

New Zealand: 4 x 4 equals high adventure

5:00AM Sunday Jun 10, 2007

By Eric Thompson



The Land Rover's terrain response system adjusts faster than any human reflex.

The Land Rover is in low, traction control is activated, terrain response system is turned on - so I don't muck things up by using the brakes at the wrong time - and I'm all set to move out. Crawling towards the start of the descent, the track seems to disappear off the edge of the earth.

According to our guides, Malcolm Langley and Mike Britton, we are only using our 4x4s at about 30 per cent of their potential.

I would have thought driving them off the edge of a cliff accounted for a bit more than 30 per cent.

This particular track, which a goat would turn its nose up at, is aptly named the Devil's Staircase.

The descent is steep and full of switchbacks, tackled by hanging the front of the vehicle over the edge before turning hard left or right, trying to avoid tipping the vehicle over as the rear wheel rides up the steep bank on the inside of the corner.

Glancing out of the side window I realise I can't see the track, it's that narrow. Even when I look down through the curve of the outside door handle I still can't see the track.

After lurching, weaving and bouncing down, we all arrive in one piece at the bottom ... but still in the middle of nowhere.

This middle of nowhere is New Zealand's best-kept secret - the South Island high country.

It is to this complex, varied and dynamic landscape that John Nicholson's company, NZ Adventures, has brought 12 4x4 vehicles and 28 people.

We're here to discover the hidden secrets of New Zealand's high country on an all-inclusive six-day trip that travels through some of New Zealand's greatest high country stations, and iconic landscapes.

We journey down the length of the South Island, closely hugging the eastern side of the Southern Alps. Along the way are wide plains, tussock-covered mountains, rocky tors, unpolluted rivers and turquoise lakes, plus award-winning vineyards, abandoned gold mines, historical sites and villages seemingly stuck in a timewarp.

Our route passes through many private and conservation areas, normally restricted for vehicles.

The routes are chosen for their scenic, cultural and historic values and are suitable for most 4x4 vehicles, as long as they are fitted with low-range gearboxes and have high clearance. This is an off-road tour, not an aggressive tough-truck rampage through uncharted bush.

There are no special modifications required, but the vehicle must be in sound mechanical order and have a good set of tyres.

Previous off-road experience is not needed but drivers must be competent and confident of their driving skills. Some days we cover over 280kph - predominantly off-road - but the pace is never frantic or forced.

You can either travel on your own, or with up to five people in the vehicle. And everyone has the option of cutting the drive short and heading to the evening's destination via a more sedate route.

It's a unique chance to get off the beaten track to experience our magnificent country. Most of the tracks we drive on are hard-based, often over stony ground but also hard-packed clay. The range of terrain is enormous, from pristine forests and empty valleys, to high tussock uplands and mountains.

With a focus on environmentally sustainable off-road touring, NZ Adventures has gained the confidence of a large number of high station landowners and managers.

We see a number of historic places, and meet some great back-country characters.

At the briefing in Blenheim before the start of the tour, the itinerary is comprehensively explained, with safety procedures, use of the radio telephones and tail-end Charlie - a nominated vehicle that remains at the rear for the entire day to ensure no one gets lost.

As well as all that I make note of this statement: "Some of the tracks climb to considerable heights and there are subsequently considerable drops from these tracks. Miscalculation on the part of the driver, or even those on foot could have very severe consequences." Nothing like an understatement to get you thinking.

Our first day's destination is Hanmer, via high country tracks and Molesworth Station. Molesworth is New Zealand's largest farm at 180,475 ha. It's known for its spectacular and diverse scenery and its historic buildings make it a must-see.

Leaving Hanmer the next morning, we head towards Methven via the Brothers Range, through McDonald Downs Station up to the top of Blue Mountain where you can see the coast and the Alps.

After lunch at the Richon Station we travel through the remote Lees Valley, Ashley Gorge and on to Methven.

We start the next day following the Rakaia River, around the Arrowsmith Mountains, and have lunch at the picturesque Lake Heron Station, set in the middle of the harsh beauty of the high country. Later, we travel through the rugged Orari Station on our way to Lake Tekapo.

Lake Tekapo is my favourite place on the trip. We arrive at dusk to find the hotel is situated right on the water's edge. The water is a glacial blue, as is the nearby Lake Pukaki - they get their unique colour from the reflective eroded rock particles held in suspension in the waters.

The next day, the only time it rains, I get not one but two punctures.

After lunch at Black Forest Station it is agreed that others should carry on and I am left sheltering under a tree waiting for the recovery truck.

As sod's law would have it, the recovery trailer gets a puncture and we have to limp all the way into Omarama at about 50kph. Not a day to remember.

Next morning dawns crisp and bright and we cross from the Mackenzie to Central Otago for lunch at St Bathans' historic pub, and a look around the old gold rush town.

After a climb to Leaning Rock we travel along the Dunstan Mountains before descending into Cromwell.

There are electric fences everywhere, but not your ordinary garden-variety, as I find out the hard way. When I lean over the top wire my thigh touches a lower strand.

The resulting boot through my chest is hard enough to put me on my backside. It is later explained these fences have to be powerful enough to keep high country cattle from crashing through the fences.

On the last day of the trip we pass through Bendigo Station, alongside Devil's Creek, the home of Shrek the woolly merino, then a quick blast up the Cardrona valley for the zig-zag climb up the old Miner's Trail and on to Mt Pisa.

Our last night is spent on the mountain at the wonderful Waiorau Snow Farm Lodge, its driveway used for the annual Race to the Sky. A statue of the late Possum Bourne looks out over the valley.

The Land Rover Discovery 3, provided by Motorcorp Distributors Limited for the trip, proves to be a no-nonsense vehicle at home both on the tarmac and off-road.

Its terrain response system removes most of the guesswork off-road and could compensate for track conditions much faster than any human reflex. You don't have to engage a separate lever to select the low ratio gears for serious work. The system has a few buttons and a rotary switch with five choices. If I can work it out, anyone can.* Eric Thompson travelled courtesy of NZ Adventures.

Checklist

South Island

Heritage 4x4 Safaris

The High Country Heritage 4x4 Safari takes six days and includes accommodation, breakfasts, high country or picnic lunches and buffet or set-menu dinners, land access and DoC fees.

Further Information

See www.nzadventures.co.nz or email info@nzadventures.co.nz . Telephone, mobile 027 222 3945, phone 03 768 4176, fax 03 768 0951.