

(watch out for livestock on the road) and toward New Zealand's famous Franz Josef and Fox glaciers. The nearby towns summoned memories of Banff and Lake Louise: bustling tourist towns with operators vying to take you on mountain adventures. We opted for free hiking around Franz Josef and a cycle route to the base of the Fox glacier. We also found a camping-by-donation site between the towns – not bad for some budget cycle touring.

The wet west coast lived up to its reputation the next day as warm, misty rain settled in. The hills and lookout points over the Tasman Sea kept us moving, as well as smells from the little cafés dotting the coastline. We left the rain behind when we turned back into the mountains and climbed up the valley. We found refuge and dried out as we watched the sunset light up the ice fields in pink. I felt a sense of accomplishment at moving through this stunning countryside by my own power.

The infamous Haast Pass loomed over us like a great wall. While the start was a steep grind, we got up and over the 564-m pass without too much pain. It helped that we stopped to check out gorgeous grottos and waterfalls alongside the highway. Surprisingly, most were unmarked but well worth exploring. The awe-inspiring scenery continued as we pedalled past Lake Wanaka and Lake Hāwea in deadly hot sun but an unbelievable tailwind. The road winds its way around the huge lakes,

surrounded by craggy peaks. Happy to hop off the highway again, we took a river trail from the town of Hāwea to Wanaka – a place with easy access to spectacular ridgeline hiking and mountain biking.

Our next big stop was Aoraki/Mount Cook – New Zealand's tallest peak and the start of the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail. Camping at the base, we watched the mountains play peek-a-boo in the clouds, offering only occasional glimpses of their steep cliffs and blue glaciers. The Alps 2 Ocean officially starts at Mount Cook, but to stay on the trail requires a \$250 per person helicopter ride over the Tasman River. We opted instead to ride the highway for 50 km, rejoin the trail at the base of Lake Pukaki, and enjoy the ride along the calm turquoise lake.

The 301-km Alps 2 Ocean was also crafted by people who know a good time on a bike. It varies from gravel paths to quiet country roads,

leads up gentle climbs and down thrilling descents and takes you right past all the little towns' amenities and highlights. We took it leisurely, enjoying the many campgrounds and stopping often to swim and gorge ourselves on apples, peaches and nectarines growing along the path. Riders also pass sights that include the Vanishing World, an enormous area of fossils in limestone, as well as indigenous Māori rock paintings and settler history, such as old woolsheds from the early 1900s. We stayed up late watching the stars; the trail is in the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve, limiting light pollution and allowing the galaxy to show off its colours.

The Alps 2 Ocean trends downhill toward the Pacific Ocean. The last 5 km wind through the town of Oamaru, past its botanical gardens and limestone historic district, and end at a pier. The quirky town – known for its old-world obsessions like penny farthings – was a satisfying end to the trail, especially when paired with a wood-fired pizza.

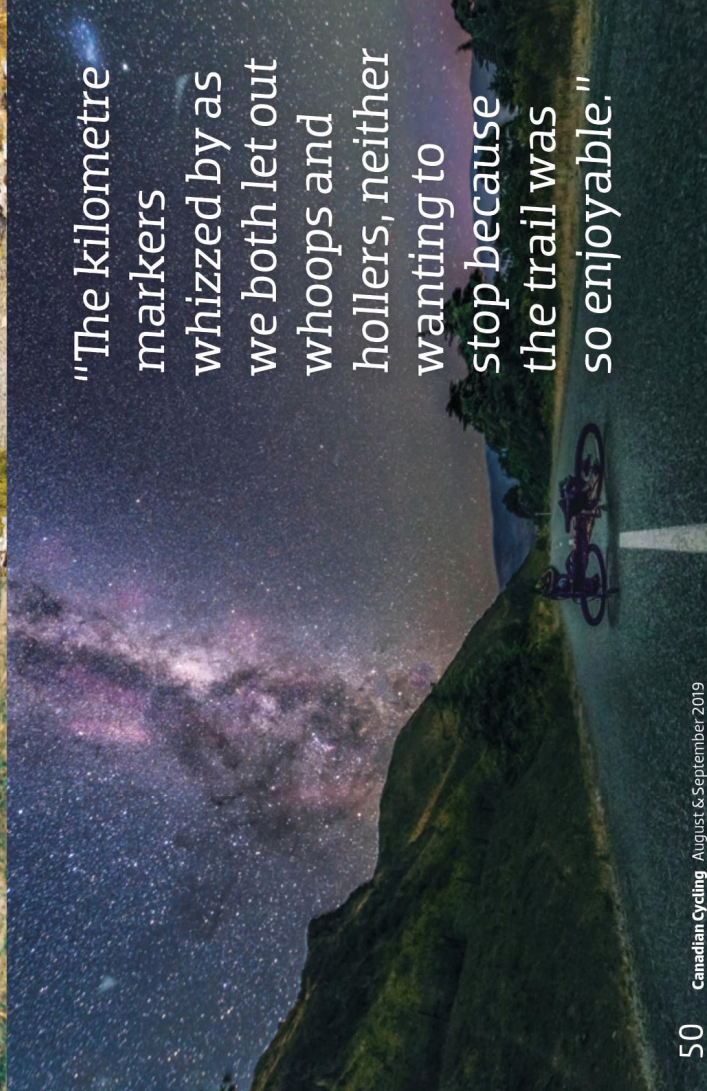
While Oamaru would've been a perfect journey's end, we continued south to Dunedin along a highway with a generous shoulder, as well as quiet coastal roads. The shoreline played between golden beaches and dramatic cliffs, with grassy dunes and sunshine galore. The east coast of New Zealand is not often bragged about like the west. "Isn't that familiar?" grumbled Coburn, a slightly bitter Canadian Maritimer. We think both east coasts are underestimated.

We spent our last few days in Dunedin with friends, rewarding ourselves with good food and checking out the city's sights, including the steepest residential street in the world. Baldwin Street reaches a painful 35 per cent gradient. I rode partway up and caught my breath while Coburn raced to the top.

New Zealand's cycle trails are exhilarating, well-built and growing quickly. Right now, any long tour requires a lot of highway riding to connect the dots, but it's well worth the pavement-pounding. The South Island is like the best of Canada squished into one breathtaking adventure.



"The kilometre markers whizzed by as we both let out whoops and hollers, neither wanting to stop because the trail was so enjoyable."



British Columbia

Bike Barn
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bikebarn.ca

Ontario

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151 Robinson St.
Oakville, ON
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racersportif.com

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Details

Where to stay

There are lots of free and cheap camping options. The plentiful Department of Conservation sites range from \$8 to \$13 per person. We often found small-town pubs or B&Bs that asked for a donation to let us camp out back. There are many hotel options for those with higher budgets.

When to go

New Zealand's seasons are dead opposite to ours – summer is December to February. While summer temperatures are fine for riding, the tourists and sandflies (like blackflies) are aplenty. We rode in March, which is similar to a Canadian September.

What to read

We got lots of good information from the Kennett Brothers, notable N.Z. cycle gurus who have published many guidebooks for varying levels and types of cyclists. We followed their *Classic New Zealand Cycle Trails*, fourth edition. **C**

Mini Canada, Big Adventure

The South Island offers fun trails, glaciers and clowns of the mountains, which are no laughing matter

however, because Arthur's Pass rewards those who make the climb. Afterward, there was 20 minutes of freewheeling downhill, descending from alpine scrub to podocarp forest.

Once on the west coast, we cruised through old mining towns with quaint tourist charms where we found one of our favourite campsites. The B&B in Taylorville welcomed us to camp on the lawn, which turned out to be more of an orchard, complete with an outdoor fire-fuelled hot tub. What a jackpot for a couple of starving, dirtbag cyclists.

Later, still elated, we cruised to the start of the West Coast Wilderness Trail that runs from Greymouth to Ross through moss-covered forests, along frigid glacial rivers and skirts

DESTINATION

NEW
ZEALAND

by Rachel Davies



My partner, Coburn, and I flew into Christchurch, New Zealand, with a rough route picked out. Our deadline: a flight out of Dunedin in three weeks. Instead of staying on the east coast of the South Island, which would have made for a more direct route to Dunedin, we headed straight west across the plains and through farmers' fields. We quickly fulfilled – more than fulfilled – our desire to see Kiwi sheep, and then climbed into the New Zealand Alps.

This country in the southwestern Pacific Ocean has snow-capped peaks, grassy plains, lush rainforests and golden beaches. New Zealand's South Island is just 2.6 per cent the size of Canada, yet it offers a stunning diversity of climate and culture. Our 1,500-km tour would feel as if we passed through our native Rocky Mountains combined with Maritime charm and Prairie skies, mixed with its own Kiwitwists.

Our passage to the west coast took us along a highway, but was definitely scenic. We had planned to camp just before the saddle in Arthur's Pass National Park, but were quickly thwarted by keas. Described as the clowns of the mountains, these alpine parrots rip apart tents and anything rubber (even bike tires) while looking for food. Not funny. A Department of Conservation officer strongly recommended we stay in a hotel or keep going, so we pushed on. I couldn't feel too discouraged,



the Tasman Sea. Built on rail trail and old mining weirs, the ride varies from gentle and cruisy to rip-roaring and exhilarating. It was clearly built for cyclists by people who understand fun. We climbed into the cool, crisp mountain air, then raced down flowing switchbacks and smooth gravel back to the coast at Hokitika. The kilometre markers whizzed by as we both let out whoops and hollers, neither wanting to stop because the trail was so enjoyable.

The last few kilometres into Ross took us through grasslands on flat rail trail, which provided easy riding. We devoured ice cream at a corner store and asked a local if he knew a place to camp. He pointed to the town bar. We wandered over and sure enough, they let people pitch tents out back for a nominal fee, which included access to a kitchen and showers. Not too many campsites have cold drinks on tap just a few metres away. This watering hole also provided an entertaining evening of observing life in a mining town. Our next few days took us back along highway, through farmland