

Discovering *Nga Haerenga*

by Gigi Ragland

Along the Otago Central Rail Trail



Pedaling towards the snow-dusted Southern Alps of New Zealand, just one of the many great views along the route.

Hours of plane and van transport left me feeling caged and ready to spring. I was itching to ride and be free of my jet lag. My new British biking buddy, another female solo traveler, and I set off spinning side by side along a backcountry lane as we headed to the main trailhead in the town of Clyde, the beginning of the Otago Central Rail Trail. Suddenly, as we turned the street corner, she raised her voice, and in her very proper Queen's English, yelled, "Keep left, stay on the left side of the street!" Generally I follow the rules

of the road, but I was still dazed from adjusting to the time difference on the other side of the world on New Zealand's spectacular South Island. Luckily, it was a sleepy morning in Clyde, and we had the road to ourselves.

This was the first — but not the last — time my British biking buddy would remind me in a polite English accent to bike on the left side of the street or trail. Admittedly, getting nailed by a car as I rounded a corner was not in my plans, and I felt like a dimwit. In New Zealand cyclists ride on the left side following the road rules of the U.K.

Cycling with a buddy was definitely a benefit of joining a group tour, especially in this instance.

As a female traveling solo, I decided to join a guided group bike tour instead of renting a bike and heading out on my own. Cycling solo has its merits, you basically are your own boss (and crew), and self-guiding allows infinite options for making changes or not. Considering that I only had about a week to tour, planning logistics was better left to an operator that knew the ins and outs of the trail route. This way, I could just enjoy the cycling without concerns and

possibly make some new Kiwi friends among the group.

Two other women traveling solo joined the Otago group bike tour. While we were all from different places and were different ages, there was one common denominator: we wanted to experience a little outdoor cycling adventure within the company of a small group. Lauren was an English schoolteacher exploring New Zealand for a few months and winding up her journey

from day one I felt at ease, possibly because there were other single women, but everyone was pleasant.”

Attending a conference in Auckland was my main reason for being in New Zealand. However, like any bike-touring traveler who likes spending more time in the saddle than at a desk, I plotted how to combine business with scenic spinning pleasure. Of course I’m not alone in this attempt to squeeze in a bike tour before or after a conference

to do with it.

Booking a trip during shoulder season offers less crowds, costs less, and there’s a chance that the weather will stay nice — or not. Sometimes it’s just a roll of the dice. In my case, it was a bit sketchy.

I flew in on the tail end of Cyclone Ita that had cut a stormy path across the northern coast of Australia and most of New Zealand. It was right before Easter weekend in mid-April,



The Adventure South Otago group sugared up and ready to ride after an Easter candy fuel break.

with a bike tour. Liz, a local Kiwi, had chosen to take her very first vacation by herself without the family in tow. The trip was her first time traveling solo and her first experience on a bike tour. Both were new to multi-day bike touring and were a bit anxious about their endurance in finishing the 150-kilometer Otago Central Rail Trail. But the excitement of being in the beautiful outdoors and the support and encouragement of a group go a long way to fuel the body and spirit. When we talked about the uncertainties of traveling alone and meeting new people, Liz said, “Right

or a business meeting. How could you not? New Zealand is an outdoor enthusiast’s paradise. It is said that if you combine the seven continents’ most dramatically beautiful landscape and rolled it into one country, you would come up with New Zealand. Pacific Island beaches and rolling farmland cover the North Island whereas the South Island offers an extensive volcanic plateau, giving way to alpine mountains within view of the sea in the south, and onto sub-Antarctic islands near the coastline. The hard part was deciding where to go. But the weather had a lot

and if you live in the Northern Hemisphere, that means spring flowers, baby bunnies, rainbows, and soft rain showers. Halfway around the world, it was quite the opposite. One long flight and autumn appeared overnight. It was as if a magician had snapped his fingers and the scene had changed. The soft pinks and whites of budding blooms disappeared, replaced by the bold reds and golds of the fall season. I had experienced traveling from winter to summer on “snowbird” trips, but leaving spring for fall was a much different animal, and a beastly one at that, because the

gale-force winds of the cyclone tore through the coastal areas, causing road and trail closures. To be honest, when I first looked at cycling in New Zealand, I had visions of pedaling through the rolling country of the Hobbits and the ups and downs of Middle Earth. But timing, my schedule, and the cyclone took care of that decision for me.

I was headed for the middle of the South Island. Luckily, the weather system was on its way out by the time I arrived. Wet and damp was okay with me — you can still ride in those conditions. Cyclones, not so much. Months before the trip, the tour operator sent out a packing list with instructions to come prepared for rain, and I was happy I had remembered to pack the gear. Rain is an issue that every touring cyclist must deal with at some point or another. Traveling to New Zealand at the peak of fall season warrants a rain jacket at least. Although snow wasn't expected, it could rain at any time.

Autumn is also the end of the season for the majority of guided group bike



Enjoying a hike along the trails of Blue Lake near St. Bathans's historic gold mining town.

tours as weather becomes more variable and cold. There are plenty of local New Zealand operators that offer group bike tours. I discovered Adventure South through a friend in the bike industry who highly recommended them. They were able to squeeze me in on the last fully support-

ed bike tour of the season, the Otago Central Rail Trail, which was fortuitous considering the conditions of some of the other trails after the storm.

After being picked up in Christchurch and fitted to our bikes, we drove through the center of the South Island, admiring views of sheep dotting

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the vast valleys with the snow-capped Southern Alps as a backdrop. Low-lying clouds of wispy fog blanketed the plains while the Alps rose up through the mist, hemming in the edges as we made our way to the town of Clyde for the start of the tour.

Of the New Zealand Cycle Trail's 13 Great Rides located on the South Island, the Otago Central Rail Trail is designated as one of the easiest. Even though I was hoping for a little tougher terrain, there were plenty of golden moments to be found along the trail, especially in fall, and the old railway towns have plenty of character. Besides, I was looking forward to the views and the camaraderie of new bike buddies.

Certainly, I was glad for the company of Lauren. As a schoolteacher, she was used to rounding up children and had such a cheery way of chiding me when I went astray that I didn't feel too bad about being fuzzy-headed. I imagined her students felt that way too. Despite riding on the wrong side of the road in Clyde, we did manage to pedal onto the trailhead to begin the three-day cycling journey of the Otago Central Rail Trail. There we met up with the rest of our group and Adventure South guide.

We began on Easter Sunday. Like Liz, I felt instantly comfortable with the group. One young woman, Sally, had decorated her bike with a bright yellow Easter basket full of candies. "Nothing like a little sugar to get you moving," she quipped in a Kiwi accent as she smiled and passed a few chocolate eggs to me. Soon we were "hippi-ty-hoppity" after a few bites of candy and ready to ride. I learned that she and her family, all Kiwis, made up most of our group. In fact, she teased me, laughing, "Glad you could make our family trip." Sally and her fiancé James (also on the tour) were engaged to be married and lived in Australia. Their parents were on the tour as well as Sally's Aunt Wendy. It had seemed like a good idea to gather all the soon-to-be relatives for a trip before the marriage. And they all seemed to enjoy cycling together as a family, an auspicious sign for the upcoming nuptials.

Much like other touring cyclists

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attempting the Otago Rail Trail, our motley crew encompassed all ability and fitness levels and ages ranged from the 20s to the 60s. On the Otago trail, you'll find young families, multi-generational groups, couples, solo cyclists, locals out for a spin to the next town,

Rides network, Otago offers exceptional facilities throughout, from mom-and-pop cafés, little neighborhood art galleries, preservation of small town heritage, and charming accommodations that reflect the character of the railway's past. Indeed, the rail trail is

tion. All the station sites (former train depots) have a red-painted replica of a New Zealand Railways Corporation emergency phone box where you can find the rubber stamps to mark the passports. Of the \$10 passport price, eight are contributed to the ongoing enhancement of the trail. Adventure South provided all of us with the passports as a souvenir of our tour. It was up to us to stop at each station to collect the stamps. Along with the stamp stations, there were historical signage and story boards, railway remnants, and a number of depots still standing to investigate.

I ESPECIALLY LIKE NGA HAERENGA, THE NAME FOR THE NEW ZEALAND CYCLE TRAIL NETWORK, WHICH TRANSLATES TO 'THE JOURNEYS.'

the extremely fit, and the not-so-fit — all going at their own pace. What makes the Otago such a pleasure to ride is that it appeals to all levels of cyclists. Barbara, the mother of the groom, was concerned about finishing the three-day rail trail and saw herself as the weakest link, "I still managed to get through. And the support from the group was always there," she said, adding that finishing was important but that "the eclectic mix of the group made the whole experience all the better."

As the "crown jewel" in the Great

the premier prototype for other Great Rides to follow in that it has succeeded in providing economic, environmental, and social benefits to the communities of Central Otago. Not only is it considered the most popular trail in the network, but Kiwis consider it one of the top adventures to enjoy in New Zealand.

The entire route is broken up into 18 point-to-point stations. All travelers along the Otago Rail Trail — hikers and cyclists — can purchase an Official Rail Trail Passport to stamp at each sta-

Completing the entire 150-kilometer (93-mile) trail usually takes cyclists three to five days, depending on how quickly they want to ride and how long they want to stay in the towns along the way. The first leg from Clyde to Lauder was 27 miles, passing six stations with options to get passports stamped at Clyde, Alexandra, Galloway, Chatto Creek, Omakau, and Lauder. I could see why Barbara was concerned about not finishing. If you were not familiar with bike touring off-road, even

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Cyclists emerge from one of the three railway tunnels along the Otago Central Rail Trail.

though the track was fairly smooth, wide, and well-packed dirt, there were hills to ascend and descend, which required some basic mountain biking skills. The challenge for me was the constant reminder to stay on the left side of the path, which oddly enough,

was more difficult off-road than on city streets. I wanted to zoom down the hills, but keeping left felt weird. Luckily, Lauren was riding with me for most of the trail.

We pedaled near rivers and creeks bearing tongue-twisting Maori names,

the legacy of the indigenous people of New Zealand who first arrived on the islands 1,000 years ago. Pronouncing the Maori names of some of the natural sites wasn't easy, but it was always interesting. There was the Manuherikia River, which means "tied bird," where we crossed a former road-rail bridge over the waterway. *Aotearoa* is the Maori name for the country of New Zealand, which means "land of the long white cloud," and the Maori greeting, *Kia Ora* means "be well or healthy." I especially like *Nga Haerenga*, the name for the New Zealand Cycle Trail Network, which in Maori translates to "the journeys." That wonderful term is what the Otago Central Rail Trail provides, and Adventure South was the catalyst to initiate our group's journey.

I was embraced by all the beauty of the season as parts of the trail were lined with autumn-touched golden willows and poplars. Rolling along, we glimpsed grazing sheep on grassy meadows. It became a game to identify the type of sheep throughout the hills and pastures. There were black-faced Suffolk sheep, dirty gray colored

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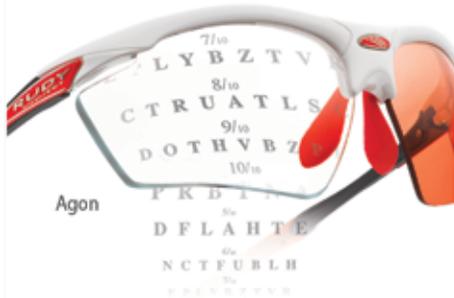
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Merino sheep, and the sweet and dreamy, white, fluffy Corriedale and Romney sheep — iconic images of New Zealand. As we raced past a flock of Merino sheep, Lauren called out, “Tell your cousins thank you for the wool!” That day she was sporting a Merino wool top that kept away the chill of autumn winds. For most of the 20th century wool was the country’s most valuable export. Now dairy operations have overtaken sheep farming.

Bike touring on the trail grants you the chance to mix with other cyclists at each section. There is a real social atmosphere to the ride. Taking a break every day at one of the many cafés along the trail is a must for anyone hiking or biking the Otago Central Rail Trail. Restaurants, cafés, and bistros are run by locals who offer tasty homemade goods to eat. The made-from-scratch treats — layered carrot cake, brownies, and freshly baked fruit scones with clotted cream — are hard to pass up and easily justifiable after logging a few miles on the bike. At least that’s the way we felt for the duration of our time on the Otago. The challenge was to stop yourself from eating too many freshly baked scones at the breaks. There is something strangely nice about feeling like a very civilized cyclist though. It’s fun to sit out on the lawn of a bike-touring café, sipping tea and noshing on the baked goodies du jour, all the while sporting helmet hair without a care in the world.

Upon reaching our lodging for the night at the historic Lauder Schoolhouse, which had been remodeled into a B&B, we noticed lots of whimsical art pieces made from bike parts displayed in the town as well as signs crafted with hubs and wheels. At the Lauder B&B, a lineup of classic bikes was exhibited on the lawn. We saw this welcoming feature throughout the towns along the route. It was evident that bike tourists were valued for their consistent presence along the trail.

Good dinners were especially appreciated by ravenous cyclists at the end of the day. Over the years, Adventure South has developed great relationships with restaurants on the route. In Lauder, the meal was extra special. It was Easter Sunday, and most of the

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The New Zealand Cycling Network (nzcyclenetwork.com) encompasses the country’s “Great Rides,” including the Otago Central Rail Trail (otago-centralrailtrail.co.nz). Primarily off-road, but expanding to include road routes, the network’s 22 trails can be explored online to plan the perfect trip.

General vacation planning and tourism resources can be found at newzealand.com.

handful of restaurants were closed. However, thanks to our guide, a small café owned by a local couple had been lined up to make dinner for us. Our guide promised it would be a nice “home-style” meal.

Flashlights in hand, we trudged from the schoolhouse across the old rail tracks to the only building with lights on. Sniffing the air, I breathed in the aroma of baking bread and the smoky scent of roasting meat. The delicious odors did not go unnoticed by the group. We walked in all smiles in anticipation of the feast. Sometimes you don’t know how hungry you are until you smell food. In a small wooden building, we squished together along one long wooden table only feet from the kitchen. The take-out counter by the door was festooned with plates and cutlery. The couple that owned the tiny café had been cooking all day, preparing for our group’s dinner. Wafts of steam puffed in the kitchen as they dished up big grandma-style ceramic bowls full of food.

That evening, our appetites were rewarded with a superb Easter Sunday dinner of local roast lamb served family style with fresh minted peas, potatoes, fresh baked bread, loads of fresh butter, salads, and decadent carrot cake for dessert. The intimacy of sitting together at one long table watching the owners in the kitchen carve the roast as they cheerily chatted with us is a very fond memory. It seemed as if we

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were having dinner at a friend's house rather than a scheduled trip dinner. We all toasted and thanked our hosts, then recounted touring tales from the day.

Of course, there were more highlights on our next two days cycling the Rail Trail. In addition to the full days of touring, we visited the historic gold-mining town of St. Bathans. There we walked along Blue Lake, headed out

for a night of curling (yes, curling) at the only dedicated rink in the Southern Hemisphere in the town of Naseby. Following the completion of the Otago Rail Trail, we took a train ride aboard the Taieri Gorge Express to the city of Dunedin. Adventure South and our guide had arranged all of these extra activities. Going with local operators and guides who are familiar with the area

is a great way to expand a holiday into something more than just cycling. They place you in experiences that offer a deeper sense of place than you would most likely find on your own.

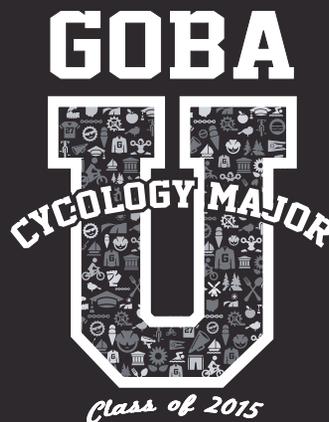
We left Lauder and pedaled onward to Ranfurly, a distance of 29 miles. We passed five stations with opportunities for passport stamps at Auripo,

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39
DISCOVERING NGA HAERENGA

Ida Valley, Oturehua, Wedderburn, and Ranfurly. The day’s ride offered picture-taking opportunities to capture several of the most iconic bridge and tunnel crossings of the Otago. The first was the curved rail bridge spanning the Manuherikia River. Our tires rattled across the 383-foot-long bridge, the longest on the trail. We then pedaled into the mouths of two rail tunnels carved within the schist stone of the Poolburn Gorge. With headlamps on, we rode single file along the center portion of the chiseled tunnels, slowly pedaling through the inky darkness to the other side. We continued along the canyon gorge wrapped with golden willows to a gradual descent over the Maniototo Plain, Maori for “Plain of Blood,” a nod to the deep red that washes over the landscape at sunrise and sunset.

The last day was also our longest day of cycling, 37 miles that would take us from Ranfurly to Middlemarch. There were seven more stations to stamp our passports, several bridges to cross, and tunnels to snake through before reaching the end of the trail. My passport was nearly complete. Station stops included Waipiata, Kokonga, Tiroiti, Hyde, Rock and Pillar, Ngapuna, and Middlemarch. Of these stations, three buildings remain intact as historic sites: Hyde, Rock and Pillar, and Ngapuna.

There were more chances to pronounce Maori words as the trail crossed the Taieri River. We passed the village of Kokonga, which means “a corner,” referring to a change in the course of the river toward the south. We left the Taieri Gorge and rode onto the open landscape of the Strath Taieri Plain with their views of cone-shaped hills, reminders of ancient volcanoes. The Rock and Pillar Range dominated the horizon to the west with huge rocky outcroppings. Strewn along the grassy slopes were big stone tors, giant boulders. It was an odd site – like a giant’s toy blocks scattered on a carpet of lush grass – with tiny sheep grazing nearby. From there we rolled over the plains, relishing the views as we rode the last few miles into Middlemarch.



GIGI RAGLAND

The Bride-to-Be donning her Easter helmet and bonny yellow candy basket full of sweets for the group.

We passed Barbara and her husband and I wondered how she was faring. She seemed to be pedaling along fine. Later I learned that she and her husband devised a plan to get through the lengthy last miles. “Our strategy was for each of us to do a kilometer as the lead person and ride hard for that kilometer. We polished it off like professionals!” she boasted.

As my British buddy and I tore through the cross-country, rolling last leg of our journey, I asked if she could slow down a bit so we could just spin and take in the final bits of the Otago landscape. At that moment, a flock of small birds that had been trailing us flew ahead and seemed to be teasing us to keep up. “I love chasing the birds on the trail,” said Lauren. “It feels like we are flying too!” And it did as we laughed and geared up to keep up with the flock. That was my Nga Haerenga moment. 🐣

The author’s favorite way to travel is via bike as long as she figures out which side of the road to ride. Gigi Ragland is a freelance travel writer that enjoys sharing tales along the trails of some of the most scenic places on earth. For more information about Ragland, visit gigiragland.com.