

+ Travel

Lost Horizons

Nicola Edmonds hits the High Country highways.

NICOLA EDMONDS IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICOLA EDMONDS.



**The 4WD convoy climbs into the mists of
Black Forest Station, near Lake Benmore.**



Life up here can be hell. It's harsh country, steep and exposed. You can get 28 frosts in January. Winter comes early – and given what we've just learned about summer, you wonder how you can tell winter's arrived – and then it rains. Mary Satterthwaite's property receives an average 650mm of rain a year, although you can't always predict when you're going to get it, or how much you'll get all at once.

Besides the workaday round of running the station, there are other vexations: rabbit control can cost as much as \$150,000 in a year, plus there's the unrelenting struggle against gorse.

Still, there are consolations, Mary tells us. "This morning, I had a 4.30 start. I was up on top of a range mustering with the dogs in a hard frost and it was absolutely glorious. There wouldn't be one other place I'd rather be. Absolute bliss – better than Fiji, a sandy beach, anything."

We listen and nod and contemplate the view as we tackle lunch, which has been laid on by Middlehurst Station, the Satterthwaites' neighbours.

The homestead is architecturally designed and straight out of the pages of an aspirational interiors magazine, with an almost completed "disappearing" pool. It's hard to imagine grander country to disappear into.

That's exactly what we're about to do. Middlehurst is the first stop on a six-day adventure traversing 1230km of staggering high-country beauty by four-wheel drive. Our route takes us through private farms and stretches of DoC estate – land few New Zealanders are privileged to experience.

At the appointed time, we rise from the first of what will prove to be many vast and glorious spreads and saddle up. Malcolm, our convoy leader, paces to and fro, ensuring everything is shipshape and Bristol fashion. When he's happy that all are tidily aboard, we hit the track and move out into the vastness of Molesworth Station. This first day is the longest but the driving is perhaps the easiest; the routes have been chosen to ease into the challenges of the terrain. We drive through Toss Woollaston landscapes – cloud shadows scudding across the bare triangles of the hills around us.

I have been treated to my own driver and guides – Cliff and Janette Diprose are a retired farming couple from Matamata, and I'm travelling in the spacious, air-conditioned comfort of a



Top: A brief interlude on a sealed road leading to Mt Hutt. Above: Taking in the views high up on Blairich Station. Opposite: Beehives at Isolation Flat, Molesworth Station.

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 Toyota Prada three-litre diesel. This is my first time off-roading and I've come armed with a small apothecary's stock of motion-sickness remedies. I hadn't expected such a comfy ride. And I'm immediately glad I'm not driving: I get to enjoy the panoramic view, and I'm not obliged to remember all the vital instructions we were told at the briefing.

Malcolm and Nancye Langley – our hosts and the operators of NZ Adventures – run a very tight ship. Every little unnecessary delay on the road has a cumulative effect, says Malcolm, unconsciously smoothing the front of his walk shorts. He's right, of course; one straggler would make the whole convoy late for the next destination.

We near a fork in the track. Another

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 vehicle is stopped there – it's the Wilsons' – and Bruce is standing beside it with a grin, extending his arm toward the right-hand fork. Clearly Bruce has been allotted the job of "corner man" on this occasion. As we pass, he gives us the thumbs-up, congratulating himself on his efficiency.

A few kilometres up the track, we pass the MacKenzies, stopped beside a gate. Hugh has been appointed "gate man", charged with ensuring the gate is left as we found it. We pass through and wind up a steep farm track, just two worn dirt strips in the tussock. We're allowed to tool along at our own pace, so long as we stay ahead



of “tail-end Charlie”, the vehicle bringing up the rear, and charged with performing a double-check on gates.

Although we’re mostly in convoy, there are moments when the nearest vehicle is just a puff of dust on the horizon. At all times, though, we’re in contact with one another by radio. Each vehicle has one, operating on a private channel. As the trip warms up, this comes alive with jokes, anecdotes, observations and tall tales. Tom, a petrochemical engineer from Louisiana now based in Whangarei, is the comic turn. He keeps us royally entertained.

Pretty much, it’s the men driving. There are exceptions: Paula Dickson, a company director from Mt Maunganui, is the go-getter of our bunch and unofficial heroine. She looks forward to the “hairy” bits and proclaims them nothing compared to the treacherous roads of the French Riviera. For the most part though, the women say they’re quite happy

to play co-pilot and just enjoy the views.

We spend each day spooling in and out of hidden realms of solitude, with nights spent back in the “civilisation” of small towns and settlements along the way.

No two trips are ever the same, according to Donald McIntosh. Don should know: he’s the driver of the vehicle that offers the special chauffeur-driven option on these expeditions, and he’s done a few by now. “That’s why I love this work. There’s always something new or different to see.”

Aucklanders Helen and Ross McLeod are doing the trip in the plush, sheepskin luxury of Don’s wagon. Helen says she feels a bit guilty. “All I do is sit back and wave to everyone – a queenly wave.”

She’s actually got a 4WD at home, she says. “Yeah, but all it does is go to the supermarket,” Ross chips in. He loves driving, he reckons, but he’s enjoying the opportunity to just relax and enjoy the views.

The rest of our group is an eclectic mix. If we happen to be nearing the full term of pregnancy or afflicted with toothache, we’re in luck: there are three dentists and a mid-wife along. There’s a number of farming couples, who clearly relish their conversations with the station owners along the way. Paula’s husband is a Mt Maunganui stevedore, and then there’s the aforementioned oilman. Within a few days, we’re all great mates. The rules become second nature. A wooden spoon is awarded nightly for transgressions and misdemeanours: accusations and cases for and against are hotly litigated on the wire as we drive.

The land and its mood changes constantly around us, with the shifts and plays of light and cloud and weather. On our third day, on a soft grey morning, we follow the Rakaia River.



Looking across the vast valley and slate-grey ribbons of the river to the Arrowsmith Mountains, we see the divided green hillocks that Mona Anderson wrote about in the books of her life in these parts. It's not hard to see that the river must still rule the lives of the people who live there now. Low and benign today, it's surely a malevolent force when the rains set in.

Malcolm comes on air from time to time in a burst of static to offer detailed commentary on the passing geography. His knowledge of these trails is encyclopaedic. The ride today is teeth-rattling – good thing having all those dentists along – but the scenery is breathtaking: from river valley

to flowery meadow, to the tussock plateaus of Glenfalloch Station. Morning tea is taken from the flatbed of a ute surrounded by great golden swathes of billowing tussock teased by a sweet alpine breeze.

Malcolm is as passionate about his country as he is about showing it to his countrymen. He vehemently believes it's the inalienable right of every Kiwi to see these unspoilt areas. But not everyone is fit enough and able to experience it by foot. That's where four-wheel drives come into it.

Listening to him, you start seeing your turbo-diesel urban assault vehicle in a new light. Malcolm has no time for the naysayers who argue that ripping through all that



pristine grandeur in four-wheel drives is a contradiction in terms. The trails we follow are pre-existing tracks built for and maintained by farmers for their own vehicles. When we traverse DoC land, it's with the blessing of the department, in the form of special concessions that Malcolm and Nancye must apply for.

We drive by a gang of hawks loitering along a stretch of fence, waiting to pick off



Opposite: The carefully preserved Acheron accommodation house, a cob building from the 1860s, on Molesworth Station. Above: Sheep crossing, Broken Hut Rd, Omarama.



“You’ll have to drag me out of here screaming and kicking.”



an easy breakfast from the marauding hordes of rabbits. As with the stock, and the birdlife that flits past our windows, the hawks seem utterly unperturbed by our lumbering passage. Apart from the odd few curious cows, the land is all but deserted and a little haunting. To a North Islander, the high country – the real thing – is a different world from the chocolate-box scenes of my grandmother’s placemats. A random moa or hairy mammoth wouldn’t seem out of place here.

The rounded bulk of Mt Sugarloaf presides over muddy brown merinos on Lake Heron station. Anne Todhunter and her husband Philip farm this property. Todhunter was a townie from Tauranga until her husband, a pilot then, was called back to the family farm. Slim, blonde and elegant, she looks like a townie, but she says she doesn’t miss much of her former life. She loves the solitude. For a break, she likes to

spend a night or two in one of the huts on the property. “You’ll have to drag me out of here screaming and kicking,” she says. One or two of the drivers in our company look interested in that idea.

Our last few days on the trail are increasingly mist-bound and the hills and mountain ranges don a cloak of mystery. Clouds coagulate and shift above our heads – there is so much more theatre in the South Island skies.

The mists occasionally retreat and our jaws drop. They’ve been dropping a lot over the past few days, as with corners rounded and ridges crested we burst into huge bowls of sky and space. Today, we are crossing land flanked by the folds of the tussock-clad Hawkduns and empty of everything but ourselves. Colours seem more saturated in these high places – the blue-violet of the ever-present borage flower and zany golden spires of the spiky Spaniard plants that glow among the stones and dust.

Between stretches of public road and flat, dusty, loose metal are long slow climbs up steep and winding tracks where thorny matagouri bushes and tyre-threatening stones are an occupational hazard. Sometimes, the wheel-ruts are a few feet deep.

Later we leave the Clyde Dam behind us to climb into the Dunstan Ranges. The terrain changes from bleak to alien. Monolithic tors crouch in jagged formations among the vibrant, rust-coloured mosses. The wind is so fierce, the only way to be outside is to hunker down close to the ground – like everything else up here. The alpine environment around us is exceedingly fragile and we’re given strict instructions to stay on the trail. We pass a double rut set into the lichen – remnants of a trail left by cart-wheels, Malcolm tells us, 100 years ago.

The highlight of our last morning is not a view, but a spot of drama, thanks to a moment’s inattention from our witty oilman and his sidekick, Dave the dentist. We arrive to find most of the other vehicles stopped, and beyond them, Tom and Dave’s is halfway over the brink, flanking a steep section of track. We watch horrified as the vehicle lurches to one side when they try to reverse back onto the trail. A chorus of women’s voices on the radio encourages Tom to stay put. All hands are on deck as we scramble up to help.

There are systems in place. Cliff alerts Malcolm and Donald, who are further ahead. Malcolm soon appears at the scene, sets his Akubra at an authoritative angle





**Opposite: Anne Todhunter, who farms Lake Heron Station with her husband, Philip.
Above: Golden Spaniards flank a track over the Dunstan Range.**



Top left: The parched hills of Central Otago. Left: A wet crossing on Cluden Station. Top: Boys under the bonnet. Above: NZ Adventures' Malcolm and Nancye Langley.

and takes charge. Under his command, the day is swiftly saved. Mitzi and Andrew Bracegirdle deploy their winch and haul the stranded vehicle back onto the trail. All in all, it's a fine display of *esprit de corps*, of the real capabilities of our vehicles and, of course, a thorough vindication of the systems. Malcolm looks pleased.

The final section of this trail is affectionately known as "the washing machine", an apt description as it turns out, for the tumbling action imparted by this deeply rutted track. The convoy climbs snail-paced up into the cloud and sleet to the top of Mt Pisa.

A blasted landscape surrounds us. It's tempting to stay put in our cosy cabins, but

we rug up and clamber across the hill to at least set foot on the last peak of our tour. On a good day, the view from here is 360 degrees and encompasses the entire region we've traversed over the past five days. So we're told. It's all left to our imaginations today.

Christine Barbour has recorded video footage of the sights and sounds of the swaying tussock and nightly updates her Facebook page with iPhone shots from the day. She impresses us with her technological dexterity, but says she's frustrated her photos can't capture "it".

This has been a common refrain during the week – the "it" being the sheer grandeur of what we've seen, and the awe it

inspires. How do you capture the sound of this kind of silence?

The tour ends with a feast at the Cardrona Hotel. Next morning we pack our bags to leave – sad to be parted and feeling a little lost without Malcolm's instructions to rule the day. Addresses are exchanged and rumours of a reunion are already afoot.

We leave the brown hills and solitude behind and drive away, rankled by the unfamiliar sound of tyres on tarmac. Our lives and the sky crowd back in around us.

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