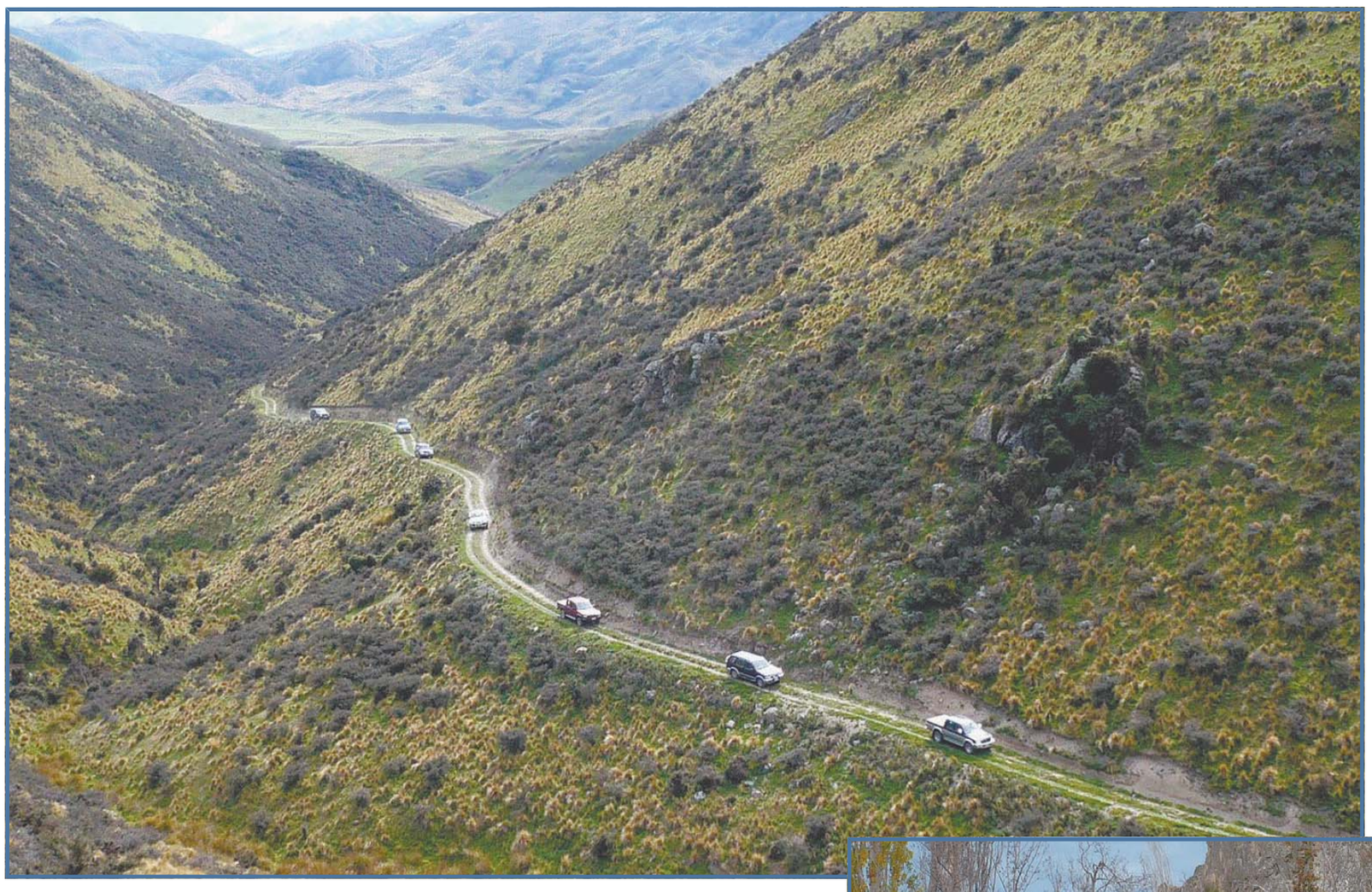
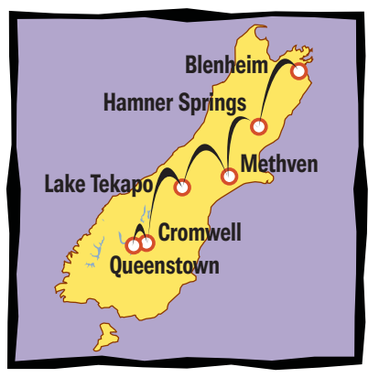
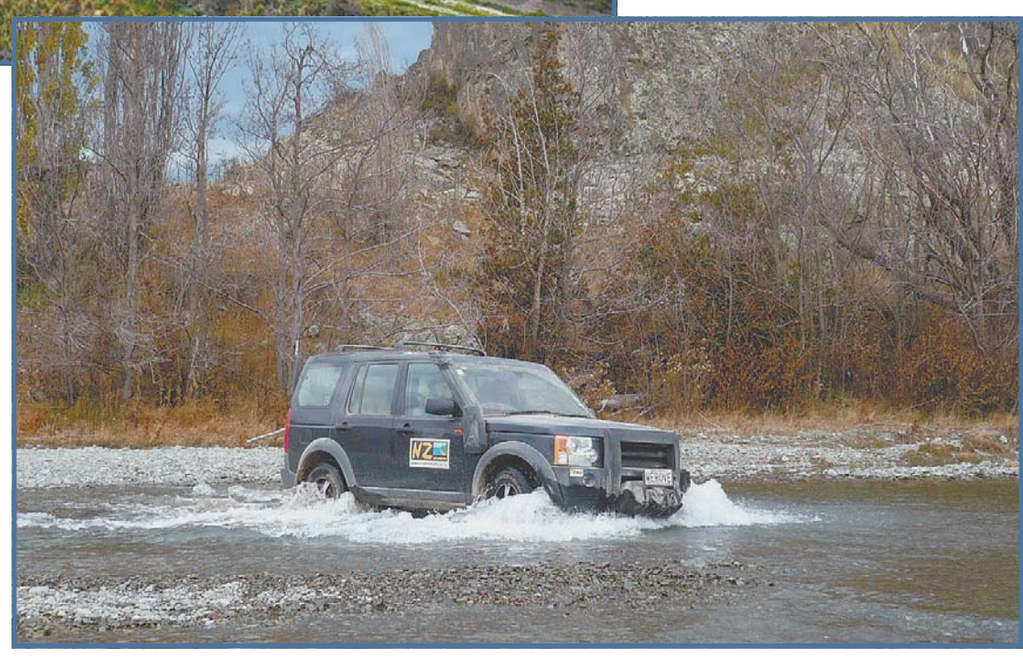
Take the high road





The convoy winds around lush terrain, left, en route to Lake Benmore and, below, fords a Canterbury river.

Photos: NZ Adventures



From Escape, E1

driver, here specifically to chauffeur the Auckland journalist who doesn't even own a car. I'd call him "my" driver – but that'd make me his gate lackey.

As it turns out, this is a job I will suck at. It's day two before I get serious gate duty. Somehow, I am supposed to use hand signals to indicate to the 14 other vehicles in this convoy that they need to slow down, veer to the left and be prepared for a half-metre drop. As the drivers of various brands of expensive all-terrain engines ignore me and plunge front-first over a concrete lip, I feel very very bad.

Here's the good news: despite the hair-raising terrain, this is the closest anyone will come to damaging their vehicle (and when I am told later some people simply didn't trust a journalist, my compassion dissipates).

The ruins and rugged landscape of the Bendigo historic reserve.

The safari has attracted a good-natured, all Kiwi crew, mostly aged 50 years or older, who have left behind farms and office jobs, classrooms and hospitals.

John Hart, 66, is from Naike. "Everyone's heard of Naike," he says (30km west of Huntly for the geographically challenged journalist). Why did he sign up for this?

"I mustered down here when I was younger. It's a bit like coming home. I had my 21st down here, and they gave me the top beat that day."

He and his wife Sue have done similar four-wheel self-drive tours through Australia. "She was wanting to do another one, but I reckoned I'd seen enough gum trees and red dust."

In his youth, Hart got to these places on horseback and foot. Breakfast was at 2am. Any driving was in a Series One Land Rover with no brakes. This week, he's behind the wheel of an Overland 4WD Rentals hire vehicle. Breakfast is a fully cooked affair in three- and four-star accommodation at a civilised 7.30am.

"It's marvellous not to have to think about what to cook," says Ali Greville, 66. "It's an absolute holiday." Has she done any driving? "A bit – but I get told off for going too near the edges."

Ironically, what she means is too close to the inside edge where sharp rocks can take out a tyre in seconds.

We're well and truly in the backblocks, but travelling only on formed roads. "If you can drive on the streets of Auckland, I'm sure you can drive in the South Island high country," says Malcolm Langley, tour leader. Most of the 30 or so people on this trip are driving their own vehicles – the tours are generally designed for those with little or no off-road experience. NZ Adventures stays on the tracks because, quite simply, it's safer and causes less environmental damage.

Yes, says Langley, high-country four-wheel drivers have their critics. "Everybody has the right to go and see the back country ... and there are heaps and heaps of back-country places you can't get to in a vehicle, where physically able people can."

The company's reputation has grown to the point where landowners are now approaching it, offering up access. One of the highlights of the trip, says one farmer, is the opportunity to meet the people whose families have worked these farms for generations (I can also confirm the station lunches are everything you'd imagine and more).

To date, Safari has hosted an 81-year-old driver and passengers well into their 80s.

There is an official chauffeured option. Auckland sisters, Beryl and Rona Fairweather, recommend it. "Sheepskin seat covers and a bottle of wine," says Beryl. "It's brilliant, getting up so high, being able to go to places you know most New Zealanders will never see. And the information and commentaries are just out of this world."

> I never thought you could stand this high in New Zealand and not see the sea.

Every vehicle is "connected" via portable radio transmitters and Langley delivers bite-sized facts about the properties we pass through: it's like a real-life slide show. It's also a good chance for a laugh. That weird, pale pink moon rock someone was coveting at the last gate stop? "That's a salt lick block for sheep," Langley announces. The couple who picked up the block look, well, sheepish.

We've just left Lake Tekapo. The spine of the South Island is laid out in early morning light. Geese fly in formation over the lake that ferrymen once allowed men of religion and prisoners free passage across. There's a photo stop at the Church of the Good Shepherd and then it's up and into the hills.

You know you're travelling with a kinder, gentler generation when someone pulls out home baking at the morning-tea stop. Helen Hermansen will gain legend status by journey's end, when she somehow convinces tourist hotels to let her into their kitchens to bake fresh scones, but today, it's the world's best shortbread: 340g butter, 340g flour, 170g icing sugar, 170g cornflour – soften the lot in the microwave "and beat the stuffing out of it".

Smoko does not always come with a bathroom break. There are several opportunities a day to use public amenities, but resign yourself to at least one al fresco experience. Toilet waste must be buried, well away from waterways, tracks, campsites and huts – the views, at least, will be spectacular.

Hanmer Springs, Methven, Lake Tekapo, Alexandra, Cromwell. We're on the road until at least 5pm every day. But this is not your regular tourist tour of New Zealand. There is a moment, as we climb out of Alexandra, when the air smells like Central Otago thyme, the rocks are straight from a Dr Seuss book, and the mountains in the distance are coal shovel blue, that I run out of superlatives.

"You come up to a place like this," muses a North Island farmer. "And you realise just how important you are ... "

It's not all about the scenery. At the Bannockburn Hotel, a turn-of-the-19th-century *Dunstan Times* article gives us a taste of days of old: "There was great excitement at Bannockburn on Saturday afternoon when the sad news came in that Mr John McKersie had been found murdered in Archie Blue's gut on the Carrick Range ... Archie Blue was always thought by those who knew him, to be a little off his head. For years he has been a 'hatter' and doubtless his solitary life led to an unhinging of his mind."

And up and up and up we climb. Past the old huts and water races built by the men who mined quartz for gold. On to the Nevis Rd, to the highest public access point of the trip where the signs warn this road "may be affected by adverse weather".

From Cromwell to Wanaka via the Pisa Range. I never thought you could stand this high in New Zealand and not see the sea. It's the moment where I feel compelled to phone my father and tell him I understand why he climbed mountains in his youth. Icecream headache cold, miles from nowhere and completely, absolutely exhilarating. I am grinning like I've climbed the bloody thing myself.

Of course, I didn't. I'm in an Overland rental too – a three litre, intercooled turbo diesel Toyota landcruiser Prado worth $50,000 brand new. Gosh, I'm glad I'm not driving.

We spend our last night on this amazing mountain, courtesy of John and Mary Lee, founders of the Waiorau Snow Farm Lodge. It's a luxury eagle's nest, at the top of the road that hosts the annual Race to the Sky, that attracts international snowboarders in winter and is aiming to break into the summer mountain bike market.

Outside, much later, the only thing you can hear is the wind. I think you can probably see every single star in the world from here. At dinner, John Lee told our group, "I love this valley – it's been my life." I think he is a lucky man.

■ Kim Knight travelled courtesy of NZ Adventures and Overland 4WD Rentals. In 2009, NZ Adventures will offer four South Island-based 4x4 tours – High Country Heritage, West Coast Heritage, Southern Lakes Experience and the Mackenzie Country Experience. Trips run between five and six days, and cost between $1999 pp and $2399 pp, inclusive of accommodation and all meals. Take your own vehicle, or pay additional to hire. For further information: www.nzadventures.co.nz

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What: Rydges Hotel is offering two-night packages for two in a superior room.
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How much: $99 a night.
Contact: www.wotif.com

PORT DOUGLAS
What: Unlimited golf package includes three nights' accommodation at the five-star Sheraton Mirage with unlimited use of the adjacent 18-hole golf course and electric buggy and daily breakfast.
When: Sales until September 24, travel until October 1.
How much: $929 per person, share twin.
Contact: House of Travel on 0800 838-747 or www.houseoftravel.co.nz

MADRID
What: Land-only package includes two nights' accommodation at a three-star hotel, daily breakfast and a flamenco show at Las Carboneras.
When: Sales until April 30, travel until May 31 and September 1-30.
How much: $355 per person, share twin.
Contact: House of Travel on 0800 838-747 or www.houseoftravel.co.nz

SUNSHINE COAST
What: Seven-night package includes seven nights' at the Sunshine Coast Holiday Apartments, eight-day Hertz car rental, a one-day family pass to Underwater World and Australia Zoo.
When: Sales until April 31, travel April 23-July 31.
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