

TRAVEL & ADVENTURE

New Zealand's Never-Ending Trail

How the Kiwis built a 1,600-mile mountain-bike paradise — with hundreds more miles yet to come. by **AARON GULLEY**

NEW ZEALAND IS SET to unveil what will become one of the world's largest networks of mountain-bike trails — a series of 23 sections totaling 1,600 miles. When the first phase is completed this fall, the New Zealand Cycle Trail will stretch from the northernmost tip on the North Island to the southern reaches of the South Island — with a decadelong phase two that will link up 1,600 more miles of trails. It will take riders through nearly every type of landscape the country has to offer, from thick rain forest canopies and grass-covered hillsides to high-mountain saddles with views of snow-covered peaks.

The new trails are the result of an ambitious and highly unconven-

tional public works project started in 2009. Still reeling from the ongoing global recession, the government hosted a job fair to solicit ideas on how to jump-start economic activity. Among the usual proposals to invest in things like education and highway infrastructure was an idea to put \$50 million into off-road bike trails to spur the tourism industry, which pumps upwards of \$15 billion into the national economy each year, nearly 8 percent of the country's GDP. "It was a completely unorthodox idea," says Geoff Gabites, owner of the New Zealand outfitter Adventure South. "But it was also popular, so the government found some money." →

In addition to 1,600 miles of trails, New Zealand is building downhill bike parks, like Queensland's Coronet Peak.

Turning to cycling to boost an ailing economy might seem foolish, but the sport is booming, both in New Zealand and abroad. In 2000, after opening a multiuse trail on the South Island, for example, tourism officials were surprised to discover that it was more popular with cyclists than with hikers. So they decided to go all in on the new trail network, known locally as the Nga Haerenga (Maori for “the journeys”).

“Mountain biking is on the rise in New Zealand,” says Kevin Bowler, head of the country’s tourism bureau. “And the trails’ success can be measured by the number of accommodations and cycling tour companies popping up alongside them.”

IN MARCH, I rode four sections of the Nga Haerenga with Gabites and Euan Wilson, owner of the U.K.-based mountain-bike guiding operation H+I Adventures, which will begin selling tours on the trail this spring. A few days into the tour, we hit the St. James Trail, a 40-mile loop on jeep roads and single-track through hulking mountains covered with a veil of fresh snow. Unlike some of the purpose-built trails, the St. James is a rugged wilderness road passing through a former 1862 sheep station. The riding is physical and rocky but not especially technical.

“This is challenging, but some of the trails are more like gravel paths,” Gabites told me as we rode, explaining that each trail is graded on a difficulty scale of 1 to 4. (The St. James ranges from 2 to 4.) “The idea was



The Saddle Spur suspension bridge over a 200-foot canyon, just one of the heart-pounding obstacles on the St. James Trail

to create variety throughout the system to appeal to a broad audience.”

A few nights later, we overnighted at Ben Dhu Station, a sheep ranch on the South Island’s Alp 2 Ocean trail, where owners Hamish and Pip Smith recently renovated three rustic-chic cabins to cater to cyclists. “The Cycle Trail program was controversial at first, but people have warmed to it,” Pip told us over a glass of New Zealand pinot noir. “As farmers, we are grateful for another means of helping support ourselves.”

“This is symptomatic of what’s happening up and down the country,” Gabites told me later that night. “People are starting to see tangible benefits from the trails.”

You can see this most vividly in Rotorua, a logging town of 54,000 on the North Island that is now home to a bike manufacturer, a cycling-equipment distributor, three trail-building companies, and six bike shops. Last year, it opened the world’s only year-round, gondola-accessed bike park.

“Historically, Rotorua has been economically depressed,” says Gaz Sullivan, the owner of the mountain-bike apparel line Nzo. “But we are changing that.”

A thousand miles south, in Queenstown, meanwhile, the company Skyline operates the country’s largest gondola-served bike park, which has seen double-digit growth since it opened in 2011. And Christchurch approved a plan earlier this year to build an even larger bike park, with Gravity Logic, the team behind the world-renowned Whistler Mountain Bike Park, vying for the contract.

South of Queenstown, on a fourth-generation farm that sits high above Lake Wakatipu, we met Tom O’Brien, a wiry 40-year-old who converted his family farm into a riding destination called Welcome Rock. Though he’d never mountain biked a day in his life, O’Brien hand-dug an 17-mile singletrack loop, complete with three trailside huts for overnight tours.

“It’s a gamble, but we’re getting more and more visitors,” he told us. “When the first pioneers got here, they called it Welcome Rock because of the relief from realizing that it was all downhill from here.” O’Brien, like all of New Zealand, hopes that mountain biking will keep him coasting for the foreseeable future. ■

THREE WAYS TO RIDE THE KIWI TRAIL

So far, 23 segments of the trail are complete. Here are the three best routes worth a ride, whether you have a few days or a few weeks.



1. TWO DAYS: Great Lake Trail

Only a few hours south of Auckland, this route follows Lake Taupo for 44 miles, with dramatic views of Tongariro National Park. In Taupo, Whakaipo Lodge has rooms near the lake; bike rentals are \$50 per day. greatlaketrail.com

2. ONE WEEK: Alps 2 Ocean

This trail spans 187 miles, but you’ll want to focus on the first half, a laid-back descent that passes glacial lakes and Maori rock art. At night, crash at one of three dozen lodges, like Ben Dhu Station, on the route. alps2ocean.com

3. TWO WEEKS: Old Ghost Road

With steep climbs and fast descents that pass through a dozen ghost towns, this 52-mile screamer is one of the system’s highlights. H+I Adventures will take you there and to other sections on a 200-mile, 13-day tour. \$3,910; mountainbikeworldwide.com