

New Zealand's Great Rides

New Zealand's growing collection of off-road, multi-day bike routes will form the showpiece of a greater project that's underway – 'Nga Haerenga' – a nationwide cycle-touring network. **Sarah Stirling** packs up her panniers to explore.



Getting high on the
Queen Charlotte Track
(2-3 days, 70km)



The Queen Charlotte Track, South Island – 70 (very hilly) kilometres

I'm biking along the rolling ridgeline of a mostly sea-drowned mountain range. On a map the landmass resembles a floating Kiwi symbol – a fern – with the track teetering along its stem. Either side of me, veins of green valley drop off steeply to blue. Further out to sea, islets – the tips of more underwater peaks – poke up here and there, sprouting classic New Zealand bush: ferns and 'cabbage trees' (a type of palm tree). Some have small settlements on them, only accessible by boat. The flooded valleys surrounding me are prettily called 'sounds', and one fifth of New Zealand's coastline is furled into this small area. With the sun on my tanned legs, I'm flying above it all. And then I'm at the bottom of the next hill.

Dismounting, I push valiantly against my handlebars again. The weight of my panniers, loaded with camping gear, pushes back. After one more step forward and another half-slide back again, I look up, panting. The hills in New Zealand aren't huge by European Alpine standards but, whether on road or off, you are constantly going up or down one, and these were the most vertiginous I'd come up against. I cursed Kiwi Chris.

"The Queen Charlotte Track is sweet as," he'd said, the first time we met him, leaning over to light-finger a potato from my orange camping plate. "Totally fine to ride with panniers. Gently rolling hard-pack." Chris, it turned out, was a former brewer who had resigned to cycle-tour his own country in search of adventure and a new career idea.

Panniers are like a Masonic handshake that accesses a very friendly club. Fellow tourers will hail you like long-lost family out on the road and beam with relief when they see you at campsites, then pull up a chair to share tales of adventures and perhaps tuck into your dinner.

With his blue eyes, blonde hair and top-of-the-range cycle-touring kit all neat and tidily packed, Chris looked German, so he flew a jaunty New Zealand flag from his seat post to prove his heritage, and – as it would turn out



Top to bottom: The Queen Charlotte map; Adventure Cycles; so many enticing place names in New Zealand; a remote camp on the South Island

– his right to casually bike the gnarliest Great Rides in his country with slick tyres and full panniers.

Great Rides

What's a Great Ride? Well, you've probably heard of New Zealand's long-established Great Walks, like the Tongariro Crossing or the Routeburn Track. I love the title. It's unshowy in classic Kiwi style, reminding me of the first time I walked into a Vegemart over there, and found there were just two types of lettuce: regular or 'fancy lettuce' (anything curly).

Building on the popularity of the walks, Great Rides are now being developed around New Zealand (mostly by adapting existing tracks), and they are similarly designed to showcase the country's best bits. Mountains, rainforests, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, beaches, fjords and plains: you can see it all from the saddle on off-road, multi-day routes.

The tourism venture has already produced crops of companies eager to take the strain by, for example, transporting your bags on from one campsite or hostel to the next for you. If, like me, though, you prefer to do it all yourself, that's possible, too.

New Zealand is an odd mix. On the surface an 'Adventure Capital', it's perfectly possible to follow guidebook recommendations from one tourist conglomeration to the next, gazing out at seas of selfie sticks and paying for experiences with a capital 'E'.

On the flip side, by simply avoiding these hotspots, you can easily find wilderness, wildlife, solitude and beautiful accommodation woven into the landscape by resourceful locals. The Queen Charlotte is justifiably popular with walkers, but we hardly saw anyone on most of the Great Rides, which are still relatively unknown.

Adventure Cycles

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Our adventures really began in Adventure Cycles. Kiwis can be so friendly that you get sucked into places – don't forget to budget some time for sideline adventures. ➤

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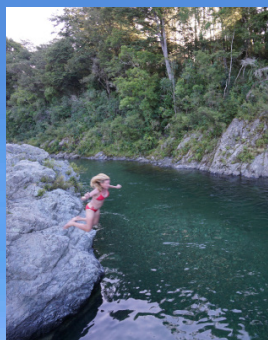
I still remember my first sight of the shop: Dismembered bits of bike oozed from shelves and drawers lining every wall, and fingerprints of black grease had crept over everything, including a jam jar labelled 'PENS THAT DO NOT WORK'. It didn't look like anything had ever been thrown away. Outside stood the reason why: rows of Frankenstein bikes made from butchered second-hand rides. A far cry from the trendy bike shops we'd explored in Auckland so far that day, it was perfect.

Staff emerged. A young lad, shy under a baseball cap, shadowed by a huge man with an outsize beard and belly to match. A dog dropped a ball on my foot, hopefully. We chatted: they'd both worked there since high school, and spoke of their boss with awe.

Then a rusty maroon Fiat Panda pulled up, with at least 20 bikes strapped to the roof in a mind-boggling architectural feat. "Bruce often gets stopped by the police when he picks up bikes," grinned the younger lad. "He just baffles them with science about weight distribution."

We explained to Bruce that we wanted cheap-looking bikes so no-one would think to steal from us, fitted with cool stealth features to take the strain out of pedalling 50 kilos up steep mountain-bike tracks. It soon became clear that he was a man of ingenious ideas who would do anything for anyone, as long as you did things his way.

We stepped into line and joined his Lost Boys biker cult for a few days, choosing bikes, servicing them, adding granny gear rings for the hills, butchering other bikes for comfy saddles, adding mirrors and crafting pannier racks that would work with front suspension forks. Then the staff waved us off like family.



Top to bottom: Heading for a shower; running above Wanaka

The Coromandel Peninsula, North Island – easy road cycling and an optional 10k mountain-bike loop

To bypass the terror of cycling out of the capital, I hatched a cunning plan. A ferry took us from Auckland to nearby Waiheke Island, where we clanked down into a microcosm of peaceful postcard New Zealand – perfect for our cycle touring initiation. After twenty kilometres of sandy beaches and hilly bush, we were at the island's other end, wobbly-legged and waiting for another ferry.

Deposited on the Coromandel Peninsula, which lies east of Auckland, we followed coastal roads alongside stretches of white beaches and sweeping red Pohutukawa trees until the sun began to set, and a sign pointed out Colville Motel. It seemed nothing was too much trouble for Wendy, who ran the place. I gave her my washing and headed to the sea for a swim.

It's said you can buy anything at Colville Store, the last place to get supplies before disappearing into the wilderness at the tip of the peninsula – I was delighted to find tent pegs as I'd forgotten to bring any. Continuing past a tempting huge white-sand surf break at Port Jackson earned us the cute little cove of Fletcher Bay. There was no-one there, apart from the campsite ranger, who leapt off his lawnmower to show off photos of huge fish he'd caught there.

From here, a legendary bike track called the Coromandel Walkway curves around the peninsula-tip. It's not one of the official Great Rides, and it's only 10km, but it's called 'Walkway' for a reason: it's not recommended to bike it. But you're allowed to try!

Cool New Zealand bush, dense with ferns and dappled with light, swallowed me; the electronic sounds of native birds loud above the hum of my bike, then I emerged, blinking, to a sea view. The trails were gnarly — I walked as much as I rode — but also flowy. And, best of all, we'd left our panniers with Wendy, so our bikes felt super-light.

When we popped out at the other end, though, the weather had turned as grey as the pebbled beach there, and Pohutukawa trees were drooping in the rain and bleeding their soggy red flowers onto the road. The weather can change quickly in New Zealand. We'd planned to cycle back to Colville by road. Sheltering under a tree as the weather worsened, my friend said:

"Come to New Zealand. It's always sunny, she says."

"Hey," called a voice from behind us. We turned to see a sun-wizened man putting out a smoke. He had clearly just had an earful of dampened-spirited bickering.

"I'm your counsellor. Chuck yer bikes in the ute, tell me all about your trip, and I'll take you to Wendy's!"

Mountains to Sea, North Island, 317km – intermediate

One of my favourite Great Rides, this one begins on the flanks of the Mount Ruapehu volcano in the famous Tongariro National Park, winds alongside one of New Zealand's greatest rivers, and finishes at the sea.

The journey begins on a cobbled corridor through the bush. Cobbled? Well, yes — before the railway line between Auckland and Wellington was completed by European settlers, horse-pulled coach was the only way

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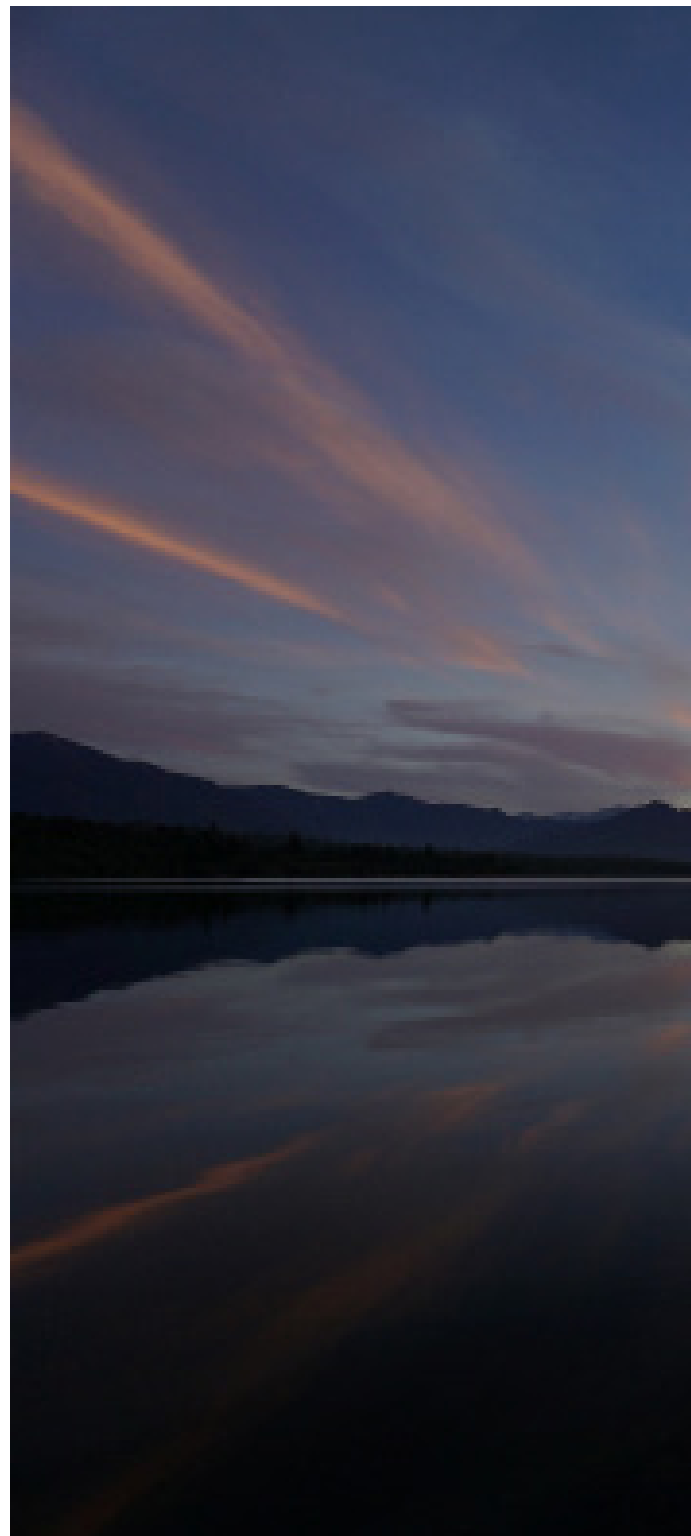
The Coromandel Peninsula



Reaching the highest bit of road in New Zealand, near Wanaka



The 'Coromandel Walkway' isn't recommended for bikers, but you're allowed to try!



to cross this difficult stretch between the two major settlements. It must have been an epic, bone-jarring journey without suspension!

Popping out onto a huge abandoned viaduct, 45m above the bush and river below, I wondered how on earth all this was constructed, back in the 1900s. Further along, another engineering feat: the Bridge to Nowhere, built across the deep Mangapurua Gorge to encourage pioneering farmers to clear the bush and settle on the other side. It proved too much of a battle, even for these hardy folk, and remains alive with greenery to this day.

Looking down over the Whanganui River from on high, it's a huge, sparkling green snake. Local Maori tribes regard this river as their ancestor. A couple of months ago, the longest-running litigation case in New Zealand ended with a world first: the river was granted the same rights as a human. The landscape in this country is so powerful that it's easy to personify it and imperative to relate to it.

Pausing by the banks of the river, which has a volcanic clay bed, I said: "People pay good money for treatments with this stuff," and, experimentally, threw a handful. A

NEED TO KNOW

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Getting a bike

Rental: Natural High offer pick-up and drop-off locations throughout both the North and South Islands and are happy to arrange one-way hires. 14 days costs \$724.

☛ naturalhigh.co.nz

Buy New: If you have a bit more time it's worth buying and selling. If you want to buy a new mountain bike, try the Bike Barn. They seem to have a permanent half price sale on.

☛ bikebarn.co.nz

Buy Second Hand: For a real NZ experience head for Adventure Cycles. But be warned, nothing happens quickly there. And do take the time to read Bruce's epic biography.

☛ adventure-auckland.co.nz/adventurecycles

Where to stay

DOC Campsites: Department of Conservation campsites are basic and beautiful. You'll find a cold shower, long drop toilet, and possibly some additional luxuries like a fish-gutting sink if you're by the sea. Cost is minimal – \$10 dollars or so – a few are free.

☛ doc.govt.nz

Warm Showers: An amazing website, which allows cycle tourists to rub each other's backs for free. You can look up members around the world and message them to ask if you can stay for free, grab a shower, a coffee or ask for some advice.

☛ warmshowers.org

Hostels: There are some wonderful, quirky hostels in New Zealand. Check out reviews, as they vary wildly from party pads to family-friendly, and from charming to soulless.

☛ nzcycletrail.com

“Pedalling on, we reached Lake Kaniere. Still and silvery pale like a mirror, it reflected our bike silhouettes”

complexion-enhancing mud fight ensued. Then, revitalised, we continued to the sea.

West Coast Wilderness Trail, South Island, 120km – easy

Long beaches with huge logs thrown onto them by the wild Tasman sea, towering forest roofs, no-one in sight, and the easiest terrain yet – I ended on a high thanks to this Great Ride, along the west coast of the South Island.

At Greymouth, small, green, perfectly-formed waves were rolling in over grey pebbles. Legend has it that the gold rush started here when three scruffy diggers turned up a lump of amalgamated gold and mercury weighing nearly 50kg. There are plenty of interesting remnants from this period on the bike ride, mostly abandoned, with the industry reclaimed by nature.

We decided to risk a wild camp when a huge lake loomed. The Southern Alps were reflected in the water and the bank was bright with wildflowers. A few locals turned up for a swim and waved to us as we cooked.

Life seemed simple round here. Partway up a long,

Above: The West Coast Wilderness trail

shallow hill one day, we stopped for a picnic. A curious local 'coaster' kid, barefoot, mullet hairdo, emerged; his arm round a dog that was bigger than him. "Where do you go to school?" I asked. "Up the mountain," he said. "Where's your nearest shop?" "Down the mountain."

Pedalling on, we reached Lake Kaniere. Huge like the sea, still and silvery pale like a mirror, it reflected our bike silhouettes in the evening light. As we set up camp, a cheeky Weka – New Zealand has some entertaining bird life – tried to drag our bike lock into the bushes. It was too heavy, so it ran away with our towels instead. I was laughing, sad that this was my last bike ride of the trip, when Kiwi Chris cycled up, eager to unload his thoughts, and to find out what we were having for dinner.

On the easy, meditative stretch down the West Coast, Chris's relaxed brain had finally produced his new career idea: he was going to win the Lotto, buy a big black shiny ute, put a chiller in the back, park at the top of mountain passes and hand out cold beers to roadies. If you see him on your travels, say "Hi!" from me. Then give him a punch for that Queen Charlotte Track 'bum steer'. **oag**