



Bound by coast and crags, the Central Otago region of New Zealand's South Island has emerged as a perfect destination for cycling enthusiasts thanks to the reimagining of the former Otago Central Railway Line. All aboard!

WORDS GLENN CULLEN

ON THE CHAIN GANG



Roxburgh Gorge Trail

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

AT FIRST GLANCE

New Zealand's Central Otago region appears inopportunely stuck between the coast and a high place. To the east is the South Island's second most-populous city of Dunedin. On its western flanks, the chocolate-box tourist towns of Wanaka and Queenstown. In the belly lies Central Otago – 10,000sq km of rolling hills, apple-green lakes and granite peaks that support about 18,000 people – the lowest population density in the country. Little more than a decade ago, small towns such as Otarehua, Wedderburn and Omakau were more likely to go bust than end up on a tourist map, as schools, post offices and shops closed down in steady succession.

Yet the area – once the wealthiest in the country during the 1860s gold rush – has a habit of reinvention when all looks lost. When the mining declined, it was sheep farming. When the sheep became less profitable, cows came in. And when the DJ class locomotive made its final stop on the Otago Central Railway Line between Clyde and Middlemarch on April 30, 1990, in rolled the bicycles.

Well, they did eventually. When the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC) partnered with the Rail Trust to develop the disused tracks into a public reserve and ultimately the 152km Otago Rail Trail (ORT) cycle trail, there were many sceptics. Local farmer Stu Duncan, who runs Wedderburn Cottages (wedderburncottages.co.nz) at the trail's midpoint, was one. "I couldn't see where all these people were going to come from," he says, "but they sure came."

Riding a new wave of fitness tourism, up to 15,000 people now hit the trail every October-April. It's driven largely by the over-50s market who love the journey-above-destination ride completed in a leisurely four days, typically west-east to take advantage of the southerly winds. With the disused rail line now sporting a sand and gravel base, the trail remains the domain of cyclists, horseriders and walkers. Car encounters are limited to the odd crossing.

The terrain is friendly. The 1:50 gradient means the only mountain passes are the ones you can spot zigzagging up the distant peaks. There's the physical beauty: snow-capped ranges, gorges and lunar-like landscapes you don't see coming in a country more known for lush countryside. The manmade attractions include classic Kiwi pubs and wineries, 19th-century bridges and homesteads. You can rough it and carry all your gear, or have a tour operator transport your bags to accommodation each night. There's not a major hotel to be seen, yet inevitably there's a place to grab a coffee or a centre to potter around every 10km or so along the track.

Transformations in Central Otago aren't limited to the towns. Bucking the winds and riding the trail's 42km stretch in reverse order from its midpoint of Wedderburn to Omakau with Shayne O'Connor, it becomes clear that its people are ready adaptors, too. Tall, lean and



Ida Valley
(and right)

conservative with his words, O'Connor has the gait and demeanour of a cricketer – something that certainly came in handy during his 19 test matches as a fast bowler for New Zealand. Back when many locals were pondering why the DOC appeared to be going AWOL with the region's money to build a bike track, O'Connor was thinking more about his next dismissal. He counted one of the game's modern greats, India's Sachin Tendulkar, among his victims before the fast bowler's curse – a knee injury – eventually scuppered his career.

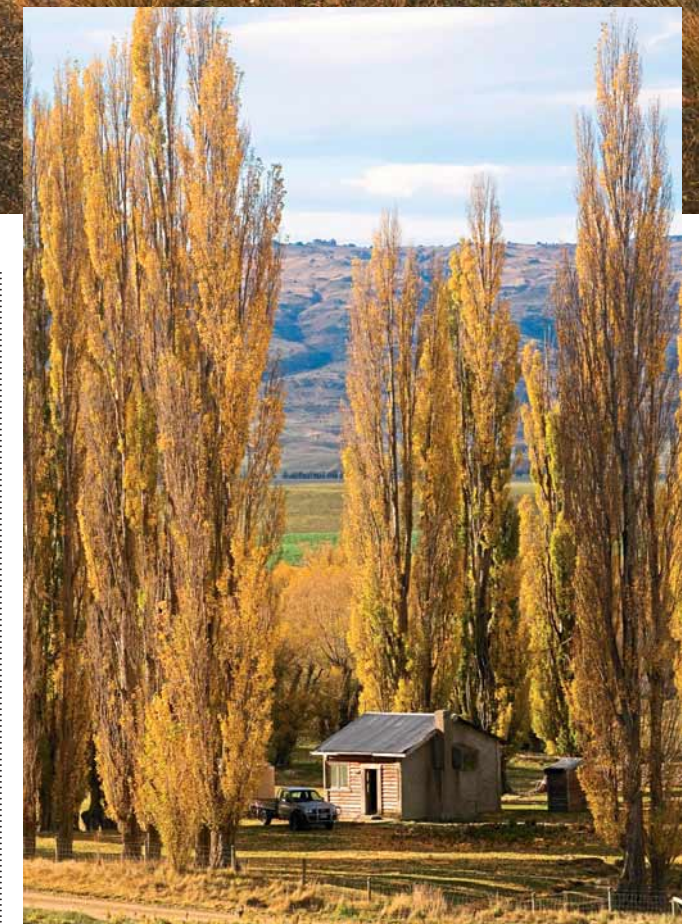
Cricket's loss was the NZ biking and tourism industry's gain. O'Connor joined his father-in-law, Neville Grubb, at Trail Journeys, a company servicing riders using the route. What began as a 10-bike operation in a back shed has morphed into a company that employs 30 people and has 500 bikes. "Neville and his partner had a bike shop in Alexandra that was kept afloat by selling chainsaws and lawnmowers," O'Connor says. "I got involved with the new business in 2005 to help out because they were so busy. It was going crazy."

From the high point of Wedderburn (618m above sea level), it's a 12km roll along the broad track to Otarehua where the classic Kiwi dairy-cum-general store, Gilchrist's, becomes the first natural stopping point. It's like stepping into the *Tardis* with a myriad of vintage grocery items, mining tools and knick-knacks. From there,

it is only a few kilometres to Hayes Engineering Works, a foundry that has been converted into a museum with a homestead kept in its original 1920s state. Then it's a cruise down the most-riden part of the trail – an undulating 21km section through the Ida Valley to Omakau. Largely downhill, it takes in the sweeping backdrop of the snow-capped Dunstan Ranges, keeping your mind on the job through unlit tunnels and then across gorges where mountains morph into waterways. It's pure genius that the trail cuts through one of the properties where riders can bed down for the night.

Not quite as delightful is the weather that presents itself the next morning for the 37km ride from Omakau to Clyde. Drizzling and cold, the nor'-wester taunts the handful of riders tackling the trail this early in the season. The Chatto Creek Tavern offers welcome respite and good coffee, fuelling the 10km stretch to Galloway and the "big smoke" of Alexandra, population 4800.

From there it's a long flat of a different kind. The concluding stretch to Clyde is an at-times arrow-straight run of 8km to the centre's old railway building. The last train may have terminated here a quarter-century ago, but lateral thinking ensured the site didn't become a disused relic. Rather prudently, Trail Journeys bought the premises to use as their base for riders to either start or end their trip. ➤



RAILWAY HUT PHOTOGRAPHY: PHOTO NEW ZEALAND; IDA VALLEY: GETTY IMAGES



Roxburgh Gorge Trail; Milford Sound (right)

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Happy *trails*

With the Otago Rail Trail shining a light on off-road cycling possibilities across the country, the idea of Nga Haerenga, The New Zealand Cycle Trail, was born in 2009. The plan for 3000km of linked trails from Kaitaia at the tip of the North Island to Bluff in the deep south may not be fully realised (it is possible to cycle the length of both islands using roads to link with trails), but there are a series of Great Rides across the country. The Otago region remains a key section of the ever-expanding network.

The Alexandra to Clyde River Track offers a nice morning warm-up; a family-friendly 12km pinball ride along the river linking the towns. Upping the stakes is the 34km Roxburgh Gorge Trail, a spectacular day ride to 350m cliff tops affording great views of the Clutha River and old schist-mining huts and sluicings in the hills. With one landowner refusing access, the project almost stalled until it was suggested a jet boat ride could cover the 12km from Doctor's Point to Shingle Creek. For \$NZ95 (\$86) a person, bikes are taken on the boat for the 45-minute ride; passengers get a potted history of the goldrush along the way. It works beautifully. Be warned, the rise in elevation puts it a step above the ORT in terms of difficulty, but the extra exertion makes a craft beer at the ride's conclusion go down particularly well. From Roxburgh Gorge, cyclists can tackle the 73km Clutha Gold Trail, usually over two days. If adrenaline biking is more your thing and you like the downs more than the ups, try a guided heli-bike tour on the Nevis Range.

CYCLE

TRAIL JOURNEYS

16 Springvale Road, Clyde.

(03) 449 2150. trailjourneys.co.nz

A one-stop shop, Trail Journeys can organise bikes, self-guided and guided tours from a day to a week, as well as transfers from Dunedin or Queenstown airports. They also book trail accommodation.

BIKE IT NOW

23 Holloway Street, Clyde.

(03) 449 2228. bikeitnow.co.nz

Also do the trail and various other tours, but the signature ride to the Roxburgh Gorge is hard to beat.

HELIVIEW HELIBIKING

2 Ord Road, Cromwell

Racecourse Airfield, Cromwell.

(03) 445 0444. heliview.co.nz

Heliview offers scenic helicopter flights as well as self-guided and guided bike tours in the Central Otago high country. There's no stinting with full carbon mountain bikes for hire.

EAT & DO

MOUNT DIFFICULTY WINERY

73 Felton Road, Bannockburn.

(03) 445 3445. mtdifficulty.com

Otago wineries are relatively new on the scene, but Mount Difficulty is one of the picks. A great spot for lunch, too.

OMAKAU COMMERCIAL HOTEL

1 Harvey Street, Omakau.

(03) 447 3715. omakauhotel.co.nz

Good place to carbo-load at the end of a big day's cycling. The meals are huge – and invariably devoured!

HIGHLANDS MOTORSPORT PARK

SH6 & Sandflat Road, Cromwell.

(03) 445 4052. highlands.co.nz

Hot laps in Porsches, go-karts and dirt buggies for those pining for motorised transport.

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