



Happy deliverance

For many years **JEFF KAVANAGH** travelled beside the Clutha River without a closer inspection. Some of his curiosity has now been satisfied in a half-day paddle.

Few people will have seen much of the Clutha River as it flows southwards between Alexandra and Roxburgh. There are glimpses when driving State Highway 8, which links the two Central Otago towns; the river's cool, greenstone-coloured waters threads through a hilly landscape of tussock, thyme and rock that appears, particularly on scorching summer days, to have all the moisture baked from it.

Disappointingly, however, this stretch is flanked by private land and from the highway there aren't many obvious spots to pull over and further appreciate its beauty.

Consequently, for years as a kid travelling up from where I lived in Dunedin to Central Otago for holidays in the 1980s, I stared from the car, intrigued by what little I could see and determined to get a better look one day.

A 34-kilometre riverside cycle trail is proposed between Alexandra and Roxburgh Dam, but disputes with landowners have stymied progress, and only the first 10km, still under construction, has been approved.

I'm more of a water person, anyway, so it's an easy decision to go on a half-day paddle down the river with Clutha River Adventures.

It's a spitting, inclement mid-December morning when I clamber into a wetsuit, lifejacket and kayak for my adventure to



the Doctor's Point Gold Strike, just north of the Roxburgh Dam. We set off from beneath the iconic arches of the Alexandra Bridge, and apart from my guide, Laurence van de Eb, 47, the smiling Dutch co-owner of Clutha River Adventures, I'm the only person on the trip. A New Zealand resident for the past decade, Laurence grew up in London, was educated in Switzerland and spends six months of the year on the Spanish party island Ibiza, where his store sells nightclubbing gear.

One of the world's fastest flowing rivers, the Clutha speeds along at just over 600 cubic metres per second – and it's not long before Alexandra is well behind us and we're in a barren river valley of small scrubby trees and lone pines. Gliding with the current, Laurence points out the long-deserted, stony remains of gold miners' huts and shelters hidden in the hills.

"At the height of the gold rush in the early 1860s over 20,000 men worked along this stretch of the river," he says in an accent that wouldn't be out of place on *Antiques Roadshow*. He explains that they lived and worked in appalling conditions, large numbers poorly nourished and sleeping rough on brutally cold nights.

Hundreds of thousands of ounces of gold, mainly in small nuggets, were extracted from the

Guardians: Enormous rocks solemnly flank the Clutha River between Alexandra and Roxburgh.

Photos: JEFF KAVANAGH

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