over Adelaide make it the ideal photo stop — and we’re there just as the day’s break escapes.

On we zip to the first intermediate sprint, where we have enough time for a two-dollar hotdog with the locals before heading to Mengler Hill. Thick crowds are gathering for what is tipped to be a decisive climb. It proves just that, with Greipel and the peloton distanced as Spanish veteran Oscar Freire takes his first win for Katusha after the downhill run into the Barossa Valley. “You picked the wrong day to follow us,” says Dimitri at the finish.

The crowds at Tanunda are the biggest so far — primarily because the amateur Bupa Challenge Tour ran along the same route earlier in the day.



One absentee was Bicycle Express shop assistant Grant, who I met days earlier. A paraplegic after breaking his back in a mountain bike accident eight months ago, the 31-year-old father of two was awaiting the delivery of a special \$20,000 hand-cycle as a gift from Trek, but it didn’t arrive in time.

“There’s always next year,” he texts. “I like having challenges ahead.” He was inspirational, unlike the idiots who threw nails on the road at the start of the event, ruining the day for many.

Stage winner: Oscar Freire (Spa) Katusha
Race leader: Martin Kohler (Swi) BMC



STAGE FIVE, MCCLAREN VALE-OLD WILLUNGA HILL, 151.5km

SUMMIT SHOWDOWN

For the first time in the TDU's 14-year history there's a summit finish at the iconic Old Willunga Hill, the Alpe d'Huez of Adelaide. Race organisers hope that two ascents of the first-category climb will mean a sprinter like Greipel will not take the overall win — although there's little chance of that, since the German conceded seven minutes yesterday.

It's no wonder Greipel struggles when the roads head uphill — he's huge and ripped. Applying sun cream at the start, his topless team-mate Marcel Sieberg looks like Plug the Bash Street Kid in comparison to the muscular mass that is Greipel.

After marvelling at a bicycle-powered smoothie-making machine outside a local cafe, I head to the Astana team car to chat to some old friends. Vino's boys are out of sorts: no wins and no breaks, they're bottom of the team standings with their best-placed rider nearly nine minutes down.

"They're useless. They're too tired and didn't train enough," harrumphs mechanic Perry with refreshing candour. I remind the silver-haired Belgian that Astana's sandwich still tops my personal lunch GC and he smiles before delivering his damning verdict: "Better catering but worse riders".

Manager Guido is nevertheless all smiles and when I fish for a prediction, he makes it two out of two by naming Valverde ahead of Gerrans.

There's a tap on my shoulder. It's Yuri the mute mechanic beckoning me to the Katusha car. Please no bananas, I pray. Without a word, he hands me the lost lens cap from my camera and smiles, before opening a pack of what looks like Nicorette.

The riders cover three laps of a coastal circuit beyond the vineyards before I head up to Old Willunga Hill in good time to mix with the spectators. The vast majority of the estimated 120,000 fans seems to have arrived by

bike, underlining the buzz generated by Cadel Evans's Tour win last July.

I chat to a GreenEdge fan wearing a particularly green (and edgy) mankini, a bunch of students dressed like 'Bogans' (Aussie rednecks), a man frying burgers on a barbie, and the parents of an intrepid boy who has climbed a tree above the road to get a better vantage point.

After an unfortunate incident involving my ankles being savaged by inch-long killer ants, I gather my composure in time to see the remnants of the break pass ahead of a peloton blown apart by Valverde's Movistar.

I get to the summit for a much-needed beer ahead of the second decisive ascent, which culminates in the expected showdown between Valverde and Gerrans. The emaciated Spaniard takes the stage but Gerrans — level on time — moves into ochre by virtue of higher previous stage placings.

Despite the sweltering heat at the finish, some riders, including the incongruously pasty Geraint Thomas, pull off their numbers and ride the 60 kilometres back to Adelaide alongside a group of lucky amateurs. As Michel might say, these short 140km stages in Australia clearly aren't hard enough.

Stage winner: Alejandro Valverde (Spa) Movistar

Race leader: Simon Gerrans (Aus) GreenEdge

Top right: Al fresco cuisine, Aussie style

Below right: A shy GreenEdge fan demonstrates his loyalty

Bottom right: Alejandro Valverde edges out Simon Gerrans to the summit finish

Bottom main: Amateurs ride alongside their idols on a 60km jaunt back to Adelaide





Far left: Liquigas manager Biagio Conte hides from the fashion police

Middle top: A Lampre man cools off

Above: Riders give their chat-up lines a dry run ahead of the after-party

Left: The streets of Adelaide provide the perfect setting for the final stage

STAGE SIX, ADELAIDE STREET CIRCUIT, 90km GORILLA THRILLER

It's a relaxed atmosphere in central Adelaide as the pack gathers for the final stage. Alessandro Petacchi does what he does best and basks in the sun while brooding; Rabobank's Graeme Brown takes his son for a spin on his bike; Liquigas manager Biagio Conte flaunts the shortest of shorts with the sleeves of his green T-shirt rolled up (I now fully comprehend the team's famed sauna bonding culture).

Sky have promised me a few laps in their car following Sean Yates's stage four snub but, with no sign of my lift as

the flag is waved, I swap Sky for the sky. Taking to the air in a helicopter organised by Tourism SA, I have a 10-minute trip over Adelaide and can just make out the peloton roaring along the street circuit hundreds of metres below. The view is astonishing, but it doesn't beat the team car in terms of being in the thick of things.

I make it back to the race to witness the final three laps and the inevitable win for Greipel, his fourth of the week. With Valverde unable to pick up any bonus seconds, Gerrans secures the overall for GreenEdge but I feel it's been an otherwise lacklustre race for the

debutants. Still, it makes the locals happy — and they have been perfect hosts.

That night in the Hilton I manage to gatecrash the official race after-party using a sick Borut Bozic's entry wristband. Gerrans has reportedly already flown out of Adelaide, but inside, his hair gelled up, Greipel commands the dancefloor while a cluster of riders swarm around the podium girls. I can't see van Hummel — maybe he's still hunting for kangaroos.

Stage winner: André Greipel (Ger)

Lotto-Belisol

Race winner:

Simon Gerrans (Aus) GreenEdge

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