

[EXPLORING]

# HUMMER TO THE



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THE SOUTH ISLAND'S ONLY

# HIGH COUNTRY

**T**he scenery was certainly spectacular, but I was far too nervous to appreciate it.

Perched on a rocky track bare centimetres wider than the H3, I was very aware of the yawning chasm to my right, sucking at the wheels as the rocks to my left threatened both tyres and paintwork.

Suddenly the ladies who'd opted to walk this bit didn't look so silly.

This wasn't the first vertigo-inducing moment on our six-day South Island odyssey, but it was certainly the most thought-provoking.

It came on day three of our drive south,

among 13 SUVs traversing an NZ Adventures High Country Heritage Safari.

This is one of several off-road trips owner Malcolm Langley conducts, and it takes in high-country stations, private and DOC land.

I'd chosen to drive the then newly-launched Hummer H3, smaller than its macho looks suggest, but wide enough to send Malcolm to his logs to check it'd make today's tracks.

He was happy, but I wasn't, much to the mirth of our photographer, who'd joined us this morning at Methven in his macho Mercedes G-Wagen.

50

## PART 2 OF A THREE-PART SERIES

BY JACQUI MADELIN.  
PHOTOS SEAN CRAIG  
AND JACQUI MADELIN



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## HUMMER TO THE HIGH COUNTRY



He'd timed it well. After two days of rain the sun had come out as we traced the Rakaia River initially north, the Arrowsmith Range looming in the distance, and Mt Algidus just visible.

The land had opened out; flanking us the high, wind-blasted tussock-clad hills were formed by the ice that once ground through here.

Great gravel fans punctuated the valley's steep flanks, flowing like water down precipitous slopes, dwarfing the little convoy that crawled across them.

It's a prehistoric landscape, and unforgiving.

Langley says some stations don't have road access. They

ford these rocky riverbeds; most stations use graders with wide tracks that can cross when a truck can't, and they'll tow the truck across.

Our convoy stopped for morning tea high above Lake Heron, breaking out thermos flasks and biscuits as we squinted to the end of the lake and its just visible airstrip, used for venison recovery.

The scale of this landscape is almost impossible to measure. It's only as a small plane drones through, or you spot the flowing dots of a fast moving sheep flock, that you get the breathtaking magnitude of the place.

Langley says this landscape was scoped for "Lord of the

Rings", but it was too isolated to be practical. I can believe it.

Long tussock grass once covered all these hills. Early herders wore long trou to force through it, and were always wet from the knees down.

Three types of tussock were reduced to one, and it's grazed short. Merino are the sheep of choice - the farmer sweeps by helicopter, the flock moves downhill and later someone returns and shuts the bottom gate - often these isolated stations are run by a single couple, year-round.

By now we're forging glacial flats past a sugarloaf hill - another reminder of the grinding ice - to Lake Heron Station for lunch.

Philip and Anne Todhunter harvest 50 tons of merino wool per year for Icebreaker, and raise 420-odd steers on their 19,600 hectares. They also rent out the cottage, are developing guided walks using the mustering huts, and use their helicopter as part of Methven Heliski.

The original house burned down in 1888, in mid-winter.

"They trucked another one up," Philip says. Ashburton's not far away but it can be bleak

in winter; there's skating on the lake, but wind funnels through and, says Anne, the snow is fun, but only "for the first half hour!"

It takes humour to farm here. Women use the farmhouse facilities, men are directed to the willow trees. "See the dead ones? That's the north islanders," Phillip says...

Now fortified, we drove inland via Orari Gorge and the long climb through Blue Mountain station - where I rediscovered my vertigo. At 1,989 mm this H3 is 49 mm wider than a Nissan Patrol.

Threading these tracks and their precipitous slopes took care, the corners eased by the relatively tight 11.3-metre turning circle. The narrow slot windows don't help, though; it's almost impossible to see the drop's sharp edge, and more than once I open the door to check we weren't about to plummet.

Lake Tekapo came as a relief...

By now the Hummer H3 looked decidedly used, its shiny black paint a dull mud colour under the autumn sun. Other than the limited view out, it's done a sterling job so far.

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Though a softer vehicle than the traditional US army car, and much smaller, it's tarred with the same brush - people love the brash persona, and hate the perceived thirst.

Shame it's not a diesel, but it's not as bad as expected - the 4-litre Pathfinder among our group was using more fuel.

Next morning we immediately headed bush via Dog Kennel Corner. In the days before widespread fencing it marked a station boundary, with a dog and kennel to control stock movement, instead of gates.

We followed the power lines toward Mt Sutton, pausing at a stone hut, its stove and iron bedstead still in situ.

Did MacKenzie camp here during his daring raids? Burke and his mate were convinced sheep were going missing. They tracked and found them with MacKenzie, who was herding them south. He was jailed, but his name remains.

Back then, claiming land meant registering it, and proving one sheep to two acres within two years. Inspectors would be royally entertained each night while men shifted the same sheep from block to block for recounting.

It was a hard life and few stayed - most who did were Scottish Highlanders, used to harsh winters and isolated living.

The roof of the world was our cafe that morning, before we descended for lunch, another gut-stretching affair courtesy of Ben and Caroline Innes at Black Forest Station, with its attractive modern holiday cottages overlooking the searing-blue lake nestled into the hills.

It looks lovely - but there's only 300 mm of rain here annually and the couple can't get permission to irrigate from the lake. They rely on a good spring to survive - that and effective management.

Last year they trapped 900 ferrets - a TB vector - and the pest trapper we greeted on leaving had caught 17 in the last 24 hours! The first 300 per year are autopsied for TB and trap locations are logged by GPS.

Deer? "We stick 'em in the freezer!"

Refreshed, we climbed again, tracking the spiny crests of hills and following the pylon line as it clung to precipitous slopes.

Dropped in by helicopter? No - built by hand, presumably



by monkeys - who else could hang on to such sheer drops, or balance so precariously on knife-edge ridges?

Then came a stomach-churning descent in low range; oh for the H3 Adventure, with its lower low range and shorter gap from first to second.

Still, the views were worth

it; azure Lake Benmore below, punctuated by the golden spires of autumn cypress trees with the setting sun touching distant snow a raspberry gold.

Crossing the dam, we made for Lake Ohau, and its attractive lodge warmed by blazing logs to shrug off a distinct night-time chill. ●

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## NEXT ISSUE:

Ohau to Dunstan Peak, Michael Peak and out at St Bathans for lunch; climb the Dunstan Range to Leaning Rock; through Moutere Station, descending through Northburn Station to Cromwell.

Then via Carrick and Kawarau Stations, and Bendigo Station to Devil's Creek, ending at Wairoau Snow Farm Lodge via Mt Pisa.

## GETTING THERE

*Our 4x4 High Country Heritage trip came courtesy of NZ Adventures*

[www.nzadventures.co.nz](http://www.nzadventures.co.nz)

Email: [info@nzadventures.co.nz](mailto:info@nzadventures.co.nz)

Phone: 03 768 4176

While it's possible to head bush solo, land owners are often reluctant to let lone strangers cross their properties, it can be difficult to contact all the farmers along your route - and you still need to negotiate with the Department of Conservation. Book an organised tour like this one, and your itinerary, food, accommodation and all land access is organised for you, not to mention information on where you're driving.

NZ Adventures tours range in difficulty, though most are achievable by novice four-wheel-drivers. Its staff will tell you if your SUV is suitable. If not, you can rent one.

Overland 4WD rentals will even supply replacement SUVs if breakdowns intrude part way. See [www.overland.co.nz](http://www.overland.co.nz) or call 0800 493 4477.

## Want to stay down here?

Try [www.lakeheron.co.nz](http://www.lakeheron.co.nz) for information on Lake Heron Station accommodation; email [www.black.forest@farmside.co.nz](mailto:www.black.forest@farmside.co.nz) for information on its lakeside cottages.

Lake Ohau Lodge recommends:

**Cure for sandflies**

**Buy whiskey.**

**Rub it liberally into the skin.**

**Cover skin with sand.**

**Sandflies attracted will get drunk, and throw rocks at each other.**

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