

OVER THE SADDLE

PART 3 OF A THREE-PART SERIES

BY JACQUI MADELIN. PHOTOS SEAN CRAIG AND JACQUI MADELIN



After four days scrambling south from Blenheim, our band of intrepid 4WDers - many off-roading for the first time - were suffering scenic overload, and needed a hearty breakfast to face the ice-rimmed puddles that greeted us for the drive into Omarama for fuel.

By now the Nissan Pathfinder's driver was getting restive, as yet again it guzzled more than the supposedly thirsty Hummer H3.

Yes, I was carrying less weight - but I'm a throttle junky. I'm also a notebook junky, and as we crossed from MacKenzie to Central Otago over the Omarama saddle, past yet more golden tussock-clad wind-blasted hills through Twinburn and into Michael Peak Station, I see I noted a comment from Malcolm Langley, who organised this NZ Adventures High Country Heritage Safari.

He'd arranged all the permits we needed - and on part of this leg DoC will go through behind us, taking photos to assess the impact we've made on this sensitive landscape.

Langley's put the fear of God into us; we stick to the tracks.

As a result, he says, "It's normal for them to call us and ask if we've cancelled the trip."

Clinging to the rocky hillside above us there's a water race, built by gold miners in the 1860s to get water from a reliable source to their works - where the stamping batteries were water-powered.

Without Langley's apparently photographic memory for facts I'd have thought some pommie import had built a wall, and been unable to guess the timeframe, particularly as some of these races still hold water when it's rained.

We spot whitish patches in the hills where water cannon were used to release gold from the clay, and come out at St Bathans, onto seal and among a small cluster of historic adobe brick homesteads.

Five residents and one hotel are all that remains of a once bustling gold mining town, which in its heyday held 2,000 people and 13 hotels.

Langley issues a challenge. Set into a ceiling cross-beam in the Vulcan Hotel there's a piece of water-race pipe. He reckons I can get through it. I clamber onto the bar to try, and - red-faced and bruised - I fail.

Clare Ward makes it, just, and thoroughly deserves the home-cooked lunch we're served in

the old wood-panelled dining room.

There's a striking blue lake below the hotel, created by the sluicing and channelling of gold

diggers, and ringed by white clay cliffs heavily scored with water. At 69 metres deep, this is the deepest mining hole in the southern hemisphere.

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The long, slow climb above the Clyde Dam.



The deepest mining hole in the southern hemisphere is now a small lake.

I make for the old church above it and its sparsely-populated graveyard, testament to the hard lives these miners and their families led.

We're tempted to send a postcard from

the Kauri-built post office, but we've wasted time with photos and Langley's keen to be off.

We cross the swing bridge at Ophir, opened in May 1880, and pause to admire the Clyde dam.

Built in two parts, a wedge in the middle section is held in by water pressure. Langley says if the dam shifts for any reason, the water merely forces the wedge further in, thus ensuring its safety. Let's hope he's right.

We leave the seal and climb through clumps of thyme, brought by the Chinese to flavour their meals. It likes the dry conditions and it's spreading. But we leave it far behind as we forge our way up the long, slow climb through Northburn Station, onto the Dunstan range and towards Leaning Rock.

I once encountered gale force winds up here, an unpleasant experience with so little cover. We stick to the faint wheel tracks to avoid damaging the delicate highland flora, heading for the massive rocks that scatter the otherwise desolate hilltops like a giant child's discarded building blocks.

Stopping to admire the 360-degree view we scramble atop boulders and look down at our dusty little convoy. We've parked at 1,647 metres, and all around the hills recede into misty blue distance. Breathtaking.

We're driving through a golden landscape, each detail crisp and surreal, following the crest of these lonely hills. If



From left, Margaret Johnstone (obscured), Marilyn Gulliver, Clare Ward and Mary Paterson check the route.



Willem and Janet Overgaauw using their farm ute for play.

not for the wheel tracks faintly parting the golden grass ahead we could be driving back in time, and it's tempting to stop and breathe the crystal-clear air.

But it's getting late; slowly we descend through Moutere and Northburn Stations to Cromwell; to wine, to dinner, to fruit pavlova and a sound sleep.

Next morning's sunny; as most mornings, I unclip the Hummer's air filter and knock its

dust out against the front wheel - an easy job, and we're soon on our way via the rare chafer beetle's reserve.

There's not much to see - a large paddock, ironically sitting right next to a forestry block housing this beetle's biggest enemy, the little brown owl.

We can't see any insects, but soon we're climbing past some of the area's growing vineyards before pausing at the Bendigo gold workings.

We're high above a valley dotted with white sheets of grapevine nets. At our feet the gaping maw of an abandoned mineshaft, its protective mesh doing little to alleviate the pull of the yawing drop.

The people who came here carried all their supplies on horseback. They farmed the flats, then discovered alluvial gold. As it ran out they sought its origins up here, in the quartz seaming the dry rock.

Their machines were powered by water - hence the dams and waterways. Often they'd mine,

then stamp the rock in batches when it rained.

By the 1900s the sparse gold was running out, though modern methods can find more in the spoil heaps dotting this landscape. Langley drops a rock - it takes six seconds to hit the bottom.

Those miners died young - dust in their lungs killed them and their wives, who breathed the dust they shook out of the men's clothes before laundering them.

They're survived by the ruins - restored by DoC's hard work, and now a potent memorial to those long-gone pioneers.

Moving on through Bendigo station we pass Devil's Creek - once home of Shrek the sheep - before descending to Lake Dunstan, where we eat a packed lunch before running up the Cardrona Valley to Wairoau Snow Farm.

We skirt the fence to avoid damaging the groomed surface of the vehicle testing ground, then make the long climb to Mt Pisa, at 1,964 metres our highest point.

Stopping at the top we can see Tarras, the Omarama saddle - and Mt Cook. The glacier gleams on Mt Aspiring; we stand on land so bare the wheel tracks barely trace it, the wind whipping through our little band, oblivious to almost everything but the view.

But as the sun sinks the cold begins to cut and it's back to the Wairoau Snow Farm Lodge, its comfortable accommodation, and our final night's meal.

Tomorrow we'll part company. Some will head for the airport; some to Christchurch or local hotels. I'll drive south, meet the Nevis Road and take that north toward Canterbury.

We've all had a blast; we've all been challenged to push a few personal boundaries - most notably for me, driving through vertigo!

We've all experienced day after day of breathtaking scenery in the company of a thoroughly nice group of Kiwi weekend adventurers, and judging by that last night's toast, we'd all do it again tomorrow.

GETTING THERE

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

www.nzadventures.co.nz

Email: 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 or call 0800 493 4477.

Want to stay down here?

Try www.lakeheron.co.nz for information on Lake Heron Station accommodation; email 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.

The HUMMER H3

Over eight full-on days I came to like this Hummer H3, despite its faults. It's a brash, characterful beast and more useful than I'd expected.

The 3.7-litre five-cylinder petrol engine works well at both crawling and open road speeds, and proved less thirsty than anticipated.

It matched its highway claim, but averaged 16.14 litres/100km during eight days spent frequently off-road, and often in low range.

Thirsty, but not as bad as the 4-litre petrol Nissan Pathfinder travelling with us. Pick the diesel...

The 328 Nm mated to a low range transmission with 45:1 crawling ratio was appreciated uphill, though first gear is too high on steep descents; I'd prefer the Adventure's lower low range.

The H3's iconic shape is a bit of an optical illusion - it's not that big.

Actually shorter than a Ford Territory, at 1,989mm wide it's 49 mm broader than a Nissan Patrol. But it's easier to manage than expected, the tight 11.3-metre turning circle particularly appreciated in tighter terrain.

But the protruding doorsills meant permanently muddy trou and the rear

doors' wheel arch location made their edges filthy; inevitably it brushed off on driver and passengers. That's okay when off-roading, less okay everyday.

The hub trim pops off too easily - yes, we lost one - and the slot windows do impede your view out which kids, especially, will hate.

All that's the penalty for the looks - love 'em and you won't care.