Steeped in history, this pioneering cycle trail offers a 150km scenic journey into the Central Otago heartland.

Named after the old railway line, built between 1891 and 1907, the Otago Central Rail Trail is New Zealand’s original ‘Great Ride’. It travels through big-sky country where cyclists traverse ever-changing dry and rocky landscapes, high-country sheep stations, spectacular river gorges, tunnels and viaducts.

There are over 20 townships located on and off the trail. Take the opportunity to meet the locals with their still-present pioneering spirit and take detours and side trips to places such as old abandoned gold diggings left over from the gold rush and the country’s only international curling rink.

You should allow at least four full days to bike the trail – more if you want to do some exploring off the trail. If you’re after a shorter ride, there are numerous townships located along the trail where you can start or end your ride. As a well-established cycle trail, there are plenty of places to stop for refreshments and accommodation.

The Central Otago climate is characterised by hot summers, cold winters and low rainfall. The autumn landscape is renowned in these parts for the kaleidoscope of browns, golds and reds. You can experience four seasons in one day, so be prepared!

LOOK OUT FOR...

Amidst the beauty of the trail, you can:

- Marvel at the hillside clock.
- Check out the historic Shaky Bridge.
- Fish for trout on the Clutha and Manuherikia rivers.
- Visit the museum or the Earnscleugh Tailings Historic Reserve.
- Take a wine-tasting tour.
- Have fun at the outdoor ice rink (during winter) or at the aquatic centre.

Alexandra

Alexandra is the heart of the Central Otago region. An area of contrasts, not least its distinct seasons, this is a beautiful place to visit any time of the year and there’s plenty to see and do. As well as exploring by bike, you can walk alongside or cruise the Clutha River, marvel at the hillside clock, check out the historical Shaky Bridge, fish for trout on the Clutha and Manuherikia rivers, visit the museum or the Earnscleugh Tailings Historic Reserve, take a wine-tasting tour and have fun at the outdoor ice rink (during winter) or at the aquatic centre.

Breathtaking Views

This is a journey of varied and distinctive landscapes. Stop and take in the magical scenery along the way, including views of Alexandra, the Poolburn Gorge, the Maniototo Plains and the Ida Valley.

Main Image: Cycling Otago Central Rail Trail © Otago Central Rail Trail Trust

LEFT: The historic Shaky Bridge, Alexandra

TRAIL GRADES:
- CLYDE TO ALEXANDRA
- ALEXANDRA TO CHATTO CREEK
- CHATTO CREEK TO OMAKAU
- OMAKAU TO LAUDER
- LAUDER TO OTUREHUA
- OTUREHUA TO WEDDERBURN
- WEDDERBURN TO RANFURLY
- RANFURLY TO WAIPIATA
- WAIPIATA TO KOKONGA TO TIROITI TO HYDE
- HYDE TO MIDDLEMARCH
- ALL GRADE 1 (EASIEST)

MOBILE PHONE COVERAGE
Coverage is good in the open plains but limited to non-existent in the gorges and tunnels, and limited sometimes during bad weather.

DRINKING WATER
Please buy water as many local schemes have limited capacity and are funded locally.
I spent 5 days biking the rail trail with friends and we had an absolute blast. We were sad to be getting off our bikes at the end, despite not being very fit to start with...

Jeff Miller, Travel Agent at Mondo Travel

**Clyde to Alexandra, 8km**

Make sure you visit the historic Clyde township before you start at the railhead for the trail. This section is flat and a good way to get settled in the saddle. The main feature is the wooden Muttontown Viaduct. The trail is a couple of kilometres from the retail and service part of Alexandra so if you need to shop there do allow time. Alexandra is the largest town on the trail and is fully serviced.

**Alexandra to Chatto Creek, 17km**

Heading north, this section follows the Manuherikia River which flows south to join the mighty Clutha. The trail traverses the farming area of Galloway and is completed at New Zealand’s smallest operating post office.

**Chatto Creek to Omakau, 12km**

Ride up Tiger Hill on a sweeping rise crossing the state highway twice. Enjoy the views and the ganger shed information boards along the way. Then you have a straight descent into Omakau, a town with most services. A side trip to historic Ophir and the 1880 suspension bridge is worth the additional few kilometres.

**Omakau to Lauder, 7km**

Past newly established dairy farms and more intense irrigation, Lauder has accommodation, a hotel and a café. It also has a NIWA weather base.

**Lauder to Oturehua, 21km**

There is a gentle rise north into the Poolburn Gorge with its two tunnels. Then it is a straight ride up the Ida Valley past historic Hayes Engineering. Oturehua boasts Gilchrist's general store, that is still set out as it was 100 years ago, and a hotel.

**Oturehua to Wedderburn, 12km**

Immediately you are offered a diversion to Golden Progress Mine where there are gold-mining remains and a stamper battery. Then it is a slow climb out of the Ida Valley to the highest point of the trail before you start swinging east into the Maniototo. Wedderburn has pub food and accommodation. A popular diversion is to St Bathans.

**Wedderburn to Ranfurly, 14km**

Easy riding east across the open Maniototo Plain to the second biggest service town on the trail. Consider a diversion to Naseby to try indoor curling or mountain bike tracks.

**Ranfurly to Waipiata, 8km**

Easy downhill ride to small rural township with hotel and some accommodation. Great fly fishing available in the Taieri River.

**Waipiata to Kokonga to Tiroiti to Hyde, 24km**

The trail now leaves the Maniototo through the upper Taieri Gorge, following the river. Kokonga and Tiroiti have accommodation available and some nice picnic sites. Flat, easy riding with a viaduct and tunnel makes this section a perfect one-day taste-tester.

**Hyde to Middlemarch, 26km**

An easy downhill ride south, unless a southerly is blowing, into the Strath Taieri valley. The Rock and Pillar Range is on your right. The end of the trail is also the terminus for the Taieri Gorge Railway. A walk around New Zealand’s only inland salt lake to the south of the valley is a nice time-filler.
Immerse yourself in the history and romance of the Otago railway and gold rush.

The Otago Central Railway was once an economic lifeline for the Central Otago region. Built to connect Dunedin with Central Otago, a thriving gold-mining area, the track took 16 years to complete and was finished in 1907. It truly is a testament to human endeavour – the detailed workmanship of the stone bridges and tunnel facings along the trail have stood the test of time and the mountains still bear scars of the races, built back in the 1860s to bring water to the long-gone gold mines. Steam trains chugged along this railway line for 83 years, but once the roads were improved and the gold rush was long over, the line was officially closed in 1990 and the railway tracks removed, leaving a long, relatively flat path through Central Otago.

Nowadays, the Department of Conservation and the Otago Central Rail Trail Trust manage the trail, and there is no charge for using it.

As you ride along it you’ll see countless reminders of the railway and associated gold rush, including long, dark tunnels, trestle and stone bridges, abandoned gold diggings and remains of mining machinery, old stone and mudbrick dwellings and preserved gold-mining settlements.

Alexandra after Princess Alexandra of Denmark • 191km NW of Dunedin

Clyde after a Scottish general • 221km NW of Dunedin

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Spring blossom

The region is alive with colour in spring as blossom trees in full bloom dot the landscape – an amazing sight!

Living in the Maniototo

The Maniototo Plain has been the inspiration for works by painter Grahame Sydney, writer Janet Frame and poet James K Baxter.

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Ranfurly, after Governor of NZ 1897-1904 • 134km NW of Dunedin on SH 85

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SHORTCUTS & DETOURS

The Otago Central Rail Trail covers a decent chunk of Central Otago, but in such a varied and interesting area it’s well worth exploring as much of the region as you can. From short detours to nearby towns to adding a train ride to the end of your cycle journey, the options are endless.

Middlemarch — after a creek that formed a boundary (march) • 77km NW of Dunedin

Located 23km from the start of the trail at Clyde, Cromwell is ‘the fruit bowl of the south’ and is a growing town set in a rocky, barren landscape. Visit a vineyard and sample the region’s famous pinot noir, learn about the gold-mining history at Goldfields Mine, visit the Cromwell Heritage Precinct and marvel at the beautiful Lake Dunstan.

Dunedin — Gaelic name for Edinburgh, Scotland • 283km E of Queenstown

Mosgiel — after Robbie Burns’ farm Mossgeil • 17km W of Dunedin on SH 87

Ophir, a short detour from the trail, has many great historical buildings, such as the Ophir Post Office. In St Bathans, a detour at Lauder, check out the reputedly haunted Vulcan Hotel and the stunning Blue Lake with its glaring white cliffs.

Aside from curling, at Naseby you can mountain bike the Naseby Forest or visit the Naseby Luge, the first snow and ice luge track in the southern hemisphere.

From the trail’s end at Middlemarch, a great option is to take a ride on the Taieri Gorge Railway. You’ll pass breathtaking scenery before arriving at the architecturally striking Dunedin Railway Station.

The huge marble-like boulders strewn along the beach at Moeraki are a sight to behold and are best seen at low tide. They were formed over millions of years by a layering process similar to the formation of oyster pearls. Palmerston has heritage trails and a butterfly and bird haven. For a great view, climb Puketapu, the sacred hill that overlooks the town.

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Dunedin is often said to be the best-preserved Victorian and Edwardian heritage city in the southern hemisphere – you will feel like you have stepped back in time. Present-day Dunedin is a city of culture and education and home to one of New Zealand’s largest universities, the University of Otago. Bursting with vitality, the more than 25,000 students give this city its distinctive culture.

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Dunedin 35min
Tariff: $120-$180 (2 persons), extra person $25

Gorge yourself
Taieri Gorge Railway is the perfect way to start or finish your adventure on the Otago Central Rail Trail. And your bicycle can travel on the train with you. Book now.

Dunedin is flourishing with easy access to diverse wildlife. The natural environment, in particular Otago Peninsula, supports seals, sea lions, yellow-eyed penguins and the northern royal albatross. Local tour operators will take you to the best viewing spots.

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ALONGSIDE THE TRAIL

Classic southern hospitality is evident alongside the trail, with over 20 townships on or just off the trail.

**Clyde** has many buildings preserved from the gold-rush era in its historic precinct. Visit the museum and the controversial Clyde Dam – the largest concrete gravity dam in New Zealand.

**Oturehua** has a heritage trail where you can visit the historic Hayes Engineering Works – a great example of Kiwi ingenuity. At nearby **Wedderburn** you can visit the goods shed made famous by a Grahame Sydney painting.

**Ranfurly** is known as New Zealand’s rural art deco town because of its 1930s-style architecture. The focal point of the town is the refurbished railway station housing the information centre. With its welcoming hotel, historic buildings and gift shop, **Hyde** is a good place to take a break.

A farming community, **Middlemarch** is at the foot of the Rock and Pillar Range, which is ideal for skiing in winter. Visit the museum, check out New Zealand’s only salt-water lake, play a round of golf, fish the Taieri River and see historic buildings such as Middlemarch Station.

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