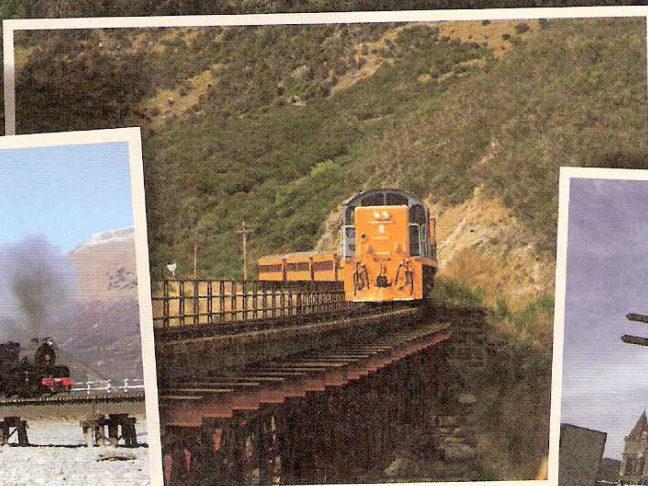


# Back on track

Mark Andrews rides the rails of New Zealand



**E**VERY MORNING TWO PASSENGER trains set off from opposite ends of New Zealand's North Island and 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 the island, the railway was the life-blood of communication. Today, like so many railways, it is struggling to find its place in the modern world. Travelers take the Overlander linking Auckland and Wellington more for the journey itself than to actually go somewhere.

Trains remain a wonderful way to see some of New Zealand's most spectacular scenery. And with last year being the centenary of the North Island trunk line, there has never been a better time to "let the train take the strain." Tranz Scenic operates three great rail journeys: the Overlander, the TranzCoastal, and the TranzAlpine. Or for those who are truly into the romance of steam, there is the annual 19-day New Zealand Steam Train Journey departing on September 7 or the Mainline Steam Tour departing on October 12.

## The Overlander

Covering 681km, this is the longest of the Tranz Scenic journeys and links the two largest cities on North Island. Down trains leave from underground in the new Britomart Transportation Centre. Opened in 2003, for the first time since 1930, this allows trains to go into the Auckland city centre and is actually under the site of the original 1885 station. Whilst the carriages are thoroughly modern, with reclining seats and panoramic windows, they are actually refurbished examples of a design dating to 1938. At the back of the train is an observation car with lounge seating around the windows. Here the seats are not assigned, making it a great place to meet other travelers. At the other end, there is an open viewing platform on the baggage car which allows passengers to take pictures unhindered by glass reflections. (And take pictures you will!)

From Auckland, the stretch to Hamilton is not particularly interesting, as it passes through the suburbs and follows the Waikato River. Hamilton, on the edge of Waikato, is where the journey starts

to get interesting. As the train sweeps toward the heart of North Island, it passes through King Country, home to some of New Zealand's best grazing. The highlight of the trip, though, comes around 30 minutes after leaving Taumarunui when the train enters the Raurimu Spiral. This is the engineering solution to the problem of how to get the line up the steep slope between the valleys and gorges of the Whanganui River in the west and the North Island Volcanic Plateau in the east. The result takes you around an ascending spiral with a circle and three hairpin bends before continuing on to two more sharp bends. In the process, the train climbs 132 meters over 6.8 kilometers. Safely on the plateau, the train then meets the up train from Wellington at National Park Station. Trains stop around 45 minutes here with the peaks of Tongariro, Ngauruhoe, and Ruapehu looming in the background – mountains that were incorporated into New Zealand's first national park. And if the peaks look familiar, it might be because the park played the role of Mordor in Peter Jackson's film adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.



After the National Park, the line makes the long descent down to Wellington. A few minutes down the line is where the final stake of the trunk line was driven in by then-Prime Minister Joseph Ward in 1908, linking the track from Auckland to that from Wellington. A short way from Ohakune Station, the train traverses the Tangiwai Bridge over the Whangaehu River. On December 24, 1953, a night express from Wellington crashed here, killing 151 people. A lahar had washed away the central span of the bridge and whilst the locomotive and first carriage made it to the other side, the next four carriages plunged into the river and another was left teetering on the brink until it too fell into the river.

Further down the track, the line starts following the massive Rangitikei Gorge and crosses over the river on some impressive viaducts, a good time to be at one of the observation points. As the train nears Wellington, it snakes the coasts before ending at Wellington Station, which dates from 1937 when it was New Zealand's largest building and the first to incorporate any form of earthquake protection.

During peak season (December to April), the service is daily. At other times, trains run only on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Until the end of September on two Saturdays a month, there is a special service, with part of the route being hauled by a steam locomotive.

### The TranzCoastal

One train runs daily between Christchurch and Picton and then back again. It arrives at Picton in time to drop passengers for the ferry to Wellington. Passenger accommodation is similar to the Overlander train, except seats are

arranged in fours around a table and there is a carriage with a full-length, open-air viewing platform.

Initially, the train tracks inland into the Marlborough region. Here the line takes you through vineyards and wineries, home to some of New Zealand's best bottled delights. After stopping at the regional centre of Blenheim, the train climbs into gentle hills dotted with sheep. With snow-capped mountains visible on your right, the train heads back toward the coast. On its way, it passes by Lake Grassmere, which is actually a salt-water lagoon. You can see the mineral being extracted here by evaporation in the salt pans.

Once at the coast, the train hangs tightly to the bottom of often steep cliffs. On its way, it passes through Kaikoura, the whale capital of New Zealand. Various tours offer whale-watching, or dolphin- or seal-swimming. Commonly seen marine mammals include the sperm whale, Hector's dolphin, dusky dolphin, bottlenose dolphin, and the New Zealand fur seal. The last can be seen from the train windows sunning itself on the rocky shoreline.

Finally, the train swings inland again to approach Christchurch, the largest city on South Island. The line between Christchurch and Picton was only fully opened in 1945, although parts opened in the 19th century before arguments over routes and cost delayed the project. Enroute, the train passes through 22 tunnels and over 175 bridges, including a double-decker road rail bridge.

### The TranzAlpine

Like the TranzCoastal, one train a day runs from Christchurch – this time to Greymouth, on the other side of South Island, and back. Carriages are refurbished with large windows and a mix of four-seat groups around tables and some unidirectional pairs. There is also an open-air viewing platform carriage, which you'll very much appreciate once the mountains appear.

Of all the Tranz services, this is probably the one with the most spectacular scenery and is a popular route. For around the first hour, the train passes across the Canterbury Plains through fields of sheep, cattle, and red deer. At Springfield, the train loads up with muffins rather than doughnuts, which might not be to Homer Simpson's liking, but this is New Zealand. Sugar-fuelled, the train starts its climb into the Southern Alps as it mirrors and crosses the Waimakiriri and Broken River Gorges. This proved a considerable engineering feat: 16 tunnels and five large viaducts, the most spectacular of which is the "staircase," looming 73 meters above the river. By the time the train reaches Arthur's Pass, it is high in the mountains. This tiny settlement is named after Arthur Dobson, who was the first European to discover this crossing to Westland. Soon afterwards, the train enters the 8.6-kilo Otira Tunnel to arrive on the other side of South Island. From there, the train

makes its way down to Greymouth through a deep river valley flanked by mist-shrouded mountains.

### The Taieri Gorge Railway

New Zealand has a smattering of preserved railways across the islands. However, the longest and most spectacular actually uses diesel-electric power rather than steam. 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 (58 kilos) and occasionally Middelmarsh (77 kilos).

Construction of the line began in 1877, and by 1891, it stretched as far as Middelmarsh and became known as the Otago Central Railway. Later extensions brought the line to 236 kilos, when it reached Cromwell in 1921. By 1990, very little traffic was left and the decision was taken to close the remaining line between Dunedin and Clyde. The line as far as Middelmarsh was saved as the Taieri Gorge Railway and the trackbed to Clyde is now the Otago Central Rail Trail.

Initially, the line passes through Dunedin's industrial suburbs before heading out into flat farmland. Just before Taioia, it starts climbing and soon after joins the Taieri River, which it snakes along throughout the remainder of the journey. Steadily, the train climbs with the sides of the gorge growing ever steeper and the river ever further below. Old railway trucks are visible deep in the river valley below. Enroute, the train crosses a dozen viaducts and passes through ten tunnels. Finally, it reaches the barren flats around Pukerangi, which in Maori means "hill of the heavens."

### 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, the TranzAlpine, and the Taieri Gorge Railway along with some preserved railways such as the Glenbrook Vintage Railway and the Kingston Flyer.

Whilst the tours have quite an emphasis on the railway side, they visit most of New Zealand's major attractions, such as Rotorua, Bay of Islands, Queenstown, and the glaciers.

In September, there is a similar but once annual NZ Steam Train Journey tour run in conjunction with Great New Zealand Steam Journeys. With this, there is more rail travel and some of it is done by specially chartered steam locomotives on the main line. All aboard! **KTO**

### Information

[www.tranzscenic.co.nz](http://www.tranzscenic.co.nz)  
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