

Flinty heights

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4WD track. It takes us back to Earnsclough, a fertile fruit and wine-growing area on the banks of Clutha River, and back into Alexandra.

With transport, guide, full-suspension mountainbike and a trail lunch of cold drinks and sandwiches, the whole trip with Altitude Adventures costs \$155; and while it is possible to do the ride independently, you'll either have to pedal 10 kilometres out from Alexandra and then a very tough two hours up the range first, or get someone to take you all the way in a 4WD.

A decent understanding of local weather is also handy – the annual average temperature at

Small detour: Guide Tony Rae, below, about halfway down the Old Man Range, calls a halt for a rest outside a couple of musters' huts for a rest and something to eat.

the top of the range is zero degrees Celsius – to identify days too cold and windy for safe return.

The first part of our ride takes us down a gentle but deceptively fast incline. We pick up speed rapidly and the track, which carves through Department of Conservation land and farmland, isn't nearly as well groomed as the public road we came up on (which needs to be maintained for Telecom vehicles). Tyre tracks twist and deepen abruptly and fat rocks loom up out of nowhere. It's terrain best suited to intermediate mountainbikers. Yet it is wide and never hellishly steep and so even though there's some skill involved, it's still very manageable for less-experienced riders wanting to take their time.

Having the right equipment clearly also helps, and the light

We drop out of a low ceiling of overcast sky to majestic views across the Alexandra Basin towards Cromwell, Lake Dunstan, and the distant Hawkdun mountain range.

and agile bike I'm on is easily manoeuvred out of sticky situations, its suspension cushioning a few of my less well-judged approaches to rougher sections of the track.

Zippering along through the cloud, we can still see far enough ahead of us for it to not greatly effect the riding; in fact, the flat light formed by mist only



Descent pause: Jeff Kavanagh stops on the downward return to marvel at the flat lands of the Alexandra Basin below.

heightens the sensation that we're somewhere unearthly. Just as I'm getting used to riding in the haze, however, Tony's prediction that it would lift is correct. We drop out of a low ceiling of overcast sky to majestic views across the Alexandra Basin towards Cromwell, Lake Dunstan, and the distant Hawkdun mountain range.

After what seems like a relatively short amount of time in the saddle, but about halfway into our trip down the range, we take a small detour off the 4WD track and stop outside a couple of musters' huts for a rest and something to eat. Chatting with

Tony, I learn that apart from some guiding for Altitude Adventures, he's the fulltime greenkeeper just down the road at the Clyde Golf Club.

He's also obviously a much superior rider than I am, yet for the first part of the ride has patiently trailed me down the range. After we've finished our sandwiches, I tell Tony I'm fine riding alone for a while. As he speeds towards the flat lands of the Alexandra Basin below, I take a couple of moments to marvel at this stunning slice of Central Otago and to envy the locals who can ride here, whenever conditions allow.



Atmospheric: Guide Tony rides through the mist.



Families embrace hikes



Stunning: Giant's Gate Falls are near Lake Ada on the Milford Track.

The Great Walks season is in full swing, and Ultimate Hikes, operator of multi-day guided walks on the Milford, Routeburn and Greenstone tracks, has opened up bookings for 2013-14 with a new season deal.

The new season offer is available for walking between November 1 and December 20, 2013. It includes a night's accommodation at the Novotel Queenstown Lakeside Resort on each side of the walk and starts from \$1299; bookings must be made by April 30, 2013.

A new feature of the 2013-14

booking season is lower child pricing. If two or more children are on the same booking, a reduced price applies after the first child.

"While our minimum age is 10 years old, it's never too early to introduce young people to the beauty of nature, and where best to do this than our own pristine national parks," says Noel Saxon, Ultimate Hikes' general manager.

"We've experienced a pleasing trend this year in more New Zealanders booking on the tracks, and family groups are also increasing."



Mountain scenery: Glorious elevated views are presented on the Key Summit part of the Routeburn Track.