

# Wild

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ISSUE 169

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Jon Muir Adventurer Profile  
Paddling in Patagonia  
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And loads more...

A U S T R A L I A



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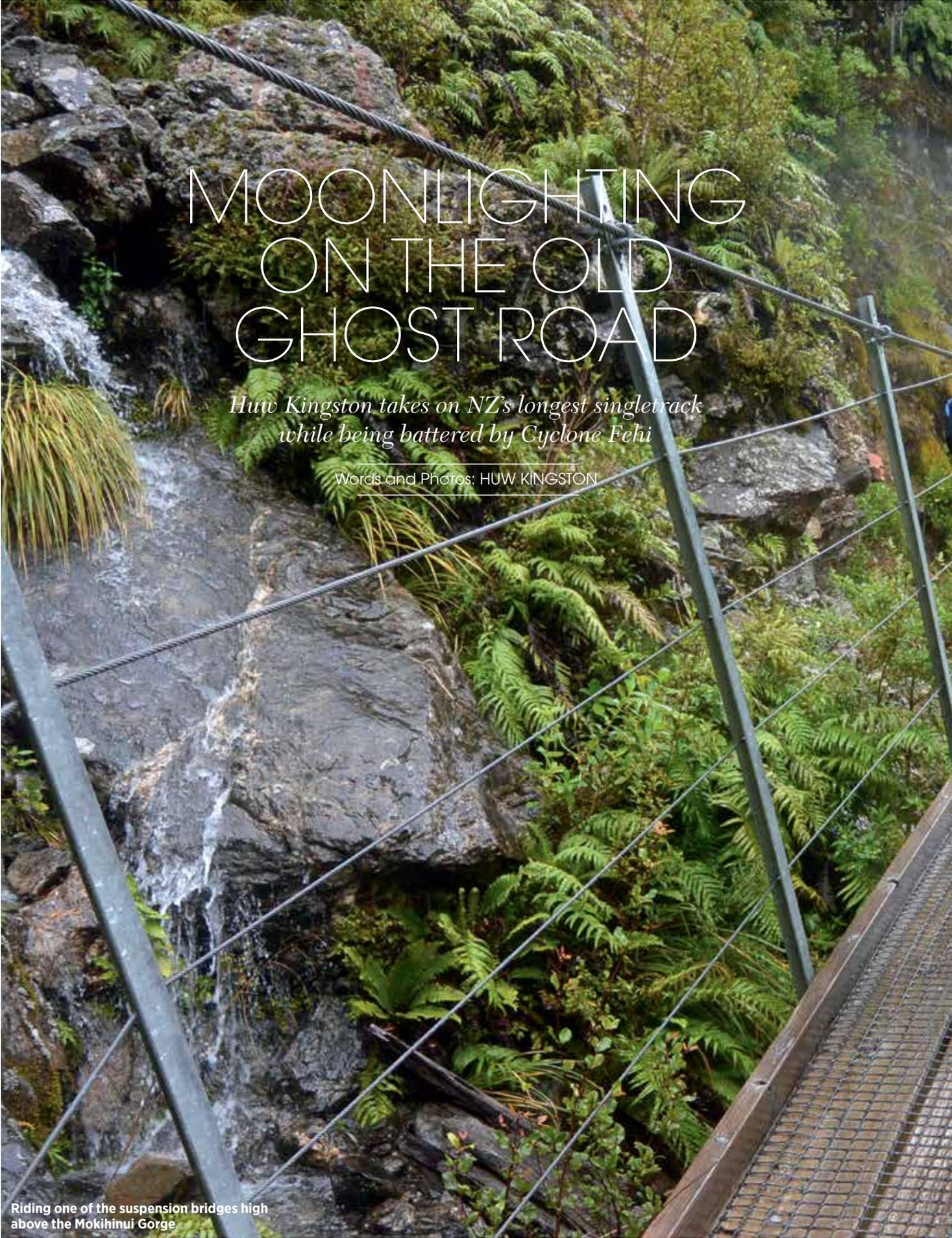
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HIKE

PADDLE

CLIMB

RIDE



# MOONLIGHTING ON THE OLD GHOST ROAD

*Huw Kingston takes on NZ's longest singletrack  
while being battered by Cyclone Fehi*

Words and Photos: HUW KINGSTON



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Riding one of the suspension bridges high  
above the Mokihinui Gorge



Ghost Lake Hut shook violently in the wind. Outside, meanwhile, sheets of rain hammered vertically, horizontally and every angle between at the whim of ex-tropical cyclone Fehi.

A couple of days earlier, over dinner back in Christchurch, 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 and 13-year-old Pearce really wanted to go surfing. But the 31st of January was indeed a blue moon (two full moons in a calendar month). Not only that, but it was a so-called Blue Blood Super Moon, an extremely rare trifecta of blue moon, lunar eclipse and the moon being closest to the earth.

I looked at the can of beer, now empty in my hand. ‘Happy Daze’ was the brew and this was omen enough. I thought of so many trips into the mountains when a bad weather forecast could easily have forced postponement but, by persisting with the mission, had instead led to some of the best memories.

Persistence is doubtless the word best used to describe the creation of the Old Ghost Road. Bloody mindedness are another two. The name indicates that the 85-kilometre trail, New Zealand’s longest singletrack, would be a long-established route. Far from it—when we rode the trail in late January 2018, it had been complete for just two years. However, the gestation period for the trail was indeed long. Long before the mountain bike was born. Some 125 years long.

#### SETTING OUT TO GHOST LAKE HUT

The murderous, blood sucking sand-flies ensured we didn’t hang around at Lyell, the southern trailhead for the Old Ghost Road. New Zealand has little to bite, eat or kill you but the sand-flies...

It was uphill all the way for the first 18 kilometres to Lyell Saddle Hut on a well-graded trail that took most of the pain away. Along the side of the trail were scattered occasional artefacts from another age: an axe head, the rusted blade of an ancient shovel, a pair of moss-covered boots. Back in the late 1800s, Lyell was a thriving boomtown of a thousand residents; a gold rush town now just a roadside camping area. Men explored the hills around it, and a trail was built to Lyell Saddle to serve the quest for gold. The Old Ghost Road roughly followed the line of this trail deep in the beech forest. Tame robins landed on our packs and the flightless weka scratched around in the dirt beyond our wheels. The ‘Big Slips’ brought us out of the forest; massive earthquakes in 1929 and 1968 had torn away the hillside and a thin, gravelly trail inched across the devastation.

Along the Old Ghost Road are five spectacularly located huts that must be pre-booked. The first at Lyell Saddle had been our original target. But with Fehi forecast to hit that night, we stopped only to cook some noodles before pushing on another 12 kilometres to Ghost Lake Hut. The grade steepened as we climbed switchbacks, a little tighter and looser higher up, emerging onto open tussock country and spectacular views of the Lyell Range. With a strong wind blowing and rain threatening, Pearce, an Old Ghost Road old hand (this was his third time), led the way along the exposed traverse line below Rocky Tor (1456 metres). Already the spirit of the trail had me in its thrall, well-satisfied to be up there despite the forecast. Once beyond Heaven’s Door—a gap in

the ridge where the wind tried to dislodge us from our saddles—we enjoyed the fruits of our labours with a long, fun descent to Ghost Lake Hut.

#### BUILDING A GHOST ROAD

At the hut, we found a group of riders from NZ’s North Island already in residence, along with volunteer wardens Lloyd and Jackie, travellers from the UK. With all huts having mattresses and cooking facilities, the trail can be enjoyed travelling pretty light; personal clothing, sleeping bag and food is all that’s required. I sat down with a can of beer, this time simply labelled ‘Beer’, and began to learn the full story of the Old Ghost Road.

Each hut holds a copy of a thin little paperback book. *Spirit to the Stone* should be required reading for anyone interested in trailbuilding, trails in general or indeed in the persistence of a small group of determined individuals with a love of wild places and the 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. In his hand he clutched an old, faded map. Marion ‘Weasel’ Boatwright—American musician, builder and co-owner of Rough and Tumble lodge—welcomed the man in. This 1896 map showed a surveyed road from Lyell through to Mokihinui. But the road was never built, save for the old miners’ track we’d ridden to Lyell Saddle earlier that day and a trail at the other end some distance up the Mokihinui Gorge.

This meeting of men and maps was the catalyst for the building of the trail, so named because it had been but an idea, a mere survey, until then. A ghost. Marion pulled together three other men to chase the ghost out into reality: Stacky, an old West Coast bushman, Phil a local mountain biker and Wayne, who ran a local helicopter business. Hundreds more would travel on the ghost train—government land managers, and volunteer trail 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.

Nothing would stop this train from reaching its destination. Not landslides. Not proposed hydro dams potentially flooding its route. Not funding challenges (the trail eventually cost some NZ\$5.9 million). Not mountains and gorges that would have sent lesser men and women away with their hands in the air, surrendering to 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; now Cyclone Fehi was knocking on the door and keen to pump up the volume. As the morning rolled on, the wind and rain smashed into the hut, threatening to tip it over the precipice alongside. We waited, brewed up, waited...

#### INTO THE STORM

Although we’d later learn that other parts of the South Island were devastated, in truth Fehi was not as bad where we were as we might have expected. By early afternoon, we decided to venture into the deluge and head for Stern Valley Hut, reckoning that—with it being only 13 kilometres away and mostly downhill—we had plenty of time.

“Come on, come on,” Laurence said to me, only half-jok-





Pearce passes the Tombstone on the descent to Ghost Lake Hut



New Zealand

Christchurch



Stacky, one of the legends of the trail



Old miners workboots early on the trail



Laurence traversing below Rocky Tor



Out onto the tops, Rocky Tor behind



Switchback climbing  
above Lyell Saddle

ingly. “No wonder it took you a year to get around the Mediterranean,” smiled Jackie, referring to my long circumnavigation of that sea 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 stepped outside to meet Fehi personally. But we’d only gone 200 metres when we came across Laurence with his bike on his back. “Smashed my bloody derailleur and hanger.”

I knew I needn’t have rushed.

We spent an hour back in the hut fixing his bike, which required some fine sight work. Laurence, a legendary former representative rider for his country, is actually legally blind, but this doesn’t stop him. In 2013 he came close to death after an anaphylactic reaction to a single bee sting. The result meant he was unable to walk or talk; relearning those skills—let alone getting back on the bike—took years. His persistence matched that of the Old Ghost Road builders.

We all left the hut for a second time. As we descended the tightest of rocky switchbacks, water cascaded all around. The switchbacks took us down to a saddle before we ascended a short, steepish climb to Skyline Ridge. Here Fehi pushed us around the most; on this kilometre of exposed ridge top, wind gusts at times forced us to cling to each other for support. The end of Skyline Ridge finishes in a cliff that had posed a major problem for the trail builders. With their never-say-die attitude, Weasel pre-fabricated 302 timber box steps that Wayne helicoptered into the site for installation. At every turn this incredible trail offered something: the riding, the landscape, the story.

By the time we reached the bottom of the steps, Fehi had moved on. We were left to enjoy an insanely fun, 10-kilometre flowing descent to Stern Valley Hut.

## THE RIDE OUT TO ROUGH AND TUMBLE

Rain showers accompanied the early hours of our final day on the Old Ghost Road, but nothing could stop the trail continuing to weave its magic. First came a superbly graded climb through the Boneyard to Solemn Saddle. Then we pinned-back-the-ears for more fun down to 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 sides of the river lived the endangered giant land snail, as did the brush-tail possum (a marsupial pest Australia gifted New Zealand). On one side the possums had learned to hunt the snails; on the other they hadn’t. The idea of the gate was to stop the hunting possums from sharing the knack with their compatriots.

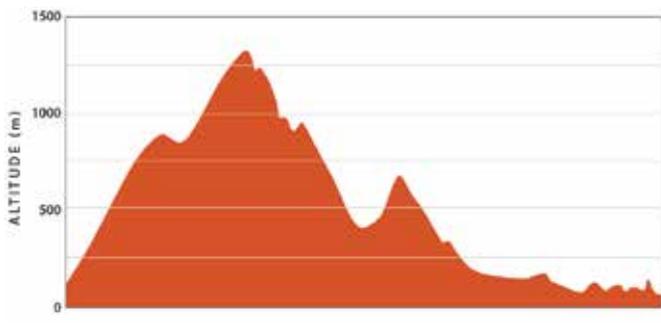
Once across the bridge we headed down the Mokhinui, climbing over numerous trees felled by the storm. Passing Mokhinui Forks Hut, at the junction of the north and south branches, our final trail treat began. The singletrack now picked up the remnants of the old miners’ trail cut into the side of almost vertical gorge walls. Our wheels delicately turned blind corners with the river raging beneath the drops. It all felt Himalayan, with classic gorges protecting the high valleys and mountains above. But here there were no smoky teahouses built into the walls. We made our own tea at Specimen Point, the final hut, which clings 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 legends who’d nursed it to a reality.

In a couple of places the gorge walls had collapsed into the river, leaving a road to nowhere. A problem? Of course not; suspension bridges were just slung across the chasms. It

was beyond one of these that, fortuitously, I had the 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. I had so many questions. Stacky was most generous with his answers.

We finally said farewell and rode the last kilometres to a finish at Rough and Tumble Lodge, the lodge built by Weasel and the place where that 1896 map was delivered.

That 85 kilometres 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 might. Should you? Emphatically no. Savour it and read the book along the way. **W**



**CONTRIBUTOR**

Writer, speaker, adventurer and environmentalist Huw Kingston has spent over 30 years exploring wild places by foot, ski, bike and kayak.



It might not be an Osprey but....

**WHEN TO GO**

The trail and huts are open year round. However the winter months of June-October can be cold, wet and often snowy with occasional avalanche risk. Bad weather can hit the region at any time as we discovered.

**HOW TO GET THERE**

There are regular flights from the major Australian capitals to Christchurch. Most people will ride the trail from south to north; Lyell to Seddonville. 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 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 all information on the trail is the official website [www.oldghostroad.org.nz](http://www.oldghostroad.org.nz). You can check trail conditions, book huts, find information on tours and transport and buy *Spirit to the Stone*. A number of operators run guided MTB tours including Adventure South ([www.adventuresouth.co.nz](http://www.adventuresouth.co.nz)); they include it in their 7 day South Island MTB Adventure.

**FURTHER INFO**

The Old Ghost Road can be ridden or trekked. It must be stressed it isn't a trail for beginner riders given its exposure and technical nature. Huts must be pre-booked, with proceeds from the fees going to ongoing trail improvement.