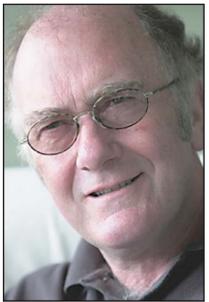


Escape

Seniors reborn on their bikes



From the shade of a willow tree with a coffee in my hand, I trace the hazy outline of the distant Southern Alps. Tucked away in a corner of the Mackenzie Basin, the contrasting brown velvety landscape and brilliant turquoise waterways are almost as surreal as my new life as a retiree and part-time biking tour guide for a small Christchurch-based tour company.

About five years ago on retiring from a career as Detective Superintendent of Police, I had some ideas to pursue. After sampling various avenues, I spied an advertisement, "Wanted — retired or semi-retired person to guide adventure tours for PureTrails New Zealand". It seemed like a perfect way to be engaged in a region of my affection, while still having time for other things.

Now in my new job with PureTrails New Zealand, and at this moment catching up on news in The Press, my charges start to appear along the gravel-country road, having descended from Mackenzie Pass. It's pit-stop time, and I bring out the coffee plunger and biscuit tin — along with some deck chairs — for an appreciative group of cyclists who have just completed a challenging 20km ride over the pass, having started from behind the Burkes Pass village.

Few manage to cycle right to

Formerly a high-ranking criminal investigator, **JIM MILLAR**, left, nowadays spends more time in the South Island's great outdoors, notably with fellow baby boomers and their bikes in the Mackenzie Country. Some have not ridden for 50 years but relish the challenge.

the top of Mackenzie Pass, but getting off your bike and walking is no sin; it's the participation and sociability of the activity that draws most of the people to this five-day biking tour of the Mackenzie Country. These cyclists are typically in the baby boomer age-bracket.

While some have been or are still active sportspeople, many who come on tours have had little or no serious experience tramping or cycling. In fact, on our cycling tours, apart from a few weeks familiarisation with a bicycle, many have not been on a bike since leaving school, in some cases 50 to 60 years ago.

I've been in the job three years, and I realise the main reason it has been so pleasurable is that most clients have reached a stage in their life where they want to maximise their enjoyment from life and to extend themselves while they are

still able. Some have regained significant independence through their children having grown into adulthood. Increasingly, older clients are bringing along children or grandchildren to share the experience.

As the clients relax in their deck chairs, I take the opportunity to recount the story of James Mackenzie (itinerant Scottish shepherd and sheep rustler).

We are enjoying our afternoon tea beside the stone monument marking the spot where Mackenzie was caught, while camped there with 1000 sheep stolen from Levels Station. His captors were John Sidebottom (Levels overseer) and his Maori companions, Taiko and Seventeen, on March 4, 1855. Mackenzie escaped from them the same night but was recaptured in Lyttelton. (The



Top right: from left, Conor Young, his grandmother, Dominique Young, and Jeanette Green, all from Auckland, beside the Tekapo-Pukaki canal, near Tekapo, in the Mackenzie Country. Photo: Jim Millar

three-sided monument has inscriptions in English, Maori and Gaelic).

Being mainly Kiwis, most have heard the story before or variations of it, but few had contemplated the significance in the way that it opened up the previously unknown and vast Mackenzie Basin to pastoral farming.

The Scots, who then arrived in the harsh environment, must have been so resilient, strong and optimistic to basically survive, let alone make a new life for themselves. There are many stories in the district, giving a hint of the character of the people, such as the well-known "Lupin Lady". It's something that you don't appreciate by simply driving through the Mackenzie Basin on the main highway as most tourists do.

As the clients begin to depart for the final section to Dog's Leg

Corner — dubbed "Torture Alley" by previous clients because of the high-pitched squeal of the high-tension power lines in a nor'wester — I pack up the van to and move ahead to the next pit stop.

Before the end of the five days, the clients will have biked along the Lilybank Road beside the brilliant waters of Lake Tekapo, along the flat and easy hydro-canal and into Lake Ohau and beyond, as well as doing a few optional extras such as horse-riding at Lake Tekapo, visiting the Mount John Observatory at night to view our amazing southern night sky, and soaking in the new Tekapo thermal hot springs.

We will also meet some of the locals and tour a local high-country farm, gaining a full appreciation of the Basin.

The success of the tours is no doubt the number of baby

boomers reaching or nearing retirement, who are looking for a challenge, want to socialise and enjoy themselves with like-minded people and have the support that a guided tour with full vehicle-backup provides.

While some light-hearted competition emerges from time to time, the emphasis is almost invariably on making the occasion socially enjoyable, while experiencing the Mackenzie Country Experience.

So bring along that mountain bike or dust off those old bicycle clips, sharpen up your cycling skills and join in, making sure you don't feel cheated in 20 or so years time when you may no longer be able to take on life's challenges to the full.

□ The price is \$915 for the five-day tour departing by bus from Christchurch (one tour starts today and another is due on February 18-22), the first biking

leg of 38km being through Mackenzie Pass. Included are four nights accommodation (Lake Tekapo and Twizel), three evening meals, five lunches, four breakfasts, snacks and bike-repair support. Bike hire (\$150) is optional, with full vehicle support. Groups of 10 or more receive a 10 per cent discount. Biking options and distances are all optional. The tour returns to Christchurch by bus via the Waitaki Valley and Waimate up the east coast.

□ More information: Visit www.puretrailsnewzealand.co.nz or call 0800 222-775 for details of the Mackenzie Country Bike Tour.

□ PureTrails New Zealand also runs a five-day biking tour of the Otago Rail Trail (for which Jim Millar is also a guide) and walking tours in both the North and South Islands, all designed for the baby-boomer generation.

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