

SARCC 2024 New Zealand Tour Report

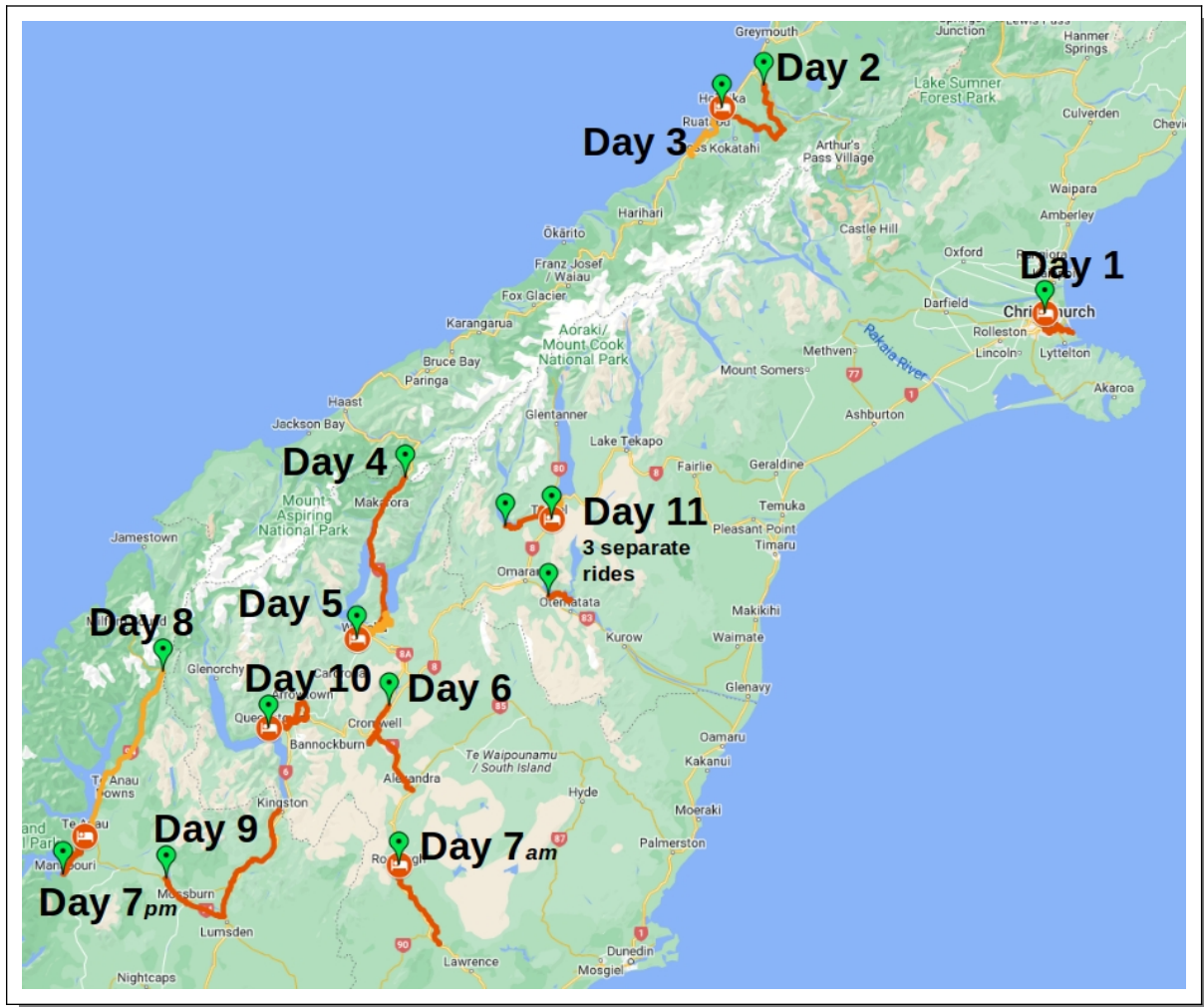
Introduction

The tour began officially on February 21, when most people arrived at the Tasman Holiday Park, Christchurch. It ended on March 6 when most people left from Christchurch. There were sixteen participants, twelve from South Australia, two from the USA, one from the UK and one from Victoria. All were experienced riders on gravel, which made for a cohesive group. Seven riders left the group two days early in Queenstown, taking the opportunity to sight see / walk in the area. Nine riders made their way back to Christchurch and squeezed in an extra day of riding. Two riders left the group one day early to catch the train to Auckland and using the hop-on hop-off option they did several more rides along the way. There were seven hire bikes of which four were E-bikes and nine owner bikes of which one was electric – Eric's. Two vehicles, a twelve-seater minibus with a twelve bike trailer and a seven-seater people mover with a four cycle rack.

Prior to describing the tour, several people deserve special mention for the effort they put into the choosing of rides, organisation of transport, accommodation and food. It was as far back as March 2023 when ERIC CHANEY mentioned that he was willing to try and organise the 2024 tour and by late June, he had produced the most amazing compact A4 page of information. This comprised estimated cost of the tour, how to save \$400 and get new E-bike, a suitable suite of rides, accommodation suggestions and optional touristy things to do. All documented with over thirty internet links. Nothing was left out. Never before had so much information been clearly displayed on a single A4 page and there were four following pages which included 168 photos, clear descriptions of rides, walks and even bakerys! A great advert for anyone wishing to participate and there was only one spelling mistake "Queenstown" :). This document kick-started the organisation of the trip and seven accommodation venues were soon contacted by ESTHER CAPREZ requesting bookings for twenty five persons. Despite this gargantuan effort, by the end of August participant numbers were not good, twelve rather than the hoped for twenty five. It was then decided to go with just seventeen persons, the absolute minimum for a viable tour, and accommodation deposits were duly paid. Ring-ins were invited during this time to complete the numbers and the tour eventually had visitors from the UK, USA and Victoria. Sometime during September after deposits were paid by participants for accommodation, three more people started cranking up their efforts regards food planning: CHRIS HALES, DI AGNEW and LEE BRULAND. All were experienced tourers and recognised that "a tour rides on its stomach", to coin / bastardise a phrase, and good planning allowing for some flexibility is the key to success. Consequently rosters were produced and every tour member had their turn at food shopping for all, a meal to cook for all, washing up for all, food packing for all, bike loading and more. An itinerary for these tasks plus room locations for breakfast and lunch prep were distributed a couple of weeks before the tour start date. Meanwhile ESTHER was having problems with male, female and couple permutations. Here DEAN BENNETT came to the rescue devising a spreadsheet that semi-automated this effort. But to quote Robbie Burns despite "all the best laid schemes o' mice an' men [/ women]", something / someone may "throw a spanner in the works" (PG Wodehouse, 1925). In this case someone had to pull out two days before the tour and someone contracted COVID 19 on the flight to Christchurch which came apparent two days after the tour start. Going back a few sentences the phrase "flexibility is the key to success" came into play here and to the credit of the afore mentioned team members and hygiene diligence of the rest of the crew nobody starved, everyone had a turn at something and most important of all COVID was contained!!

The rides.

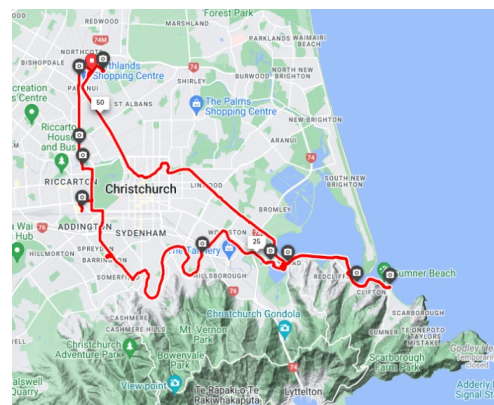
Rides are listed below by day number with ridden distance, climbing elevation and moving time.



Map of 11 days of riding and 7 accommodation locations c/o Dean

Day 1: Christchurch loop, 55 km, 227 m 3:40 hrs

This was a local ride led by Eric around his home town of Christchurch to make sure all the hire bikes were fit for purpose, owner bikes had survived their air travel and had been reassembled correctly. Just one slight adjustment due to air travel was needed - a bent brake disc. One bike was incorrectly assembled – bars not tight and the owner fell off. A pedal fell off one of the hire bikes, but luckily close to the hire shop who promptly fixed it.



Day one route went alongside the main rail line, via the train station, so that those leaving at the end from there knew where it was. It then went via Barrington where we had coffee and followed the Heathcote River. Here the group witnessed what can only be described as an aquatic lawn mower.



A river "mower"



View from Heathcote Estuary bridge

The route crossed the Heathcote Estuary bridge which proved a great viewing point to see the hills around Lyttelton. Toilet facilities were somewhat limited on the way to the coast, so when one was spotted, some were keen to make sure they didn't miss out.



Lunch and an ice-cream for some was consumed when we reached to coast, which turned out to be very windy. Thus it was a great ride back from the coast with the wind behind. After a short stop to fix a pedal that fell off the group then split with some riding directly back to the accommodation to go shopping for the evening meal. Others were guided by Eric around the sights of central Christchurch and by coincidence witnessed the anniversary commemorations of the 2011 major earthquake.



Lunch at Sumner Bay



Day 2: West Coast Wilderness Trail (Kumara to Hokitika) 73 km, 533 m, 4:30 hrs.

Taking into account a detailed weather forecast for the West Coast area and predicted heavy rain on the afternoon of Day 3 a decision was made to do the hill section of West Coast Wilderness Trail on Day 2.

After a three hour bus drive of 220 km, riders disembarked and got ready for their first gravel ride of the tour.



Once out of town and on to the gravel it soon became evident that for many, tyre pressures needed to be reduced. After a steady climb of 100 m over 5 km (2%) the first real view appeared of where the trail was heading. The weather was ideal for riding and enjoying the wonderful scenery.



For the most part, up to the 21 km mark, the trail followed single track access roads to a small scale hydro-electric scheme (by NZ standards), occasionally dipping into the forest or across swampy areas on specially prepared cycle paths.



As we got higher, the bush got thicker, the streams more rocky and the bridges bigger.



There was time for a bit of larking about before we reached the Summit at 317 m. On a previous ride we had stopped at “Cowboy Paradise” for lunch, but due to the poor reception then, we decided to skip it this time and have lunch elsewhere. However, we did stop briefly as a quick reminder and the telling of the 2023 tale for the umpteenth time. There were a couple of falls on the downhill track from “Cowboy Paradise”, but none were life threatening and both riders were able to continue down to the road where the more seriously bruised of the two was picked up by the bus.

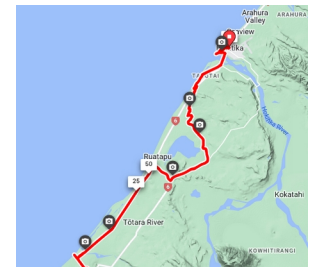


From the 40-50 km marks we were back on gravel road again to Lake Kaniere where a few more tired riders were picked up. From there about half the group made their way down to Hokitika through thick bush via a series of tracks next to old gold races, now supplying the small Kaniere Forks hydro power station. Pizza for tea!



Day 3: Hokitika to Ross & return. 75 km 429 m, 4:30 hrs.

Heavy rain was predicted to come to Hokitika from the south in the afternoon. Ross is 25km south of Hokitika. This meant a very early start to avoid the rain and only three riders, two of which had a vested interest as it meant they had completed the entire West Coast Wilderness trail from Greymouth to Ross - in a year.



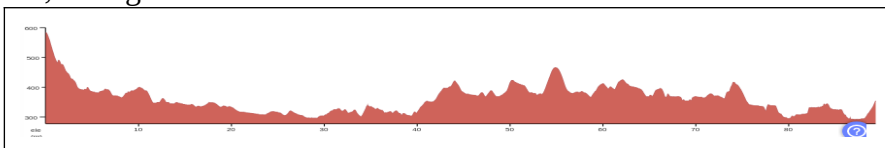
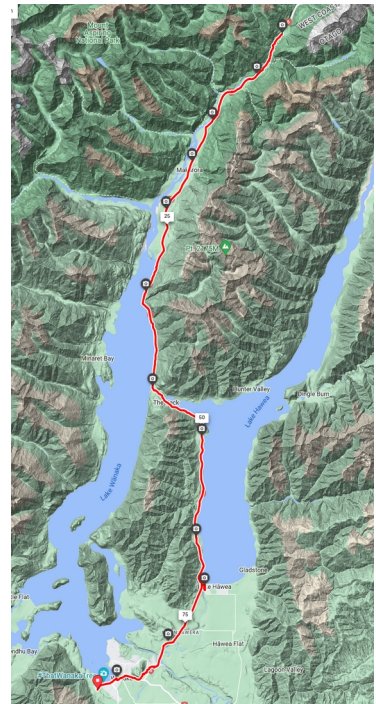
The later risers followed, but returned via the main road after refreshments at the Treetops Cafe. After reaching Ross, where it had already started to rain, one rider headed straight back to Hokitika arriving two and half hours before the others (from here on know as the “Slow Pokes”) who took their time to experiment with porn photography and learn about the history of the area. The track follows the coast for the first seven km then plunges into the forest and for the next ten follows old logging tramways passing by rickety bridges, historic sawmills and other interesting locations with informative signs. From there to Ross it’s bitumen then a very boring rail track.





Day 4: Haast Pass to Wanaka. 90 km, 935 m, 4:50 hrs

This was the first taste of fast bitumen. The route provided some awesome views, but for many the road conditions were not ideal citing too much fast traffic. After a six hour bus drive of 340 km including coffee and lunch break, Eric announced the choices were either the full 90 km ride from the pass to Wanaka, 80 km from “Blue Pools” or 40 km from “The Neck” between Lakes Wanaka and Hawea. Four riders opted for 90 km from the top, which suddenly appeared, such that the bus driver had to brake hard and then expertly reverse back to into the parking area to unload. Two riders scarpered off down the hill and were never seen again by the two left at the top. These two had obviously gained a reputation for being slow due to the number of photos they would take. Anyway the “Slow Pokes” set off at their own pace at 3 pm. The scenery was absolutely stunning and became more impressive as the day wore on, the light softened and the wind died.



The Makarora River





View from Blue Pools



View to Mt Aeolus



The road along Lake Wanaka



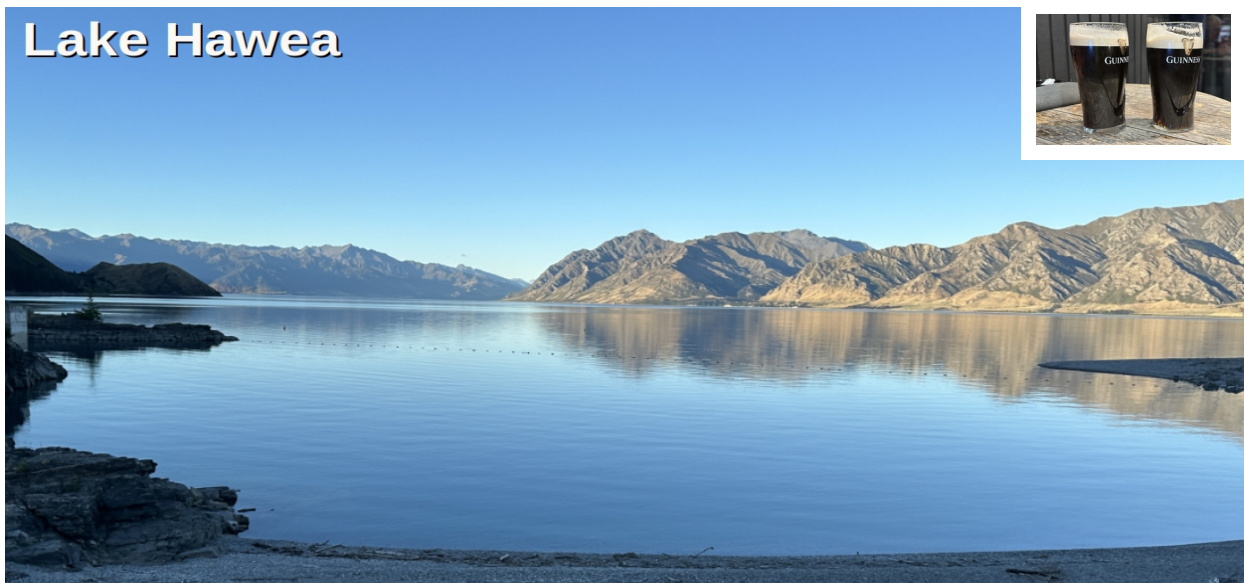
Last view of Lake Wanaka



Looking back to "The Neck" and Lake Hawea

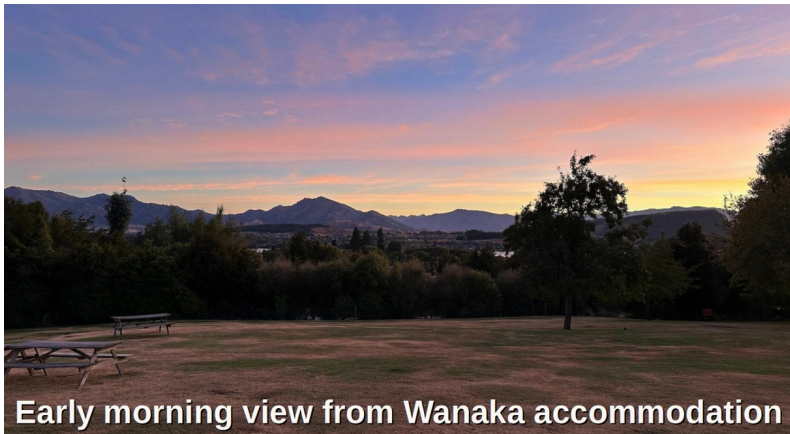
For the Slow Pokes it was well worth the effort and after a six hour ride and many photos they needed some sustenance in town to regain their strength and make the last hill up to their beds.

Lake Hawea

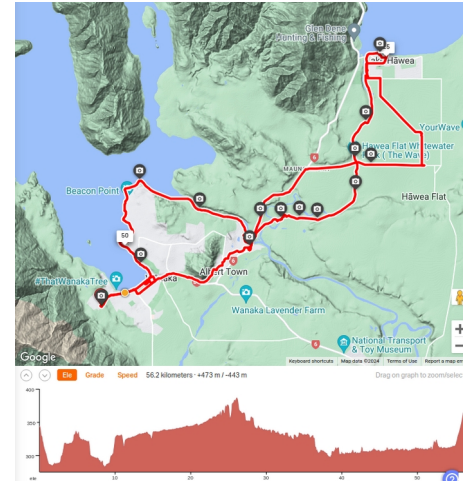


When they returned, well after dark, they were told tales of woe, bus punctures, tool malfunctions, bumpy roads, killer hills that weren't supposed to be there etc, all of which they were oblivious to.

Day 5: Wanaka to Hawea Loop, 56km, 473m, 3:45hrs



Early morning view from Wanaka accommodation



A beautiful morning and no dealing with the transport this day. As the day wore on the high cloud thickened keeping the day cool, but no rain.



Heading down towards the bridge over the River Clutha and the main road from Albert Town



4km of main road up hill
100km/hr zone – not good

The entire group, except for the COVID patient, did this ride. The route comprised mainly gravel bike paths, minor roads and an unpleasant 4km stretch of Highway 6 leaving Albert Town.



Hills, mirror lake,
lunch and an ideal photo opportunity



Heading back down the hill
on a well maintained trail

Lunch was taken on the shores of Lake Hawea where the view was stunning – a chance for some memorable photos – before heading back down a very enjoyable cycle path following the Hawea River to Albert Town. Lake Hawea is a partially dammed natural glacial lake.

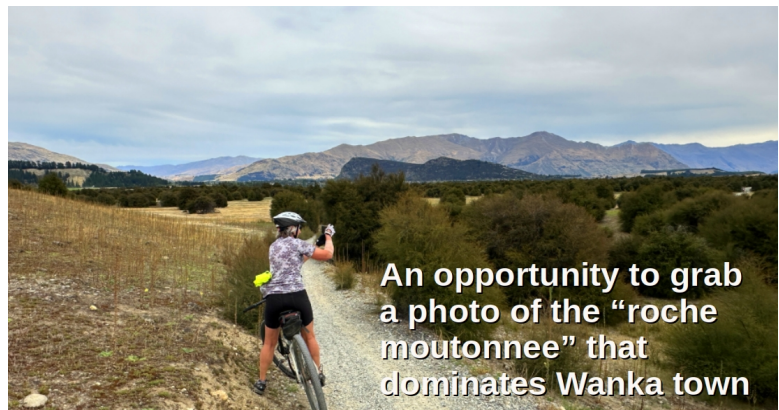
It was halfway along the Hawea River path that someone realised they had left their bag back at the lunch location 6 km back, so set off at haste with another rider to successfully retrieve the offending bag. Luckily it was still there.



Following the Hawea River



Nice tight group



An opportunity to grab a photo of the “roche moutonnée” that dominates Wanaka town

At the bottom of the hill the track crossed the Hawea river over a quite substantial bridge. Nevertheless, there was the usual warning sign but with a slight twist indicating that playing soccer on the bridge could be dangerous.



Bridge over the Hawea River

After coffee in Albert Town and a moment of panic / an amusing altercation with a garbage collector who we thought was a thief, we headed off around Beacon Point, which was considered by many to be a very good technical challenge and a delightful part of the route.

The ride finished in Wanaka after riding through the local boat yard. Most people went shopping and particularly enjoyed the local ice cream!



On the way to Beacon Point



Wanaka boat yard



The view of Lake Wanaka from Beacon Point

Day 6: Lake Dunstan Trail to Alexandra. 70 km, 818 m, 4:40 hrs

This was considered by many to be their favourite ride of the whole tour. It was a beautiful day for riding, the track was new, well dressed and in places challenging. The scenery was variable from serene lake with vineyards to dramatic rock gorge and the cantilever cliff-side paths were awesome. The start was just a 30 minute bus ride from the Wanaka accommodation and 30 minute bus ride from the end at Alexandra to accommodation at Roxburgh. Ideal!



Correcting bars which were reversed



And they're off

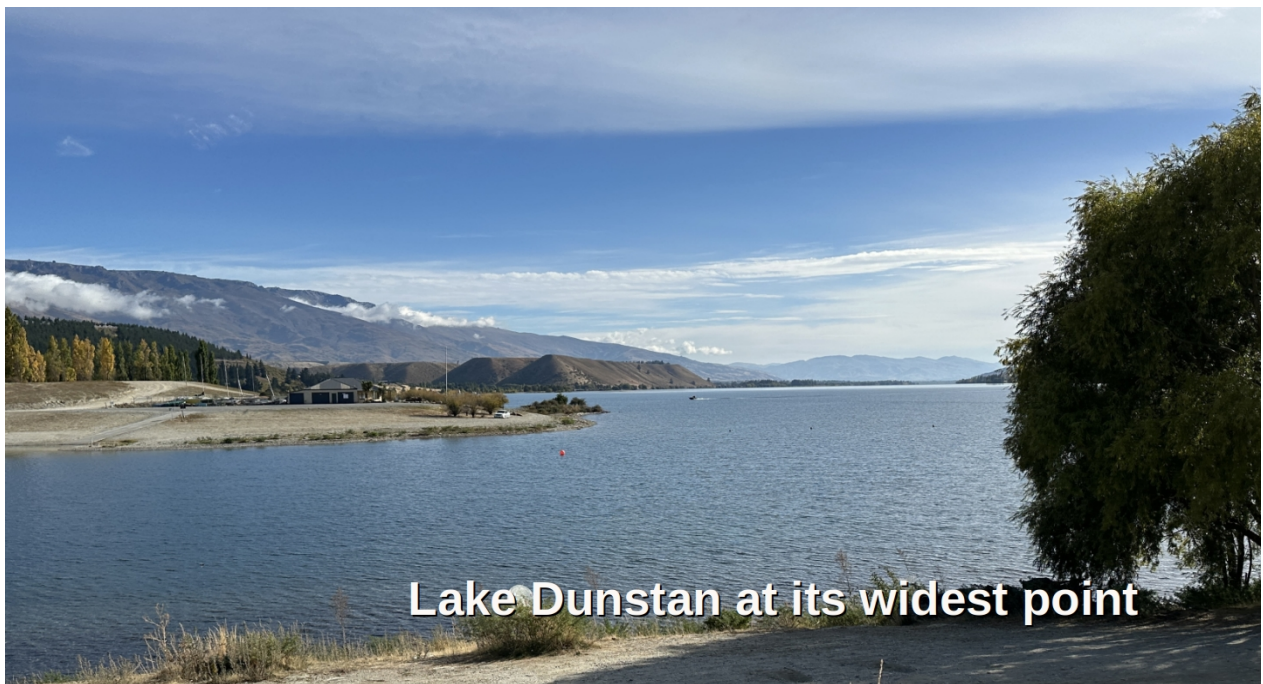


Much effort is put into keeping the young off the streets here



No slums around here

Getting started for some was problematical, but when we did start the riding surface proved to be first class. We passed some very modern architecture, expensive landscaping and the odd youth distraction scheme, all the while following the lake shore.



Lake Dunstan at its widest point



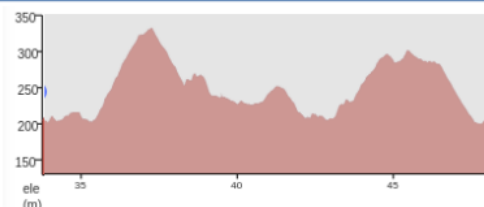
While the main group spent time trying to work out where the first pickup location was, others entertained themselves. The town of Cromwell was inspected by some. This was an old gold mining town which had been half flooded by rising flood waters due to the damming of the river.



It was at the point four riders lost touch with the rest of the group, unsure whether they were in front or behind. They searched all the town bakerys but the others couldn't be found. So they carried on, assuming the others may have detoured to a pick-up location. They were temporarily fooled by a completely different group being dropped off, but the rest of the SARCC group were eventually found and then it was into the gorge with no chance of a return!

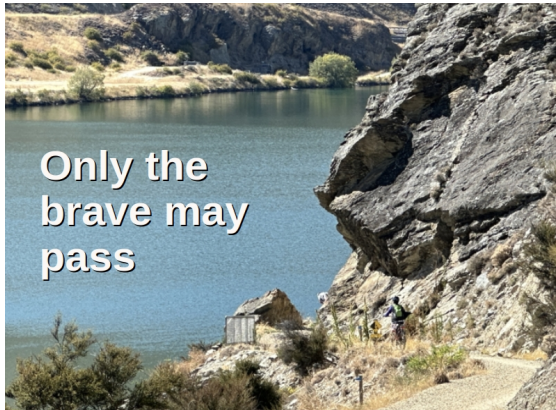


Stats for the gorge
Max grade 15%



Selected: 33.7 – 48.7 km

15 km distance	339 m elevation gain	332 m elevation loss
14.8% max grade	1.8% avg grade	01:14:22 moving time



A little way into the gorge we came across a couple of boats moored up and serving coffee, ice cream, burgers and more junk – most people wished they hadn't bothered and that we'd stopped earlier where there was more of an incentive to provide good service. The coffee shop banned us from eating our own food there as if they owned the location, despite buying a coffee. Anyway from there we headed up the first big climb of the day, successfully negotiating an impressive switchback section and 15% gradient.





There was mild confusion when we arrived at the pickup location. The bus was there, but not the driver. It turned out that the driver was standing under the bridge expecting us to pass him. But we went a different way.

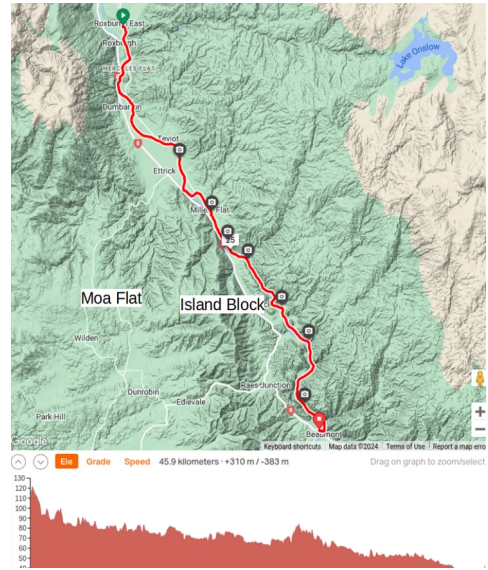


A few riders opted to continue along side the river to Alexandra another 13km distant. A very pleasant extension. Flat, but technically challenging in places.

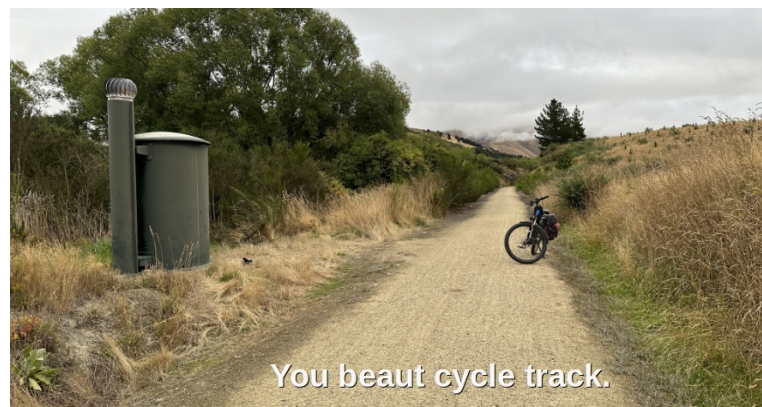
Day 7(am): Roxburgh to Beaumont. Clutha Gold trail. 46 km, 310 m, 2:40 hrs.

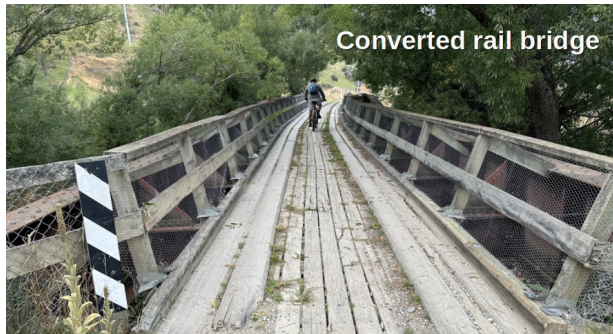
Only three riders did this ride, possibly because it was the first of two rides this day. To make the second ride at Manapouri, a three hour bus journey away, this ride required a start in total darkness at six am. The “Larks” started directly from the accommodation at seven minutes to six and it was well worth the effort. Good lights were essential, but the track was in excellent condition, the air still, the weather cool and dry. Because there were only three Larks, they made good time and arrived in Beaumont well before their scheduled pickup time. Riding in the dark along side the Clutha River was not as flat as one would expect with plenty of tricky turns and small hills. The Larks rode 10 km in total darkness but not total silence as the dawn chorus from river erupted. They turned their lights off at about 12 km and by 15 km it was light enough to take the first photo. They were astounded at the speed the river was flowing.

There were plenty of informative interpretive signs along the route explaining the local history, but unfortunately they didn't have time to read them. However they were photographed and it can now be told that among other things that the area was first settled by Europeans during the 1861 gold rush. The main gold rush lasted from 1861 to 1864 and Dunedin was then the largest settlement in New Zealand. At a place called Island Block some of the richest pickings of gold along the Clutha River were found. There were nine species of Moa of which six occurred in Otago and some survived until 40 years before the first Europeans (Able Tasman 1642) mapped the Islands.



As the light got stronger it was apparent that the country was much greener than further north and very pretty. From the 26 km mark the cycle track closely followed a single track vehicle road and judging by the gradient, cuttings and telegraph poles the route followed an old railway. But the amazing thing was that even though there was a reasonable, traffic free road the NZ tax payer had also paid for a you-beaut cycle track too.





Converted rail bridge



Quite rugged country



We did get a brief sprinkle of rain



The three larks

For the last 10 km coming into Beaumont the country became more rugged, the river displayed rapids, the weather became cooler and the Larks did get a sprinkle of rain. From Beaumont they made thier way over to Manapouri by people mover to start the second ride of the day.

Day 7(pm): Manapouri to Te Anau, Lake to Lake trail 32 km, 317 m, 2 hrs.

After a 3 hr bus ride, this was the first ride of the day for most riders. Another fine afternoon, with 50% cloud cover, although the sun seemed to shine most of the time. The track was well dressed and easy to follow passing through some native forest following the east bank of the Waiau River. After setting up the bikes and a bit of larking about the group set off at 1:30pm.



Some people!like a bit of fun



And its the start of yet another great ride

The track provided occasional views across Lake Manapouri to Fiordland National Park. Just past the 6 km mark was the busy Te Anau Manapouri Highway. Riders were quite disciplined and split into two smaller tight groups of five or six, but that didn't slow the traffic down. However, it was marginally safer than being in a large group by allowing traffic to pass more easily. This road section lasted for 4 km and from there it was back on gravel down to river level.



The track surface is well prepared



The road is horrible – speeding traffic

There was a request that a visit to the bridge at the start of the Kepler Wilderness Track be made. However, there was some confusion as to where it was, who was going down the road straight ahead to find it and who was keeping to the trail? In the end it turned out that the trail ran parallel to the road, just 30m to the north over the bushes and after 300 m the trail and road joined together again and all concerned ended up in the same place at the Waiau River bridge.



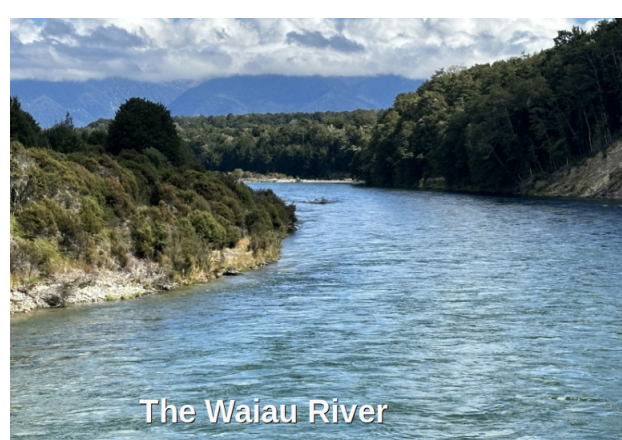
Parting of the ways



The bridge seeking group

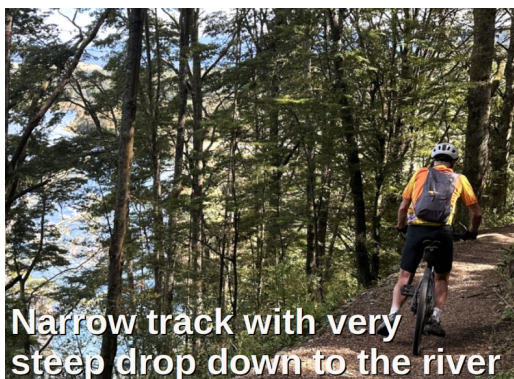


The bridge



The Waiau River

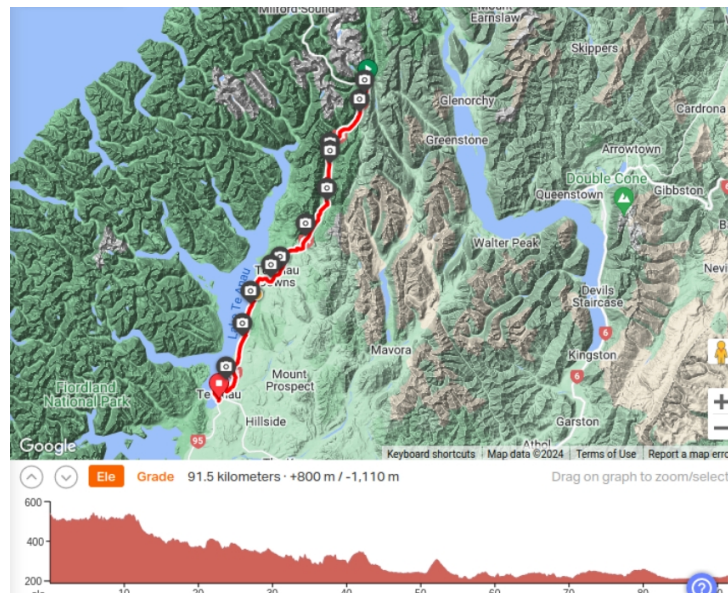
From there the trail ran very close to the river for the next 14km. High cliffs and narrow forest trails revealed some spectacular scenery, before arriving at Lake Te Anau control gates



Day 8: The Divide back to Te Anau, 92 km, 800 m, 4:40 hrs

This was another day on the fast bitumen. Only three riders opted to do the planned ride. Six opted to walk to the Key Summit via the Routeburn Track and the rest stayed in Te Anau having a rest day. Of the three riders that set off from “The Divide” there was one fast rider leaving the two Slow Pokes again to make their way down at their own pace. Possibly the reason for the reluctance of many to ride the planned route was their experience on the Haast Pass to Wanaka ride. The route looked very similar. Indeed, when the bus took the walkers and riders up to “The Divide”, amongst heaps of traffic, the riding group were also worried. After all it was the first sunny / clear day there for several weeks – according to the locals.

Anyway as it turned out just about ALL the traffic in the morning was going one-way towards Milford Sound. In the first hour of riding the other way, only six vehicles overtook the Slow Pokes and by the time their ride on the main road was complete in mid afternoon, the vehicle rate was only one every two minutes. Presumably there was a repeat of the morning traffic conditions again in the late afternoon and evening, but coming back. A quick calculation, based on number of 50 seater coaches counted, some five to perhaps ten thousand people did the trip that day.





The walkers all smiles



The slow poke riders start taking photos

This was going to be one of those days when the scenery even stopped the fast rider, but he was never caught. By the time the Slow Pokes reached the coffee stop, which had been noticed on the way up at Mirror Lakes (27 km), they had stopped 13 times and taken over 50 photos ! You'll be thankful only a few are show here.

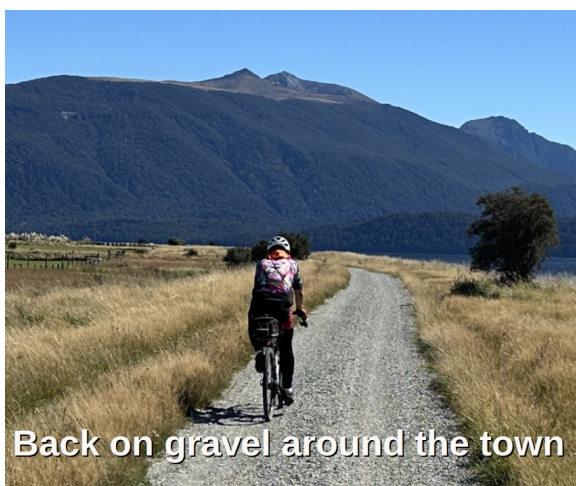


2 km: David Peaks – Morning Mist



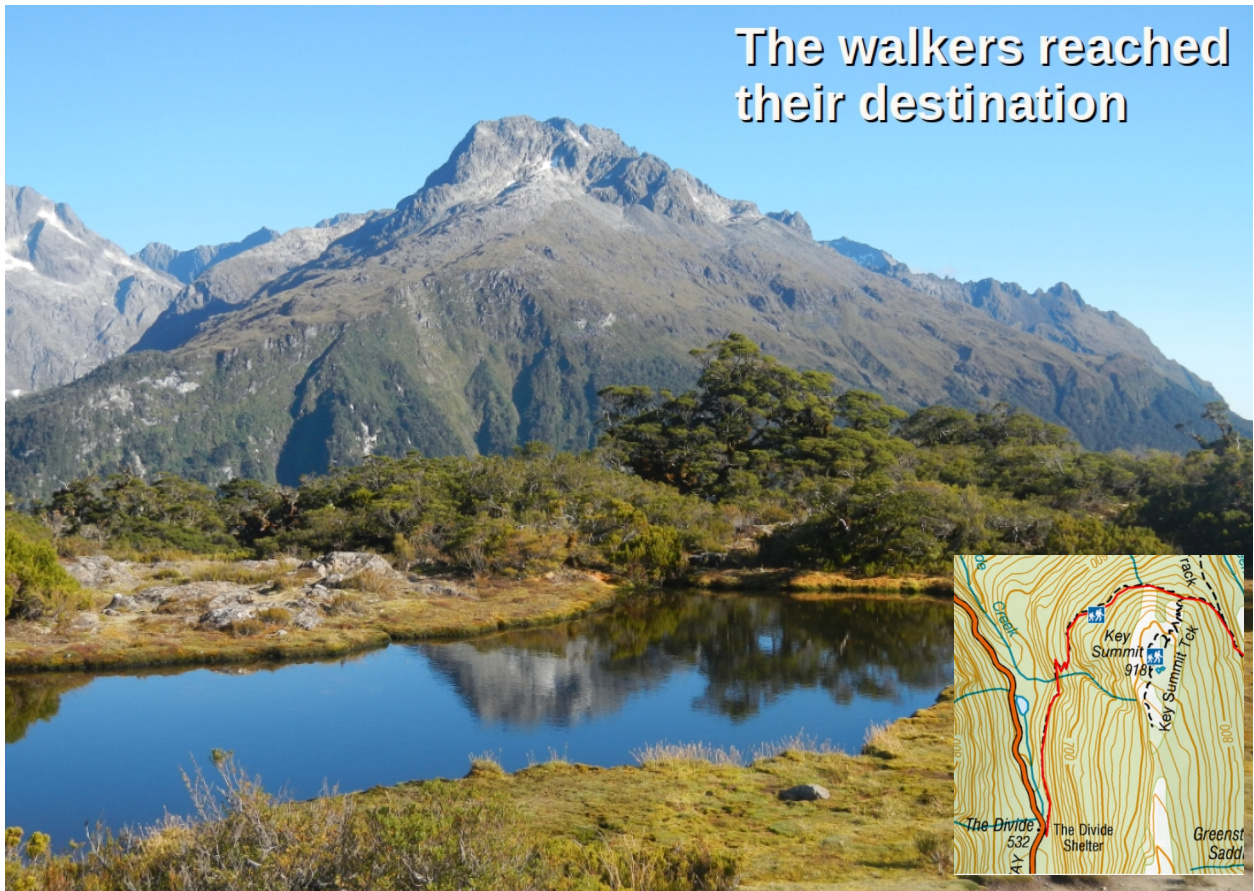
7 km: Lake Gunn – Spear Shadow





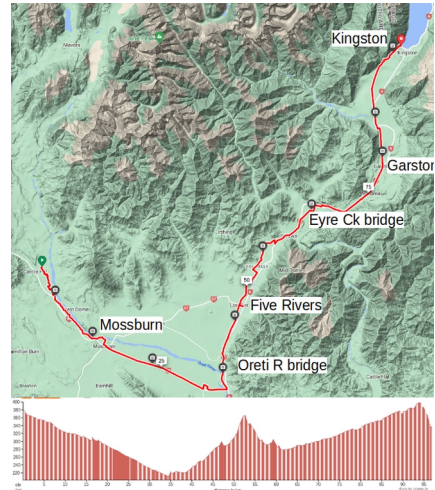
After 7 hrs in the saddle and over 100 photos taken, the Slow Pokes felt they had done the ride justice and considered it one of their best ever.

Meanwhile:-



Day 9: Around the Mountain – Part 2 only. 97km, 466m, 6hrs
Part 1 of this ride starts from Queenstown apparently. We Just did Part 2. Most people did the first 47 km section to Five Rivers, but five did the full 97 km.

After a 30 minute bus drive from Te Anau, the riding group were dropped off in a howling wind. Luckily this was a northwesterly and made riding the first 35 km in south-easterly direction very easy. Sometimes there was even no need to pedal because the wind was so strong. Luckily by the time the Oreti River was crossed and the track turned northward, just north of Lumsden, the wind had died down. Riding in a generally north to northwest direction was thus OK. Except from Garston onwards where a strong headwind was again encountered. Not easy on tired legs! The wind did whip the clouds into some amazing, but almost static shapes for most of the day, thus adding to the scenery. Presumably their formation is controlled somewhat by the mountains. Once again the track was well dressed and because much of the route was along an old rail line the gradients were small.



Getting ready in a howling wind



Someone forgot to put their battery in.



And we're off with the wind in our favour

The first part of the trail to Mossburn, was along the right bank of the Oreti River had a constant downhill gradient of less than 1% but plenty of interesting turns.



A small diversion on the track.
Lenticular stratus clouds forming.



A well maintained track



Sun on distant mountains

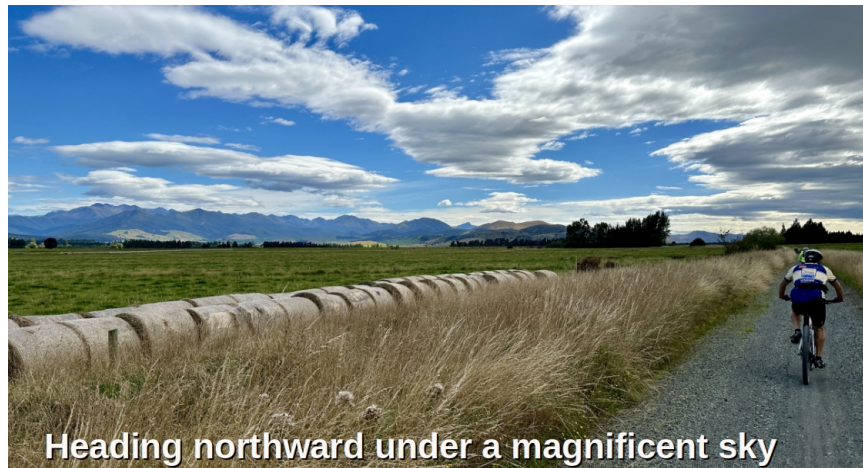


Two different types of feed
being layed out out for winter?

From Mossburn to the bridge over the Oreti River and northward turn, the track ran along side the main road. It was here that the bus driver who had parked at Five Rivers met and cycled back with the group. The only place there was no separate track was the 100 m over the Oreti River bridge.



However, here concern for cyclist safety was well serviced with an electronic sign that flashed up when a vehicle, or cyclist, approached.



After a brief stop for lunch at the Five Rivers bakery (reportedly good), five riders continued to Kingston on the southern tip of Lake Wakatipu. For much of this part of the route, after crossing Eyre Creek, the cycle trail follows the old Fairlight rail track. The northern section of this is now operated by enthusiasts across Trotters Plain and this is also where tired legs encountered a very unwelcome headwind. The route follows a very fertile valley often across farmland, where a dozen or more gates had to be opened and shut. Either side was flanked by mountains that increased in size as we approached Kingston.





Trotters Plain – strong headwinds here



Coming down towards Lake Wakatipu

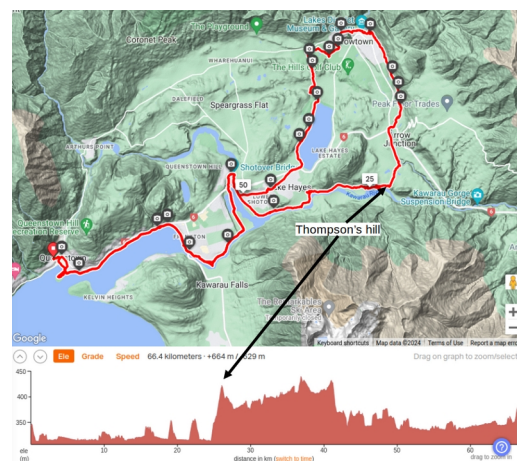


Kingston – terminus of the Fairlight Railway

Day 10: Queenstown / Arrowtown Loop: 66 km, 664 m, 4:40 hrs

This was the last ride before the group split up, with seven finishing the tour here, while nine continued up to Twizel the next day. As it happened the majority decided that riding up to Arrowtown from the Kawarau River was something they preferred not to do, so they turned around at Thompson's hill (26 km) and retraced their journey back to Queenstown.

After avoiding a local fun-run in the town centre the group rode along the north shore of Lake Wakatipu and then the Kawarau River. This location provided a close up view of the Remarkables.



Last ride with almost the entire group



View across Lake Wakatipu

At the 14 km mark the Shotover River (famous for jet boating) was reached. A wonderful view of the river and distant Remarkables was provided from the old road bridge, which was opened in 1915, closed in 1975 and restored as part of the Queenstown cycle trail in 2004.



Kawarau River & Remarkables



Shotover River Bridge



Shotover River looking back to the Remarkables

The group continued together until reaching the top of Thompson's Hill. From there only five riders carried on to Arrowtown. The route turned out to be much easier than expected, rising just 120 m over 10 km (0.5%). It followed the Arrow river through shady woodland on a well prepared track.



Overlooking the Kawarau River Gorge



Arrow River Bridge

Arriving at Arrow town some very tired runners were passed and the group were pleasantly surprised by no less than four major sporting events taking place.



An off road Marathon, an Ultra run and a Mountain bike race all starting close to or from the shores of Lake Wanaka and making their way along the Montatpu Track. Also the New Zealand Open Golf



tournament. The town was heaving with people – luckily when on bikes, parking and getting sustenance isn't a problem. A delightful coffee place with a nice garden, available tables and shade was easy to find.



The golf course was very upmarket with an entire housing sub-division interspersed with fairways, bunkers and greens. Much to the delight of one of the riders, some quite famous golfers were on the course near to where we crossed.

At the 41 km mark we rapidly descended for 500 m at an average of 11.2% before arriving on the shore of Lake Hayes. From here the track skirted the lake and height gave good views. The group then took a short cut, but at times very steep, commuter trail through the suburbs of Queenstown back to the Shotover bridge and from there retraced their route back to the accommodation.



Lake Hayes



12.9% and loose gravel
on a "commuter" route



Jet Boat on the Kawarau River



Returning to Queenstown

As it was the last night of the entire group being together there was a small get together and minor speeches with all contributing. Some became quite emotional when recounting their experience and favourite ride. Just two photos, c/o Esther, recorded the evening.



Eric showing off



Dean telling off

Day 11: 3 separate rides

Lake Ohau to Twizel, Sailor's Cutting and Twizel to Lake Pukaki.

The group was split between the two busses for the trip from Queenstown towards Twizel, which was originally intended to be the jumping off location for either a ride or a walk up to the Mt Cook glacier on what would have been day 12. However, the weather forecast for day 12 looked very grim and it was decided to make the most of day 11. The people mover dropped three riders off at Lake Ohau to ride the rest of the way into Twizel and the bus with five riders headed for Sailors Cutting close to Benmore dam. Two of the group that did the Lake Ohau to Twizel ride then decided it was such a nice evening that a quick sprint up to Lake Pukaki was possible.

Lake Ohau to Twizel: 30 km, 132 m 1:35 hrs

Three riders started early afternoon at the Lake Edge. A very strong wind was whipping across the lake forming white caps. The sun was strong, the temperature just right and the track well dressed. Luckily for the most part the wind was a cross-wind and once into the lee of Mount Ohau it died away very quickly. Lunch was had at the natural, as opposed to canal, outlet to the lake.

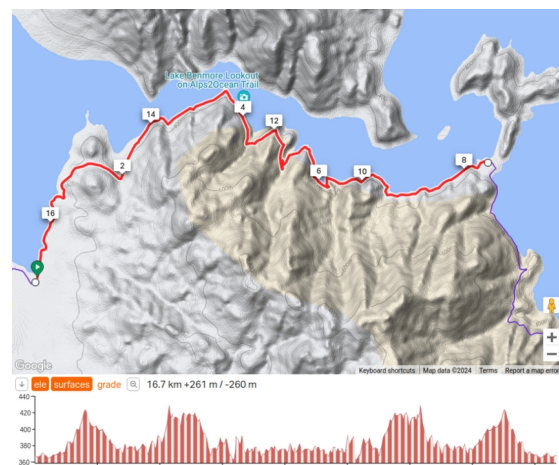
From there into Twizel the route was entirely on smooth bitumen. It followed the Ohau canal and then headed down into Twizel where we met Eric who had driven the bus and came up to join the group.





Sailor's Cutting return: 16 km, 261 m

The five riders in the bus decided their last ride would be Sailor's Cutting, which three of them had ridden last year and knew it to be a good ride. They started from near the Sailor's Cutting campsite, turned around halfway after lunch and retraced their route back to the bus.





Impressive cantilever bridge



Lunch time
with a view



On the way back



Last hoorah

Twizel to Lake Pukaki: 21 km, 124 m, 1:10 hrs

Because the Slow Pokes had time and the energy, the quest for serious bike porn was at last satisfied



The next day it rained hard most of the morning confirming the group had made the correct choices the day before. It took four hours to get back to Christchurch.