

Greg Foyster is a widely published journalist and an alumnus of the Centre for Sustainability Leadership. He has presented on environmental issues and at writers festivals around Australia. The *Age* recently featured him in their 'Top 100' inspiring and influential Melburnians.

Sophie Chishkovsky is a classically trained cellist and a committed cyclist. This whole crazy adventure was her idea.

‘At first, Greg Foyster and the cast of characters he meets on his journey all seem a bit mad. Oh, how we need mad bastards like these. *Changing Gears* opens up new approaches to the way we live our lives, without the discomfort of saddle rash that Greg had to go through.’

SEAN ‘THE BIRDMAN’ DOOLEY, author of *The Big Twitch*

‘From advertising to dumpster diving. The thought-provoking account of how one couple sought ways to live by their principles by riding thousands of kilometres around Australia. You’ll learn many tips for your own life, such as “don’t ride thousands of kilometres around Australia”.’

CRAIG REUCASSEL, *The Chaser* and *The Checkout*

‘Until humanity figures out what to do about climate change, we need heroes like Greg Foyster and Sophie Chishkovsky who put their lifestyles on the line to inspire us to change.’

COLIN BEAVAN, author of *No Impact Man*

‘Greg is funny, insightful and sometimes painfully honest. But Sophie is hilarious!’

TANYA HA, author of *Greeniology 2020*

‘This book is honest, edgy, raw and confrontational. Greg shares his truth in an uncut, heartfelt and mind-digested way. In the saddle of his pushbike we share a personal journey that’s uncovering community for what it is... A compelling ride to the future we are all creating.’

COSTA GEORGIADIS, host of *Gardening Australia*

‘Greg Foyster raises questions many of us have asked ourselves about work, spending, values and commitment. Looking for a way to live well within an ethical framework, he and his girlfriend Sophie hit the road to cycle up the east coast of Australia. They were looking for others who had moved from a life of stress and overconsumption to a gentler and simpler way of living. What they found was self-belief, self-reliance and the beginnings of a better life. If your lifestyle clashes with your values, if you want to change how you live but need a push to get you there, this is a must-read book for you.’

RHONDA HETZEL, author of *Down to Earth*

# **CHANGING GEARS**

**A Pedal-Powered Detour from the Rat Race**

**GREG FOYSTER**

For a more detailed map visit  
[www.simplelives.com.au/route](http://www.simplelives.com.au/route)



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## Not Sold

This is a book about me and my partner cycling up the east coast of Australia exploring simpler ways of living. So it's mostly about bikes, but for me the journey actually begins with a car.

Or, to be precise, several cars: a taxi, and a whole fleet of bogan utes.

It's October 2008, and I'm in a taxi rushing to hospital. My breathing is shallow and rapid. My arms are stiff in front of me, my fingers splayed in a rigid V. I can't move my hands or feet, and a tingling sensation is creeping up my limbs.

'It's probably an asthma attack,' says the worried taxi driver.

I try to mouth the word 'ambulance' but my cheeks are numb, my jaw locked shut.

By the time we make it to the hospital my condition has worsened. I'm frozen in a sitting position with my forearms extended, propped up by invisible armrests. The orderly has to carry me to a wheelchair and push me into the Emergency Room.

I've never been in an ER before. My eyes swivel around, searching for nurses ferreting medical supplies or surgeons barking 'Stat!' But there's no mad rush, no scampering to save lives perched on the precipice. The doctors stand around holding clipboards and chatting. The nurses look almost bored.

For some reason, this workaday atmosphere soothes my jangled nerves, and my breathing returns to normal.

After an oxygen test and an ECG, a doctor walks over and calmly delivers the prognosis:

‘It was a panic attack.’

A panic attack? I thought only neurotic, overly sensitive types suffer panic attacks? People with agoraphobia or OCD or severe personality disorders? Am I really that highly strung?

The doctor tells me a panic attack is a physical manifestation of a psychological problem. The stressed mind sends the body into shock, and breathing becomes quick and feeble. There isn’t enough oxygen to reach the hands and feet, and so they seize up. ‘Has anything stressful happened lately?’ he asks.

You could say that. Yesterday I quit my job.

Four months earlier I was at a swish function room in Melbourne’s Docklands precinct, attending an award show for the advertising industry. I’d been working as a copywriter for the past four years, but I’d felt increasingly uncomfortable with my role spruiking consumerism. Yet there I sat, gorging myself on a slab of expensive steak, clapping along as the advertising fraternity congratulated itself for finding clever new ways to increase consumption.

As far as I was concerned, Australians consumed enough already. I’d recently started writing a column about environmental issues for a magazine, and I’d begun to think that overconsumption was the root cause of many ecological



problems. Put simply, people in rich developed countries were gobbling up more resources than the planet could replenish.

The most pressing problem was climate change; Australians had among the highest emissions per person in the world. Our modern lives, while comfortable and full of conveniences, were almost wholly reliant on burning coal, gas and petrol.

That's where the second lot of cars – those bogan utes – come in. For while I was spending my nights and weekends learning about the environmental evils of fossil fuel use, I was spending my days writing retail ads for Holden – a company that, at the time, was known for producing inefficient V8s. I was a walking contradiction, and I hated myself for it.

At work, I kept my newfound conscience a secret. I rode in a Hummer limousine to a staff Christmas party and then got drunk to drown my guilt. Back at home, I watched *An Inconvenient Truth* with my girlfriend Sophie and curled up on the couch with my face in my hands. 'You can't keep making yourself miserable like this,' she said.

This wasn't the first time I'd questioned the industry I worked in. Truth is, I'd had reservations about advertising from the very beginning. At my first job interview I met a creative director who spent twenty minutes criticising a recent Vegemite campaign. Surely, I remember thinking, there were more important things to do with your life than discuss the 'brand personality' of a kitchen condiment? Judging by what I did next, there weren't. I got a job at that agency, finished a degree in 'creative advertising', and was soon pumping out TV commercials for frozen meals.

About a year later, I attended a brainstorming session for Heinz and spent an entire day discussing whether to change

the nozzle size on a tomato sauce bottle. Was the new nozzle size a good fit with the brand's integrity? How would it make customers *feel*? A co-worker later told me I'd been in the privileged company of 'the best canned food marketer in Australia', a woman entrusted with overseeing such cultural landmarks as 'Beanz Meanz Heinz'. What an honour.

As much as I mocked advertising, I also secretly loved it. For a young person with creative ambitions, copywriting is one of the coolest jobs around. You get to sit in fancy offices coming up with wacky ideas, and then companies pay to turn those ideas into slick 30-second videos. I got a huge buzz when my ads appeared on TV or in magazines. Instead of slogging away for years at a novel or film script that might never see the light of day, I could channel my creative energies into big-budget commercials that had a guaranteed audience. Who cared if it was all meaningless crap? At least my work was being seen. Advertising was the creative equivalent of a chocolate bar: instantly gratifying and dangerously addictive.

I was hooked. Mingling with film directors, businesspeople and C-list celebrities made me feel important and intelligent. I clung to this prestige, even though I still had reservations about the ethics of the industry. My job was entwined with my sense of self-worth, and so I couldn't quit without giving up my identity.

Fear of unemployment also played a part. Not that I was worried about money. I didn't have kids or a mortgage, and working in advertising had inoculated me against 'affluenza' – the pathological urge to out-shop the Joneses. No, what worried me was the social stigma. I was afraid of not having an answer to the perennial party question, 'What do you do?' I was afraid of being a nobody.

So I kept working, promising myself I'd leave the industry once I'd reached a certain level. 'Wait till you've done one really great ad,' I'd say. 'Wait till you've won an award.' 'Wait till you've worked in a top agency – it'll look good on your CV.' Years went by as I waited for the milestone that would give me permission to 'do what I really wanted'. Of course, once that milestone arrived, another beckoned. And another. And another.

I might have kept marching towards a mid-life crisis if I hadn't taken on this environment column. The contradiction of promoting Holden cars while writing about climate change was too much. For the first time, what I believed and what I did were in direct conflict, and the rift was tearing me apart. I tried to justify the hypocrisy to myself, but it didn't work. After years of spouting corporate spin, I was immune to my own bullshit.

As I sat at the advertising awards function applauding the latest innovation in packaged goods marketing, I couldn't take it anymore. Why were we congratulating one other for making the world a worse place? I put down my knife and fork and slipped outside. I walked around the corner to a pier with expensive yachts bobbing on the dark, silky water. I knelt down with my head between my knees and started crying.

After that I stopped writing ads for Holden cars, and then for other products I also considered unethical. Four months later I walked into my boss's office for a chat. The agency had recently moved into the eleventh floor of a CBD skyscraper. I looked around at the designer decor: the white bookcase, the super-thin Mac laptop, the ergonomic desk chair, the large glass window with a stunning view of the Yarra River. This was a workplace people envied, the sort of office I'd been taught to aspire to. But it just wasn't me.

‘I need to quit,’ I said.

For the next 24 hours, I felt elated. Then the panic attack struck. What the hell was I going to do now?

After I left my job, I tried to make a living from freelance writing. I set up a home office in my bedroom and started pitching feature articles to every outlet I could think of. Within a few years I was covering stories on the environment and refugees for different publications around Australia. The work was sporadic and poorly paid, so to make ends meet, I did some freelance copywriting for solar power companies and government departments. Every now and then I had to flog products – I wrote some pretty crappy ads for irons – but mostly I stuck to my convictions.

The best part about being semi-employed was that I had more time to spend with Sophie. She was studying cello at the University of Melbourne, and I got to know some of her more radical friends – artists and activists who lived in a warehouse, scavenged their food from supermarket dumpsters and put on amazing exhibitions. Their example opened my eyes. I didn’t want to squat in squalor myself, but I was fascinated by the fact they got by on very little income and had lots of free time.

Previously I’d lived in fairly typical share-houses: one person per bedroom, takeaway for dinner, nights in front of the TV, weekly shops at Coles. I was the resident hermit, arriving late from work and retreating to my room to read or churn out an angst-ridden journal entry. If I heard a knock on the front door, I’d quickly turn off the light.

I had a decent income in advertising, so most of these places were pretty nice. They were the sorts of share-houses professionals live in: modern, clean, well-kept. One North Melbourne terrace was so fastidiously spotless that if I left an unwashed mug on the kitchen counter my housemates would glare at me like I'd just strangled a dolphin. Our relationships were equally sterile. I'd say 'bye' on the way to work each morning and 'hi' on returning at night. That was the extent of our daily social contact.

When I moved into a communal share-house with Sophie, I got a taste of a different sort of lifestyle. At first the house was fairly clean and orderly. Then some hard-partying artists and musicians moved in, and the place began to look like the aftermath of a rave. By the time we left, six people occupied five rooms, and a guy called Stitch was living in a two-storey shanty built against the back fence. Meanwhile, the house had collected even more animals than occupants: two dogs, six chooks (including two meat chickens liberated from a factory farm) and one constantly pregnant cat that belonged to a neighbour.

A lot of our food came from supermarket dumpsters. A housemate had somehow secured a key to the most bountiful bins around Melbourne, so our kitchen benches were always crowded with partially rotting fruit and nutritionally useless muffins from Aldi.

The backyard looked like a cross between an organic farm and a lost-and-found booth. Broken bicycle wheels hung from a tree. Seedlings sprouted from old leather boots filled with earth. A blue kiddie pool – the site of a jelly wrestling match between a recently released asylum-seeker and a crusty punk chick – lay abandoned on the muddy ground.

The place was filthy, chaotic and disorganised – the complete opposite of other share-houses I'd lived in. But although I complained about the dirty dishes and cluttered backyard, I enjoyed living in this communal shithole. Relationships were more important than rules or rosters. We all got along.

Forget everything I just told you. Imagine, instead, that I'm the average Australian. I'm 37, married, with two kids. (Statistically, I've got 1.9 kids, but we'll round up so my youngest gets born with two full sets of toes.) Like 64 per cent of Australians, I live in a capital city – let's say Melbourne. Together, my partner and I pull in \$1234 a week, and fork out \$1800 in monthly mortgage repayments on our house (hey, it beats renting), which has three bedrooms. My garage has one or two cars, and each week I spend almost four hours getting to and from work. I'm a white-collar professional, and I put in more than 40 hours a week at the office, Monday to Friday. Weekends are for BBQs and booze – as a typical Australian I eat 116 kilos of meat a year, second only to the Yanks, and I drink 111 kilos of alcohol, but eat only 98 kilos of vegies. Health-wise I'm feeling pretty good, though I'm a bit on the chubby side from eating junk and sitting down all day. Despite this, I'll probably live longer than my parents (they're in a retirement home), so can't complain.

Except, as you know by now, I was hardly any of those things. I was 28, unmarried, no kids. I lived in a capital city, but I was a renter. My home was a dilapidated share-house with five makeshift bedrooms for seven people. Instead of one or two

cars, our garage had seven second-hand bikes. I almost always cycled to work. I was a white-collar worker, true, but I earned under \$30,000 a year, and some years only \$15,000. Being a vegetarian, I ate zero kilos of meat, leaving more burgers for the Yanks.

I don't fit the national average, and nor would anyone else. So there's a danger in reducing people's varied experiences to a single 'typical' lifestyle – no one lives exactly that way. But coming up with an average Aussie lifestyle is also a useful tool because it highlights the underlying pattern of most people's lives.

In Australia, there is a really obvious pattern: most people invest a lot of money in their family home, work in a different location from where they live, and travel in a car to get there. And once we've identified that pattern, we can look at the incentives that drive it: government grants and tax exemptions for homeowners, jobs clustered in central locations, investments in roads rather than rail.

All this stuff isn't just of interest to policy wonks in Canberra – it affects us personally. Because if the majority of people live a certain way, then the economic and social system is usually set up to cater for that lifestyle. This can make it very hard – or at least prohibitively expensive or inconvenient – to buck the trend.

As I approached my twenty-ninth birthday, I felt myself being nudged towards a more typical lifestyle. Remaining a renter didn't seem like a good long-term option because there's no security. When leases expire, landlords often choose to renovate or reoccupy. I'd lived in four share-houses in five years. Meanwhile, my friends started talking about buying property, maybe moving further out of the city. If Sophie and I also wanted to buy a place we'd need a deposit, and that meant

a steady salary. I got the impression society was telling me to grow up, find a job, get a mortgage and start making babies. Like a planet pulled towards a black hole, I was sinking into The Average.

I wouldn't have minded so much if I could have kept living by my beliefs. I'm not work shy, and I could appreciate the economic logic of squirrelling your savings into a house. My hesitation was that in moving to more secure housing – and in the process adopting a more 'typical' lifestyle – I'd have to compromise so many things important to me.

Sophie and I don't have much money, so the only properties we can afford are in the outer suburbs. This means we'd probably need a car to get to work or do the shopping – there goes my commitment to cycling and avoiding fossil-fuel use. We could live in the middle suburbs, but that would mean an even bigger mortgage, and my preferred line of work (freelance journalism) doesn't pay well. I'd have to take a corporate, government or PR job, drastically reducing my free time and sense of autonomy. And studies show consumption generally increases with income, so we'd end up buying more stuff. Our environmental footprint would soar. I'd find myself in the same position I was in advertising: believing one thing and doing another. I'd end up hating myself again.

A few of my friends, also in their late twenties or early thirties, faced a similar dilemma. Their solution was to look for cheap inner-city apartments in grungy areas like Footscray or Sunshine. They were exploring a fairly conservative alternative to the typical Australian lifestyle – but why not go further? Why not search out as many alternatives as possible, and then decide how to structure a life?



I wasn't interested in being different for its own sake. Given the choice, I prefer to fit in – which is why I cut my hair short and dress neatly in jeans and a shirt. I just seemed to be heading for a life I'd never consciously chosen, simply because it was the path of least resistance. I wanted to be exposed to other options – not just the obvious ones – before embarking on the next phase.

The more I thought about it, the more a 'typical' way of life seemed constricting. I'd read research showing that once basic material needs have been met, more stuff doesn't necessarily make people happier, so could I go without the mod-cons of Australian life? Did I need a plasma TV? A stereo system? A designer shirt to hang in the closet? A renovated bathroom with heated towel rack? Why complicate a life with so many extra belongings?

As I pondered my situation, another realisation arose: I wasn't living my beliefs *now*. After moving into the communal share-house, I'd significantly reduced my carbon footprint, but not through my own efforts. Although I applauded the virtues of growing organic food, keeping chooks, capturing grey water and reusing plastic containers, I hardly ever did these things myself. I was a wannabe intellectual who avoided practical chores because I thought they'd impinge on free time to think, read and write. I rarely set foot in the garden. I didn't feed the chickens or take out the compost. In all the time I lived at the communal share-house, I never once went dumpster diving for salvaged supermarket food. I was freeloading off the freeloaders.

While all this was ping-ponging around my head, Sophie and I were talking about going travelling, but we didn't want to fly. When she suggested cycling up Australia, I thought it was

a crazy idea. ‘That’s impossible!’ I said. Then we met people who’d performed similar feats, including a genuinely loopy Scotsman who’d ridden from Darwin to Adelaide *in the heat of summer*. Our little excursion up the east coast no longer seemed completely nuts.

So that was it. We decided to cycle up Australia exploring alternative and simpler ways to live. Since we were both drawn towards environmentalism, we planned to visit sustainable communities on the way. For me, the bicycle trip became a quest for two things: to explore ways of life that matched my beliefs, and to learn to live those beliefs in practice.

I sent a call-out to friends, family and journalism contacts, explaining what we were doing and asking for suggestions of people to interview. Within a month I had collected one hundred inspiring examples from all around Australia. There was a forest activist living up a tree. An architect who designed tiny houses. A chef who’d organised a locally themed banquet. A man who survived in the bush using only 18<sup>th</sup>-century clothes and tools. People were growing their own food, sewing or mending their own clothes and building their own simple shelters. A forum site called *aussieslivingsimply.com.au* had 50,000 visits a month and a community of more than eight thousand users sharing practical advice about worm farms, grey water, recycling and organic gardening. And apparently this movement had a name: voluntary simplicity.

Inadvertently, Sophie and I had stumbled onto something big. But before we could head off on our great adventure, we needed someone to explain the history and philosophy of the movement, and perhaps give us a gentle push in the right direction.

Preferably someone who lived within cycling distance.