

Picton to Queenstown Come Rain or Shine

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On the 18th of November 2019, I set out on a bike journey through the south island of New Zealand. Over 26 days, I rode from Picton – after taking a ferry from Wellington – to Queenstown covering 1080km. The following writings are taken from a logbook that was taken to record the experience.

From the outset, the exact route to take was not fixed. As it all unfolded, my nose led me down the south island's rugged west coast; past the scenic beaches of the Paparoa national park, and over the unforgiving hillscapes of glacier country. Initially, the plan was to complete the whole trip wild camping in a hammock, without utilising any kind of civilised accommodation, even campsites. Despite getting off to a good start with this, at about the 2-week mark a heavy storm battered the west coast. While testing my endurance, it rendered wild camping unwise; from here I began to utilise hostels and campsites.

Some of the entries have been modified slightly but the text that follows is for the most part composed of the ordered logbook entries without major addition.

Pre-Departure

Gearing Up 6/11

Preparations are on. Today I purchased the steed - a Kone Rove DL gravel bike. As well as this I bought a gas stove, gas, and a pan to cook with. I've also ordered a hammock and tarpaulin from Amazon. These, along with the clip pedals and shoes posted from the UK by dad have been sent to the Waterloo Hostel in Wellington where I am currently staying.

After returning to the bike shop to get the Kone's pesky mudguards removed, I took the bike out for a spin around the Wellington Botanical Gardens, which to me seemed less like a garden, more like a jungle.



Left, Kone Rove DL gravel bike; right, Tree-ferns in Wellington's botanical gardens.

The bike is good, it's exactly what I was looking for. On-road, it rides smooth and fast, almost imperceptibly slower than a traditional road bike. Crucially though, unlike a road bike, it is right at home on a gravel track, and even a rough trail can be approached with a little care. This added capability opens many doors that are closed to a road bike, especially here in New Zealand.

First Training Ride 6/11

Today, after purchasing a note pad for a logbook, I departed on the first real training ride. Spanning about 40km, it meandered into and around Wellington's neighbouring countryside. At around the mid-point, I took a welcome break at Makara beach, a beautiful little place. I'm really surprised that such a lovely beach could exist so close to a city as large as Wellington while remaining so quiet. Overall, I am pleased with the ride. I feel fit, or at least as fit as one can expect to feel on a *first* training ride; my behind became quite sore, but no doubt it will soon become accustomed; the bike is performing well and I am confident it will serve reliably for the tour. There were a couple

of slight niggles: the handlebars weren't on perfectly straight, they were twisted clockwise relative to the front wheel by a degree or two; a slightly more concerning problem though is that there is sometimes a subtle vibration felt in the pedals when peddling at the higher gears. I don't know whether this should be of concern or not. It might well be fine. I'm pretty sure it will not cause an issue on the tour, but it is this lingering uncertainty that is the real concern.



View at Makara beach.

Apprehension 7/11

This will be quite a big challenge, in fact, it scares me a little. There are some things that could conceivably go wrong. Despite worry though, I am confident that this is the right exercise to undertake. It seems that it will present just sufficient difficulty and complexity to hold me at the cutting edge of my domain of competency, whilst not too much to cast me completely adrift. I have ridden further - the cycle from Leeds to Barcelona was about 1600km. Actually, that trip had the added difficulty of 45°C heat in Spain; not to mention the fact that I was leading a group; and, we did it all in only 13 days. There is no doubt that at least on paper, Leeds to Barcelona was more difficult a test, and in a sense it probably was. But riding down the south island, I will be completely alone, carrying all of my own equipment, and setting up camp un-supported. These extra complications can indeed be mitigated with some simple adjustment - I'll travel slower, and allow for extra time in the evenings. No problem. I sense that the real challenge of the task is not going to be in its physical exertion, rather, that the true test of grit will be internal. It looks like only time will tell.

Something that concerns me slightly is that it may be difficult to find appropriate places to hang the hammock. What if there aren't any trees?

A Turn Off into the Unknown 13/11

Two days ago, I went on the most committed training ride yet. The route started out along the coastline. From the Island Bay area, I continued, persisting in the direction of Makara beach. I planned to follow the coastline for some time, then on finding it, climb a road that would head into the hills, and eventually back to Wellington. Riding the coastal track was tough; Its surface was

mostly made up of large pebbles, which my wheels would often sink into. After some toil on the path, I was excited to find the gravel road leading into the mountains - the one that, on inspection via Google street view, looked like a perfectly agreeable escape from the harsh coastline. On arriving at this track however, my hopes were drowned. At the turn off for this road was a sign saying: "Long Gully Station, Private Property, Keep Out, NO Walkers, NO Runners, NO Mountain Bikes, NO Vehicles, Trespassers Prosecuted".



Another sign, similar to the one on the beach. This one also says 'Dogs shot on sight'.

I was quite intimidated by this sign. Unfortunately though, my position along the coastal track was relatively committed, turning back seemed unthinkable. Google maps had no good alternatives. There was another road leading into the mountains, but it was much further along the coast, and who knows, maybe it also had an equally unwelcoming sign. In smaller print at the base of the sign was written the manager's contact number. Calling it yielded no answer.

Once sufficient hesitation was completed, I decided to take the plunge. Ascending the road was tough; it was no small hill, and the wind was gusting significantly. So much so in fact, that at one point on a particularly exposed hairpin bend, I was, while walking, very grateful indeed to have a heavy bike to hold for stability. At least, that was until its wheels lifted off the ground, leaving me holding it like a sheet in the wind, panniers and all. On the incline of this hill track, I looked back to take in the view. It was quite beautiful indeed - the rugged sea, punctuated by sharply inclined slopes.

During the sightseeing, I noticed that a pickup truck had just left one of the sparsely positioned coastal huts that dot the shoreline. The vehicle was headed for the entrance of my trespassed trail. I was immediately concerned by the thought that they might be coming to ask me to leave. In fear, I hid on the rightmost side of the track, away from the edge. I wanted to see what the truck was doing, but I didn't want to make myself visible. Who knows, he may not have seen me yet. The driver stopped near the turn-off. He exited the vehicle. Thankfully though, he seemed to be occupied with something else. With a rush of relief, I eventually saw him drive on.

Continuing up into the mountains, I began to see some of the true New Zealand wilderness. Un-spoilt hillsides filled the view. Poignantly, there was a whole slope occupied majestically by a colony of tree-ferns. It looked like a scene straight out of Jurassic Park. Further up, I came across the occasional house, highly isolated in this mountain range of another time. I rode quickly past



View from the hill road.

the driveways, head down, scared of being seen. In hindsight, I think that the residents of those houses probably didn't mind that I was using this road; the real problem was Long Gully Station, which was a complex situated further along the track. Thankfully, after all the worry, it was not necessary to pass through it.

Much gravel later, I was back on tarmac. Looking out from a hilltop vantage. The prospect of an exciting down run was omnipresent in my mind.

The Adventure Begins

Setting Sail 18/11

Sitting on the ferry, I watch the north island fade away. On hearing the alarm at 5:30 am, neither I, or Sherry had any intention of rising, or shining. Later, at 6:30 am, the concern of me missing the ferry became sufficient to outweigh the pull of a warm bed. After a somewhat sad farewell, I was rushing to the ferry port. The bike felt heavy; I had ridden it before with full bags, but now there was lots of food on-board too.

Looking forward, I see the unknown. A place where the existence of unmanifested potential and danger lay waiting. Equipped well, I feel ready to probe this uncertainty with commitment. My largest concern is still that of locating places to sleep. In an ideal world, there will be lots of quiet forested areas.

First Day 18/11

As I lay gently swinging, suspended between two trees, I reflect on an eventful day. In Picton, I went straight to the tourist information building, there buying first and foremost, a map; and on impulse, three pocketbooks on New Zealand's birds, insects, and trees. Eventually, after a significant amount of stalling, I embarked out of the town, cycling into the rugged countryside.



Kindly taken by a passing woman after she saw me struggling to do it with a timer.

The scenery was breathtaking; through hills upon hills of untamed vegetation, the road occasionally touched down at remote coastal bays. Despite the large hills of this first stint, I was flying; my

blood was flowing with the rush of adventure.

All went very smoothly for an hour or two, I was having lots of fun. Then, in the distance I saw a flash; a few seconds later, a clap of thunder, a cathartic roar from the gods. Soon dark clouds were moving into my path, coming head-on. As they drew nearer, it was clear that they were heavily depositing. Rain, it looked like, but it was I later found, a biting combination of cold water and hail. Anticipating the encounter, I stopped to prepare. By the time my jacket was on it had begun. Initially, the downpour was light. Not for long. Soon it was torrential, and back on the bike, I was soaked and being pummeled by clumps of water and fragments of ice.

Thankfully, just like it came, suddenly, the storm departed. The clouds fractured releasing powerful rays of sunshine. Clouds of vapour emanated from the road surface; steaming up to create a numinous atmosphere, beautiful and harsh.



Sights from the winding hill road out of Picton.

First Night 19/11

As evening fell yesterday, I began to think of a camping spot. It was mostly farmland that the road was passing through; an expansive plane of fields that only gave way to forests at the edges, where pine hills rose. At around 5 pm I saw an unused looking track that headed up into one of these forested hills. Immediately, I committed to exploring it. Leaving my bike out of sight, I ventured up. A foul smell soon revealed itself as a rotting dead cow. Passing it quickly after a curious look, I pressed further up the track. A short while later, I spied a potential spot hidden from view in the trees; it was littered conveniently with evenly spaced pines.

After hauling the bike and bags up to the camp, I set up the hammock for the first time. gingerly getting in, it was a novel experience; soothing to be gently swinging in the silent perch, yet exposed, alone in an unknown land.

Dinner was a boil in the bag Bombay biryani, some noodles, and powdered soup. Cooking and eating it transported me to the rugged yet homely feel of top camp on the CUCC Austria expedition; there we ate exactly this food, even the same brands.

The night was cold. I uncovered one of the main challenges of hammock camping: your weight compresses the sleeping bag, reducing its insulative capability. This combined with the cool air which sweeps through the trees, licking the swinging hammock's base, is a recipe for a really cold bum. Hence a cold night. Tonight I will try fixing the tarp closer to the hammock's sides. Reducing the draft, it will hopefully dampen the chilling effect. Some clothes under bum will probably help too.



First night's camping set up.

Day 2: A Long Road A Pesky Head-Wind 19/11

Today's cycling was draining. I chose to take route 63 from Renwick to St Arnaud. The road, which I am still on, is fine, apart from some very big lorries that blast past, leaving me feeling constantly on-edge. It is long; Route 63 is mostly set in a straight line, trailing for over 90km through a wide valley. The views have been nice, but going has been tough with an energy-sapping headwind that has persisted for the whole day.

A suitable camping spot presented itself next to a wide river, just before the Kowhai Point Camping Area.



Pictures from the morning of day 3. Left, looking back down the Wairau river, just beyond the previous camp; right, looking forward towards the mountain range which towers over St Arnaud.

Day 3: 21/11

Yesterday, the cycling was far more enjoyable than that of the day before; thankfully, it included some variation. A rewarding long steady hill climb started the day, and from here, smooth descents

took me into St Arnaud. I went down to the lake there, huge mountains lay in the backdrop. Exploring, I ventured into the forest. No Kiwis to be seen yet.

I got a video call from some friends from back home. David and Ben were at the caving society's weekly pub meetup; the time was 2 am there. It was nice to catch up, and they introduced me to some new faces in the club. While on the phone, I noticed that the rain was coming in. The background mountains were shrouded by an advancing grey haze. It was time to move. Saying goodbye I prepared for the downpour; jacket on, rain cover attached to rucksack. In the biting cold rain, I departed St Arnaud in a hurry, forgetting to fill up with water.

What followed was a series of long, straight, gradually descending roads through some spectacularly located farmland. Then leading to a section that snaked through some forest hills. Rain showers periodically came and left, leaving bright sunshine in the gaps. My body was no longer cold though, so I didn't mind the showers so much. Before heading on to Murchison, I planned to



Left, lake Rotoiti from St Arnaud; right, forested hills around Kawatiri.

make a detour to Lake Rotoroa. A smaller country road lead there. Despite being labelled as only 11km, it seemed to drag on for much longer.

Getting to the lake at about 6 pm, I immediately head along a 'nature walk' into the indigenous New Zealand forest, looking for a location out of sight to hang the hammock. Leaving my bike hidden near the path's beginning, I ventured into numinous untamed woods. In the end, my camping spot was quite close to the start, but while walking I was continually drawn deeper and deeper into the forest, pulled by an awe of its beauty. It was like stepping foot on a new planet, one similar to home, but noticeably different in a number of ways. The ground is littered with a species of fern, kind of like the tree ferns but smaller in leaf and close to the ground; its leaves are hard, crispy almost. The path ran along the lakeside. Occasional clearings reveal a towering snow-capped mountain range in the distance. Closer to shore, the pure clarity of the water shows a bed of white sand. Differing from English forests, many of the tree trunks are coated with a black substance. I can't tell if this is produced by the trees, or if it is an external lichen or moss-like plant. Also, I notice that here there is more of a prevalence of epiphytes; trees are often home to multiple climbing species, and various mosses, some that drape down creating a mystical aesthetic.

As night drew in I set up camp and ate dinner: couscous and a bag of tofu curry.

Day 4: A Home In The Woods 21/11

I decided to stay in this forest for 2 nights, with the day in between as a time to rest, wash clothes, and explore the area. I am now writing this at 16:15 on that day. After some clothes washing in a



Clear water at the edge of Lake Rotoroa.

nearby river, and a good lay in, I went for a walk along the lakeside. Stopping at a small beach, I went for a quick skinny dip to wash and then cooked some warm soup to recover from the ice-cold water. Some more walking done, I've stopped again to write this and brew some tea. The cup



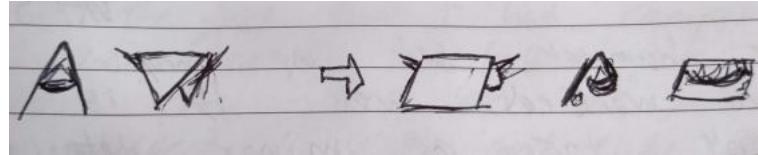
Washing spot.

Sherry lent me is now filled with some very over-brewed tea. Why is the tea over-brewed? When it was cooking I was sitting on a bit of a slope, just above a very large tree trunk that lay head down in the water; I was resting my foot against its flat cut section. As I was writing, the whole trunk started to shudder, just a little, but periodically, jolting from time to time. At first, I passed it off as simply my foot slipping against its resting point, causing the unexpected sensation. On closer inspection however, I realised that the whole trunk, which was really quite large, was moving. My mind jumped to the possibility of an earthquake. This scared me quite a bit, as the slope I was on,

I noticed, looked pretty land-slide susceptible. Jumping up, I moved away holding only this pad and pen, leaving the tea and stove behind. Waiting a little while in what felt like a safer place, nothing happened. I gingerly edged back, picked up the cooking equipment, and moved the set-up elsewhere. In hindsight, I think the tree was probably shuddering due to the waves lapping against it in the lake.

Here in the forest, there is no phone service. This would be fine apart from the fact that Sherry and I have been in daily contact; I didn't inform her that I won't be reachable for two days. Hopefully she isn't worried.

Tonight, my hammocking style will change. Specifically the tarp's position; instead of a diagonal



Sketch from the logbook of experimental new hammocking tarp style.

fixture, it will be set with sides parallel to the direction of the hammock's hang. One taught slanted side will be fixed to the ground at both corners, serving as a windbreak and baggage shelter; the other side will wrap loosely underneath the hammock underside. This will create a small space between hammock and tarp which air can become trapped in, acting as an insulative layer.



Camp in the forest set back from the banks of Lake Rotoroa.

Day 5: A Scenic Pit-Stop 22/11

The hammock set up would have worked well with warmth if it wasn't for a minor detail: I was completely soaked. Unfortunately, the cycling clothes that I washed yesterday didn't dry off fully by nightfall. The major problem in this is that my cycling clothes are also my sleeping clothes. I tried drying the clothes by wearing them around camp while making dinner. This was to no avail. As a result, the night was spent in a damp, gradually cooling cocoon of nylon and polyester.

Waking cold at 6 am, I slowly packed up and prepared for another day on the road. Just as I was exiting the wooded area, two people bumped into me, an older couple. They didn't say much of it but I could sense a slight unhappiness in them with the fact that I had camped in the woods. We talked for a while; they were on a walk to inspect a landslide on the path. Our conversation ran without smoothness, maybe due to the elephant in the forest of my camping. They were local. Maybe I should have been more forthcoming with a confessional explanation.

Soon after departing, I was in search of a bin, 2 days of refuse was in my rucksack. I asked an old lady wandering by a flower bed if she could direct me to one. She informed me that there aren't any bins here but kindly offered to take the rubbish for me. We talked; she had admiration for England; she told me of her plans to visit Scotland, saying that her ancestors were from there.

Setting off for real, I noticed a gravel track leading up into the hills. It featured a sign pointing to Murchison. A quick check of the map later, I changed the planned route and took it, skipping a large section of the main road. It was a blast; winding, undulating gravel road led me through the hills. Cars were few and far between so the road was mine to enjoy, a good choice. Somewhere along it, I checked for phone service; there was 3G signal. I quickly went to WhatsApp to inform Sherry that I was alive. She had worried more than I feared, in fact, she was quite angry. We called and I was met with a flurry of words. She spoke of what she was going to do with me, all the ways she would kill me for making her so worried. It was nice to hear her voice again. I don't think I know anyone who is quite as cathartic in speech as Sherry. It's a trait I admire in her. problems arise, I think, when people censor their emotional experience too much.



Gravel road between Rotoroa and Murchison.

Arriving in Murchison, I stopped at the Four Square supermarket for food, and then at the Lazy Cow backpackers hostel to charge my phone, head torch, and battery pack. The supermarket felt like an alien spaceship after spending so long in the woods and natural environment. Hungry, I put item after item into the basket; not able to decide on a brand of hot chocolate powder, I bought 4 packs - one of each. Something of a surprise feeling passed me when the checkout price totalled \$80. Oh well, better to be overstocked than under. That is of course only true if it all fits in the bags. Lightening the load somewhat, I ate a lunch of 5 bananas and 2 full packets of Oreos.

The hostel owner kindly let me charge my devices. I paid him a nominal fee of \$10. Walking into the clean and tidy hostel, I felt filthy; I was probably very smelly indeed, but my nose had become



Murchison.

blind to it. Speaking of my route, the man told me of a section of coastline that was considered a must-not-miss among road trippers, the Paparoa national park section of the west coast. My plans changed to accommodate it.

Starry Night 23/11

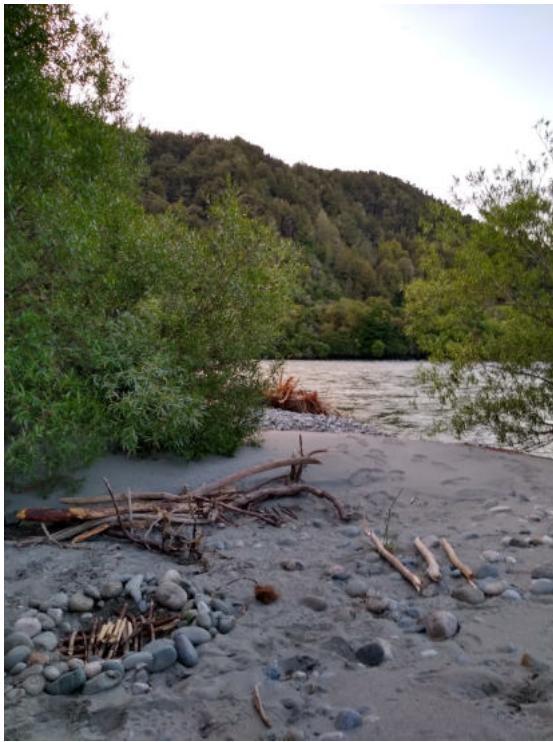
With a charged phone, I departed Murchison at around 5 pm yesterday. Evening was fast approaching. It wasn't long before the location of a sleeping spot was forefront in my mind. I saw a stony track heading up into the forests of a hill. Ascending it, my hopes were high. Unfortunately though, a house gradually revealed itself between the trees. I departed immediately.

A while later, there was a short track turning off the main road. It lead down to a rough car-park-like platform, topped with gravel, and home to a bus that had clearly been on fire. Quite a spectacle. From here, I saw a continuation down to an expansive stony river bank. Exploring, I found some light riverside trees perched in the sand. On testing their strength, they were highly flexible; I decided to hammock between them anyway, clustering a few together on each side for added rigidity.

The following night was one to remember. Metres away was an epic river: wide, and with very fast-flowing water; its peaceful power was intimidating. Mountains surrounded the valley basin. Apart from the occasional far off passing of a car or lorry, and some distant pylons, I was the only sign of humanity. With night drawing in I ate dinner, discovering the magical combination of musli and hot chocolate powder. As darkness fell, I set up and lit a fire in the sand, cheating with the use of a roaring gas stove. A meditative state lit by firelight and a blazing star dotted sky continued long into the night until the concept of sleep became too sweet.

Day 6: Lazy Day 23/11

Waking at 6 am I endeavoured to begin a proactive day with an early start to cycling. This motivation soon transitioned into a desire to lay in the hammock and read for an hour or so. Returning to the warmth of my sleeping bag, this intention genuine, I immediately fell asleep. 5 hours later, I awoke, a new man. Feeling lazy though, it wasn't before 1 pm that I set off.



Left, camping spot by the river; right muesli and hot chocolate powder.



A small domain of known-ground, nested within the great unknown.

Today's route was that of the Buller Gorge. Snaking through untamed forested mountains, the road ran above the Buller river. On entering the scenic road section, an old man on a motorbike was coming the other way. Riding in a boiler suit with one of those old pilots helmets; he looked very happy indeed; his whole face was made up of one giant grin. He raised a palm high and shouted a big friendly 'Hi!' as we passed. In shy English fashion, I sheepishly said 'Hi there.', and continued. His apparent mood gave me high expectations of the road to come.

Working through the forest route was almost entirely spent struggling up a hill, or sailing down one. Despite the added effort of climbing, this is a style of riding that I enjoy greatly - it's just like home in the Lake District. When lunchtime came I uncovered the nifty trick of holding a snack food in the front right bike bag. Leaving it open, I could reach the peanuts and dates while riding.



The Buller river - spot the jet-boat.

At about 5:30 pm, I spoke with Sherry, we called, talking about nothing in particular. The call lasted quite a while, meaning that I was somewhat stressed later in pursuit of a sleeping location, but it was nice to hear her voice. I found a good spot anyway. Now, perched in a hammock, just off the road on a wooded hill, I will sleep.

Day 7: Visitors in the night I 24/11

Before going to bed, I decided to put all of my food into two drybags, and hang them at either end of the hammock. The initial motivation to do this stemmed from the realisation that I had set up camp directly on top of an ants nest. Later, at about 2 am, I woke. There was a loud rustling noise coming from the area of my baggage. Patting myself on the back for hanging the food, I tried to ignore it and get back to sleep. On waking up in the morning I came to discover that my rubbish bag had been studiously emptied; its contents distributed across the surrounding forest floor. On closer inspection, it was visible that the individual pieces of rubbish had been chewed by small mouths. Rats I assume. Particularly, a curry packet 3m from its initial residence in the bin, lay chewed open and licked clean. At least with the curry residue used up, I will be carrying less weight! I make a point of eating *before* picking up the pieces, and rinsing the pan prior to use.

In addition to the rubbish eaters, I had an interesting first encounter with a tree wētā. See it pictured below.



Left, the male tree wētā (With the corresponding female pictured on the white book.); right, chewed open, and licked clean curry packet.

Drizzle Hills Drizzle Coastline 24/11

Soon after leaving camp, it started to rain. I began to feel small among the untamed forest hills. Powering through, rain in face, it was a good exercise in perseverance.



Wet forest hills.

Eventually, I reached the west coast flatlands; emersed in a soft drizzle, I continued with head down. The coastal road delivered me to a wet barren wasteland; wild expanses of heather scrubland were interspersed with occasional fields of damp farmland. Despite the conditions, I started to feel good. The roads were flat and straight, but the wind seemed to be coming from behind, progress was quick. A sign saying 'NO FULE FOR 90km' drove me further to push on.

At about 2:30 pm, a hard sun burst through the cloud. The road began to steam. In lighter spirits, I stopped at the Charlestown gold mine museum. As I was looking around the entrance section, reading some information boards, the owner popped in and we began to talk. He was clearly an outdoorsy type, probably in his mid-30s. We talked about hammocking, he spoke of finding very

cheap jungle hammocks in Cambodia, on sale for \$10; we speculated that it would be a good idea to sell them in NZ at a marked up price. The conversation was in part fueled by a shared love of outdoor activities, but it felt weird to be talking after so much time spent alone. He invited me to walk around the mine track without paying the \$10 fee. The trail led into the mine itself. I enjoyed running through the dark tunnels. At one point, I ventured into a side tunnel. A little way in I noticed a large insect on the floor, large enough to span the palm of your hand. The cave wētā (their name I later learned) is like a stubby grasshopper with legs and antennae that are very long in relation to its body. Intrigued, I went to take a picture. Suddenly, I noticed a congregation of these creepy crawlies on the wall, it was a little startling, but cool, I thought. The feeling of fear sharply tilted into the majority, however, when I noticed that these creatures were everywhere. The walls and ceiling in front of me started to crawl and hop. Turning quickly to exit, I was spiked with a third pulse of fright; more of them layered the tunnel surfaces behind and above me - I was surrounded. I'm not usually someone who is bothered by insects, but this predicament tested me somewhat. Finishing and exiting the trail, I happily paid the \$10 fee as a sign of gratitude, then proceeded to sit on a bench and cook noodles.



Tunnels of the old Charlestown gold mine.

Alone In The Fog 24/11

Later, back on the road, fog swept in, filling the horizon. I was slowly edging my small field of vision through the great wilderness of the west coast. The surrounding scrubland was concerningly void of trees. Worried about finding a resting place, I constantly scanned the limited environment that was allowed into view by the fog. Some trees did emerge from time to time, but they all seemed to be in really quite unsuitable locations, often part of a dense shrub-land, and also commonly part of private land that looked unwelcoming. Entering deeper into the national park however, my wishes were granted. I came across some trees that continued down a decline to a suitable wooded camping place. It was nicely situated just off from the banks of a picturesque river.



Left, a New Zealand Pigeon; right, the river just down from camp.

Day 8 Visitors In The Night II 25/11

At about 11:30 pm yesterday, I was lying peacefully in the hammock, trying to get to sleep. Out of nowhere, I was startled by a loud tinny bang. My pan had been knocked firmly; it may have collided with the lid to make the noise. Darn, rats again I thought. A similar occurrence took place at about 2 am. The night was not one of sound restorative sleep; the 5 am freeze only added to this fact. Waking from the cold, I began to notice further rustling. Were the rats still at it? Before going on, it is worth mentioning that at the time of this writing, 11:30 am, I was interrupted again by the very creature you are about to read about. Cold and annoyed at 5, I exit the hammock to scare off those blighters. I saw in shadow the perpetrator of this invasion; it looked way too big to be a rat. A big round fur-ball was moving among the rubbish, picking at it loudly. Hang on, those are feathers, not fur. It's a bird! Yes, it was a weka. I recalled reading about them the day before in the bird identification book. Apparently they are a notorious pest to hikers. Things began to make sense; I think there was a weka present the night before as well; it did seem a bit loud to be only rats. I began to throw sticks at it to make it leave. Sticks turned to stones when it bravely held its ground. The weka's persistence really impressed me; I would throw something at it, missing only by a hair, then after a brief retreat of a meter or so, it would come right back every time. The exchange lasted for some time. In hindsight, I am grateful that none of my stone throws made contact. I was tired, cold, and the weka was actually pissing me off. The baseball-sized rocks were not intended as warning shots. An aggressive side of me had emerged that is usually held dormant. After an early breakfast, I proceeded back to sleep. Waking to sunshine, the afternoon was spent in bed, feeling wrecked, filthy, and completely de-motivated. This was the lowest I had been on the ride so far. Picking up the pieces, I decided that it would be a good idea to wash clothes and body in the nearby river. It was significantly warmer than Rotoroa lake dip, but still quite exhilarating. Seeing murky clouds emerge from my socks, I began to feel really quite sorry for the surrounding aquatic life. The wash served me well. Strapping the wet clothes to my rucksack, I departed at 4 pm. From here the day picked up. Reaching the sea, I started to feel good. Presented with a taxing coast road, I put on my most offensive drum and bass set and cracked on with zeal. Burning the candle at both ends with a blowtorch, I was bombing down, and up, the seaside hills. Under the dazzling sun, I felt that raw state of channelled insanity that this intense music brings on in me with such reliability.

Less than 3 hours after setting off, I was spent, and began to think of camp. My ambition was to get as close as possible to Greymouth before settling down for the night. There, the next day I



Left, mysterious shape in the darkness; right, troublesome weka.

planned to restock on food, gas and electricity.



A beach on the west coast.

Day 9: Apprehension of a pitstop 26/11

The chosen camp spot of the previous night was located about half a kilometre down a stony riverside track, hidden in some tree ferns. At night, under a magnificent starry sky, I spoke to Sherry. This was confined to text though; we tried calling but the network was too weak.

Despite the cold of the night, the sleep was comfortable; it seems I have this hammock thing figured out. One side of the tarp is wrapped underneath the hammock, attached at one side with elastic to prevent over tensioning in the tarpaulin material (I learned the necessity of this the hard way after one of the tarp's connecting loops was torn off.). Interestingly, I tried placing my book, Gandhi's autobiography, in-between the hammock and the tarp. Thinking about it later, this could be a powerful trick. It forces a small air gap between hammock and tarp, causing improved insulation. I will repeat the method, and may experiment further by putting other items in-between,

maybe a jacket.

Feeling quite lazy, I didn't set off until 3 pm. Oh well, better than yesterday's 4 pm, I thought. Today's riding so far has been a pleasure; untamed coastal beauty, seasoned with warm sunshine. I reached Greymouth at about 5 pm. It feels like a real step back in time here, like a green, coastal wild west. That is of course apart from the behemoth supermarkets on the outskirts. On arriving, I was apprehensive. would I find gas? Would I find a phone charging facility? Leaving late after the pit-stop, would it be dark; would I find a place to sleep? The whole predicament felt very uncertain.

Now, at 8:30 pm, sitting writing this in a Subway, I feel comfortable mooching off their warmth and power for 3 hours after paying \$3.80 for a small coffee. Gas was obtained from the large neighbouring hardware store, The Warehouse; and leaving my things in Subway, I walked over to Countdown, a supermarket. There, I spent \$57 on lots and lots of food. After returning to Subway, I walked across the road, sat on a bus stop bench, and ate a feast: a pizza slice from the bakery with a full pot of cottage cheese, and 3 large oranges. Earlier in the week, I felt that my vitamin C may be low, hence, these oranges were a true delight.

Come 9 pm, Subway will close. I will leave with however much electricity has been collected by then; proceed to pack a larder of food into some inappropriately small bags; and venture into the dark unknown countryside, hoping to find hidden trees to sleep in.

Day 10: Long Break By The Lake 28/11

Thankfully, I managed to find some trees the other night, climbing into the hammock at 00:30 am in the end. Waking early, I departed at 9 am, optimistic of the day ahead. I had decided to take something of a detour. Instead of going straight from Greymouth to Hokitika, following the west coast's main road, I would head inland on some smaller roads, looping around Lake Brunner via Moana.

The day started well; I listened to two introductory lectures while covering good ground. Both the first lecture of Jordan Peterson's psychology of personality course, and that of Robert Sapolsky's on human behavioural biology gripped my interest strongly. I decided that on arriving in Hokitika, I would exploit the free month of YouTube's premium service using it to download the rest of each lecture series. Over the trip, I have also been listening to JPs book: Maps of Meaning. It talks broadly on the origins and purpose of religion, and myths from various cultures. Recently, its been talking about the reasons people voluntarily expose themselves to the forces of the unknown; which mythologically speaking is also known as the great mother, the creator and destroyer of all things. I have found the section particularly interesting, not least because in a way, that's what I'm doing now.

At some point, the road turned to gravel. That's fine, it was still somewhat smooth, and I could roll fast. Continuing into the bush, sections of shrub-filled scrubland, occasional forest, and the odd bit of farmland. Gradually, as the track lead further into the woods, it became more stony, a bit harder going, requiring more thought. I became cautious, worried about the fixtures of my heavy pannier bags; under previous pressures, I have discovered that they can bend out of shape.

At a river crossing, I stopped for a snack: an orange, a Thai coconut, and some warm soup. Filled up with water from the river, I pressed on, to my emerging dismay, the road got stonier and stonier. I began to muse on how, in life, in times of prosperity, it can actually be best to favour a path of higher resistance. Thus making oneself stronger and more resilient in preparation for inevitable harder times, where it will be required. On looking at the map, I had made a wrong turn. In a somewhat committed location along the alternative route, and in accordance with the above philosophy, I decided to continue with the new path. Google maps clearly suggested that it was to join the main road. Sometime later, in a significantly more committed location - after

battling along what would be better described as a rocky hiking trail than a road - I came across a gate: 'Aratika Farm, Private Road, No Trespassing'. Oh dear. As much as I like breaking the rules, there's something about trespassing in New Zealand that makes me uneasy. I think this is due to the combination of two factors: I don't really understand the culture here yet, and from what I can understand, there seems to be more respect between people and for authority here than in England. Not even thinking of the prospect of redoing that rocky nightmare of a road, I gingerly proceeded. The farmer's track was seemingly endless. As it slowly worked its way down a large hill, I could see



Trespassing.

the farmhouse. The road was mostly hidden from its line of sight, apart from a temporary clearing near the base of the hill. Unfortunately though, adjacent to the road were fields of many cows. These eliminated any feeling of secrecy by becoming absolutely intrigued by my presence, galloping towards and alongside the track, coming from far and wide. Nobody came from the house. I did, however, run into a tractor coming the other way. Stopping in advance to let him pass with an embarrassed, but overtly friendly wave. I was met by a stare, primarily of scorn, but with a dash of confusion, from the young-man in the driver's seat.

Eventually getting back on the tarmac road again, it led to Lake Brunner. Here I stopped for what turned into a 3-hour lunch break, not least because of a long phone call with Sherry.

Soon after setting off, I had a rapid onset malfunction of health. All of a sudden, the whole world started to become layered with a peculiar numinosity. Everything began to feel intense. Before realising I was ill, this initial effect was actually quite interesting. I was powerfully gripped by the present moment. Then however, it started with a cold sweat, and a feverish feeling. The world began to be drawn away from me. This accompanied a feeling of dizziness, and slight disassociation from my body. I need to find water, and then shelter immediately, I thought. Stopping at a roadside stream, I quickly dosed all 3 bottles of water with the necessary amounts of chlorine solution. While this was in preparation, I shakily took 2 tablets of paracetamol, at first dropping one of them in the packet; and then industriously peeled and ate an orange. Back on the move, I became worried, no sleeping spots were presenting themselves. I felt small in a big world. At one point I left the road, stumbling down a loose slope thick with vegetation, hoping in vain that it would offer someplace to sleep. Eventually finding a place to camp, I ate a large dinner, and got into bed, passing out.

Day 11: Recovery 28/11

I always like being in the hammock; it's comfortable, but particularly I like the protection of the bug-net. Flies - both sandflies and mosquitos - are something of an issue in this trip, my hands and ankles itch daily, peppered with bites. This comfort was shattered at 2 am when I woke to find the bug nets zip wide open. Looking up, mosquitoes hovered silently inside the net. Now completely wide awake with adrenalin, I began to make a studious effort towards killing them. In the end, there was only 3 or 4, but disturbingly, the second one killed left a big red splodge between my palms; she had already found her mark.

After quite a nice sleep I woke with a very swollen right hand. Despite in general feeling dramatically better than yesterday, I spent the whole day in bed, writing this at 5:30 pm. Before making dinner and going to bed, I ventured down to the river; in the most private location available, I washed clothes and took a bath.



Left, clothes washing and bathing spot; right, the view from it.

Day 12: Folly And Full Speed Ahead 30/11

Sitting in a Subway in Hokitika, I wait for the lecture series to download while reflecting on the thrills of yesterday's ride. With an early start, I set off feeling enriched; illness departed; drive restored. I planned to take the road to Inchbonnie, continue on the highway to Kumara, then, taking gravel tracks, reach a point just shy of Hokitika to camp. This perfectly suitable plan was quickly departed from. On route to Inchbonnie, I somehow managed to take an unplanned turn that introduced a gravel trail which dramatically veered from the intended highway route. It tracked north instead of south, of Mount Treacey, bringing me back into contact with Lake Brunner, but from the opposite side to Moana this time. This folly of route-finding, unlike that of two days prior, was not of significant consequence. In fact, in the end, I really enjoyed the accidental diversion. Traversing it in focused silence, the time was spent in the state of internal regeneration that I have sought from this journey. Eventually arriving in Kumara, I stop at a convenience store. Here I buy a magnum ice cream, a pack of Mcvities chocolate digestives, an apple, and two bananas. The cashier correctly identified me as English, based on the fact that I had chosen the Mcvities. Sitting in the sun outside, I proceed to sequentially consume all of these food items. The 1500 calorie pack of chocolate digestives made my skin tingle, and generally feel quite funny.

Outside the public toilets, I come across an information board telling of the local West Coast Wilderness Cycle Trail. I see that part of it tracks 72km from Kumara to my desired location,



Lake Brunner from the opposite side to Moana.

Hokitika. After some hesitation, I decide to make a further departure from the day's plan and take the route. I was intrigued by its path into the mountains to a place called Cowboy's Paradise. After giving the food some time to find its seat, I embarked for this wilderness trail. Soon into the route, it was clear that the decision to take it was a good one. The track was narrow, quiet, and relatively smooth. Traipsing along a lakeside and through woods, it would occasionally offer sections of undulating twists and turns. Despite being fully laden with panniers, the Kona Rove tore these trails up without hesitation. Lifted in spirit by the omnipresent natural beauty, and turbocharged by some 2000 calories of sugary junk food, I knocked back the first 30 km of this track as if it were a pop to the shops.

The chosen camping location, ironically named 'Cess Pool' was situated by a beautiful wide blue river among majestic towering forested mountains. Here I was alone. Well not quite; I would be if it wasn't for the innumerable swarming sandflies that quick-and-heavily congregated any place that was stopped at for more than 60 seconds. For the first time on the ride, I was forced to eat dinner whilst briskly walking.

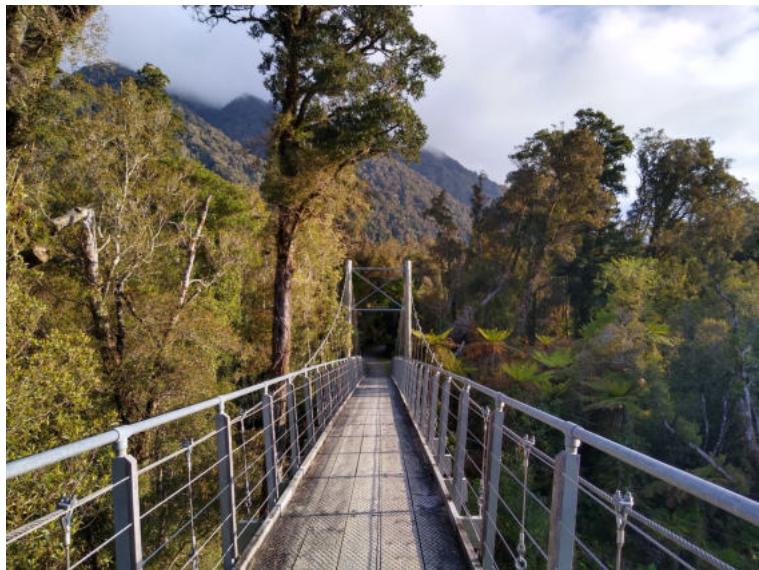
Day 13: Ready For The Rain 30/11

Setting off early, I quickly reach Hokitika to restock. The week ahead looks to be laden with stormy weather; on every day for the next 7 it is forecast to rain. I feel somewhat apprehensive towards this, especially with regard to camping. I do however think that it will be a good experience. It will step up the challenge of the ride to the next appropriate level of difficulty. We wouldn't want things to be too easy now would we?

Checking the map, it is now 489km to Queenstown. I expect the trip to transition in nature. Up until now, it has been easy going; I've been getting to grips with things, not pushing too hard. Going forward, equipped with experience, I intend to step it up a notch. Not quite to a head-down, formation focussed racing mode, but at least to somewhere in that direction.



Left, Kapitea Reservoir at the begining of the West Coast Wilderness Trail; right, a sandy bottomed river with very clear water.



Left, bridge on the West Coast Wilderness Trail; right, track through the bush at Cess Pool.



Left, the trail winding down towards Cess Pool; right, looking up the valley at Cess Pool.

The Storm

Day 14: A Hitch-Hiker In The Rain 1/12

After finishing yesterday's writing, I went to buy food, then ate a feast for dinner overlooking the mouth of the Hokitika River. The meal consisted of a large flat loaf of bread covered with cheese and caramelised onions from the supermarket bakery, a pot of cottage cheese, half a kilogram of hummus, a bag of rice crackers, and an apple. Soon after leaving Hokitika, I found a place to sleep in some woods. Nightfall was decorated by the chirping sound of surrounding tree wētās, brushing their hind legs; correctly pointed out by the book on New Zealand's insects, this sounds remarkably similar to a fingernail run across a comb.



Dinner by the Hokitika River.

With the new day came expected rainfall. Beginning in force soon after I set off. It stayed a prominent feature throughout the day; there were occasional let-ups and ease-offs, but these occupied a minority of the time. A long straight gravel track eventually arrived at a village called Ross. Riding through, I briefly noticed a woman sheltering from the rain under a shop-front cover. Something was odd about her, but I didn't give it much thought. Seeking shelter myself, I stumbled on an outside roofed section of a gold mining museum; here, taking stock of the situation. There was a water point across the road and a grocery store in the village centre. In a period where the rain began to ease, I proceeded to the store. After buying a can of beans, some garlic nut-like snack from the Philippines, and a large bag of chocolate cookies; and partaking in small talk with the cashier, I sat down at a table outside to heat the beans. Before the stove came out, the woman I noticed previously approached me and asked of my travels, just making conversation. We started

talking about our respective circumstances and plans. She told me of her objective of hitch-hiking to Fox Glacier, about 130km south. It was especially nice to converse with Bella (as I later found out her name to be). Not least because I've been sleeping in the woods, on my own, for 2 weeks, in almost complete solitude. We were immediately connected by our shared position as lost souls in a big world. Actually, Bella seemed to be somewhat more lost and alone than myself. She was in fact a girl rather than a woman; furthermore, her plans and situation seemed to be strikingly tenuous. Firstly, she looked very cold. Her footwear consisted of slipper-style rubber sandals (no socks); she was wearing very casual looking clothes under a long thin rain cover. I felt cold just looking at her. She pointed to a small mountain of luggage, with many pieces, studiously piled up against the wall. On a rough piece of cardboard, she had written 'Fox Glacier' in large, but very thin-lined letters; I didn't make it out on my initial sighting of her. Apparently, she been standing in the rain, waiting to be picked up for 2 hours, and was starting to lose hope. No wonder, I thought. Bella was on a working holiday visa as well, and came from Taiwan. As we talked of her culture, I began to understand her apparent naivety towards hitch-hiking here in a westernised country. She spoke with pride about how people in Taiwan are always ready to offer a hand to those who ask for one. I believed every word she said on the matter. It all fit nicely alongside my impression, limited as it may be, of the culture in Manila, Philippines. In the 10 hours I was there on the flight connection, it was clear that the people interact very differently to how they do in England. Poignantly, pedestrians walk out freely into oncoming traffic; with just a wave and some eye contact, the drivers stop. Weirdly, I kept catching direct eye contact with drivers; seeing me startled, they quickly looked away, maybe confused a little. In talking about the cultural differences, she spoke a sentence that caught my attention sharply. It fascinated me so much that I interrupted, and then quizzed her on it. 'People here think too much'. The explanation, simple as it was, immediately crystallized in my head an understanding of the wisdom of the eastern cultures. You might say: so what, people here think too much and it causes problems - I already knew this of course. It was specifically from Bella that I gained the insight that one of these problems is that people are integrated with, and help each other out less. From here, we began to talk about Buddhism. Bella was fascinated by my interest in it, and I was fascinated by her description of a cultural environment where it lay the foundations. Despite a growing appreciation in me for the mythology and teachings of Christianity, I can't help but feel that Buddhism, at least in the way it has been presented to me, is easier to swallow in a scientifically minded society. This may be less the case if people were to understand the true nature and purpose of Christianity's biblical stories and ideas. Specifically the fact that they don't have any exact reality in the objective historical world of objects and physical events. Rather, that they have utility, only in providing insight into phenomena in the realm of subjective experience and affective meaning. But of course, my views and understandings are of yet underdeveloped and nowhere near the big picture, on either side of the mythological fence; there will no doubt be many important details I am yet to uncover.

Bella and I's conversations were interspersed by a repeating event: A car or van would pass, she would walk out with thumb up and sign presented, then return as the car passed by, and we would pick up talking where we left off. I began to feel concerned for Bella. Not least because she was a lovely person, and maybe a little too nice for life in western culture. She had no plan B, should a lift not present itself. Internally, I committed to staying with Bella until she found a lift. And as she was starting to shiver, I proceeded to cook her some noodles with leek and potato soup mixed in. She gratefully accepted the offering, and ever so politely left some for me.

Eventually, out of thin air, a couple, seemingly in their 40s, approached us, they appeared to be interested in helping. I wasn't relieved yet, they were very surprised indeed by the magnitude of Bella's luggage - and rightly so! The woman was particularly unsure whether it would all fit in. The man went to get their hire car. Bella and I talked with the woman. They were from Canada

on holiday, road tripping in a hired camper, carrying some cheap \$150 bikes; they were travelling the length of New Zealand. When the vehicle came, I became more hopeful. It was pretty big. With some work, the many items of luggage did in fact fit. The farewell was somewhat hastened by my unfamiliarity of the couple. Despite meeting Bella only an hour or two prior, we had developed some friendship and the goodbye was a little sad.

Now lying in the hammock, listening to the pitter-patter of raindrops on the tarp, I feel sleepy.

Day 15: Wrestling A Mud Monster 3/12

Yesterday morning, I made a mistake of ignorance: all warm and cosy in the hammock, I dozed lazily through a perfectly dry morning. Then, as I began to emerge at around 12 mid-day, the heavens opened. I'm unsure whether this is obvious or not, but I can assure you that dismantling a camp is made orders of magnitude less fun in the presence of heavy rain. The whole exercise becomes a hopeless exercise aimed at keeping important items dry. Then, with equipment packed, the task of wrestling with a waterlogged tarp is thrust upon you. As you studiously go after the objective of folding it into something that will reasonably fit into the tarp bag, various sections of the sheet form pockets, trapping the ever-growing pools of water. I was really regretting not getting up sooner.



Left, a cheeky weka; right, the camping spot with the missing tent peg.

Just as I thought the ordeal was coming to a close, a new monster emerged from the ever muddying forest floor. Finalising the process of putting away the tarp, I noticed that a tent-peg was missing. I had taken them both out of the ground, the first, putting it in my pocket; but the second, I had misplaced somewhere. It is important to realise at this point that I was fading gradually into a state of major internal disarray, pulled down by the omnipresent forces of wet disorder and chaos that constituted my experience of the environment. I began to search for the peg. This was made hard by the fact that the peg was a straight black object, and, since the stems of dead tree fern leaves are black as well, the whole forest floor was completely littered with black straight objects. Wandering around with an ever-rising sense of dismay, I was bent double, eyes glued to the muddy floor, the rain pouring over me. At some point, I realised that there seemed to be a force which was preventing me from finding that which I sought. It was like my higher self was desperately trying to get the conscious part of me to face something internal. And, it just so happened that this particular task, undertaken in a state of dismay, was a perfect medium in which to raise that demon from its depths.

I figured the most effective course of action was to allow that which was trying to get out full

right of passage in my experiential domain. This, of course, was no small task. Putting on some calming Ludovico Einaudi to anchor my feet to the ground, I paused the search to open up and allow the experience to fully manifest itself. The process was difficult and it threw me around like a leaf in the wind. But, as can happen when one voluntarily engages with their suffering, the light of consciousness began to alleviate this psychological knot. It retreated - down, but not out.

Feeling a bit shaken, but in a way empowered, I resumed the search with a somewhat clearer head. Not long after, I located the peg; it was between the spokes of the bike's front wheel. Cool. All done right? I went to reunite the found peg with its other half. Only to find that the other was now missing. It wasn't in my pocket. Did I even put it there? I checked all of my pockets in unending cycles. In the hopeless down-pour, I seriously began to question my memory. Did I actually find the first one; did it fall out of my pocket into the spokes? Which peg did I pull up first? Where even were the pegs placed? Taking deep breaths in and out, I began to forge a domain of order from the omnipresent forces of chaos; I began to mentally map out areas that had been checked. When none were left, I began delving into my scattered memory, piecing together my steps, one at a time. Under the torrents of water falling from the sky, neither of these strategies yielded the desired result. I was starting to shiver with cold. A voice began to emerge; it said succinctly: 'Your work here is done, let it go.'. Initially, I resisted, clinging, attached to that which was lost. Soon, however, I saw wisdom in the advice, and subsequently submitted to it.

Packing up, feeling cold, broken, but somewhat lighter in spirit, I began to gather my things. On lifting the bike to depart, out of nowhere I heard a metallic 'Cling Ching Cling'. The peg.



Left, mist and rain; right, lake Ianthe with waters rising.

Day 15: Stepping It Up A Notch 3/12

Setting off at 2 pm, I was soaked. The rain did die down somewhat, but not completely. A fair stint down, the small town Hari Hari presented itself. I soon gravitated to the general store. It had closed minutes prior at the turn of 4 pm. Kindly though, seeing me, the owner opened the window offered to let me in. I wanted to buy some biscuits. How did I thank this store owner for his generosity? Walking in, I placed my rucksack on the floor to remove my wallet. From its rain cover, a dinnerplate-sized puddle of dark brown muddy water was deposited on the floor. Oh, dear. I felt terrible and offered to clean it, but he insisted that it was fine. I moved across the road to eat, too embarrassed to stick around. At this point, the weather began to come in heavy. A man smoking outside approached to chat, he was curious of my route. We talked of England where he was also from. He spoke of how he moved to live in Queenstown when he was younger. Speaking of

the weather, he warned me of the forecast for very heavy rain over the next few days. He seemed to be a bit concerned.

I ate the full pack of biscuits, 1000 calories; I also ate a dry pack of instant noodles, pouring the flavouring powder into my mouth. The wacky concoction, along with a bit of drum and bass grooved me into the appropriate psyched-up mental state to take on another onslaught of water. The following stint was in a word: intense; I met the severity of the wind and rain with a balancing energy.

Sometime later, passing through the small town of Whotara, I took refuge from the elements under a sheltered picnic area. With the rain thrashing down, I began to become concerned for the night ahead. The thought of setting up camp in such conditions was far from salutary. Venturing onwards, I was unsure where my decision to wild-camp lay on the spectrum between bravery and stupidity. It seemed to fall somewhere in the fuzzy middle.

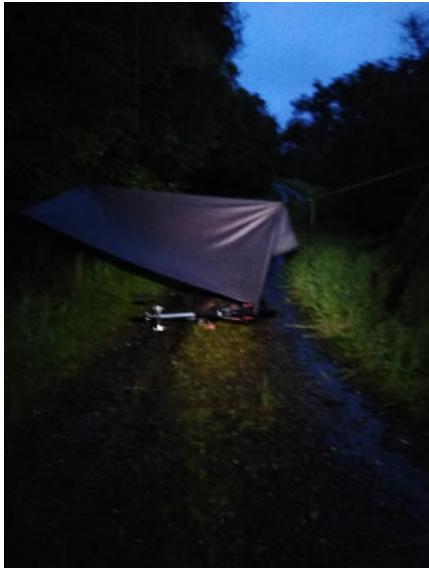


Making the most of a roof outside some public toilets.

Night 15: A Wet And Wild Night 3/12

With darkness creeping into the wet and wild wilderness, I knew that it would soon be necessary to commit to a camping spot. On the right, a lake emerged from the remote rain-forest landscape; its banks were void of even light civilisation. Seeing a gravel track running into the woods towards it, I turned off, desperately navigating the leading edge of my exposed circumstances. It continued parallel to the lake for some time. No feasible hammock hang seemed to emerge. Eventually, it lead to a torrentially flooded ford across a river that gushed out of the lake. Thinking with some desperation, I expanded the limiting conditions of what was to be considered an appropriate spot. Doing so yielded a hang location that spanned perpendicularly across the track. I figured it to be acceptable since it seemed to be that people didn't come down this track very often, and if they did, I could only imagine that they would have at least some sympathy given the conditions. Fighting heavy rain and a beating wind, I wrestled the tarp into position. Doing so required a bit of quick thinking: One corner of the tarp was attached to the bike's pannier rack; another, fastened with electrical tape, was held by a thin flexible tree branch that was weighted down by one of my 1L water bottles. With the strong gusts of wind, this tenuous bottle solution proved insufficient,

so later, I upgraded the weighting with a bike helmet full of stones, which despite still hanging suspended in mid-air, did the trick.



Left, a precarious hammock hang accross the track; right, corner of the tarp secured to a thin branch - weighed down by a bottle of water.



Corner of the tarp attached to pannier racks.

Just about ready to sleep, a lingering concern nagged me - it had until now been overshadowed by the pressures of the moment: The lake was visible just off the track to the side; its level was no more than 1m vertically below the road. A part of me began to worry about the fact that it may rise, flooding my camp. The rain was beating down, heavy and sustained, but it *was* a pretty big lake. It will probably be fine, I thought. As a precautionary measure though, I put all of my stray equipment in bags, tied all the bags together, and then tied them to my bike. I figured, worst-case scenario: I wake suspended above thigh-deep water, and with everything tied up, I won't

lose anything.

The following monologue was written after a failed attempt to fall asleep:

In the hammock I huddle up. The wind and rain are howling and lashing down on my thin tarpaulin. Tonight I will not sleep at all. The reason for sleeplessness will not however be due to the disturbing nature of the harsh assault on my tarp. More unsettling is the reason. A fear that was dormant in me while setting up camp is coming to light: the lake adjacent to the road which I am suspended above is beginning to rise; its water level, previously a marked height below the track is now lapping only 5 metres down road of my bags. I have not long noticed its position, so its rate of movement is still unknown. I shall now monitor it closely. There is a particularly bright leaf, seemingly fixed in place, that at the time of this writing is not quite under-water, but only by 30cm or so. This is my crude measuring instrument. It seems clear that at some point before sunrise, I will be forced to take action and leave. When this will be is unclear, but the prospect makes me uneasy. I lost the front bike light a few camps ago. I still have the back one, but it is currently dead. I will now put it on charge. Furthermore, as I write these words, my head torch is giving the flashing signal to show that its battery is low.

The rear bike light is now on charge, so that's good. Less good is the fact that: On protruding out of the hammock to reach for the electrical equipment box, I noticed my signalling leaf, floating in the now quite a bit closer lake. Since it is floating, I'm actually not sure how much the level has moved. I suppose a suitable strategy will be to choose a point where, when the level reaches there, I will start to make moves.

Such a point has been chosen some 150cm from my outermost bag. Now I will think about my plan of attack which will be utilised to transfer me from, lying-in-hammock, to on-bike-riding. Once I'm on the bike things will probably be fine; the rain isn't too cold, its actually about 15°C, and thankfully, due to a deliberately large dinner, there's plenty of fuel in the furnace. The main concerns are seated in the process of packing up. I could get very cold and wet, leading to a state of disorientation and disarray; and my dry things, like sleeping bag and books, could become saturated. I suppose a good starting place for a strategy is to plan to take down the tarp and hammock last, so as to maintain shelter to complete other tasks under. To keep books as dry as possible, I can wrap them in the blue fleece and hope that that will be enough in the damp but rain-covered rucksack.

The lake is now only about a metre and a half from the point which I have labelled as an evacuation signal. The red bike light is flashing, desperately taking in what life it can.

2:40 am - time's up.

The process of packing up went relatively smoothly, I was tired and wet, but driven to focussed action by the uncertainty of the situation. At 3:30 am, I set off into the night, my target was to ride 40km to the town of Fox Glacier, and there check into a hostel. The night was deep and dark. Thankfully, the rain died down somewhat during this stint. I listened to Pink Floyd's album: The Dark Side of the Moon. Occasionally, lights, blue yellow, numinous in the night presented themselves. With no traffic to pull me into the present, they were wholly and profoundly transportive in nature.



Raging river after a night of heavy rain. It was flowing with such force that you could feel the bridge shudder as its supports were struck with rocks.

Day 16: Rehabilitation In Preparation 3/12

Arriving at the Ivorytowers Backpacker Lodge around 7 am, the reception office was shut. It seemed like a nice place, clean dry cosy and warm. I was remarkably self-conscious about my state of presentation; coupled with a strong smell of sweat - which being accustomed to, I could probably only smell half of - muddy water was dripping from each and every one of my clothes and possessions. When the owner finally came to open the office and checked me in, somewhat surprised at my early presence, I insisted on leaving the bags outside. He suggested to keep them at least under the shelter of the veranda, out of the rain.

Today I plan to spend the whole day inside, eating, reading, writing. Tomorrow I will embark on the final chapter of the journey. Trading the challenges of homelessness for the difficulty of distance, tomorrow I plan to ride 120km from Fox glacier to Haast in one day, and then onwards in more long stints.

Day 17: The Care Of Mother Nature, And A Lesson Worth Learning 4/12

At 5 am, the alarm sounded sharply. I was groggy, but ready to pounce on the day.

Just before sleeping, a guy in the room (didn't catch his name) told me of a road closure due to rock-fall, just beyond Haast. And apparently, when he got there by car, all the lodges were full. He had travelled there from here, Fox Glacier, but drove back on finding the situation. Despite this news, I still planned to leave early for Haast. Leaving in the exceedingly cold rain, which probably felt colder after spending time indoors, I noticed a big sign at the town's perimeter. Flashing on its dot-matrix display was a message saying that the road beyond Haast was still closed. After the conversation last night, and with the biting cold rain, this twanged at my conscience. The sign suggested that there would be an update at 10 am, in 2 hours 30 minutes.

At this point, I was pulled by a force separate to the plan. A nature trail's entrance presented itself; departing to the left of the road, it lead tantalisingly into the forest. After some hesitation fueled by a desire to stick to the plan, I decided to go on a whim and explore it. It seemed to make sense to stay in the area until at least 10 am for the road condition update. The pull of the track

was in part seeded by the fact that a hostel employee at the Ivory Lodge Backpackers had labelled this particular trail as her favourite in the area. Leaving the baggage at the entrance, I ventured forward. Light and nimble, the steering felt jerky for a while without the extra weight.



Path through the native forest leading to Fox Glacier.

Following it quickly, the path lead into the native rain forest. The botany on both sides was perfectly unspoiled. Rare is it that I have encountered such lush and radiant beauty. Despite the freezing cold temperature, I felt bathed in the warm glow of mother nature. Soothing, healing, and restorative, the experience allowed me to enter states of mind that are in normal circumstances, too discontinuous to broach. The forest track eventually leads to a sign saying:



Path no more.

As you can see, located a short distance behind the sign is a sheer drop off. The hostel employee had already informed me of this slip, it has rendered access to the glacier difficult. Knowing that the track would eventually lead to a glacier, I was curious. So, with only a small moment of hesitation, I began to push into the neighbouring forest, intent on finding the other side of the path. This was no easy task in dense forest with a bike, but the lack of baggage helped a lot. Eventually, I reached a high steep bank which descended to the road. A ladder was positioned on the decline, fixed in

place by heavy-duty stemples; it was presumably in situ for workmen. I carefully climbed down with bike on shoulder. On the road, looking back to the township, the tarmac just ended, and after a void, continued.



Left, access ladder for workers; right, gate blocking the road to Fox Glacier.



Road back to the town drops off into a void after landslide.

To my disappointment, a fairly convincing road closure sign blocked the way on. It was at this point that I entered a sustained and contemplative period of hesitation. Maybe there was another landslide. If so, maybe it was passable; maybe it wasn't. Maybe, the road on was complete, landslide free and safe, but they decided to close the road here just to be safe. The most frightening possibility was that there were no further landslips, but, there was a section of road that was invisibly weakened, and could falter under my weight, plunging me into the abyss. On the whole, I felt uneasy. Part of me wanted to go forth; a tangibly separate part felt it to be a bad idea. The two personalities were in heavy conflict. The prevailing opinion went back and forth: I'll go, I won't go, I'll go, I won't go. Eventually, the cautious personality won the argument. I decided not to go on. Walking away, a phrase crystallised in my mind:

It takes bravery to break the rules, but it takes wisdom to know when not to.

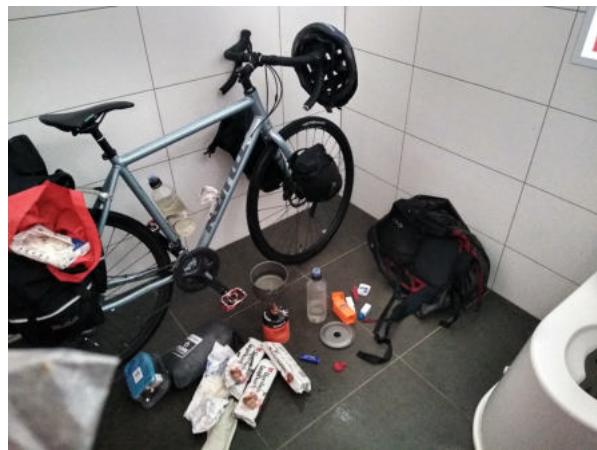
Also while walking away, the exploratory rule-breaking personality began to scream, fighting with its last reserves. Actually, it brought me once again to an edge of hesitation, though without success.

I returned to the hostel, made some hot chocolate, and with a burning interest, watched The Lion King.

Day 19: Stepping Through The Window, Into The Storm 6/12

With rain pounding outside, and road conditions uncertain, I decided to spend another day in the shelter of the hostel. The next day, Friday morning, it was time to go. The 120km road to Haast was ready and waiting to be taken. Usually, this distance wouldn't be all that intimidating. Today however, there were a couple of factors that made it so: I already knew that the road was closed beyond Haast. Actually, I thought it might be cleared by now, but on leaving, the informative dot matrix display now simply read: 'Road Closed'; before, it was saying: 'Road Closed After Haast', and 'Update At 10 am'. The succinct 'Road Closed' was intimidating. Was there a new issue between Fox Glacier and Haast? My attention flitted back to the contemplation of bravery vs stupidity. The weather forecast was far from pretty: 3 days of thunder, lightning, and heavy rain. What if the road was closed before Haast and I became stranded in the storm. I decided to take the plunge and embark, passing the road closed sign with a not so non-existent feeling of fear. It was at least in part the good kind of fear though. The kind I felt when leaving the safety of home in Cumbria; and again, when leaving Picton for a ride into foreign lands. Rationally, I knew that in absence of a genuine natural disaster, I would be fine. I could only hope that the floor wouldn't fall out from beneath my feet, metaphorically, and without any real exaggeration, physically.

Now sitting safely in the hostel in Haast, I can see from online news stories that on the road between Franz Joseph, and Fox Glacier, a major landslide has completely removed a part of tarmac surface, leaving an impassable void spanning the width of the road; furthermore, on another part of the route that I travelled just days ago, a section of bridge has been wiped out by its flooding river. This potential of a worst-case-scenario event happening was obviously, though still minute, less so than I anticipated while embarking.



Left, Bruce Bay; right, pit-stop in a public toilet.

The ride was indeed long and tough. At one particular section, the road lead into a region with big forested hills. Here, towards the end of the day's ride, energy levels were low. But nature had no intention of handing out a free pass. The heavens opened, unleashing a downpour. The road

became rivers. Simultaneously, a large lightning storm presented itself in force. Thankfully there were no nearby ground strikes; the inter-cloud discharges were more bark than bite, only acting with a means of setting the stage. Battling up the hills, in the brutality of the situation, a huge truck hurtled past me, splashing water every which way as its roaring presence blasted any conscious engagement with the road out of possibility. In this traumatic challenge, one would expect to foster a state of inner turmoil, rumination on the ills of life. Instead, there was a peace to it all. Bred by desperation, a calm focus was single-pointedly directed to the act of peddling. I became a silent observer.

While riding this hilly domain, I came across two workmen. They seemed to be the first responders to a fresh land-slip. The slip was above and to the side of the road, not causing a complete blockage, but actively depositing mud and rocks onto the road, it was still moving as I passed. One of the workers and I shared a somewhat crazed grin as I passed, studiously weaving through the muddy debris.



Left, crossing the Moeraki River; right, the flooded Lake Paringa.



View out towards the coast near the recent landslip.

Day 21: Haast Pass Open 8/12

Saturday was spent recuperating in the Haast hostel. Actually, I couldn't go on because the road from Haast was still closed. That's not the primary reason for taking time off though. The day prior had been tough. It satisfied in a certain way; I had found my fight and fought it. The idea of another day in the howling wet seemed superfluous, and quite frankly not fun.

Setting off on Sunday, my initial intention was to ride the whole 145km to Wanaka in one day. This plan was however premeditated before Friday's 120km to Haast, and its driving motivation had subsided. I decided instead to savour the long passage of Haast Pass, following my nose down each of its enticing short nature trails.



Left, one of the short nature trails off the Haast pass road; right, Thunder Creek Falls after heavy rain.

Large mountains loomed on either side. Their tops were concealed by thick cloud; a thin skirt of snow was visible, hinting at their magnitude.



Left, hills surrounding the Haast Pass highway; right, a runaway ramp on a steep hill leading down to a narrow bridge.

At around 4 pm I reached the Pleasant Flat campground, a simple patch of grass with long drop toilets and a covered picnic area. On stopping for some noodles and powdered mashed potatoes, another cyclist approached. He was an older man, maybe in his 50s; his bike was fully laden - it

seemed that he was carrying at least double my luggage. This made at least some sense when he let on that his plan to ride all the way to Athens, going via Taiwan and Japan, but he did admit to having packed too much gear. Ross was from New Zealand. Having set off from his home in Dunedin only a week prior, his intention was to ride north via the west coast, eventually reaching Auckland. I became somewhat concerned for his plans, informing him of the road closures. Although, he did seem like a resourceful old chap. Apparently, Ross had ridden the area quite a bit, yet he kindly took my advice that the West Coast Wilderness Trail would most likely have survived the storm.

Pushing on, I eventually reached the pinnacle of Haast Pass. Here there appeared a small nature trail that departed the road, winding up the steep hill, which supposedly led up to a viewpoint. Taking it without hesitation, I soon discovered that the going was very steep indeed. Dropping the bags at the bottom, I walked up pushing the bike.

After a brief pause at the culmination, I ventured back down, keen to push the Kone Rove at something a bit more technical. Sketchy is a word that comes to mind. With steep fall-aways to one side, the rocky hairpins yielded some frightful focus. Actually, I ended up walking quite a bit of it.

About a quarter of the way up this track, I chanced upon a rather perfect looking camping spot. There was still a very long way to Wanaka, about 80km, but ‘what the heck’, I decided to commit.



Camping spot in the hills above the Haast Pass.

The location was good and bad. On the one hand, there were very few sandflies around. I think the reason for this could be seated in the approximate 600m altitude. This however, also added a con to the weightings - the night was freezing. At dawn, I awoke in a cloud. The moss carpeted forest

has a mysterious fairytale-esque air about it. Before long however, the warm sun burned through, illuminating one back to reality.

Sunshine

Day 22: A New Dawn 9/12

On setting off, the brilliant blue sky revealed majestic snow-capped peaks. Dawn had broken on the days of rain and darkness. My appreciation of the scenery, enhanced by a progressively illuminating clarity, only heightened as the warm sun elevated further into the sky. Haast pass' mountain rain forest environment soon gave way, and was replaced by breathtaking views of faraway peaks, glistening with snow in the sun, preceded by the vast expanse of Lake Wanaka.

That night, I decided to camp in an actual campsite. Bizarre idea. It was the first campsite of the ride. Part of me was suspicious that the time spent in hostels might have made me soft, and hence somewhat averse to the idea of wild camping. On the other hand, the land currently present was all privately owned. Only one or two potential camps were noted on the pursuit, and they all required a bit too much fence-hopping boldness for my liking. Actually, the campsite was a good choice; it cost only \$7, which I hesitated towards not paying since it was an unmanaged site, but decided against it in the end, figuring it would be bad for my conscience.



A record wide hang at Alberttown Campground.

Soon before reaching the site, a sudden bike malfunction startled me significantly. Going up a hill there was a sharp jolt in the pedals. Something felt very wrong. Stopping immediately, I found the front derailier hanging loose. The magical device that had been transporting me without complaint across New Zealand had all of a sudden transformed into a bike. And in all of its objective mechanical complexity - a broken one at that. Actually, there turned out to be no sheered parts; a

frame seating spacer for the derailer had somehow vibrated itself loose. I administered a temporary quick fix, then rode onto the camp in a dizzying state of fight or flight.



Views from the road just beyond the Haast Pass.



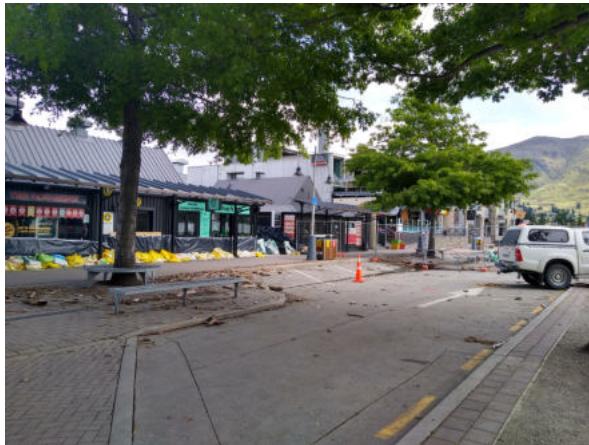
Lake Wanaka from The Neck.

The campsite was situated in Albert Town, only 5km from Wanaka. Because of this, you could

fairly assume that the following day's ride into Wanaka would be short. This however, was not the case. I decided to take a bike trail, skirting along the river and lakeside, figuring that it would ride nicer than the main road. On arriving at the trail's start, I found it to be under-water. The river had risen as a result of the now past storm. At this point, I met an English couple. Charles and Suzanne were probably in their 50s and were intent on cycling around New Zealand. It was refreshing to talk with some other British people after days without. I have found that the nuances of English culture, especially in communication, are highly illuminated when seen in an environment where English culture is a minority.



Flooding on the cycle track adjacent to Lake Wanaka.



Left, post-flood highstreet in Wanaka; right, hanging out.

Intent on finding the cycle trail dry beyond the flood, I embark into a network of light MTB trails. They sprawled across some land raised slightly from the river. These were highly stimulating on a fully laden touring bike, especially when another rider came in the opposite direction. Eventually, I reached the lakeside section of the elusive cycle trail. At first, it seemed promisingly dry. Soon however, the track transitioned into an extended patch of large and densely packed drift-wood, and then a lake. Persevering, I removed shoes and socks, then pedalled through. The water strikingly went over the top of my wheels, pouring into the front left bike bag which I had neglected to seal given the dry weather.

Through periodic plunges, the trail continued with alternating sections of dry land, and lake. On a dry stretch between two of deep water, I stopped for lunch. Picturesque by the lake, it felt very private; I made the assumption that no one else would be quite foolish enough to get this far. Moving again, it became a novelty cycling under-water. At one point my rear pannier bags began to provide sufficient buoyancy for the back wheel to lose traction on the sandy the lakebed. When this happened I got off and began to walk, the bike just about floating alongside. The water was crystal clear, offering a beautiful view of life beneath the ripples.

Eventually arriving at the town, I checked into the Wanaka Bakpaka Hostel, went to a supermarket, then proceeded to eat a feast of cheese, bread, fruit, and veg by the lake. It was clear that the water had risen significantly, and subsequently receded; though it was still high above its normal resting place. Shopfronts close to the beach were laden with sandbags; a pump was chugging water continuously from a bar's submerged beer garden and basement. With the surrounding streets strewn heavily with driftwood, the scene was chaotic. Although, after being effectively homeless for the past 3 weeks, I felt to some degree at least, in a state of inner chaos as well. It felt fitting in a way.



Panorama from Roy's Peak.

Day 25: Home Straight 13/12

After an extended stop in Wanaka, I'm on the road to Queenstown. The journey is finally coming to a close. Only 40km to go, I can see the finish line fast approaching. Part of me is excited to attain the goal; another is more contemplative - I've been thinking about how most of the pleasure



Only 67km to Queenstown.

enjoyed attaining something actually comes in the incremental steps towards the end, rather than at the end itself. I won't be jumping for joy on arrival later. Rather, I'll probably sit in quiet satisfaction for a while, then look on towards the next mountain to climb - both metaphorically, and indeed physically.

With only one last push to the finish, you would think that it would be straight forward, but my legs are on the edge of giving up. They are very sore indeed after the hike up Roy's peak in Wanaka; despite feeling cardiologically fit, my body is completely spent. This tree I am sitting under is providing a refreshing shade from the burning sun, and there is barely a sand fly to be seen. I could quite happily lay down in the grass and drift off to sleep.



Lunch stop in the Cardrona Valley.

Day 25: Completion 14/12

It's done. Yesterday, after a long climb over the Cardrona pass, and a roaring hairpin descent into the Wakatipu Basin, I arrived in Queenstown.

The Cardrona Valley road was beautiful indeed. There was a fairly consistent flow of traffic, but this hardly hampered the experience. Snaking through wild mountainside, the route presented a visual and olfactory delight: colonies of purple and yellow lupin flowers decorated the scene, organically peppering the hillscape.



Purple lupins in the Cardrona Valley.



Top of the big descent into the Wakatipu Basin.

Once down in the valley, I found myself on busy roads with heavy traffic roaring past. After a while, and with not far to go until the finish, I accepted the reality and pushed on. Not long after

this resignation however, I chanced upon a roadside track - The Queenstown Cycle Trail, I soon discovered, would lead me all the way to the town and the finish line. Superb. Following it took me on an undulating ride alongside the Kawarau River, then eventually to the shores of Lake Wakatipu.

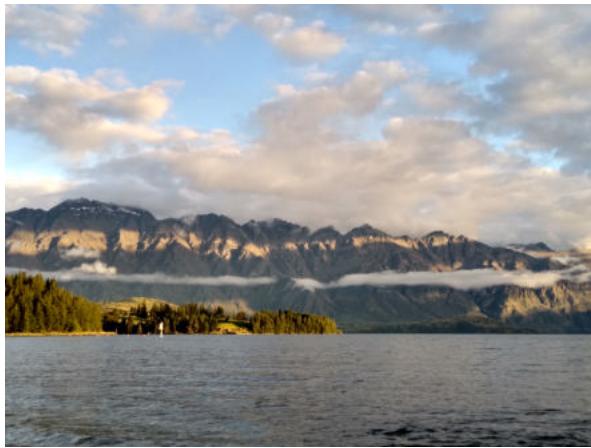
It is true that most of the enjoyment of attaining this goal was in the process, the daily grind, ups and downs, but when the town finally presented itself, the world dissolved into a state of dreamland numinosity. I rolled smoothly along the lakeside, into the harbour area.



Lakeside at Queenstown.

On arriving, I found a Swedish man stacking a microwave on top of three wooden tables. He was a street performer - Sven from Sweden was already creating a scene, harassing many a casual passer-by with humorous comments of questionable social acceptability and political correctness. A large crowd gathered to observe, circling around him. Sven announced with vigour to the audience that his final trick was to climb up to and stand on top of the microwave. This seemed quite impossible given the top was at least 1 and a half of his height, and the narrow-table construction was practically wobbling in the wind. After a lengthy preamble of practical jokes on members of the crowd, notably including an attempt to zip a child into a suitcase, and a peppering of non PC comments directed every which way, not least towards himself and Swedish culture, he enlisted three men to help him ascend the tower for his finale. Among the lucky (or unlucky) selectees were a man from Scotland, another from Singapore, and me. With the Scot and I holding hands in a bridge formation, he awkwardly scrambled up onto our shoulders, at one point making the crowd laugh by sitting on the Scot's shoulders - crotch in face. From here, after asking us to stand with arms folded, he proceeded rising to a standing position between us, one foot on each set of arms. Then somehow, Sven managed to climb from here, up the wobbly stacked tables, and eventually onto the microwave. 'Singapore', as he was called by Sven, dutifully passed up three blue Ikea angle poised lamps, and a helmet with a large pencil protruding diagonally forward out of the top. Finally, on reaching down, and opening the microwave, Sven collected a pre-prepared bowl of Swedish meatballs with a cocktail-stick Swedish flag sticking out, balanced it spinning on top of his helmet's pencil point, and juggled the three lamps - all while squatting precariously on the shuddering tower of Ikea furniture. A spectacle to behold.

Today, I bumped into Piper, a girl from Colorado who I met at a hostel in Auckland. She kindly repaid the \$1 I gave her to buy a half melon. On venturing out together, we read in a park and

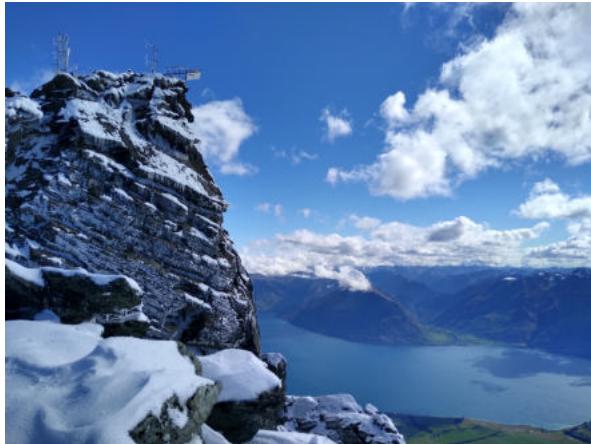


Left, The Remarkables mountain range; right, Piper on a walk up Queenstown Hill.

went to the Queenstown-famous Fergberger bakery. Here another chance encounter - one of the employees there was a man who Bella (the hitchhiker) and I had spoken to in trying to source her a lift. A small world.

Queensotown

Staying in Queenstown for a few days, I tried out some of the local activities. Most notably among these was the Nevis Bungy jump, and a cycle/hike up to 2200m in the snow-capped Remarkables range. Aside from this, Piper and I mostly just hung out around the town. Soon it was time to fly back to Wellington. The adventure was over, but then, as one journey ends another begins. I flew into Wellington on the 21st of December - just in time for Christmas.



On the Remarkables range overlooking Queenstown.



Nevis Bungy jump in Queenstown.



Left, completion; right, Wellington from the plane coming into land.