

Flinty heights

Zits theory: Giant rocks, the largest of which is more than 25 metres high and shaped like a Stone-Age arrowhead, look as if geological forces have squeezed them out of the ground “like giant zits”. Photos: JEFF KAVANAGH



Free of the cloud on Central Otago's Old Man Range, JEFF KAVANAGH finds himself in a landscape of golden tussock, schist, and huge stone columns.

It's my second attempt to reach the top of the Old Man Range, just outside Alexandra. The first was scuppered a few weeks earlier by a dumping of spring snow and a clump of thick cloud that stuck itself to the crest of the range and refused to budge, despite the otherwise warm and sunny weather bathing the Central Otago town.

It's now the second week of December and although the snow has mostly melted, the cloud is back, engulfing the steep, unsealed public road we're

driving up in a cool, soupy mist.

Visibility is thin at times, but Tony Rae, my mountainbike guide from Altitude Adventures, in Alexandra, isn't worried. Originally from Dunedin, the tall, 42-year-old has been living in the area for more than a decade and has ridden the range “heaps of times”. Although it might be a bit misty all the way to the top, he expects the cloud to lift as the morning warms up.

Halfway up to the 1700-metre summit we pass four riders. They've stopped to open one of about five farm gates we pass

through and seeing their cheeks ruddy from chilly air and the first section of the climb, I'm happy to be sitting in the warm comfort of a four-wheel-drive, our bikes strapped to the back.

Our driver, Dave Sainsbury, a cheery bloke with a warm chuckle, navigates us through the ruts in the track, the vehicle bouncing and bumping and eventually emerging into bright sunshine a few hundred metres from the summit. Free of the cloud, we discover ourselves in a landscape of golden tussock, flinty schist, and huge stone columns,

crowned by an enormous telecommunications tower. It feels as though we've touched down on a different planet.

Tony says that no-one knows why the giant rocks, the largest of which is more than 25 metres high and shaped like a Stone-Age arrowhead, are there. But he tells me there's a theory that “they've been squeezed out of the ground like giant zits”, by the same geological forces that formed the range.

Scarred by the elements with pockmarks and gouges, and popular with local free-climbers

as a result, the rocks are an amazing sight, particularly as they appear to be sticking out of an island floating in a sea of puffy cloud.

Once we've unloaded our bikes, Tony and I pedal over to the largest rock and get a couple of snaps before facing our bikes down the hill and a descent back into the mist.

The drive up has taken half an hour, but the ride down is about 90 minutes over a 20-kilometre