

Hard core *beauty*

Here's an adventure – joining a group of SUV drivers on a six-day trek right down the centre of the South Island, from Blenheim to Wanaka. Who wouldn't say yes to a good time like that? So slip in behind the wheel and let's go...

Story Jacqui Madelin
Photography Sean Craig





Left to right: A lazy, last-day picnic lunch by the quiet shores of Lake Dunstan; crossing Lake Heron Station on day two, following the path of an ancient glacier; the Hummer H3 looks the part, but is small enough for real-world driving says writer Jacqui Madelin, here taking a break at St Bathans, Otago. Previous pages: Morning tea stop on the tussock-clad slopes of Blue Mountain Station.

I'd wanted an adventure and I was certainly getting one – vertigo was hitting, big time. The first days we'd cruised through rural stations via gnarly gravel tracks. We'd dined at high-country farms, the autumn sun glowing gold on turning leaves as we tucked into baking still warm from the oven, and sipped on freshly brewed coffee. There were huge views to die for, draped in mist; steam rising from Hanmer's hot pools; morning tea on the porch of sod huts; it had been an idyllic trip.

But now we'd reached this serious, hard-core, Lord-of-the-Rings-type scenery and it was steep, very steep, with cliffs scraping my left-side mirrors and a yawning chasm sucking to the right. Suddenly the ladies who had opted to walk this bit of the journey didn't look so silly.

We started out from Blenheim, a band of intrepid holiday-makers in 13 SUVs, many heading off-road for the first time for a six-day High Country Heritage trip. Our guide, Malcolm Langley of 4wd Adventures, has set up a range of easy trips designed to show Kiwis the best of the South Island's interior. The idea is to meet folk who farm the area and learn some of its history – along with something of our own abilities.

There's no bush-bashing and mud-plugging, but he said we could expect a few challenges for those of us who had never off-roaded before; like Auckland's John and Kristen Schnauer, driving their son's Nissan, and giving it a few genuine scratches to take back to its city school run.

We would also encounter characters like Bill Patterson, who runs sheep, cattle and rabbits – “mostly rabbits” – on McDonalds Down Station, south of Hanmer. Patterson's wool is contracted to Smartwool for carpets and hiking socks. Since he arrived he's trebled the stock and constructed over 250km of station roads; “My mum used to worry I was spending too much money.”

It takes imagination to make a living there. As well as livestock the station houses 600 hives, the bees pollinating the white clover and feeding on honeydew from the beech trees. “We used to harvest the wasps, too,” Bill says. “We'd mark the nests, harvest and chill them so the larvae wouldn't hatch and send them to Japan. I think they eat them!”

“It wasn't easy. The men had to don two sets of bee gear and wear goggles as the wasps will sit on the veil and squirt venom in. It wasn't a popular job...”

That day we cancelled our ascent of Blue Mountain station – low cloud and rain would have made it risky – and opted for an easier route through the Lees Valley and Ashley Gorge. And from then on we had constant sunshine, blazing from an eggshell autumn sky.

Driving across gravel fans spilling from high glacial valleys underlined this country's icy past, thus giving us a lesson in geography. And we absorbed a range of history lessons too as we learnt more about our pioneering ancestors. Early settlers arrived by horse and cart or, in a triumph of confidence, aboard early cars. Even now some high country stations don't have road access; farmers will cross rivers using a grader to tow the ute to

safety, and many children are correspondence-schooled.

We stopped for tea above Lake Heron, the Arrowsmith range looming chilly in the distance. Mt Heron station is 40km long, its 19,600 hectares supporting 10,000 sheep. This isn't rich land, and above all it's dry – the station gets 700 to 800mm of rain per year so a large area is needed for each animal. Stations are often run by a husband-and-wife team, mustering by helicopter and hiring only at busier times. “The autumn muster takes four days, and we camp out and bring guys in,” says Philip Todhunter. “But the spring muster we use helicopters. Ten or 12 of us can do it in one day.”

The station looks remote, but Ashburton is only an hour away. His wife Ann turns out wonderful food for the sudden influx of visitors, and also has an easy elegance and an infectious sense of humour, directing ladies indoors to the bathroom and gents to the willows, where the dead trees are blamed on the North Islanders...

We still followed the power lines we'd trailed from Blenheim, and then clambered the Black Forest track, which provided my moments of vertigo.

We headed for Mt Sutton, at 1890 metres, then descended to Lakes Benmore, Pukaki and Tekapo. Up there under vast skies the land seemed as bare as the surface of Mars, and greeting fellow drivers who were manning gates, or handing out sweets as you closed one behind them, offered a welcome touch of warmth.

By now my Hummer H3 was looking decidedly used, its shiny black paint dulled by dust under the autumn sun. Forget

traditional US army Hummers; this is a real-world SUV aimed at families who want a taste of adventure.

Lunch came courtesy of Caroline and Ben Innes who farm 40,000 acres on which they winter 7000 merino sheep and 120 cows. Caroline also runs lakeshore tourist cottages for visitors who come to walk, fish for rainbow trout or salmon. Caroline was every inch the gracious hostess as she showed us round; Ben was concentrating on the farm, hard work given the twin attacks of pests and last summer's arid weather. Last year they trapped 900 ferrets and got just 300mm of rain.

That night we stayed at Lake Ohau lodge, clustering round the blazing logs with our pre-dinner wine, and dining on local salmon and cream-laden pavlova. After a frosty morning we drove to St Bathans for lunch in the historic pub's dining room before a walk around this old gold-mining town, its graveyard a testament to the hardships the early settlers suffered. Then it was the long climb up the Dunstan Range to Leaning Rock, a desolate place where massive boulders dwarfed our little band as we carefully followed faint wheel ruts to avoid trampling delicate highland flora.

Finally, the ascent to Duffer's Saddle – the highest public road in New Zealand, via a visit to an old gold mine and its settlement, now picturesque ruins. The miners died young, from quartz dust in the lungs, and their wives soon followed after breathing dust shaken out in the laundry. A sobering thought – but not one that lingered.

Ahead lay a run up the Cardrona valley, to Mt Pisa (1964 metres) and across the wind-blasted tops to the Waiorau Snow

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On this, our last night, we sipped wine and laughed over the memories of our week exploring the high and lonely reaches of the beautiful South Island – and the challenges we'd faced. The Schnauers will be back: "We'd not done this before. It wasn't too tough, though some stretches gave us pause for thought – but that's what made it more enjoyable, being pushed into something you're not used to and seeing parts of the country you don't normally go to. And Malcolm always made sure we knew what to do on the tougher bits – like those steep downhills!" Would they do it again? "We've already signed up to do the West Coast."

Like the Schnauers, I'd pushed a few personal boundaries – my vertigo! – marvelled at day after day of breathtaking scenery, and enjoyed the camaraderie of our group of Kiwi 4wd adventurers. ☺

GETTING there

Our 4x4 High Country Heritage trip came courtesy of NZ Adventures: Web: www.nzadventures.co.nz
Email: info@nzadventures.co.nz Phone: 03 768 4176

A trip like this isn't easy to do yourself. Land owners are often wary of allowing lone strangers to cross their remote stations, and you'd need to negotiate with the Department of Conservation. Opt for an organised tour like this one and your itinerary, food, accommodation and all land access is organised for you, as is information on the country you'll traverse and its history. NZ Adventures will also advise you whether your SUV is suitable for the journey – many trips require a low-range transmission in case of rain.

Don't have an SUV with low range? You can rent one. Overland 4wd rentals will even supply replacement SUVs if punctures or breakdowns intrude part way. See www.overland.co.nz or call 0800 493 4477.



Go see



Visit Cuba a.s.a.p

Where else but Cuba are the streets full of 1950s Chevrolets, with billboards overhead espousing the virtues of socialism? Exploring Havana's restored colonial district, with its baroque churches and outdoor cafes, reminds you of Europe – until you get a drift of salsa beat or a whiff of a cigar. The Trinidad area is another delight with its cobbled streets and former sugar barons' opulent homes now open to public view. But look closer and you see that restoration often only goes as far as a lick of paint. Cuba has a sense of majestic decay. Those ancient cars seem to run on willpower alone, alongside horse-and-cart transport. For outsiders this is part of Cuba's charm. But Cubans know that with Fidel fading, change is on its way. The time to see this place is now, while it's still a country like no other. Adventure Travel Wellington has lots of Cuba options. Ph 04 494 7180 or go to www.adventuretravel.co.nz

Fun via Victoria

Bookings for the *Plenty* readers' tour of Victoria are rolling in. Golden Holidays' 12-day trip in October includes time in Melbourne as well as rural and river treats like paddle steaming, wine tasting, eco-cruising and penguin watching. For info, call 0800 804 159 or see www.goldenholidays.co.nz

Down Monaco way

Nelson's Monaco Hotel and Resort is expanding fast, with 18 new cottages just added to the English village-style complex, and 20 more on the way. With brick-paved personal patios and roses climbing around the door, the cottages are cosy but elegant, with sleek bathrooms and pretty bedrooms with canopy beds. Nice touches include umbrellas at the door, and board games stashed in the cupboard. There are kitchens too, but if you don't want to cook, the chic Orangerie restaurant is right on site. Close to city and airport, Monaco is really well placed for local sightseeing. www.monacoresort.co.nz



At Enid's place

Enid Blyton, the Famous Five, lashings of gingerale – it's all so evocative of childhood. You can stay on the Dorset farm where Blyton once lived, now owned by New Zealander Sue Simon and her English husband, Oliver. They offer bed and breakfast at the 17th century farmhouse in a tiny village called Stourton Caundle. The couple have filled the house with art and period furniture and added a tennis court and swimming pool to the lovely garden. Sue loves to cook, so expect *splendid* English breakfasts. Email the farm at olandsue@fsmail.net for more info.

