

# Blown away on the Old Ghost Road

Buffeted by the remnants of a cyclone, four bikers explore an historic route that delves into the South Island's mining country

By Huw Kingston



GHOST LAKE HUT SHOOK VIOLENTLY AS wind and rain hammered it from every direction. Ex-tropical cyclone Fehi had come knocking. I looked at the can of Happy Daze beer, now empty in my hand. Omen enough, I decided. I thought of many past trips into the mountains I could have abandoned due to weather but hadn't. Persisting often led to some of my best memories.

A couple of days earlier, over dinner back in Christchurch, our party of four had discussed what the storm might mean for our planned traverse of the Old Ghost Road. The name suggests that the 85-kilometre trail, New Zealand's longest singletrack, is a long established route. That's only half-right. When we rode the trail in late January 2018, it had been open to bikers and hikers for just two years. But the trail was in use long before the mountain bike was

born – dating back some 125 years to the days of the country's very own gold rush.

Sat around the table, our conversation also centred on striking it lucky. Laurence had informed me that, "It's once in a blue moon that New Zealand's South Island gets hit by a cyclone". Viv looked apprehensive while 13-year-old Pearce wanted to make the most of the predicted waves and go surfing instead.

But January 31 was indeed a blue moon. Though this is commonly thought to mean the second full moon in a calendar month, it is actually the third full moon of four in a given season. Either way, it's comparatively rare and in January 2018 it was a so-called Blue Blood Super Moon: an extremely rare trifecta of blue moon, lunar eclipse and the Moon being at its closest point to the Earth. Surely the heavens would

TOOLS OF THE TRADE  
Where once trod miners, in their hobnail boots (right), today bikers spin their way up the trail in cleated shoes.

approve of our audacity?

Lyell was our start point, the southern trailhead of the Old Ghost Road. The murderous, bloodsucking sandflies we encountered right from the get-go there ensured we didn't hang around. NZ, unlike neighbouring Australia, has little to bite, eat or kill you. But these incessant little pests do their darnedest...

It was uphill all the way for the first 18km to Lyell Saddle Hut but the trail was graded well enough to take most of the pain away. Along the side of the trail were scattered occasional artifacts

from another age: an axe head; the rusted blade of an ancient shovel; a pair of workboots, leather now hairy with moss. Back in the late 1800s Lyell was a thriving boomtown of 1,000 residents; today the gold rush town is just a roadside camping area. Men had once struck out to explore the surrounding hills and a trail was built to Lyell Saddle to serve their quest for gold. Today's Old Ghost Road roughly follows the line of this trail through deep beech forest. Bold-as-brass robins landed on our packs and the flightless weka scratched around in the dirt just beyond our wheels. We emerged from forest at The Big Slips. Massive earthquakes in 1929, and again in 1968, had torn away the hillside here, and the thin,

gravelly trail seemed to tiptoe nervously across the devastation.

Along the Old Ghost Road are five spectacularly located huts. The first, at Lyell Saddle, had been our original Day One target. But with Fehi forecast to hit that night, we stopped only to cook some noodles before pushing on another 12km to Ghost Lake Hut. The grade steepened as we climbed switchbacks, tighter and more gravelly higher up, before we emerged onto open tussock country with spectacular views of the Lyell Range.

With a strong wind and rain threatening, Pearce, an Old Ghost Road old hand – this was already his third time at the tender age of 13 –

led the way along the exposed traverse line below Rocky Tor (1,456m). Already the spirit of the trail had me in its thrall, already we were well satisfied to be up there, despite the forecast. Once beyond Heaven's Door, where the wind tried its best to dislodge us from our saddles, we enjoyed the fruits of our labour with a long, fun descent to Ghost Lake Hut.

A group of riders from the North Island were already in residence, along with volunteer wardens Lloyd and Jackie, travellers from the U.K. I sat down with a can of beer, and began to learn the full story of the Old Ghost Road.

Each hut on the trail has a copy of a thin paperback, *Spirit to the Stone*, which should be required reading for anyone interested in trailbuilding, trails in general or indeed just the persistence of a small group of individuals with a love of wild places and an inability to shy away from a seemingly impossible challenge. The book tells how in 2007 a local West Coast man knocked on the heavy wooden door of a lodge built on the banks of the Mokihinui River. Marion 'Weasel' Boatwright, American musician, builder and co-owner of Rough and Tumble lodge, welcomed the man in. In his hand he had a faded map from 1896 showing a surveyed road from Lyell through to Mokihinui, a road that was never built save for the section of old miners' track we'd ridden earlier that day to Lyell Saddle, and a trail at the other end some distance up the Mokihinui gorge.

This meeting was the catalyst for the building of the trail, named because until then it had been but a bold idea, a survey, a ghost. Marion pulled together three other men to chase the ghost into reality – Stacky, an old West Coast bushman, Phil, a local mountain biker and Wayne, who ran a local helicopter business. As the ghost train rolled, hundreds more jumped aboard: government land managers, volunteer trail diggers and hut builders from across the world.

As everyone else in the hut played cards by candlelight, I lay on my bunk and read on.

Seemingly nothing could stop this train. Not landslides, not proposed hydro dams potentially flooding its route, not funding challenges (the trail eventually cost some US\$5 million). Not even the mountains and gorges themselves which would have chased lesser men and women away, such are the challenges of the steeps and deeps of the New Zealand wilderness.

BANG! We all woke to a single massive clap of thunder that accompanied the dawn. It had been quiet overnight but now Cyclone Fehi was knocking on the door and keen to pump up the volume. As the morning drew on, the wind



and rain smashed into the hut, threatening to tip it over the precipice which it overlooked. We waited, brewed up, waited some more.

We'd later learn that other parts of the South Island were devastated but in truth Fehi was not as bad for us in our exposed spot as we feared. By early afternoon we decided to venture into the deluge and head for Stern Valley Hut, reckoning that with it being only 13km away and mostly downhill, we had plenty of time.

"Come on, come on," chided Laurence half-jokingly. "No wonder it took you a year to get around the Mediterranean," smiled Jackie, referring to my circumnavigation of that sea by human power alone that we'd discussed the night before. I was last to be ready and by then Laurence and Viv had already set off. Pearce and I had only gone 200 metres when we came across Laurence with his bike on his back: "Smashed my

bloody derailleur and hanger," he said. I knew I shouldn't have rushed.

We spent an hour back in the hut fixing his bike which required some fine-sight work. Laurence is actually legally blind, but that doesn't stop this legendary former representative rider for his country. In 2013 he came close to death after an anaphylactic reaction to a single bee sting. The result was years spent relearning to walk and talk, and of course, getting back on the bike. A level of persistence the Old Ghost Road builders themselves would have been proud of.

We all left the hut for a second time and descended the tightest of rocky switchbacks as water cascaded all around. The back-and-forth took us down to a saddle before a short, steepish climb to Skyline Ridge. Fehi pushed and pulled at us along this kilometre-long ridge, forcing us to cling to each other in the gusting wind.

The end of Skyline Ridge ends in a near-cliff that posed a major obstacle for the trail builders. They weren't to be stymied having come this far though: Weasel pre-fabricated 302 timber box steps that Wayne helicoptered into the site for installation.

By the time we reached the bottom of the steps, Fehi had finally moved on, leaving us to enjoy an insanely fun, 10-km flowing descent to our last overnight at the Stern Valley Hut.

Lingering showers punctuated the early hours of our final day on the Old Ghost Road as we took on a superbly graded climb through the Boneyard to Solemn Saddle. Then it was pin-back-the-ears time for more fun down Goat Creek and out to a wide suspension bridge across the swollen Mokhinui River. A solid steel gate guarded the middle of the bridge and, as we crossed, signage revealed its purpose. On both



**THE HIGH LIFE**  
Left: There's nothing better than being snug in a robustly-built hut while the weather does its worst outside. Below: The trail in more benign conditions. Bottom left: Within minutes of leaving Ghost Lake Hut, Laurence was back with a smashed derailleur.



sides of the river lived the endangered Giant Land Snail as did the possum, a marsupial pest introduced from Australia. On one side the possums had learned to hunt the snails while on the other they hadn't. The idea of the gate was to stop the hunting possums from teaching those without the skill!

Once across the bridge, we headed down the Mokhinui, climbing over numerous trees felled by the storm. Passing Mokhinui Forks Hut, at the junction of the north and south branches of the river, we began our final trail treat. The singletrack now picked up the remnants of

#### HIGH WIRE ACT

Reinstating the route meant adding new bridges to negotiate stretches of trail long-ago lost to the river.

the old miners trail cut into the side of almost vertical gorge walls. We delicately guided our wheels around blind corners with the river raging beneath the drops. It all felt Himalayan, like those classic gorges that protect the high valleys and mountain country above. Here though there were no smoky teahouses built into the walls so we made our own tea at Specimen Point, the final hut, clinging to a small ridge above the gorge. By now I was shaking my head at the all-round goodness and madness of the Old Ghost Road. I wanted to hug those legendary souls who'd nursed it into a reality.

In a couple of place the gorge walls had collapsed into the river leaving a road to nowhere. Here suspension bridges had been slung across the chasm. It was beyond one of these that fortuitously I got my chance to hug a legend. Travelling up the gorge on a motorbike was

Stacky, one of the original four trail proponents from 2007. Now responsible for trail maintenance, he was heading in to clear those fallen trees. Ecstatic to meet one of the trail's creators in the flesh, I peppered him with questions. Despite the pressing need to get to those trees, Stacky was most generous with his time.

Finally we said our farewells and pedalled the final kilometres to finish at Rough and Tumble Lodge, Weasel's place, to which that 1896 map that started it all had been delivered.

Having ridden trails all over the world, I'd say this 85-kilometre route is as good a mountain bike tour as I have experienced anywhere in the world, for the trail, terrain, huts and of course the story. Could you ride it in a day? Yes, some could. Should you? Emphatically no. Savour it, watch out for cyclones and read the book along the way. **AA**



#### PRACTICALITIES

##### When to go

The trail and huts are open year-round. The winter months of June-October can be cold, wet and often snowy with occasional avalanche risk, but bad weather can hit the region at any time – as happened in the case of the author's trip.

##### How to get there

Auckland, New Zealand's capital, has good connections to Asia, with onward flights to Christchurch and Nelson on the South Island. There are direct flights to Christchurch from Singapore and China.

Most people ride the trail from south to north, Lyell to Seddonville. Here are sample driving distances and times from likely start points:

Christchurch to Lyell – 300km, 4.5 hours

Seddonville to Christchurch – 380km, 5 hours.

Nelson to Lyell – 160km, 2.5 hours

Seddonville to Nelson – 270km, 4 hours.

There are handy vehicle relocation services available from one end of the trail to the other, as well as shuttle services by road or helicopter. [www.oldghostroad.org.nz/transportation](http://www.oldghostroad.org.nz/transportation)

##### Contacts

The go-to source for information on the trail is the official website [www.oldghostroad.org.nz](http://www.oldghostroad.org.nz). Here you can check trail conditions, book huts, find info on tours and transport and buy *Spirit to the Stone*. A number of operators run guided tours including Adventure South, [www.adventuresouth.co.nz](http://www.adventuresouth.co.nz), who include it in their seven-day South Island MTB Adventure.

##### Further info

The Old Ghost Road can be ridden or trekked, though note that this is not a trail for biking beginners given its exposure and technical nature.

Huts must be pre-booked, with proceeds from the fees going to ongoing improvement of the trail. All have mattresses and cooking facilities, so you can travel light with just clothing, sleeping bag and food.

