


ADVENTURE | CYCLE TOURING, NEW ZEALAND

Hills and



New Zealand made its intentions clear from the beginning, forcing Paul to hike to the misty tops of the Richmond Range.



headwinds

Wild weather and challenging terrain
turn this one-month cycle tour of
New Zealand into seriously hard yakka.

WORDS AND PHOTOS DAN SLATER

Bluff: they couldn't have chosen a better name. Not only was the town situated on a lonely outcrop of rock, buffeted by the winds and seas of the roaring forties, but it had tricked us good and proper.

The perfect South Island cycling route had always been obvious to me: from the inter-island ferry terminal at Picton across to the West Coast, down to Bluff, back across to the East Coast and up to our starting point. Such a route would take in the best of Te Waipounamu (and more importantly would look great when drawn on a map) but was based on Bluff being the southernmost point of the mainland, and this was apparently not the case. That honour goes to Slope Point, a mere 15th of a degree further south but nearly 100km away. We'd been well and truly Bluffed.

DAY 1, PICTON

I always think of supermarkets when I think of New Zealand, probably because whenever I arrive here I immediately do a big shop for some imminent outdoor adventure, and today is no exception. Cycling around the South Island had been a dream of mine for, well about six months to be honest. Ever since our previous dream of driving through West Africa had been scuppered by a minute virus called Ebola, myself (treasurer and videographer) and Paul (navigator and mechanic) had seamlessly rerouted our planning efforts into another of our long list of work-avoidance schemes. Congratulations New Zealand – your number just came up!

DAY 5, WESTPORT

The way to the west coast, one of Lonely Planet's top 10 regions to visit in 2014, lies across Marlborough and the southern fingers of the Arthur Range. Mist and drizzle are abundant, shrouding the Douglas fir tree plantations that line the road over low but frequent hills. With every ragged exhalation into the cold air we add to the cloud, out of which roars a stream of vehicles like motorised banshees. This is not a gentle introduction to cycle touring.

When we were planning this caper the question our friends most often asked was about the hills – were we ready for them? A profound misunderstanding of cartography left me with the assumption that the terrain would be downhill all the way to Bluff and uphill on the way back, by which time we would be 'trek fit'. The truth had been a shock but we coped with pragmatism: when it rained, we donned our waterproofs; when it was sunny, we slapped on cream; when the road led uphill, we went up; when it led down, we... well, you get the idea.

We approach Cape Foulwind on New Year's Eve, although had we looked more closely at the map we may have avoided



The start of some ridiculous hairpin bends on the Roxburgh Gorge Trail.

such an ominously named place. We were expecting rain, sure, but not necessarily sheets of water thrown into our faces by 50km/h winds. The Lower Buller Gorge is beautiful (I can just about tell while being blown sideways into the path of camper vans and milk trucks) but we are glad to reach the haven of Westport. Soaked through, we treat ourselves to dorm beds and steak. The sleepy main street belies the hectic party that erupts later in the evening. Saddling up tomorrow will not be easy.

DAY 14, WANAKA

After a fortnight on the road we are hardened cycle tourists: we have the selection of bush campsites down to a fine art; our dinner routine is down pat – from unpacking the pots to eating our pasta and sauce takes precisely 20 minutes; sleep comes quickly, our tired legs still pedalling limply in our sleeping bags.

There were some teething troubles though: within minutes of restarting on New Year's Day, each pedal stroke felt like someone trying to prise my kneecap off with a screwdriver. This was the first of my body parts to signal defeat and we were less than a week in. Fortunately, full-time painkillers dulled the screwdriver sensation to that of a butter knife and I was able to continue. More amusingly, Paul got his sun cream and chamois cream mixed up and slathered his gonads in factor 50. He said it was an accident but I suspect he believes the sun shines out of his backside.

The west coast was rugged and beautiful, with picturesque rock stacks reminiscent of Victoria's Great Ocean Road but with the added fun of millions of sand flies. We >

Last one to Picton buys the drinks!



Following the Clutha River while keeping an eye out for missed gold deposits.



The historic Cardrona Hotel was a brief diversion from the slog over the Crown Range.





Top: The stunning Queen Charlotte Sound, which we biked as an encore.

Bottom: Paul developed multiple rider disorder by the time we reached Lake Wanaka.

Wanaka is our first full rest day and we know exactly what to do with it – eat, eat and eat, preferably standing up.

were very lucky with the weather and scored a record 115km day heading down to Haast, from where the pass back over the Southern Alps promised to be a big day. “It’ll test your mettle,” enthused one tourist at the picnic spot where we rested before the big push. “I think I’ve got mettle fatigue,” I replied through a mouthful of cheese and crackers.

Contrary to expectations the Haast Pass was lovely: all alpine meadows and cascades crashing down beside the road. Had it not been for the ridiculously steep gradient we would have had a smashing day. At least, we thought, the following day’s route around the base of Lakes Wanaka and Hawea would be flat. We were sadly mistaken. In fact, it’s amazing in how many otherwise-flat aspects of geography NZ manages to insert hills.

Wanaka is our first full rest day and we know exactly what to do with it – eat, eat and eat, preferably standing up. We’ve been averaging 72km per day and my bum is usually the first part of me to refuse to go further. I cringe at the naivety of my Day 1 self: “Wow,” I’d enthused upon realising the sun doesn’t set until 9pm, “We could ride for 14 hours a day!” Poor, innocent fool. Reasonable days with frequent breaks are necessary to prevent permanent damage to my arse bone.

DAY 19, BLUFF

It is an appropriately bleak day when we finally ride into Bluff. The leaden sky is pierced by the crying of seagulls carried on a stiff breeze. I pedal the last few kilometres toward the rocky headland, just visible through the drizzle, the town’s white buildings clustered low on the flanks of

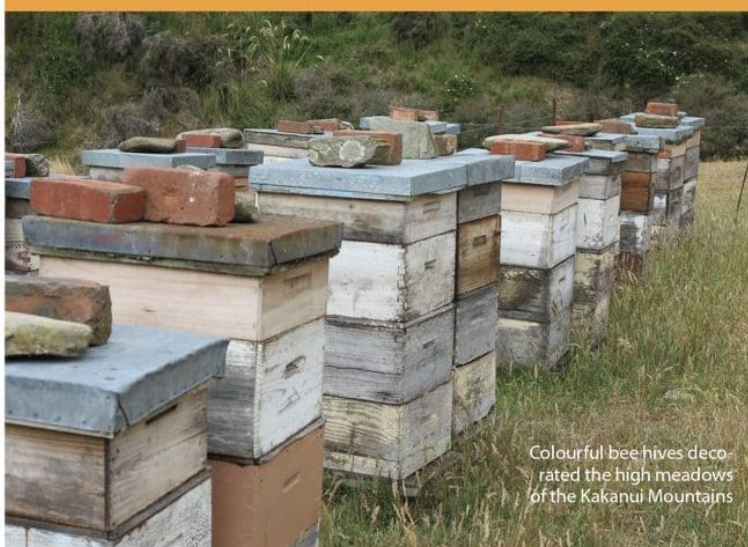
the hill. So this is the legendary place to which we needn’t have come. Unfortunately, visiting Slope Point would entail a two-day detour which we can’t afford, so Bluff will have to do.

From Wanaka we’d crossed the Crown Range, the highest sealed road in NZ, to Queenstown. Where, I wondered, was the highest unsealed road? Until then we’d been pretty lucky with the weather: apart from those first few days of rain and the odd breeze we’d enjoyed blue skies, but as we pushed further south our luck thinned out until we were battling fierce headwinds. Not only did they sap our strength but the blasts from passing logging trucks were amplified; my helmet would have blown clean off many times had it not been strapped to my head. In a land where even the rural postboxes huddle together for protection, we are desperately looking forward to a tailwind.

Bluff isn’t a dead loss though – it was still the first European settlement in New Zealand and home of a coveted Land’s End-style signpost. “This is the furthest from the end of the ride you’re ever going to be,” says Paul, helpfully. Thanks, mate. He’s right though; there’s nothing for it but to point our handlebars north and go back to Picton.

DAY 22, OMAKAU, CENTRAL OTAGO

As cycle tourists, the wind is our nemesis. The promised tail wind out of Bluff propelled us along nicely for about 15 minutes before, incredibly, it changed direction and began howling out of the northwest. From that moment on we were pummelled, buffeted and blown sideways all day, every day. The wind was like a heat-seeking missile except that >



Colourful bee hives decorated the high meadows of the Kakanui Mountains



Traffic Jam! Stuck behind a few thousand sheep.



Total Distance: 2270km
Punctures: 0 Rest days: 3 Average distance per day: 78.3km
Longest day: 115km Shortest day: 38km



Home, sweet home.



Those Kiwis sure know how to party.



A quiet moment on the short Hawea River Track.



Day 32: It's all over! A pint of Speight's never tasted so good.

Katzhiko Takashige taking a quick breather from his 40,000km Peace Run.



whenever we changed direction it would move around to face us and hold its massive palm against our forehead like a schoolyard bully.

As soon as we left Invercargill behind we stayed off the main highways, choosing instead the network of smaller roads between farms. That meant fewer trucks, motorhomes and road kill, but also fewer rest stops and roadhouses. The wild mountains and coast were replaced by beautiful rolling farmland and scenes of rural idyll. Despite our battering near Cape Foulwind the country was apparently in drought and giant irrigation structures threw water in inventive ways across the landscape.

Some of the sections we have been most eagerly anticipating on this trip are the purpose-built bike trails of Central Otago. Nga Haerenga ('The journeys') is NZ's nationwide network of cycle-ways, comprising 2500km of trails and 23 Great Rides. Although our circuitous route does not coincide with many of the trails, we manage to incorporate sections of the Clutha Gold trail, Roxburgh Gorge Trail and the classic Otago Central Rail Trail on our way north.

Getting onto the network is a huge relief and the kilometre markings fly past as we remember the joy of off-roading. We follow the wide, blue Clutha River past historic

gold diggings and around the spectacular Roxburgh Gorge, now flooded by a hydroelectric dam. The Otago Rail Trail is less visually impressive but no less fun, winding between dry hills of wind-blasted tussock, through eerie tunnels and over creaky wooden viaducts.

It is grand fun but the dust and gravel play havoc with my drivetrain. After a few kilometres my chain is squeaking like a rusty mouse and changing gear sounds more like I'm kicking over a trolley full of surgical items. Man and bike are relieved when we pull into Omakau's campground for a shower and a pint. "The cyclists usually camp over there," says the proprietor helpfully, pointing at a copse of poplars bent over at 45 degrees. I scan the back pages of the *Otago Daily Times* for headlines such as 'Strongest Winds Since Records Began' or 'Otago Braces for Hurricane' but find nothing except the chilling revelation that a bike has been stolen from outside the post office. It seems that these skin-scouring gales are nothing special.

DAY 27, CHRISTCHURCH

In an attempt to keep off the highway for a few more days Paul took us inland through the sleepy village of Naseby and up into the not insignificant Kakanui mountains. Beautiful though they were, our route took us over Danseys Pass – according to locals the highest unsealed road in NZ! At least I no longer had to wonder at its whereabouts.

Once over that we reached the long, straight, flat roads of the Canterbury Plains where we could scoot along at 25km/h – heaven! So far we have not had the luxury of taking in many tourist attractions, our main aim being to progress as far as possible toward our goal, but now that the end is in sight we can relax a little and spend a day exploring the reconstruction of this resilient city.

DAY 32, PICTON

Past the vineyards of Blenheim and the seals and beaches of Kaikoura we ride, through a final range of rough, green peaks to the town that met us, fresh and enthusiastic, off the ferry a month ago. In that time we've seen snow-capped peaks, glacial lakes of the deepest blue, offshore rock stacks and sheep. Lots of sheep. We've hitched a lift on a jet boat, learned not to eat trail mix while riding over corrugated gravel and fought an orc army for the treasure of Smaug. Well, maybe I imagined that last bit.

Then there were the other cycle tourists. During our circumnavigation we met dozens of them, mostly Swiss, riding on anything from tandems to recumbents to credit cards. We met Katzhiko Takashige, a Japanese man who is running 40,000km on five continents for world peace; we watched Peter Caldwell, cycling solo from Cape Reinga to Bluff (I wonder if he knows – ha!) to raise funds for diabetes, and hold up a mile of traffic over NZ's longest road bridge; we even passed a chap who appeared to be Nordic blading across the country!

But now we're done, and the ferry back to Wellington approaches. Work beckons. For now though, I dream of luxurious sofas and doughy pizzas. I can't wait to do nothing; I close my eyes; I empty my mind; I am at peace. Now then, where did I put that map of West Africa?