



Raconteur:
Laurence van de Eb provides anecdotes as he paddles the Clutha River.

Clutha and its surrounds. Laurence's eyes light up when he says that most of the larger nuggets, some as big as fists, were too large for the sluices of the time and now lie tantalisingly along the river bed.

Listening to Laurence and seeing his obvious enthusiasm for goldmining in Central Otago, it's unsurprising to hear that his home, just up the road in Clyde, is packed with memorabilia and books on the subject. "I wanted to take my girlfriend to a museum the other day and she said, 'Why? You already live in one'," he says, laughing.

Slowly, the morning's poor

weather dissipates, bathing the hills in golden light. A harsh, yet beautiful environment, it's endowed with an eerie sense of emptiness and the only sounds we hear, beyond our voices, are chirping birds and the occasional splash of a paddle. Floating through this abandoned landscape in near silence, my thoughts perversely turn from gold-mining to *Deliverance*, the 1970s John Boorman movie in which Burt Reynolds and some buddies get terrorised by a bunch of demented hillbillies on a backwater canoeing trip.

Thankfully, these thoughts are only fleeting and soon dissolve

into a feeling of peaceful contentment at lying back and being borne along by the river. It's all very easy, and the reality is that there's very little exertion involved on our trip and, besides using it to steer, my paddle frequently lays across the bow of my kayak during the 12km from Alexandra to the old gold strike where we'll be picked up by Laurence's partner in the kayaking business, Steve Toyer.

An hour and a half after we set off, we reach the strike, which was the site of a large-scale commercial mining operation during the gold rush. Littered with the remnants of mining buildings and elaborate water races, and huge mounds of tailings, the rocky waste product of the mining process, it's a fascinating place and from the water resembles a huge, abandoned movie set. Once on dry land, Laurence gives me a tour, and we explore the frequently well-preserved huts and crawl into tight, dusty old mine shafts glittering with fool's gold and pockmarked by pickaxe blows.



Historical ruins: Remains of mining building at Doctor's Point gold strike.

We're not here long before we hear the roar of Steve's pontoon boat coming down the river and we go to meet him for the half an hour trip back to Alexandra. A solidly built, 55-year-old ex-fisherman from Sydney who prefaces every second sentence with "mate" and doesn't, judging by his gruff yet otherwise pleasant demeanour, suffer fools easily, Steve tells me he's been doing motorised river tours along this section of the Clutha for the past decade.

He's also lived in and around Alexandra for almost twice that time and I ask him if, having lived here so long, he considers himself a local. "Nah, mate," he laughs. "I'll always be an Aussie. Every time the rugby's on, I get out my Wallabies jumper - that gets all the locals going."

Learning about a part of New Zealand I've passed through countless times - courtesy of a couple of blokes who aren't even from this part of the world - I listen to them chat animatedly about a new cave discovered in the hillside.

The pair are convinced it was used during the Depression, when projects were set up to rework tailings and old mines for left-over gold.

■ As well as the half-day trip from Alexandra to Doctor's Point, Clutha River Adventures offer other kayaking trips down the river, including a guided four-day tour including overnight accommodation from Wanaka all the way to Balclutha.

For more information, go to cluthariveradventures.co.nz.

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