

NEW ZEALAND



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Bikers cross one of the many bridges on the Mangapurua Track in Whanganui National Park on the North Island. The trail is part of the New Zealand Cycle Trail network.

Wild about biking

Heights, mud, dropoffs, bridges — and out before dark!

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MANGAPURUA TRACK — To avoid panicking, I focused on maintaining my balance and freeing my legs, which had disappeared up to my knees in mud. I gripped the handlebars and tugged fiercely as my bike's rear wheel slipped toward an abrupt edge beyond which was a 200-foot drop to the meandering Mangapurua Stream. A limestone cliff, called Battleship Bluff, loomed overhead. One by one my fellow bikers and I attempted to walk our bikes across a fresh 20-foot-long mudslide, politely called a "slip" in this part of the world.

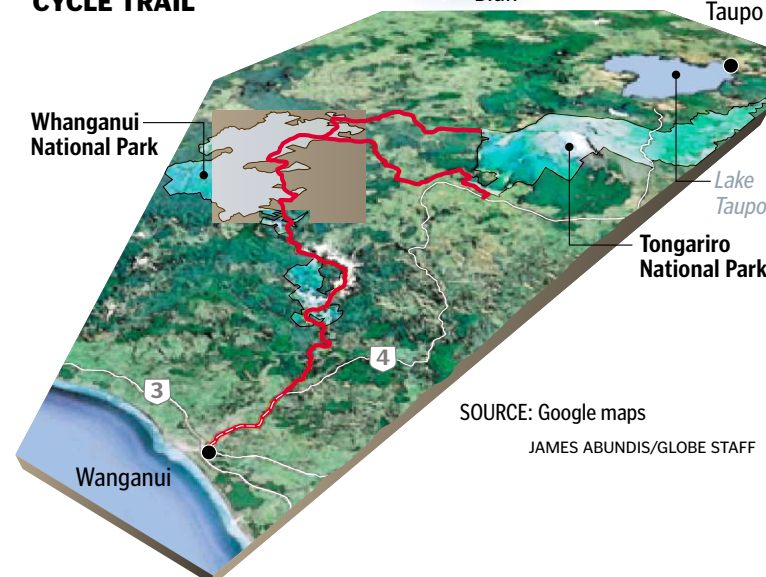
We were biking along the Mountains to Sea Trail on New Zealand's North Island, in an area so dense, hilly, and remote that the native Maori never bothered settling here. Giant tree ferns, moss-covered beech trees, supplejack vines, and towering rimu trees created walls of vegetation so thick we couldn't see a big valley or river until we were upon it.

The 200-mile trail starts on the slopes of a volcano, passes through two national parks (Tongariro and Whanganui), includes a jet-boat ride down a placid river, and ends at the Tasman Sea on the southwest coast. The trail has been designated one of the country's Great Rides, similar to its famous multiday Great Walks like the Milford Track or the nearby Tongariro Circuit, which takes hikers past alpine lakes, up volcanoes, and along the lip of a steaming crater (including

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MOUNTAINS TO SEA CYCLE TRAIL



SOURCE: Google maps

JAMES ABUNDIS/GLOBE STAFF

ROTORUA Where the earth bubbles and boils around you M4

Uninhabitable areas lush with challenges

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Mount Ngauruhoe, which starred as Mount Doom in “The Lord of the Rings”).

The Mountains to Sea route also forms part of Nga Haerenga, the New Zealand Cycle Trail, a new bike-path network that will eventually include 18 so-called Great Rides, mostly off-road trails stretching from Cape Reinga on the North Island’s northernmost point to Bluff, the South Island’s southernmost town. Once the cycle trail is completed, by the end of this year, bikers can explore more than 1,500 miles of paths that cut through some of the country’s most stunning landscapes.

With our time limited, four of us signed up to do a 22-mile section that included the Mangapurua Track and the Bridge to Nowhere extension. The Mangapurua Track had only recently opened to mountain bikers when we tackled it in November, having until then served mainly as an access trail for hunters. Even our guide had only cycled it once before, and he approached it from the opposite direction.

Our group of New Zealanders and overseas visitors included mostly intermediate riders. I recommend having a significant amount of confidence on a mountain bike before attempting this challenging route. One woman in our group, a Kiwi, was a first-time mountain biker, but she was strong and athletic and ran a sheep and cattle station with her husband, so she understood the wild landscape and how to navigate it.

Our plan was to drive an

hour south of National Park Village, the main “town” for the Tongariro and Whanganui parks, to a remote access point 19 miles down Ruatiti Road. This one-lane, twisting gravel road had treacherous drops and no guardrails, and was not designed for those with vertigo or motion issues. We would then bike 22 miles through the wilderness to a boat landing on the Whanganui River. Here, we would meet Richard, a local farmer who would whisk us by jet boat more than an hour up river to Blue Duck Station, a remote farm and conservation area where we would find hot showers, a home-cooked dinner, and cozy beds in our own private lodge. The trick: We had to meet Richard by 4 o’clock in order to make it back by dark; in these parts, you can’t see a thing on the river at night.

The ride started with a one-hour uphill grind until we reached a sign marking the entrance to Whanganui, the country’s newest national park, established in 1986. It was all downhill from there, as the trail cut through virgin rain forest and abandoned farmland that had been settled by returning servicemen after World War I. The government leased pieces of land to these men, nearly 40 in all, who set off with their backpacks and high hopes to make a go of it in the bush, building homes and farming the wild terrain. Most walked away within the first few years. By 1943, all had left.

We biked by old chimney stacks, fences, and hedges that stood as reminders of those hardy souls. Wooden markers



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A fresh mudslide on Battleship Bluff, a limestone cliff along the Mangapurua Track. The dropoff is 200 feet.

listed the family name of each pioneer who had homesteaded there. We also passed a quarry and an old explosives cave near Mangapurua Trig, the trail’s highest point at 2,175 feet. Take a short detour to this overlook on a clear day for dynamite views of Tongariro National Park (the country’s first national park, established in 1887, and now a World Heritage area) to the east and the perfect cone-shaped volcano, Mount Taranaki, to the west.

Stewart Barclay, owner of Adrift Guided Outdoor Adventures and our guide that day, was right when he had warned us that, “It will be a dirty, slimy, slippery, mucky ride.”

The area had just received 11 inches of rain in a few short days, so the rivers looked chocolate-brown from all the runoff, the trail disappeared under several inches of water in open fields, and we had mud caked on us from the eyelets on our soggy shoes to our eyelashes.

The views of the waterfalls plunging off the hillsides, the limestone bluffs, and the stunning valleys were well worth the mess. Even the dozens of wooden bridges were fun to navigate.

The trail narrowed to single-track and the landscape opened up as we made our way south, giving us sweeping views of the Mangapurua Valley, the stream a couple of hundred feet below and, one by one, the towering bluffs. With a healthy fear of heights, I was happy to learn it is required for bikers to dismount and walk several hundred feet along the limestone cliffs, because of the extremely narrow and, in some places, unstable ground. A fence and a sign at the start and end of each cliff let bikers know when to dismount and remount.

The path skirting the first couple of bluffs had dirt-packed surfaces and proved easy to cross. Even the dropoff to the river proved only moderately

If you go . . .

Visit Ruapehu

011-64-6-385-8427

visitrुapehu.co.nz

New Zealand Cycle Trail

nzcycletrail.com

Blue Duck Station

Whakahoro

011-64-7-895-6276

blueduckstation.co.nz

Rates start at \$185 for a lodge, based on double occupancy; \$45 per person in a dorm room.

Adrift Guided Outdoor Adventures

National Park Village

011-64-7-8922-751

adriftnz.co.nz

Runs bike trips in Tongariro and Whanganui national parks.

Rates: \$176.50 per person for full-day trip on Mangapurua Track, Fisher’s Track, or Old Coach Road, includes bike rental, local transportation, guide, and lunch. Jet boat ride extra.

fear-inducing. Then we came upon the dramatic “slip” on Battleship Bluff.

If we retreated, we would face a 20-mile, mainly uphill ride back over rough, muddy terrain to reach the closest road, mostly in the dark. If we successfully traversed the slide, we would have less than a 2-mile ride down to the famous Bridge to Nowhere, a beautiful cement bridge built by the settlers that looked overly grand for its location, and the Whanganui River where Richard would be waiting for us.

My knees felt wobbly and tired, as my bike’s back tire slid toward the trail’s precarious edge. I managed to dislodge my left foot from the cement-like mud and take a step, using forward momentum to yank the bike’s tire back up onto the trail.

Each step took full-body effort, and staying upright while one foot or the other was sucked into the muck was not easy. I eventually tugged and lunged my way across the slide, dragging my bike dragging behind me like a resistant child. I waited for the last two bikers to follow. Safely across, we rolled down to the river.

Richard loaded our bikes onto his jet boat and delivered us to Blue Duck Station in Whakahoro, a settlement with a historic old farm from the Bridge to Nowhere era that still had authentic settlers’ cabins on site.

That night, station owner Dan Steele and his wife, Sandy, served us a delicious goat curry, venison sausages, and quinoa salad, all made with ingredients fresh from their farm. Over dinner, we learned that Steele had bought a small patch of land here just six years earlier. He started farming the land, raising livestock, restoring the old cabins, and purchasing more land in the valley. He also developed a project to eradicate the area’s nonnative pests, such as stoats and possums, so native species such as the endangered kiwis and blue ducks could survive and thrive.

By the time we met Steele, he owned 5,200 acres, had a successful sheep and cattle station, ran four lodges and a cafe, and had a crew of people working with him on his ambitious conservation project. He had taken a wild and neglected swath of land and turned it into a self-sustaining homestead and a thriving business.

This was a perfect way to end our epic biking adventure: enjoying a wonderful feast in a cozy lodge, and hanging out with a modern-day pioneer.

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