

# 4WD adventurers rev it up in high

**Howard Keene**



## Challenge good for the soul

**T**HE convoy rolls out of Blenheim heading for Central Otago – the hard way.

What would normally take nine or 10 hours' driving will take this group of North Islanders in their four-wheel drives six days as they pass through many South Island high country stations, covering over 1200km.

By the time they have finished they will have experienced summer heat, gale force winds, rain and, unusual for January, snow.

The High Country Heritage 4WD safari run by New Zealand Adventures is designed for people to bring their own vehicles.

Relative novices will end up driving quite difficult tracks, but shepherded by the owners Malcolm and Nancye Langley and their guiding assistant Donald McIntosh, they finish the week competent and confident at handling the rough terrain.

The group are mostly business or professional people, some retired, who are loosely based around two Rotary clubs.

However, around half the people that come on these trips are farmers or retired farmers, Malcolm says.

"We often get groups who are friends that travel together."

The high country is still New Zealand's spiritual heartland, often surrounded by romanticism and myth, but for the relatively few families that farm these vast tracts of land it is a working landscape.

One of the attractions of these trips is meeting high country families and visiting their homesteads.

As we head out through the Marlborough vineyards I feel in safe hands being chauffeured by former North Canterbury farmer Donald McIntosh, who, like Malcolm Longley, is a qualified 4WD instructor.

All 13 vehicles in the convoy are connected by radio, and it is the specific responsibility for one vehicle at each intersection to make sure all the following vehicles go the right way. Similarly vehicles take it in turns to close farm gates. The closure is always double checked and radioed through.

By following these simple rules the convoy keeps moving along smartly.

First up we go off road over the hills south of Blenheim through the Merino country of Tyntesfield Station and then Blairich Station, before dropping into the Awatere Valley and heading up into Molesworth country.

The ascent to Blairich Saddle is the group's first chance to try a hill climb and it probably feels difficult for first time drivers. However, Malcolm tells them to have confidence and says that their vehicles are more than capable of doing the work.

NZ Adventures' clientele is largely New Zealanders and they have little trouble with the heights, but on a few occasions when overseas drivers have done the trip some have found the drop offs from the track beyond their comfort zone.

Up the Awatere we stop off for lunch provided by Willie and Sue Macdonald at Middlehurst Station.

They have been on the

**N**ANCY and Malcolm Langley became involved with NZ Adventures in 2002 and took over the business in 2007.

The High Country Heritage Safari is run about seven times between mid-November and mid-April. Other tours run once or twice a season are a West Coast Heritage Safari, a Mackenzie Country Explorer Safari and Southern Lakes Explorer Safari.

Nancye says people who come on the tour enjoy the social aspect and being able to drive safely to remote spots.

"The group we had before Christmas was like they had known each other all their lives. They were mostly farmers, retired farmers or contractors."

She says it's great watching the confidence of drivers build over the days. "And I really enjoy the scenery; it's good for the soul."

"We're watching people all the time, and we've got pretty good at picking out people who need a helping hand."

Malcolm says he believes every kiwi has a right to see their country.

Clark Gilhooly, aged 36, of Auckland, who works at customer electronic installations, says the trip was great, although it was different to what he imagined.

"It was more challenging than I thought. I just thought it would be dirt tracks."

"I thought the stations and the information provided was good. The homemade lunches were fantastic, and Malcolm's fantastic at retaining information."

"It's definitely broadened my knowledge."

16,500ha property for 13 years running Merino sheep and beef cattle, and like most of the properties we visit they have a contract with Icebreaker for their fine Merino wool.

Willie says when they bought Middlehurst no one wanted it. "People concentrated on what was wrong with it."

However, with a low stocking rate and vigorous weed control programmes they appear to be doing alright. Willie says they are now expecting a few good years in agriculture.

Throughout the journey Malcolm is a mine of information in his off the cuff talks on topics ranging from high country tenure review to the New Zealand electricity system to historic gold mining.

Molesworth, like most of the eastern South Island we pass through, is remarkably green for this time of year. The country's biggest station is run jointly by Landcorp and the Department of Conservation.

In most of the high country advancing weeds especially broom, briar and wilding pines are a constant problem, and we see this clearly with the wilding pines which have advanced over from the Hamner forest into the



On Blue Mountain Station in South Canterbury.

Travelling through Blairich Station the Awatere Valley in Marlborough.



Farmer Willie Macdonald, left, talks to the 4WD group during lunch stop at Middlehurst Station in Marlborough.

southern part of Molesworth. On Jollies Pass it is snowing as we make our way to Hamner Springs for the night.

Morning tea on day two is spent with Bill and Phil Paterson who have made a really good business out of McDonald Downs Station near Hawarden.

The 10,400ha has been with the Paterson family since 1966. Today they run Halfbred and Perendale ewes, and Hereford-Angus cross cows.

The Halfbred ewe wool contracted to Smartwool and the hogget wool to Icebreaker. All beef is finished on the property for a supermarket contract.

One feature of the property is the extensive system of laneways more akin to a dairy farm than Bill has created over the years.

"If we can be modest we're having a ripper of a year," Bill says.

The convoy moves on over Okuku Pass and into the vast Lees Valley for lunch provided by Hereford breeders Rob and Julie Stokes, the third generation on Richon Station.

A feature of the lunch is corned venison made from a stag shot on the property.

One threat the Stokes face is that Lees Valley has been earmarked as a possible giant water storage lake for Canterbury

Plains irrigation. "For a dam to happen here would sink us," Rob says.

After a night in Methven we head up the south side of the Rakaia River. Weather and scenery wise it is the best day of the trip.

The stations here have mostly been farmed by the Ensor and Todhunter families.

Although there is gorse in the riverbed, it's a tribute to the landowners that the hills have remained relatively weed free. It's some of the cleanest land on the whole trip.

Leaving the main Rakaia valley, one of our party gets stuck cross-

# High country



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A vehicle needs a pull out of loose shingle above the Rakaia River in Mid Canterbury.

Crown as part of the tenure review process. This off road route was taken from Twizel to Central Otago for building the Clyde Dam in the 1980s. The main road through Lindis Pass was considered too difficult because of the numerous small bridges and inconvenience to the travelling public.

Over the saddle and down into the Mauherikia Valley we head to St Bathans and the historic Vulcan on for another excellent lunch.

At the Clyde Dam Malcolm gives a good rundown on the development of the electricity grid in New Zealand, and then we make a steep climb on to the top of the Dunstan Range.

Here the wind is so strong at over 1600m that those who venture out of the vehicles have to grab on to each other to stay upright.

To finish off the day we visit Tom and Jan Pinckney's Northburn Station for wine tasting and food matching. They have successfully combined wine and food with farming on their nearly 13,000ha property.

When we wake up the next morning in Cromwell for the last day of this great expedition it's hard to believe this is January with the temperature in low single digits and the snow line down to about 1000m. This is supposed to be the hottest part of New Zealand in summer.

After a look at the old gold workings on Bendigo Station a yummy lunch is provided by Lesley Purvis at the Cruden Station homestead in Tarras.

The 12,500ha property is another largely Merino and beef cattle farm where Lesley has lived for 33 years. Since her husband Neil died her two sons have done the physical farm work and she has concentrated on the accounts.

She says the cooler weather is a welcome relief as they have had a long run of 30 degree days since November.

The final leg of the journey is the 12km haul up the road the Snow Farm on top of the Pisa Range near Cardrona.

This was developed by landowners John and Mary Lee, and now includes cross country skiing tracks and a snowboard park. As well it is home to the Southern Hemisphere Proving Ground where vehicle manufacturers test their vehicles in

snow and ice conditions.

We spend our last night in luxury accommodation at the snow board park lodge high on the mountain at over 1400m, before everyone goes

their own way the next morning. A really good adventure is the general consensus.

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ing a shingle fan on Glenfallock Station, but Donald soon pulls him out.

At Lake Heron Station another excellent lunch is provided by Philip and Anne Todhunter. The valleys in the area show some of the best glaciated landforms you will see anywhere in the world.

Besides raising Merino sheep and Angus cattle on the 19,600ha station, the Todhunters operate helisking and guided tramping and cycling trips. Philip is a long-standing pilot and Anne a former mountain guide.

This is our longest day, and

after lunch we head for Tekapo via Orari Gorge and Blue Mountain Stations, thereby missing out Geraldine and Fairlie.

On these steep backcountry tracks our novice drivers get their first taste of driving steep pitches on loose, sharp shingle. "Keep your forward momentum going, don't rely on your wheels to drag you through," Malcolm says.

It's obviously a matter of confidence, which is definitely growing among these city folk. Everyone comes through unscathed.

Normally Tekapo to Omarama on the main road would take little more than an hour, but day four is taken up climbing the hills on Stony Creek Run which has recently been returned to Haldon Station.

At the lower levels much of this barren rocky land is infested with briar and hieracium, and rabbits are making a comeback. Haldon manager Paddy Boyd, who won the Ballance Farm Awards for Canterbury a few years back, has retired it from grazing for five years to allow some recovery.

One of our party blows a tyre on a rocky pitch. The sidewall is blown out, so they are going to have to find a new tyre.

There doesn't seem to be one that size in the Mackenzie Basin, but they locate one in Cromwell, so that's where they head. It wasn't the first puncture on the trip and it won't be the last.

Day five Omarama to Cromwell is another short journey on the highway, but one that takes all day as we traverse the newish Oteake Conservation Park formed out of Twinburn and Michael Peak stations which went to the