

Westland

HIGHLIGHTS

- See tumbling **glaciers** (p260) nearly kiss the sea
- Marvel at the head-spinning variety of terrain around **Haast Pass** (p272)
- The rugged solitude of the wild and wet **West Coast** (p262)

TERRAIN

Hills. Big ones, little ones – there's lots to choose from. There are a couple of flat sections too. But whatever the terrain, all are accompanied with stunning mountain views to the east and chiselled beaches to the west.

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Cycling along the west coast of the South Island is either your wildest dream or your worst nightmare. The thin strip of land that is sandwiched between the Southern Alps and the Tasman Sea is a shooting gallery of strong winds, heavy rain and other inclement inconveniences. But once you get beyond the foreboding veneer there is magnificence to be discovered. The views of the Alps, ocean and rainforest are uncompromised. You'll go hours between vehicular sightings and the quirky settlements give the coast a Wild-West vibe.

Franz Joseph and Fox Glacier nearly tumble into the sea, the Pancake Rocks really do look like pancakes and there's the odd elusive views of Mt Cook. Hokitika has wild food on offer, Greymouth is grey and there are sandflies the size of small children. Though much of the riding is challenging and lonesome, the fruits of the labour are stunning and trump the efforts required tenfold.

The easiest part about this ride is the navigation – either head north or south on SH6, it's your only option.



HISTORY

The area was sparsely settled by Maoris in pre-European days. Groups moved through in search of food and carried prized greenstone across the mountain passes to other regions.

The first European to sight the west coast was Dutch navigator Abel Tasman in 1642. It was nearly 130 years before the next visit, when James Cook sailed the *Endeavour* north along the coast in February 1770.

Sealers visited the coast from the early 1800s, but the dense vegetation and uninviting weather hampered land exploration and white settlement. The discovery of gold in the late 1850s was the spur to development. The Arthur's Pass coach road was completed in 1865 and by 1867 about 30,000 prospectors had flocked to goldfields along the Buller River and Lake Brunner.

From 1861, timber exploitation saw kahikatea (white pine), matai (black pine) and silver beech rafted down the rivers and lakes to the gold-mining areas for use as pit props, while flax milling took place in the Makarora Valley for three decades from 1890.

After gold-mining declined, many of the prospectors who remained turned to coal-mining, the timber industry and farming. The coastal bush was hacked back but always threatened to reclaim open spaces. Now, scattered throughout the thick bush and by rivers, is the rusted debris of a century of exploitative industry.

ENVIRONMENT

The Alpine Fault running the length of the west coast is a major geological feature shaping Westland. The two tectonic plates carrying different sections of the earth's crust continue to slide past one another, causing earthquakes along their junction. One of these earthquakes caused landslips in 1968 that dammed the Buller River in its gorge near Inangahua. The resulting flood forced people to evacuate as water banked up behind the slip and overflowed the river's banks downstream when it broke through.

Haast Pass, at just over 560m, is one of the lowest passes on the main Southern Alps divide. The contrast between the rainforest on its western side and the lakes and open spaces to the east is amazing. On the valley slopes atop the pass, sub-alpine

scrub dominates the first 100m above the tree line, with tall snow tussocks and herbs at higher altitudes.

Before white settlement, the lower flats of the Makarora River were covered by cabbage trees, flax shrubs and ferns. Remnants of the original vegetation are preserved in Mt Aspiring National Park.

The Haast region is the centre of a major wildlife refuge where some of the biggest stands of rainforest survive alongside some of the most extensive wetlands. The kahikatea swamp forests, sand-dune forests, seal and penguin colonies, kakas, the Red Hills and vast sweeps of beach have ensured the preservation of this hauntingly beautiful place as a Unesco World Heritage site. In the forests of rimu with their flaming red flowers, birdlife abounds. You may see fantails, bellbirds, native pigeons (kereru), falcons, kiwis and moreporks.

Because of their steepness, Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers (13km and 11km long, respectively) are unique at this latitude in terms of how close to sea level they descend. The glaciers fluctuate according to snowfall, advancing when snow accumulates at the top faster than the ice melts at the bottom and retreating when the opposite is the case. Nowadays Franz Josef's foot is about 10km inland, but during the last ice age it extended right to the coast.

Along the valleys leading to the glaciers are piles of terminal moraine left during halts in the early 1600s, mid-1700s and around 1825, and the ice-cold streams leaving the caves at each face appear to steam with condensing vapour.

CLIMATE

Westland could aptly be called 'wetland' with its lush rainforest supported by an average annual rainfall often quoted in metres rather than millimetres. The rain is driven by strong westerlies of the Roaring Forties and the wettest place is Roaring Billy on the Haast River. Here, 22km from the coast, the average annual rainfall is 5840mm and rain falls, on average, every second day. By contrast, Makarora, at the eastern foot of Haast Pass, receives an average 2440mm in 125 days – still more than enough from a cyclist's point of view.

Despite the deluge, Westland enjoys as many sunshine hours as the region around

