



friendship force  
NEW ZEALAND

GLOBAL JOURNEY

GREAT CYCLE TRAILS  
OF NEW ZEALAND

10 FEBRUARY – 3 MARCH 2024



## AMBASSADORS

<b>Name</b>	<b>Club</b>
Sylvie Limoges	Amitie Montreal, Canada
Marilyn Hussey	Edmonton & Area, Canada
Francois Lecrouart	Region de la Capitale, Canada
Christine & Daniel Bowers	Honolulu, Hawaii
Christine Kastella	Mid-Willamette Valley, Oregon
Brenda Chapman	Oklahoma
Darcy Hegreness	Pikes Peak Region, Colorado
Tom Schultz	San Diego County, California
Mike Pasterkiewicz	San Diego County, California
Amina & Barry Giles	Spokane, Washington
Lori & Dave Smith	Spokane, Washington
Debbie Mathew	Spokane, Washington
Nancy Draayer	Western Michigan
Lisa Fisher	Western Michigan
Kathy Berglund & Larry Ellison	Western Michigan
Graham & Jenny Wigley	Wellington, NZ (SI only)
Debbie Lattey (JC)	Kapiti Coast, New Zealand

## PROGRAMME

10 – 12 February	Auckland and Waiheke Island
12 – 17 February	Hosted by Friendship Force Hamilton-Waikato
17 – 19 February	Kohutapu Lodge Maori experience
19 – 23 February	Hosted by Friendship Force Kapiti Coast and Wellington
23 – 24 February	Free time in Wellington
25 – 27 February	Travel to Christchurch, tour of South Island with Pete
28 February – 3 March	Cycling in the South Island

**Saturday 10 February**

**Auckland**

**Debbie L**

**A**rrival day in Auckland.

Some ambassadors arrived a few days before the start of our cycling journey, but most arrived on 10 February. We all met at the Movenpick Hotel where we stayed for two nights.

That first evening we enjoyed a delicious meal at Boda Restaurant, and spent time getting to know each other. Debbie also handed out the ambassadors' travel folders prepared by Susanne.



The evening prior, our group gathered for the first time in Auckland at the Movenpic Hotel's Boda restaurant, for an amazing meal of top-notch NZ favs (pork loin, lamb, chicken), plus a variety of sides and salads. We were greeted for an early buffet style breakfast so we could get an early start on the 8 am Ferry. The 40 min ferry ride began a 20-day trip heralded with incredible weather; we picked up our e-bikes, to begin the Five Bay ride around the island. Beginning on the north side, heading east, the hilly terrain allowed for epic vistas, a foray into the sheltered Palm Beach, where many stopped to enjoy toe dipping and chatting.



The group of 20 broke up into smaller groups; most stopped in Onetangi Bay, to enjoy the extensive white sand beach and beach town cafes. Heading south, many stopped at the Heke Brewery to enjoy a craft beer alongside lunch. Afterwards, we made our way up a long hill to Whakanewha Regional Park (we were glad for the e bike assist by then) and the Batch Winery. A few of us hiked along Cascades walk to a little waterfall; negotiating a series of stairs on the path, we enjoyed the cool shady forest and small creek and waterfall.

We returned to our bikes at Batch winery, where some members were sampling the local liquid grapes. Out back of the main building, most of our group had assembled under some beautiful trees for a siesta, simply absorbing the panoramic view and amazing summer air.



As we were heading out, Debbie, our journey coordinator, got the news that Larry, one of our group, had a bike accident. Although serious (10 ribs, clavicle & scapula broken), it was not life-threatening. However, it served to awaken how this could happen to any of us, and a reminder to be vigilant. The group is now 18 in total, as Larry and Cathy, his wife, are on another big journey on their own. Life has a way of sending curveballs -our sympathies are with them.

Back on the road, smaller groups chose from a variety of routes to return to the ferry for the finale; to enjoy a NZ famous ice cream or gelato. We returned our bikes, ready for 5 pm return ferry, intoxicated and content, having enjoyed a full day of exercise, wonderful vistas/beaches, sun and great companionship as folks began the process of connecting in friendship. Dinner and evening on our own were perfect; after a cleansing shower, I'm sure all were happy to greet their pillows.



After a nutritional breakfast at the buffet of the hotel, all the ambassadors meet in the lobby with their luggage. We boarded a comfortable coach where each of us could have their own row. We then hit the road, really the highway to start with. At one point, the driver mentions the presence of carved poles and tells us that they are Maori poles checking the highway for our safety. Our first stop is in a rest area where ambassadors favor coffee, sandwiches and pastries at the Robert Harris café.

We then continue to the [Sculpture Park and Arboretum Waitakaruru](#) where we were welcomed by the lady who, with her husband, created this place. This location is a former quarry which has been transformed into an arboretum with trees from around the world. To visit the site, we are divided into teams to play a kind of escape game and also to find sculptures of 'Rurus'! A ruru is a native bird of New Zealand which looks like an owl. All teams brought back their pieces thus contributing to the completion of a puzzle. After the walk around the park and resolution of the puzzle, we ate salads, meat and dessert served on a buffet table.



Our next stop is to meet the hosts from the Friendship Force clubs of Hamilton and Waikato clubs. Each ambassador is hosted by one of these two clubs for the next four days. To 'break the ice', the hosting clubs organized a riddle game with the names of many American states. Some were easier than others and hosts and ambassadors had much fun playing.

A welcome meeting would be incomplete without some food! All hosts had brought food – salads, meats, breads, desserts – and they set up a long buffet table for all to eat. Once done, we all went 'home' with our respective hosts.

We were greeted by Greta from Bike, Hike, Stay Shuttle & Tours. Greta was our driver to take us to Spellbound Glowworm Waitomo Caves. Our tour guide was named Scoober. Scoober provided an awesome tour of the limestone caves carved out by water. We were shuttled through the caves by boat, in total darkness gaining an unbelievable view of thousands of glowworms on the ceiling of the caves.



We were treated to a scrumptious lunch. We were then off for a walking tour of more caves to see relics of an extinct bird, the Moa.

The tour was concluded with a Waiata (Māori prayer) blessing sung by Scoober in the phenomenal acoustics of the caves. The prayer was dedicated to Larry and wished him a swift recovery from his injuries.

Our second stop was at the Monavale Blueberry Farm. We enjoyed blueberry treats prepared by the café while Oliver enlightened us on the history of his family migrating from Holland and the growth of the farm. What a perfect end to a perfect day!



Great morning life and Happy Valentine's Day! What a beautiful, sunny, clear day here in New Zealand! After a quick breakfast of fruit and some nuts it was off to the Ngāruawāhia Squash Club! What a beautiful reserve/ park with the river bordering one side and tall shady trees all around (yep, it was a bit brisk to begin however we soon warmed up as we hit the trail 😊)

This wonderful trail was a mix of dirt/pavement; shade/sun in both rural and city settings. Just the right mix to start our epic adventure!



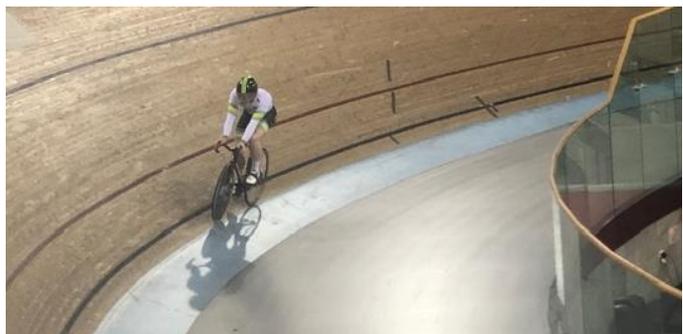
Soon we arrived at the beautiful Hamilton Gardens for a feast of sights, smells, visual colors and food to fuel our ride and walk!



After lunch, a tour of Hamilton Gardens awaited us! While some parts of the Gardens were under construction, there was so much variety of beauty to see!



Soon it was time to hit the trail again where too soon it seemed we reached our end destination of Cambridges Avantidrome which I had only seen something like that on TV! What an experience!!



From here, our bikes were picked up and we all headed home for showers and time to reflect on an amazing Valentines Day in New Zealand 😊

It was a 'blue dome' day, the sky so clear and bright blue from all horizons. Our warm, generous and thoughtful Hamilton host, Sheryl, had arranged our day to begin with Glynnis, who picked up Darcy and I for a day of adventure, with Sheryl meeting us along the way. We enjoyed visiting the Hamilton museum, thrift shops, Raglan parks, surf beaches, and of course coffee and food.

Other group members reported touring the museum as well as Raglan. Walks along the Waikato River, visits to the Alpaca Farm, Taitua Arboretum, Waikato University and thrift shops were also enjoyed. We finished our day at Chim Thai Restaurant with hosts and friends.



*Hamilton Museum*



*Coffee in Raglan*



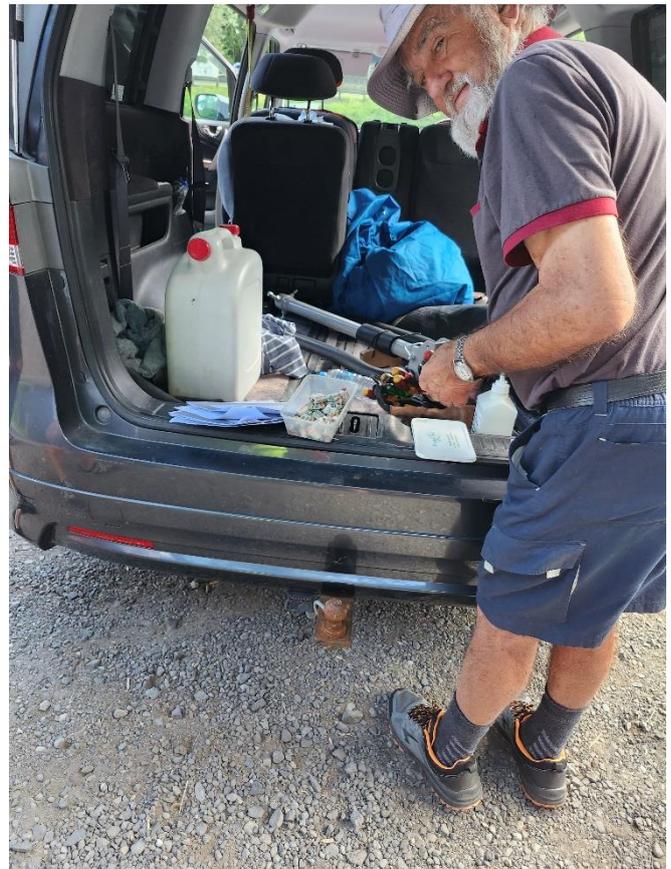
*Selfie surfers!!*



*Dinner at Chim Thai Restaurant with hosts*

**T**hursday we rode the Hauraki rail trail. It was beautiful trail alongside rivers. We stopped and walked to a waterfall.

As we rode we would find one of our hosts along the route with yummy lollies and a happy smile!

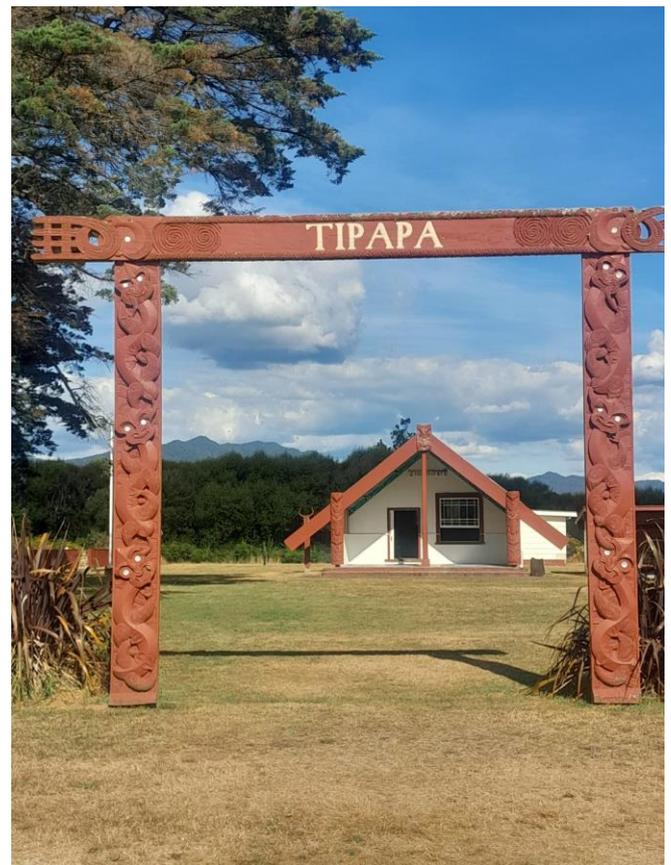


After being split for homestays, we reunited in Hamilton and boarded a bus for a day of travel. A ninety-minute ride took us to Rotorua where we rode gondolas up Mt. Ngongotaha and were treated to a bird's eye view of Lake Rotorua and the surrounding area.

After lunch at the Skyline Restaurant and luge rides we got back on the bus for an hour-long drive to meet-up with our Maori guide, Taj.



Taj led us on a hike to New Zealand's oldest rock carvings and to the Ancestral Carved meeting house, where we touched noses (a 'hongi') with the elders and were formally greeted to the Marae / Maori meeting house.



After snacks and afternoon tea, we got back on the bus for a short drive to Kohutapu Lodge where we spent the next two nights.



Highlights of our late afternoon and evening at the lodge included a delicious evening meal cooked in a traditional earth oven (Hangi) served in woven flax baskets, a stunningly beautiful sunset, and an evening sitting around the campfire.



**K**a pai! Our guide, Taz, took us on a walk through the Whirinaki Forest. We were introduced to various types of trees in this ancient forest.



The Whirinaki Forest is under the New Zealand Department of Conservation, DOC. Taz did a Māori chant and explained the ceremony welcomes us to the forest ancestral grounds, we are walking through a gateway into the realm of Tané, the God of the forest. There is male energy & female energy which join together to create life on Earth.

At dawn there is a chorus of birds to let the trees know it is time to wake up. Their song has healing frequencies, such as are in classical musical which is used in sound healing. The birds tell the trees “the Sun is on its way, time to grow”!

Taz showed us examples of the five main types of ancient trees the Māori used – Totara, Rimu, Kahikatea, Kauri and Miro. 4 out of 5 trees have female healing energy. Some trees were used to make spears to hunt birds. Proverb: “Even the smallest bird of our forest can reach the tallest tree of our forest”. (Like the story of the little engine that could).



Back at the Lodge we had a Haka workshop, some went to see the eel traps, buffet dinner & dessert. A fabulous day of culture & learning.

Farewell to Kohutapu Lodge as we boarded our bus.

We stopped for photos at the interesting mud pools at Rotorua.



We then carried on to Lake Taupo, largest freshwater lake in Australasia, where we gathered under a Māori carving for a photo.

After that we continued travelling south until we reached the Kapiti Coast.

We dropped off half of our journey friends in Waikanae where the Kapiti Coast Friendship Force hosted them.

Those remaining on the bus traveled one hour to Lower Hutt in the Wellington area. We got settled with our new hosts.



Today we picked up our e-bikes from a local bicycle shop for our two days of riding with our host's usual weekly cycling club. After signing our lives away, we cycled out of town up a highway past Debbie and Wilson's old farm homestead (from which they had recently moved).

We stopped for cake at a coffee shop next to a nursery. It was packed with our 20 and a few other bikers as well. Though their only other customers would be gardeners, they seemed to be doing fine.

We continued through a residential area to where the Waikanae River flowed into the Tasman Sea. The water felt summer-warm.

Then we biked along the beautifully lush riverside bike trail. After leaving the river, the trail went past vast wild blackberry brambles. I fully enjoyed foraging for delicious blackberries at every opportunity. It was one of the highlights of my whole trip.

We stopped for lunch at the "award winning" relish café for lunch on our own. Then the 10 of us ambassadors and the 10 of the regular bike club riders split up to return to our various host's homes for a quiet afternoon.



The ride the day before, was supposed to be in Windy Wellington, but cancelled due to the high fire risk. Ride changed next day to Remutaka rail Trail. Drove up to the top of the mountains to get our bikes – beautiful day and a 12k journey to the summit where we had a wonderful lunch and walked across a swing bridge. Colin my host, and Graham led the ride. Beautiful trail with views.

in the evening, some of the group with local Friendship Force members had a very enjoyable Thai dinner.



Meanwhile in Kapiti the group enjoyed a picnic at Otaihanga Domain and played games with their hosts and members of the Kapiti Friendship Force.

Half of the Great Cycles Trails journey group joined the Kapiti Coast e-bike group to ride through Queen Elizabeth Park to Paekakariki for morning tea. (Many of us ate at Old Beach Bakery and Rich Coffee Roasters). I was fortunate to ride with my Kapiti home host Judy and Don Keats, who pointed out so many special sites. I give them credit for riding the trail on regular bikes.



In Queen Elizabeth Park, we rode through the last of the wetlands. We rode by Yankee trail and Kapiti coastal cycle trail. We rode to the memorial that commemorates the 50th anniversary of the US Marines' arrival in New Zealand in 1942. It expresses the goodwill felt by residents towards the US Marines and memorial in memory of USS Americans legions who died on June 20, 1943.



At the end of our biking, we returned our bikes and walked to Coastlands Mall for shopping and late lunch. The afternoon was free and some found places to hike and shop, others went back to host homes to get ready for host appreciation dinner at Waterfront Restaurant in Raumati. We all enjoyed a lovely dinner with our hosts.

It was a wonderful time to visit with both the Kapiti ambassador host and the ebike club that also home-hosted our group. The night ended with a beautiful sunset.

It is with heavy hearts that we leave our hosts at the Paraparaumu railway station. When the train arrives, we join ambassadors who embarked at the Waikanae station. After about one hour, we arrived in Wellington where we have free time that is, there is no program set. Lori has the address of the hotel on her phone so we follow her for a 5 to 10-minute walk. Some rooms being ready, we take our luggage to our room. Shortly after, there are messages on the WhatsApp Group giving a time to meet and have lunch. Six of us leave together and find a nice café in a boutique hotel. We are so happy with the food that we want to adopt the place during our stay in Wellington. Unfortunately, it is not open during the weekend!

We then hit the [cable car](#) to the [botanical garden](#). We walk the various tracks and see plants, flowers and trees along the way. We arrive down the mountain and end up on the waterfront walk. Since I want to continue to walk till the end of it, I leave the group and continue on my own. I go by the [Te Papa museum](#) which I will visit another day. I walk into the 'Time Machine'. I stop by some public art sculptures. I pass by the Freyberg beach but the temperature is a bit cold to swim. I also walk by the [Freyberg Pool and Fitness Centre](#) in which there are seven pools. I then try to find a way to go up the mountain to have an overview of the waterfront. Unfortunately, this is not the right place so I walk back to the hotel to meet with some ambassadors.



We decide to have dinner in a restaurant on the waterfront and 'vote' for Portofino. Upon finishing our meal, we see the moon rising and it is almost full so it is big. It is a special day.



Wellington is reputed to be the windiest city in New Zealand and on this particular day, it lived up to its reputation. Today was a free day, but I think many of us did similar activities since this was our only full day here.

We stayed at the centrally located Rydges Hotel making activities walkable. Many went to Te Papa Tongarewa Museum which included the Earthquake House, a Māori exhibit, and the Gallipoli War exhibit with the impressive, huge, life-like statues made by the world-class Weta Workshop. You can find out more at: [www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)

Some headed off to Zealandia by way of the Wellington Cable cars. Zealandia is an impressive nature sanctuary created to preserve many of the endangered plants and animals of New Zealand. This ambitious project which was started in 2000 is run by many volunteers. It has proven to be successful in restoring many species. As a nature lover, I wish I had had more time to spend there.



LT Colonel Percival Fenwick



Little Black Shag (Cormorant) and Pied Cormorant



New Zealand Kaka

We were picked up at our hotel in Wellington at 7:30am for a short coach ride to the Interislander Ferry Terminal. The ferry left Wellington at 8:45am. We enjoyed the views as the ferry headed out of the harbor in a wide arc and then crossed the Cook Strait into the Tory Channel and then entered Queen Charlotte Sound.



We arrived at the small town of Picton in the South Island at 12:15pm. We had a little over an hour to look around Picton and pick up something to eat for lunch before catching the Coastal Pacific train at 1:40pm. We enjoyed the views as the train went along the Pacific coast to Christchurch.



We arrived at the Christchurch Station at 7:30pm and were at our hotel shortly after. Some of us quickly went to the town center to see a little of Christchurch.

Monday, February 26 was a busy day with travel and sightseeing. We met our coach driver, Pete Higginbottom at our hotel in Christchurch. The day started with a jolt by testing our new counting system upon departure, leaving two people behind!

As we drove across wide, open spaces, Pete explained how irrigation has transformed the land and economy. The green fields transitioned into brown hills, then rugged, wild mountains. We learned about braided rivers (they look just like they sound) as we made our way to Erewhon High Country Station where they work the farm with



Clydesdale horses. Turns out horses are smarter and more intuitive than tractors. We enjoyed a wagon ride pulled by a team of eight Clydesdales while Erin told us about life on Erewhon and answered our many questions. Teams are used for working the fields and for mustering, which involves pulling a wagon with dogs, musterers, and supplies up into the hills to tend to the sheep.

After lunch in a barn, we drove south through the Mackenzie country, where Pete told us the story about the local folk hero, outlaw, and sheep rustler, James Mackenzie and his faithful (and innocent) dog, Friday. We visited Lake Tekapo and the little, stone Church of the Good Shepherd, where a bronze statue of a sheep dog stands nearby. We stretched our legs later at Lake Pukaki where the weather cooperated and we were lucky to see Mt Cook/Aoraki in the Southern Alps, the highest mountain in NZ. Down the road, we settled in for the night in the small town of Omarama.



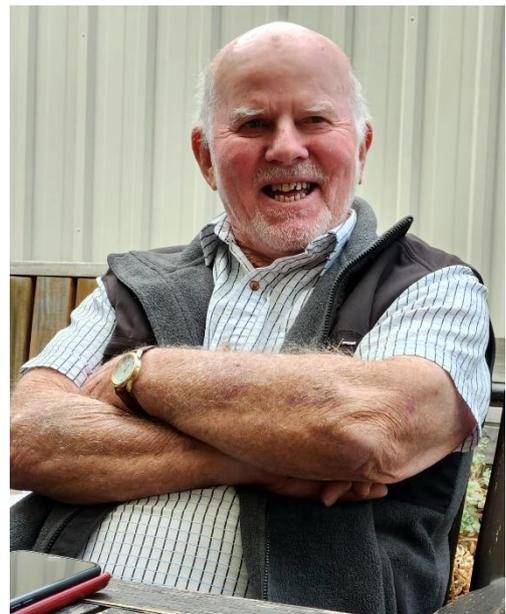
On the night of the 26<sup>th</sup> we stayed in Omarama, and first thing in the morning Pete took us to the clay cliffs. They were awesome, we also enjoyed a little hike in the cliffs, along a beautiful trout river.



Our next stop was in the resort town of Wanaka. We took a break, everyone walked along the waterfront, and had lunch. Wanaka is a beautiful mountain-surrounded lake town. After lunch many people walked along a boardwalk, and scoped out some beautiful birds, Nancy was pumped!

The afternoon brought us to Arrowtown. This place had a mining history, as everyone strolled icecream was a priority, I had a nice little latte. One of my favorite streets was called Buckingham St, beautiful trees, and historic houses prevailed. Arrowtown is famous for its fall colors!

Next we cruised into Alexandria, the plan was a BBQ dinner, in the outdoor cooking area. Debbie, Graham and Jenny got some delicious sausages, and several yummy salads. Everyone loved this dinner and its format. Great idea! As we got ready to turn in everyone was very excited to begin cycling on the Dunstan lake trail. It was amazing, personally it was my favorite day of all our cycling.



We started the morning in the lovely Alexandra Motor Lodge. A 7:30 am start - it's a little dark and a bit cool. Everyone excited for Day 1.

The bus picks us up and Peter is his jolly self. .... *"What the wrong place?"* This is the end stop! Peter then drives us to the Highlands Depot, Cromwell, for our briefing and bike hire. The Highlands Depot, a Car Racing venue, is a spectacular facility, the toilet block is a must to see. Fancy Donald Trump there to greet our USA visitors!

Our briefing explains about the many switch backs, turns and hill climbs and steep grades but by now it's a lovely day and we are all rearing to go. The trail of 40 km is Cromwell - Bannockburn - Cromwell Gorge along the Clutha River to Clyde. This part of the trail follows the Kawarua arm of Lake Dunstan to the Bannockburn bridge and down to the waterline to the Hugo Suspension Bridge and the beginning of the "clip-on" platforms around the bluffs. Some of us chose to walk our bikes here.



The lunch stop "For Sale" was a disappointment. This boat moored at the edge of the lake is setup for a coffee stop and snack, it will be sadly missed.

We all made it to the end of Day 1 and it was a welcome sight to see Lake Dunstan Dam with the inviting water to cool our bodies, most of us had a good paddle but of course there is always an energetic one and Amina had a swim.

"The Post Office" with its huge meals was our evening venue. Don't think anyone finished their meal, true southland hospitality! We definitely had to have a walk before retiring.

Charged the bikes - 20 of them, how we didn't trip the electrical circuit I will never know ! Tonight it's the Motel Clyde Central. Richard has delivered our bags. We are sharing Unit 5 with Sylvie and Darcy (hope there is no snoring) and after a very hot powerful shower it's off to bed, tomorrow it's a 8:30 am start Clyde to Lauder 41 km.

After breakfast in a quaint little stone-building dining room we were on our way down the more picturesque route of the Clutha River trail, rather than the start of the Rail Trail proper.

Amazing views of the mighty Clutha as the trail meandered through the trees. Debbie put Graham to the test with a flat tyre. (why not a front tyre!!) However, with everyone's assistance it was soon sorted. Coffee stop was a long way off but finally after looping uphill, across the Clutha River bridge, through Alexandra (passing many coffee shops) and northwards, until we finally arrived for a well-earned coffee at Industry Lane Eatery. It was exciting to be off on the Rail Trail at last, destination Chatto Creek for lunch.



The trail has long straits as it heads down the valley before commencing the climb up Tiger Hill. Prior to arriving at Omakau a distress call was received regarding another puncture! Much to everyone's delight three young boys on their way home from school offered their assistance. Debbie M. and the boys soon had the tyre repaired. Apple and lollies and a Koha were the payment.



We took in the small loop ride to Ophir, a tiny authentic gold mining town, to see the village and the 1880 single lane suspension bridge (amazing engineers).

7km on we arrived at our destination Lauder where our accommodation was the Old School House. A great stop as Trail Journeys put on a splendid BBQ meal and Bruce, the school host, entertained us on his ukulele, with Graham and Barry chipping in.



This area is known for its clear night skies and Bruce gave us a guided tour of the universe. "Can anyone see the Southern Cross?"

Today's cycling route was from Lauder to Wedderburn, about 35 kilometres. We all left the Lauder School B&B after breakfast. It was raining a bit but everyone put their rain gear on.



We cycled through the stunning Poolburn Gorge, which features historic tunnels and viaducts in a secluded rocky setting. The gorge then opens out to the vast expanse of the Ida Valley.

We stopped at Hayes Engineering Works for lunch and then had a tour of the grounds, including workshops and the homestead.



We reached the highest point on the trail at 618 metres above sea level and it was pretty well all downhill to Wedderburn, no need to pedal at all.



We stayed overnight in lovely cottages and had dinner at the Wedderburn Tavern.



The group departed the Wedderburn Cottages shortly after 9 am; it was a self-serve breakfast from fridge basics, each in our cottage, overlooking the vast fields. The terrain continues as spacious fields, primarily dotted with grazing sheep; the track is gravel, wide and flat. After the 13.5 km to Ranfurly, all stopped and stayed to poke around shops, cafes and unique businesses; it was nice to have time to just explore with no time push.

Around noon, most headed onwards to our destination; this part of the rail trail has a series of metal sculptures of our solar system planets; the position, size and distance all to scale. It was fun to find them, and also to see Jupiter in an artwork by a local artist in her gallery; wonderful to see a creator making it in such a small town.

7.5 km later, we straggle in throughout the early afternoon into Waipiata; it consists of a tavern/restaurant and hotel; it serves all our needs with great beds/rooms and attentive hosts. The place is eco conscious and accommodating for a variety of palettes and dietary needs. Famous for its meat pies, the waitress wears a WaiPIEata t-shirt.

Post lunch, a bunch of the group cycle down the path to swim in the Taieri River; it was so refreshing. A big boon on another scorching day.



Card playing in the afternoon, or lounging/hanging, alone or with others.



A lovely group dinner with the same gracious attention to the food was appreciated. Since it was our final group dinner, we acknowledged our wonderful coordinator, Debbie Lattey, for all of her careful planning and guidance along the way. We all know how hard she worked to pull this big journey off!



The varied accommodation along the Otago trail has been really fun. It's been a real treat to have windows without bug screens, as most North Americans are accustomed to, as the views are clearer, and the night air circulates through the room more easily as we sleep. Being in such a rural environment has meant very quiet and starry nights, if anyone managed to stay awake long enough to witness those stars!

Our final day and rain is threatening! It's cold and we rug up warmly as we head off early for a 50km ride to the finish line. It's downhill all the way through mostly farmland, so an easy ride, and we each celebrate as we cross the finish line.



Once in Middlemarch we returned our bikes to the Trail Journeys depot and caught the shuttle to Queenstown. And so ended our biking adventure as we dispersed to our different hotels. Some were staying on for a few days to explore more of the South Island, and some headed home.

We hope you all had a wonderful time and made many new and lasting friends, and take home fond memories of your time cycling the great trails in New Zealand.

