

Railway romance



Above Expect to see stunning North Island scenery on the Tranz Scenic Overlander

The wind stings my cheeks and whips through my hair as I gaze in awe at the dramatic landscape unfolding before me – lush green hills mounting towards the misty blue, snow-capped peaks of Mount Ruapehu and its neighbours, glinting in the sunshine.

This is just one of the many highlights of my trip on the Tranz Scenic Overlander, which runs the 681 kilometres between Auckland and Wellington in New Zealand's picturesque North Island. Two further routes, the TranzCoastal and TranzAlpine, also offer breathtaking views of the South Island.

Whether standing on the open viewing decks, gazing through the panoramic windows, or ogling the constantly changing scenery through the glass-backed observation carriage – these train journeys offer one of the most exhilarating ways to view New Zealand's stunning scenery, as well as lending a glorious celebration

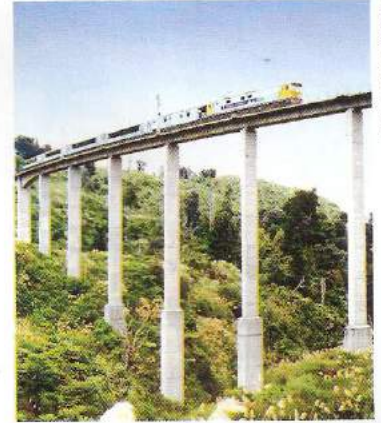
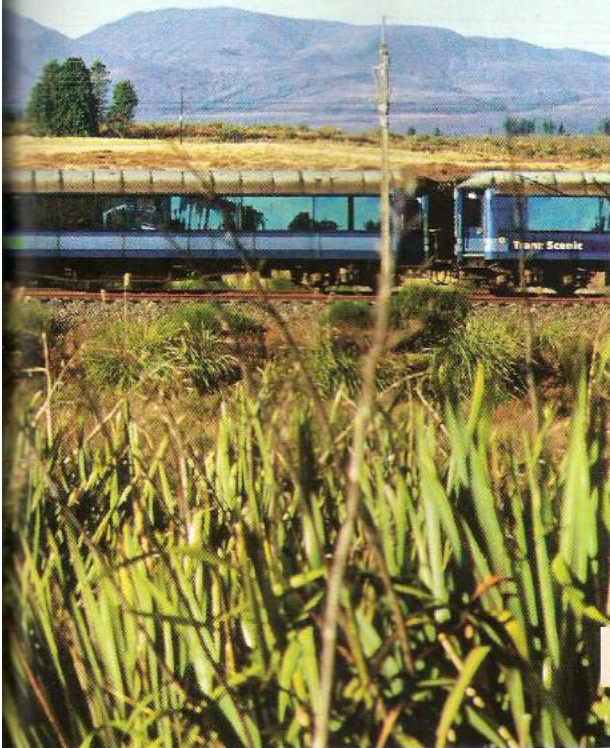
of the country's history and the chance to meet some interesting travel companions to boot!

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

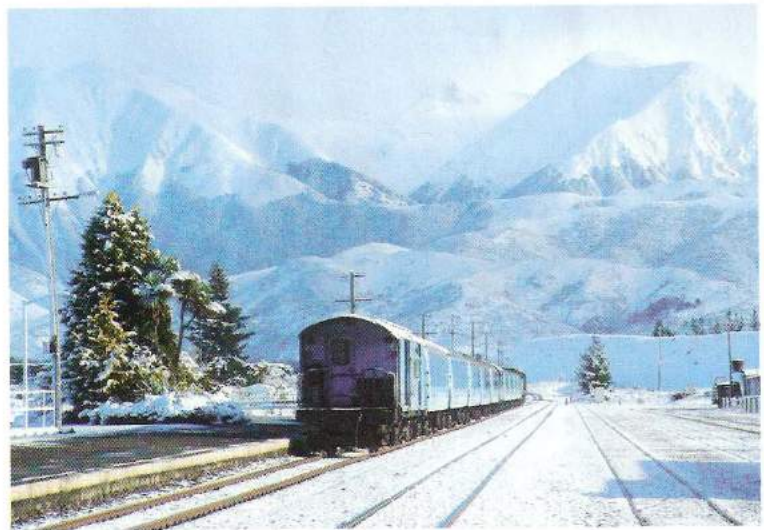
Each morning the two Overlander passenger trains set off from opposite ends of New Zealand's North Island, but for the rest of the day, the rails see little else but freight. It wasn't always like this. One hundred years ago, with the completion of the trunk line across North Island, the railway was the life-blood of communication. Today, sadly, it is struggling to find its place in the modern world. People take the train as much for the journey itself as to actually go anywhere, and only public outcry saved this route from being scrapped in 2006.

However, because this year is the centenary of the North Island trunk line, there has never been a better time to climb on board. And don't miss the steam specials, culminating in the All Aboard railway festival at

Whether you prefer the delights of steam or modern luxury, coastal views or the rugged beauty of the Alps, New Zealand's railways offer it all, writes **Mark Andrews**



Photos: Tranz Scenic



These train journeys offer one of the most exhilarating ways to view New Zealand's stunning scenery

Above, clockwise People often take the train just for the sake of the journey; The Overlander train climbs high above valleys and gorges; Enjoy views en-route of snow-capped peaks at winter

Fielding between 23–27 October. You can also celebrate by joining the annual 19-day New Zealand Steam Train Journey departing on 7 September, or the Mainline Steam Tour, which leaves on 12 October.

THE OVERLANDER

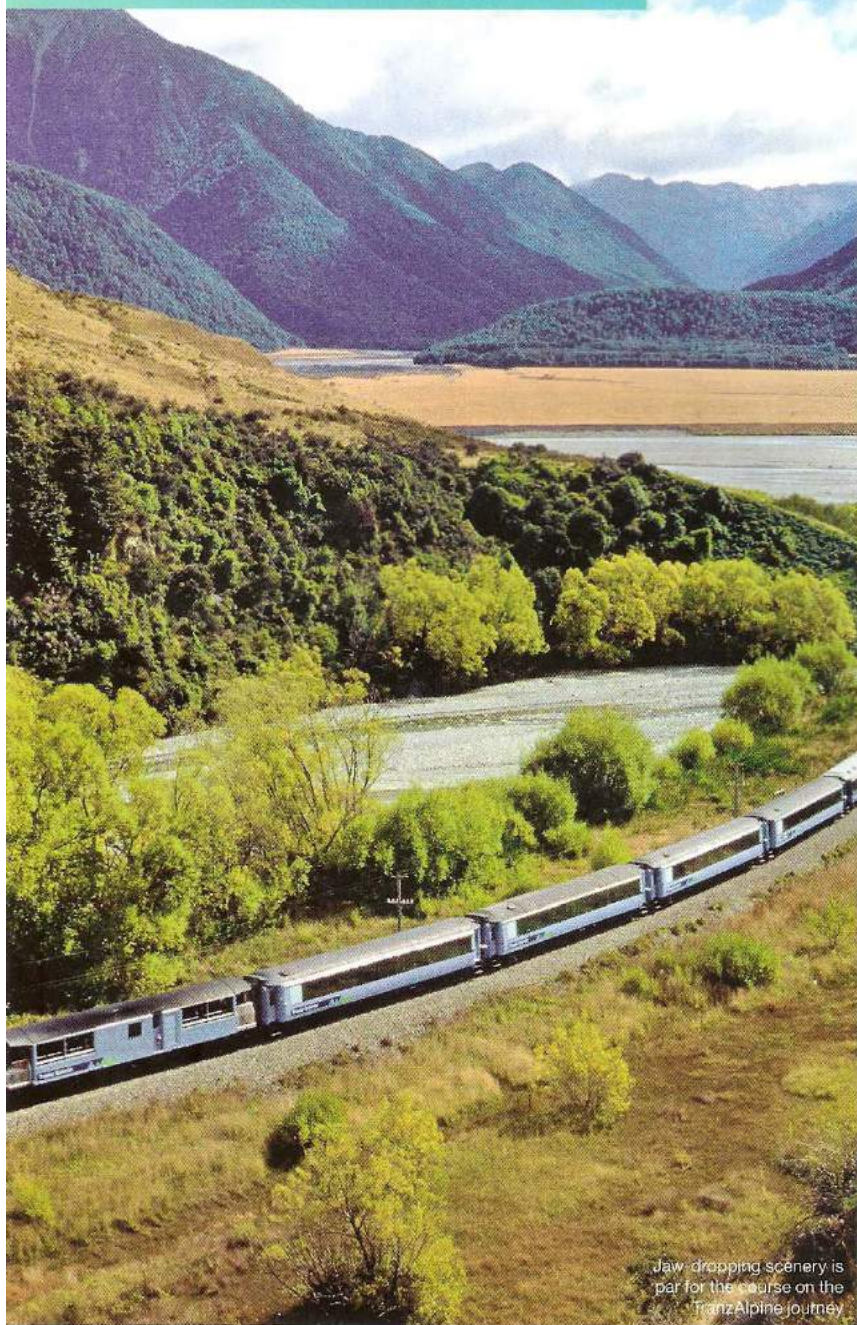
The longest of the Tranz Scenic journeys, the Overlander thunders the 680 kilometres across the North island between Auckland, City of Sails and artsy Wellington. You can admire the ever-changing vistas through panoramic windows, while lounging in reclining seats that are the height of luxury, despite the fact these carriages are refurbished examples of a design dating to 1938.

Hamilton, on the edge of Waikato, is where the journey starts to get interesting. As the train sweeps towards the heart of North Island, it passes over the shimmering ribbon of the Waikato River as it meanders

through lush farmland, then we encounter the green sculpted hills of King Country, before mounting the Raurimu Spiral. This incredible feat of engineering enables the train to climb an incredible 221 metres in less than six kilometres, traversing the valleys and gorges of the Whangantui River and carrying us up onto the volcanic plateau, where we meet the 'up' train from Wellington at National Park station.

The precipitous climb is a little nerve-racking but the incredible views at the top make it all worth it. Travellers join me in the open air viewing carriage to gawp at the peaks of Mount Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu looming in distance, an awe-inspiring backdrop familiar from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in which they appeared as Mordor, the sinister home of the Dark Lord.

Afterwards, the line makes the long descent down towards Wellington. A few minutes down the line is the point where in 1908, Prime Minister Joseph Ward, >>



Jaw-dropping scenery is par for the course on the TransAlpine journey

drove in the final stake of the line linking the Auckland track to the one from Wellington. After the steep drop from the plateau, the route becomes green and lush again. The dramatic white cliffs and viaducts over the Rangitikei River (where, in 1953, the night express crashed and fell into the river, killing 151 people) are astounding, and gazing down into the steep-sided gorges I felt quite dizzy. But on the approach to Wellington, stunning views of Kapiti Island, silhouetted against the azure waters, instill me with a sense of calm again.

Finally the train snakes along the coast to its ultimate destination, Wellington station, which dates from 1937 and was New Zealand's largest building when constructed, as well as the first to incorporate any form of earthquake protection. Disembarking here after my 11½-hour trip I feel quite overwhelmed by the whole experience – I think everyone should do it!

THE TRANZCOASTAL

Speeding between the charming port of Picton and Christchurch, South Island's largest city, the TranzCoastal route passes through 22 tunnels and 175 bridges – and, sandwiched as it is between the dramatic Kaikoura mountain ranges and the rugged Pacific coastline, offers scenery to dazzle the senses.

You can revel in the gorgeous views, and admire the fur seals, which can be seen from the train windows, lazily sunning themselves on the rocky shoreline.

Initially, the train tracks inland into the Marlborough region, where the line takes you through vineyards and

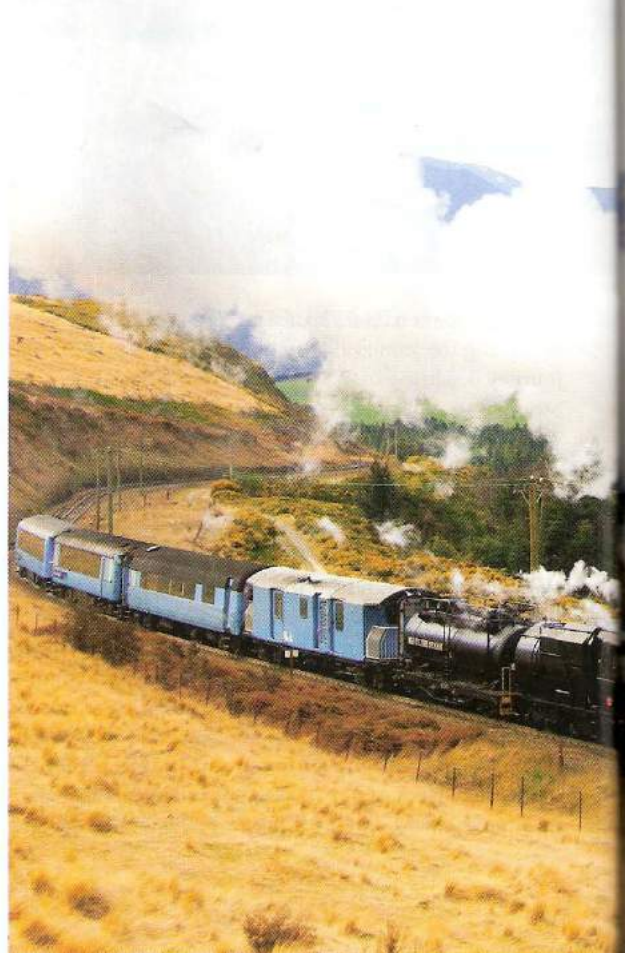
Centennial celebrations

The climax for the centenary is the All Aboard event held at Fielding between 23-27 October, a partnership between numerous groups. This features a number of special steam excursions along the mainline and other events such as an Edwardian wedding and street parades. Connecting with the All Aboard celebrations at Fielding on 25 October is the Mainline Steam Tour which travels between Christchurch and Auckland between 12-28 October.

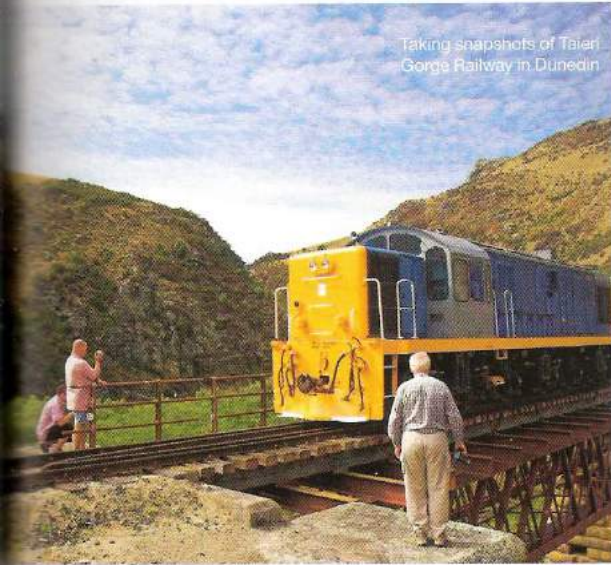
The tour covers both the South and North Island, mostly using steam-hauled trains. It allows participants to fully sample the All Aboard celebrations before going on to Auckland by steam. Also operated by Mainline Steam, the Centennial Flyer will go down from Auckland for the event. This will give you the chance to experience a steam train climbing the dramatic Raurimu Spiral.

Steam Incorporated are running a Governor's Special between 9-11 August taking members of the public from Auckland to Paekakariki (near Wellington), in three stages. They are also operating the Parliamentary Special from 6-8 August in the opposite direction, although this will not be open to members of the public.

Photo: Michael Teich/Mainline Steam NZ, Tranz Scenic



Taking snapshots of Taieri Gorge Railway in Dunedin



wineries, home to some of New Zealand's best bottled delights. After stopping at Blenheim, the train climbs into gentle hills dotted with sheep, before heading back towards the coast, with views of snow-capped mountains visible on the right. En route it passes by Lake Grassmere, which is really a salt water lagoon. You can still see salt being extracted here by evaporation in the salt pans.

On reaching the coast, the train hugs the bottom of the steep and dramatic cliffs, passing through Kaikoura, the whale-watching capital of New Zealand, famous for

Above A train winds its way past forest-clad mountains and tiny villages

Below Nearing the top of the Otorama Bank on the Midland Mountaineer

its array of aquatic wildlife and offering the chance to join seals and dolphins for a splash about in the ocean. Finally, it swings inland towards Christchurch.

THE TRANZALPINE

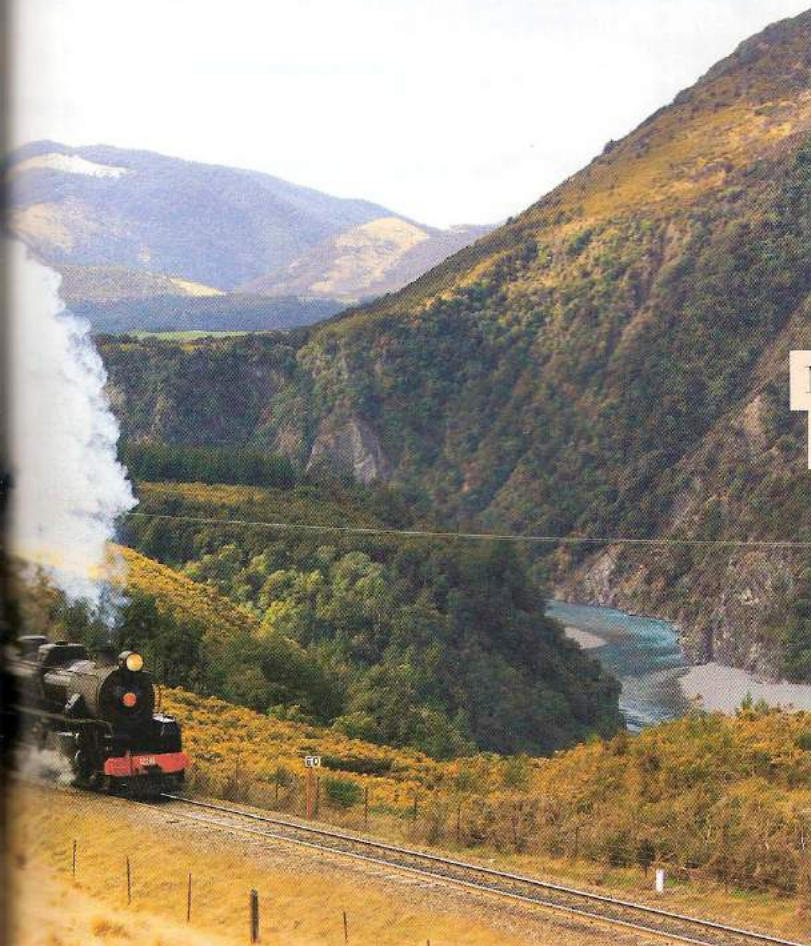
Mind-boggling, jaw-dropping scenery is par for the course on this journey, which runs between Christchurch and Greymouth, from one coast of New Zealand's South Island to the other, traversing the Southern Alps. Perhaps the most spectacular of all three train journeys, it's definitely worth braving the chill of the open-air viewing carriage (despite the grime and often icy winds) simply for the stunning, uninterrupted views of the surrounding area. Just wrap up warm!

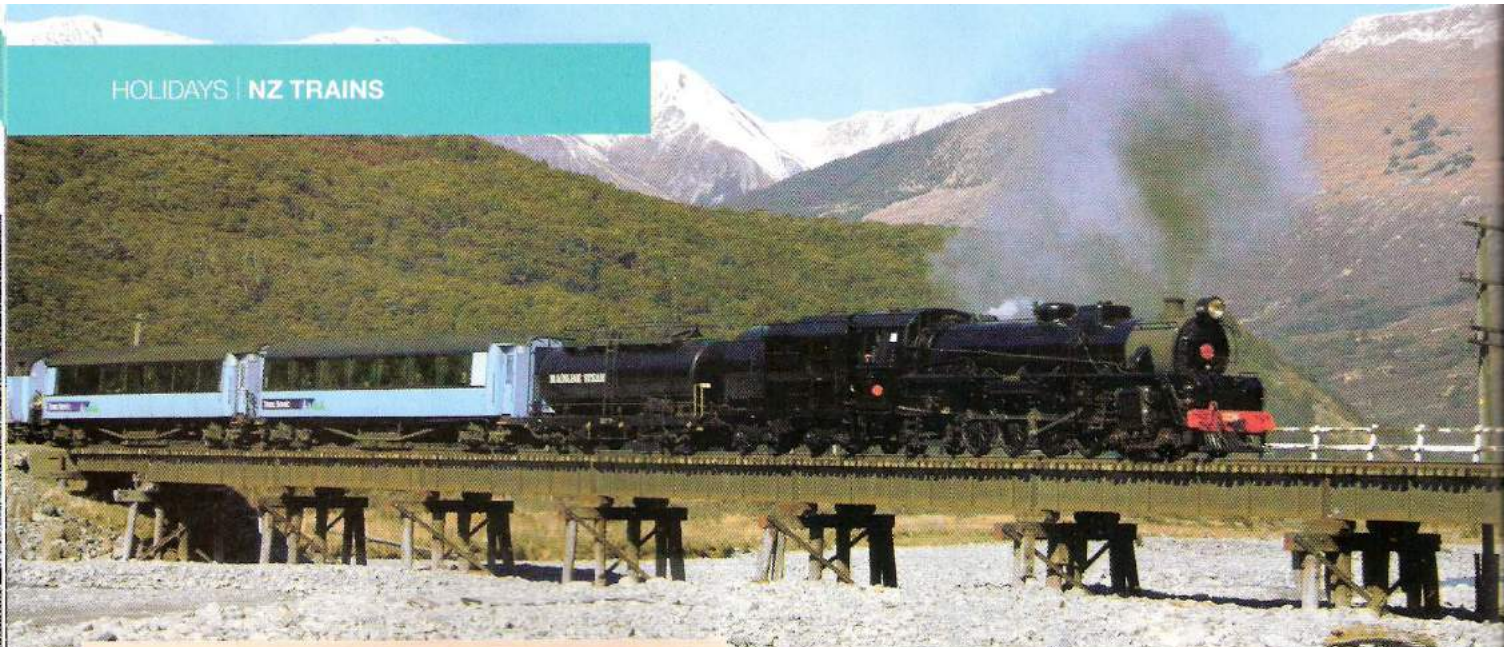
Golden blankets of wheat, blowing in the breeze, stretch away to the blue mountains silhouetted on the horizon, as we cross the vast fields of the Canterbury Plains – dotted with grazing cattle, sheep and red deer who don't seem remotely phased by the trains speeding through. At Springfield, the train loads up with muffins and, sugar-fuelled, we brace ourselves against the chill ahead, as we climb into the Alps.

Mind-boggling, jaw-dropping scenery is par for the course on this journey

The spectacular gorges and river valleys of Waimakariri and Broken River, winding away from the train into the distance are next in line.

Creating this section of the line was a considerable feat of engineering, requiring the building of 16 tunnels and five large viaducts, the most spectacular of which – known as 'the staircase' – is a staggering 73 metres above the river, the precipitous drop below leaving me dizzy and dry-mouthed. We speed past mountain villages, their houses huddling together, as if for warmth, at the base of forest-clad mountains – whose peaks >>





We speed past mountain villages, their houses huddling together as if for warmth, at the base of forest-clad mountains

are wreathed in streamers of frothy cloud. We are high in the mountains by the time we reach the dramatic scenery of Arthur's Pass – a tiny settlement named after Arthur Dobson, the first European to discover the crossing.

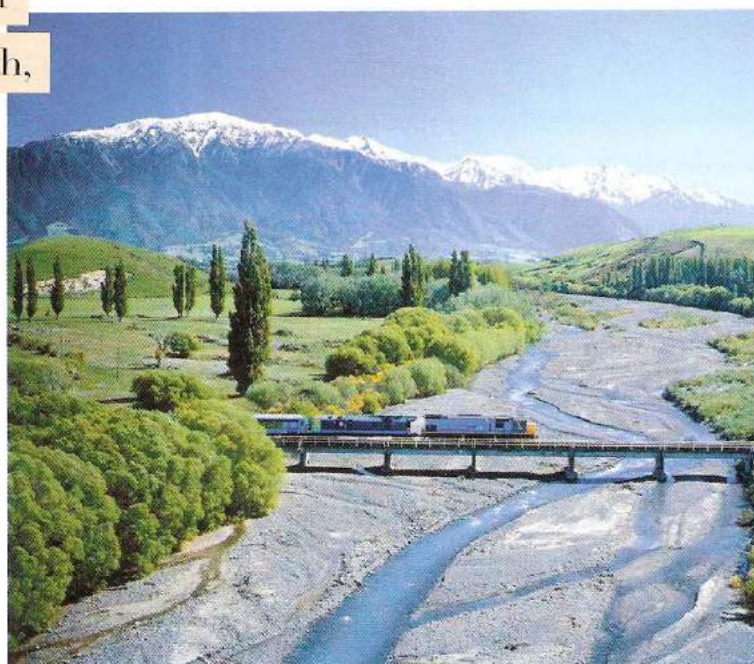
Soon afterwards, the train enters the 8.6 kilometre Otira tunnel to the other side of South Island. From there, we descend through lush beech forest and a deep river valley flanked by mist-shrouded mountains to reach the port of Greymouth, a old gold and coal mining town, where the History House Museum with its vast photo collection from the colonial era, is well worth a visit.

TAIERI GORGE RAILWAY

New Zealand has a scattering of preserved railways across the islands. However, the longest and most spectacular uses diesel electric rather than steam locomotives.

Leaving from Dunedin's distinctive Edwardian era station, the Taieri Gorge Railway follows the course of the river for much of its way up into the hills surrounding the city. Up to two trains a day go to Pukerangi and occasionally Middlemarch.

Construction of the line began in 1877, and by 1891, it was opened as far as Middlemarch and named the Otago Central Railway. Later, the line was extended, reaching Cromwell in 1921. By 1990, very little traffic was left and



Photos: Michael Tolich/Mainline Steam NZ, Tranz Scenic

Above Panoramic windows make for a thrilling ride on the TranzCoastal train

Top The TranzAlpine train speeds over the Bealey River in Arthur's Pass

a decision was made to close the remaining line between Dunedin and Clyde. The line as far as Middlemarch is now known as the Taieri Gorge Railway and the trackbed to Clyde as the Otago Central Rail Trail.

On the Taieri, we first pass through Dunedin before heading out into farmland. Then, just before Taioia, we start climbing, joining the Taieri River soon after, which we follow for the remainder of the journey. Steadily we climb, the sides of the gorge getting ever steeper and the river almost vanishing beneath us. I spot old railway trucks deep in the river valley below. Crossing the dozen awe-inspiring viaducts en-route there are staggering views. Finally, the train reaches Pukerangi, which in Maori means "hills of the heavens". Personally, it wasn't just the destination, but the whole trip I found 'heavenly'. If you ever get the chance to try this truly astounding experience – just do it! 🇳🇿

Tours

Grand Pacific operates a 19-day luxury rail/coach tour between Auckland and Christchurch with departures throughout the year. These incorporate travel on the TranzCoastal, TranzAlpine, and Taieri Gorge Railway along with some preserved railways such as the Glenbrook Vintage Railway and the Kingston Flyer, taking in spectacular major attractions such as Rotorua, Bay of Islands, Queenstown and the glaciers.

The annual NZ Steam Train Journey tour, running in conjunction with **Great New Zealand Steam Journeys**, departs on 7 September, is also one to watch out for, which much of the journey covered by specially chartered steam locomotives on the main line.

■ www.TranzScenic.co.nz; www.taieri.co.nz; www.allaboard.org.nz; www.steaminc.org.nz; www.mainlinesteam.co.nz; www.greatnzsteamjourneys.co.nz; www.grandpacific.com