

CLOSE SHAVES ON THE WEST COAST

COVID-19 MAY HAVE TEMPORARILY CLOSED OFF NZ BUT THE NEW PAPAROA OFFERING IS ONE TO ADD TO THE BUCKET LIST.

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Cutting down through the steeps.

It only struck me toward the end of our ride on the Paparoa, as we prepared to leave Pororari Hut. Leaning over my handlebars, I looked down and saw the connection. My 29er bike brandished Pike forks as did Laurence's. This fine track those forks had cushioned us on, and that were about to get a full workout down to the sea, had come about because of a tragic accident. Out of this tragedy has come something that will offer enjoyment for thousands.

On 19 November 2010, an underground explosion at the Pike River Mine near Blackball, trapped and killed 29 miners. It was one of the darkest days in New Zealand's modern history and one for which final answers are still being sought. There is currently an attempt to find and retrieve the bodies of the men that may provide closure for the families. It was these families who wanted to create something in the memory of their loved ones. The Paparoa Track is the memorial to the Pike 29.

The Paparoa is the first New Zealand Great Walk to be purpose built as a walking and MTB trail. It, along with the Heaphy, are the only ones of the ten Great Walks that allow riding along their length. Landslips and bad weather had delayed the opening for some months, but the Paparoa was finally ready at the start of March and Laurence and I were there in that first week.

The track weaves through the ranges staring down onto the West Coast, back from the town of Greymouth. Greymouth in Grey District on the banks of the Grey River, is a gritty, real town with few pretensions. It does though have Monteith's Brewery, a West Coast institution.

Off these mountains a bitterly cold and misty wind can roll down into Greymouth. Locals call it 'The Barber' although it never showed up when we were in town. I did spy, though, the most gorgeous chocolate box Barber's shop, and resolved to celebrate with a haircut. I'm a sucker for barbers and for years have been unable resist a cut whenever travelling.

The best direction to ride the Paparoa is undoubtedly south to north. You get a long, steep climb out of the way early, undulate across the top of the range and then swoop down, for the most part, for the final 20km or more.

The southern trailhead itself is a spot in the bush called Smoko. Far better, I think, to start at the village of Blackball. Here you'll find an eclectic mix of businesses and buildings. Wendy at Currantly Oddfellows, a café and knick knack business, Blackball Salami, apparently world famous in New Zealand. As a vegetarian I can't confirm. Then there's 'Formerly' The Blackball Hilton and the fabulously direct Cynthia; a grand building offering accommodation, food and a bar. On the wall they proudly display the letter from the



Anticlockwise from left: Huw pops out of the forest near Ces Clark Hut.

On the Paparoa between Ces Clark and Moonlight Tops.

Laurence riding the ridge en route to Moonlight Tops.

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Hilton hotel chain's lawyers telling them to stop using the Hilton name. The owners just added 'Formerly' to it and carried on regardless.

After dropping off Laurence and I, my Wendy and his Viv disappeared into Blackball's Inn for a champagne breakfast with the local ladies, it being International Women's Day.

From Blackball it's an 8km pedal up a gravel road; a chance to warm up the legs and work off brekkie before Smoko. With a foul forecast and a fair ride ahead of us, we set off. The first part of the 56km long Paparoa follows the historic Croesus Track, an old miner's track that, whilst now repaired and

newly bridged, has stood up to the onslaught of time remarkably well through the forest. I found myself stood up a fair bit too, straining to pedal up the trail. A singlespeed wouldn't be everyone's choice for bikepacking a mountain trail. I questioned mine. The angle and loose rocks saw me stood next to the bike a fair bit too as Laurence effortlessly pedalled his way up.

After 9km and some 600 metres of climbing we popped above the tree line to arrive at Ces Clark Hut just as the rain began. Taking shelter in the hut we chatted to some hikers and a couple of other bikers and pulled on our waterproofs. They were off again, on again



Right: Moonlight Tops Hut on a sunny day.

Opposite page: On the historic Croesus Track en route to Ces Clark Hut.

GENERAL INFO

For general information and bookings www.greatwalks.co.nz/paparoa. Huts must be pre-booked and no camping is allowed along the track. Huts have mattresses and stoves but you'll need to carry sleeping bag, billies and utensils. It is planned for the track to be open for walking and mountain biking year-round. Even in summer wild weather can hit and certainly in winter you need to be prepared for all conditions including snow. Keep an eye on the weather at <https://www.metservice.com/mountains-and-parks/national-parks/paparoa>. For general information on the West Coast region www.westcoast.co.nz.

The waterproof 1:50000 Paparoa Track map from New Topo www.newtopo.co.nz covers the track and the wider area. There is reasonable mobile coverage along the track although none at Pororari Hut. Make sure to visit the very impressive and popular Pancake Rocks at Punakaiki before or after your walk. A Department of Conservation (DOC) Information Centre is here.

Getting there

You can ride the track in either direction, but undoubtedly there is more smiling to be had starting at Blackball or Smoko. Several operators offer drop-off and pick-up to both ends of the trail. They will also move your vehicle too. Paparoa Shuttles www.paparoashuttles.co.nz, Paparoa Great Walk www.paparoagreatwalk.co.nz, Trail Transport greymouth@sportsworld.co.nz

If coming from Christchurch there are plenty of car rental options including Touchdown www.touchdowncarrental.co.nz. It takes about three hours to drive to Blackball. Another great option is to take the Tranzalpine Train <https://railnewzealand.com/train-services/the-tranz-alpine> winding across the Southern Alps to Greymouth. This could be done both ways or a rental car could be used one way.



for the 10km across to Moonlight Tops Hut, traversing the highest and most exposed part of the trail. We got knocked around a couple of times in the wind but enjoyed some fabulous descents on the meandering trail, with views west to the Tasman Sea and north deeper into the mountains.

While fit riders might complete the trail in one long day, the Paparoa deserves to be savoured over two. The ideal is probably to stay overnight at Moonlight Tops, 20km in from Smoko and with the biggest climb behind you. However the hut was fully booked when we made reservations, so, after a late lunch, we pushed on a further 19km towards Pororari Hut.

All that's good about bikepacking on mountain trails followed. The track soon dropped into the most enchanted of mossy forests. Down a lot, up a bit; the singlespeed was loving it too. Eventually we emerged to follow an escarpment, hugging its edge for some kilometres, with astounding views all round. Looking beyond the cliff edge, we could just pick out the hut sitting on a ridge below us. Below, of course, meant more gravitational fun to be had.

Far below, on the other side, to the east, we

could pick out the construction of the final piece of the Paparoa jigsaw. The 11km Pike 29 Memorial Track will lead walkers and riders steeply down to the Pike River Mine site. Here, a memorial and interpretive centre will unfold the story of the 2010 disaster. Whilst much of this side trail is complete, it won't open until the retrieval project is complete and the mine sealed off again.

The Memorial Track will undoubtedly be a rip roaring 800 metre descent by bike. Without climbing all the way back up again, it would seem that riders will find themselves choosing whether they exit the Paparoa from the mine site or complete the standard Paparoa and save the Pike 29 Memorial Track for another day.

Nothing seems to faze a Kiwi trailbuilder. Experience borne of tackling the steeps and deeps across their country, ensures that terrain that might scare off lesser humans is moulded into rideable terrain, whether switchbacking down cliffs or swingbridging across them. Hamish Seaton, one of the pre-eminent masters of this art, played a key role in designing the Paparoa, as he has with other now legendary trails such as the Old Ghost Road.

Soon Laurence and I were leaning into tight

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turn, after turn, after turn as the trail plunged off the escarpment, threading through steep, cliff-lined country.

The Paparoa sidled across to the ridge line that held Pororari Hut and we arrived, after one final climb, some seven hours and 40km from Smoko. A very satisfactory day's effort.

Like Moonlight Tops and a mirror image of it, Pororari sleeps 20 in two bunkrooms with spacious living and kitchen areas. We were the only riders that night and enjoyed the company of a large group of walkers from the North Island as well as a Korean couple. Laurence as always, whipped up a fine dinner, this time a veggie curry. Not for him the freeze-dried meals beloved of Kiwi trampers. Not for

him, ever, Cadburys chocolate, only the local Whittakers. He's a bit proud of his heritage. Hillary, the hut warden, shared a mug or two of red with us, coming toward the end of her nine-day shift. After five days off, she'll trek back in, laden with supplies.

We woke to fog and drizzle and, despite having only 16km of generally downhill trail to Punakaiki and the finish, Laurence served up a at least three morning's worth of porridge. It stuck well to my sides despite the shaking it would soon endure.

The run down to the two crossings of the Pororari River was a grin and tonic for any mountain biker. Chuckles and whoops from us both, first through tree fern forests, then,

once across the first swingbridge, onto a track cut into the steep sided valley, hanging high above the river. Finally we barrelled straight to the second crossing to where the Paparoa splits for its last few kilometres.

Walkers continue on down the Pororari river whilst we turned left onto what was part of the old Inland Pack Track. A steady climb over a ridge reminded me of my lack of gears, but we were soon into a fine and final descent to the Punakaiki River at the end of the track.

We still had a couple more kilometres to ride up the road to Punakaiki. A visit to Pancake Rocks there is highly recommended, particularly if the sea is surging at high tide. Our visit to the similarly named café opposite saw Laurence, despite the porridge and despite the downhill run, devour a huge plate of eggs benedict and a pancake stack large enough for a family. Luckily I could offer some assistance

The Paparoa is another fine addition to the quiver of 'must do' Kiwi MTB trails. Sadly, after all the delays in its opening, Covid-19 saw the trail shut after less than a month. As soon as you get a whiff that things are opening up, get your hut booked, get over there. And get a haircut. 🍷