



The Shotover
Gorge Trail.

HOT on the TRAIL

Pedal through the big-scale, big-sky
scenery of the Southern Way.

STORY **FIONA BARBER**

FOCUSING TRAVEL PLANS on New Zealand’s south and all its jewels is never a bad idea. Eye-popping landscapes, myriad food and accommodation options, adventures that range from the nerve-tingling to those that inspire quiet wonder... It’s all here. What, then, could be better than immersing yourself in these regions collectively known as the Southern Way? Doing it on a bike, with the wind in your face.

The Southern Way, which encompasses a swathe of the South Island from the Tasman Sea in the west to the Pacific in the east, and from Waitaki in the north to Stewart Island in the south, is home to seven of the 23 premier cycle routes that constitute Ngā Haerenga Great Rides of New Zealand. On and near the Great Rides network, which runs the length of the country, visitors can take in wildly diverse sights and experiences, but we’ll be concentrating on the Southern Way’s spectacular seven, on and off-trail, with some of their star offerings and hidden gems.

Before you set your heart on a ride or two, do some research. Each trail section is graded from one to five, so you can check that you are not cycling off more than you can chew. Choose to complete the trails at your own pace, with pedal-only power or electric assistance, with or without the support of a commercial operator, or simply select sections that suit your fitness, ability and experience levels.

Whether you’re a committed cyclist with all the kit or a hill-shy suburban pedaller, there’s something for everyone. It’s the Southern Way.



ALPS 2 OCEAN TRAIL

At 315km, this is the longest Great Ride and takes in the dazzling stars of the Mackenzie Country and Southern Alps – lakes, glacier-gouged valleys, a braided river, other-worldly limestone rock forms, famously clear night skies and the country’s tallest peak, Aoraki Mt Cook. This is natural grandeur up close and personal.

The multi-section ride links Aoraki Mt Cook village and Ōamaru and includes an option that takes riders to Lake Takapō and back. Families and the not-so-fit can still enjoy day trips from easily accessible spots such as Takapō, Twizel and Ōmārama.

Along the way and off-trail, you also find hydro dams, wine and craft beer outlets, pubs, cafes, glider flights and hot tubs at Ōmārama and the world-recognised International Dark Sky Reserve at Takapō. Imagine star-gazing from a hot tub after a day on the trail, or seeing the landscape you’ve traversed from the cockpit of a glider. **Grade 2** (easy) and 3 (intermediate). **Duration** Approximately 4-7 days for the complete route, 8 at a gentler pace.

On trail The impossibly teal lakes of the Mackenzie Country. **Off trail** Penguins, pints, fine fare and Victorian streetscapes in Ōamaru, and the wine country of Waitaki Valley. Cheers.

ROXBURGH GORGE TRAIL

It’s not every adventure that includes



a landscape dubbed New Zealand’s Grand Canyon or a section known as the “missing link”. You’ll find both in this 21km day trip that connects Alexandra and the Lake Roxburgh Hydro Dam and takes in the Mata-au Clutha River – and a lot more Central Otago goodies besides.

The canyon? That’s the gorge, where steep cliffs scoured by the river formed a pathway for Māori moa hunters travelling from the mountains to the ocean. The missing link is the 13km jetboat trip that takes riders from Doctors Point to the Shingle Creek jetty. You may not be on your bike, but it’s still a terrific way to enjoy the natural splendours, wildlife and remnants of the area’s gold-mining era. Work has started on the missing section and, once complete, will expand the Roxburgh Gorge Trail to 34km.

- 1. Sailors Cutting, Alps
- 2 Ocean Cycle Trail.
- 2. Heritage Precinct, Ōamaru.
- 3. Go off trail for kororā little blue penguin watching.
- 4. Clutha Gold Trail.



Grade Mostly 2 (easy), but with some grade 3 (moderate) hill climbs, narrow sections and switchbacks.

Duration A day. Allow one to two hours for each of the two sections and 45 minutes for the boat transfer. Boat passage needs to be booked in advance.

On trail Schist huts and other gold-rush relics, birdlife including kārearea, the native falcon, and, of course, the Kiwi mini-Grand Canyon.

Off trail Wineries and orchards from Alexandra through to the Teviot Valley. Jimmy’s Pies in Roxburgh is a Central Otago institution.

CLUTHA GOLD TRAIL

With a smooth, wide surface and no steep hills, this 135km trail from Lake Roxburgh Dam to Waiholā is one of the most leisurely. That’s not to say it lacks drama. Far from it. The dam itself is spectacular – its story is explained in the first of the information panels along the trail – and rock forms burst from the riverbanks and hillsides.

There’s even more theatre: an old railway line takes riders to the highest point, Big Hill Tunnel and a 440m pedal through the dark. Emerge to feast your eyes on the trail down to the gold-rush town of Lawrence. From here, riders can choose to take the 62km route that takes them to Lake Waiholā, an inland tidal lake. Plan for about an hour per 10km on this section. The Clutha Gold Trail passes through Roxburgh, Millers Flat, Beaumont,

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Lawrence, Waitahuna and Milton. As well as farmland, points of interest include remains of gold mining, flax-milling and pioneer sheep-farming industries, tunnels, a viaduct and a historical camp where Chinese miners lived.

Grade 1 (easiest) and 2 (easy).

Duration 2-4 days.

On trail Hot pies and lamingtons from Lawrence country cafes, old railway tunnels around Mt Stuart, the Waitahuna Coffee Cart and award-winning restored Waitahuna Station building, Horseshoe Bend Bridge,



- 5. Roxburgh Gorge Trail.
- 6. Waitahuna Station Coffee Cart.
- 7. Kārearea New Zealand falcon.
- 8. Carrick Winery, Bannockburn.
- 9. Cromwell Heritage Precinct.



Lake Waiholā, its boardwalk and its native wetlands – evidence of the remarkable project to restore them.

Off trail Gabriel’s Gully Historic Reserve just out of Lawrence, the birthplace of the Otago goldrush. The legendary Waiholā Fish and Chips shop.

LAKE DUNSTAN TRAIL

This day-ride connecting the heritage towns of Cromwell and Clyde takes you above and beyond – above the lake on cantilevered boardwalks and beyond it into settlements, and more blue-ribbon scenery. It also traverses places filled with fascinating history and engineering – some of the landscapes were formed by gold miners and dam builders in centuries past. They’re impressive, but so are the



boardwalks that cling to the sides of the cliffs and an 86m-long suspension bridge. Cyclists can also enjoy grandstand views of Kawarau and Mata-au Clutha Rivers and relaxing pit-stops at vineyards and cellar doors along the way.

Grade Mostly 2 (easy) with some gentle hill climbs and tricky bits that push it to 3 (intermediate). The grade 3 sections include sharp corners, exposed cliff edges, narrow sections and steep hills that are best left to more experienced riders and adults.

Duration The total 55km route between Smiths Way and Clyde takes 4-5 hours. Cromwell to Clyde is 42km.

On trail Clyde Dam, the Hugo suspension bridge, Bannockburn wineries. Carrick Winery – with tastings, restaurant, cafe and gardens, is tailored for cyclists.

Off trail Take a tour of the Clyde Dam and visit museums in Cromwell and Clyde.

QUEENSTOWN TRAILS

Where to start with this 150km-plus collection of off-road routes that wind around the Whakatipu Basin on paths, lanes and cross-country cycleways? From Queenstown, trails take cyclists to Gibbston and Arrowtown and offer, well, as much or as little adventure as they want. Check out day-trip-friendly sections such as the Kelvin Heights Sculpture Trail and the Gibbston River Trail or new routes, including Wharehuanui Trail and Shotover Gorge Trail. The 32km Kawarau Gorge Trail is currently being built and will connect the five Otago Great Ride routes that will result in more than 530km of continuous network.

Grade 2 (easy) and 3 (intermediate) with

some slightly harder riding 4 (advanced) around Jacks Point. Given the variety of Queenstown Trails, riders of most ages and skill levels should find a route to enjoy. Day rides are popular, as is combining sections to form a loop.

Duration Suited to both multi-day trips and day rides.

On trail The suspension bridges between Arrowtown and Gibbston, bungee jumping at the Kawarau Bridge, Shotover Jet, the 50km backcountry/single-track Coronet Loop for advanced riders and the new Shotover Gorge Trail, with its old gold-mining tunnel and swing bridge over the Shotover River.

Off trail Queenstown’s adventure activities, wineries, craft breweries, culinary delights and golf courses along the routes. You’ll also find specific Queenstown Mountain Bike Club trails for the more adventurous.

OTAGO CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL

Instantly recognisable, this is the ride that inspired the creation of the Ngā Haerenga



10. Lake Dunstan Trail. 11. Clyde Dam tour. 12. MacTavish's stone cottage, Blacks Hill above Ophir. 13. Te Kano Estate, Bannockburn. 14. Southern Discoveries Bridge, Queenstown Trails.



New Zealand Cycle Trails network – and for good reason. This is 152km of accessible cycling along an old railway route between Clyde and Middelmarsh. It’s also chock-full of big-sky scenery, historical landmarks and friendly settlements along the way. Think viaducts, bridges, tunnels, old gold-mining set-ups and architecture that ranges from the art deco to the rustic.

Like other rides, it can be broken into shorter rides to suit time frames and abilities. Just past Ōmakau township is a new addition, Orkney Wetland, which is home to birds and native plants. This is just one of many conservation projects, which act as wildlife corridors that run the length of the trail network.



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Manuherikia No. 1 Bridge, Otago Central Rail Trail.

Grade 1 (easiest), making it suitable for families and rusty riders.

Duration Most people allow 3-5 days.

On trail The Poolburn Viaduct and tunnels, quaint trail towns every 15-20km with pubs and cafes, the Interplanetary Ride, a scaled representation of the solar system, Waipiata Country Hotel and its epic pies, Naseby's night-sky tours and curling.

Off trail Historic Hayes, a living museum dedicated to the early pioneers

AROUND THE MOUNTAINS TRAIL

Ready to leave the buzz and delights of Queenstown? You can easily reconnect yourself with lonely landscapes that make this part of the world so special. This 186km journey winds through astonishing scenery including mountains, lakes, hidden valleys, rolling farmland and tiny settlements. To call this ride spectacular is not overstating it. Depending on where you set off, you either start or finish with a boat trip across Lake Whakatipu on the TSS Earnslaw. Most people start at Walter Peak at the northern end of the lake, which takes advantage of the lay of the land and prevailing wind, and finish up at Kingston. It's almost a circuit around the Eyre



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Mountains and passes through Southland settlements, Mossburn, Lumsden, Athol and Garston.

Grade 2 (easy) and 3 (intermediate).

Duration 4-5 days for the fit, but there are also day-trip options.

On trail TSS Earnslaw steamship cruise, Walter Peak Station and glacier-carved Mavora Lakes.

Off trail A steam-train ride on the *Kingston Flyer* from Kingston to the Fairlight Railway station in Southland and return. Check the timetable, it only runs on Sundays.

southernway.nz nzcycletrail.com



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TRAIL MIX

Have the luxury of time and energy to burn? Stitch together some of the rides that are a natural fit. Remember, once the **Kawarau Gorge Trail** opens this summer (2025/26), all of the Great Rides in Otago – that's 530km all up – will be connected.

Roxburgh Gorge Trail (starting in Alexandra), connects to the **Clutha Gold Trail** at Roxburgh Dam (finishing at Waihola).

Lake Dunstan Trail (starting in Cromwell), connects to the **Otago Central Rail Trail** in Clyde (finishing in Middelmarsh).

If you start on the **Lake Dunstan Trail** (in Cromwell) and follow the **Otago Central Rail Trail** from Clyde to Alexandra, you can turn left and continue on the Rail Trail, or turn right onto the **Roxburgh Gorge Trail** and then feed into the **Clutha Gold Trail**. 🚴



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Getting there

QUEENSTOWN +
INVERCARGILL +



Air New Zealand operates flights to Queenstown, Dunedin and Invercargill, with connections across the domestic network.

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airnewzealand.co.nz

AIR NEW ZEALAND

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER

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