

10 GREAT REASONS TO DO THE Otago cavalcade

*A wagon trail retracing the steps of 19th century fortune-hunters is an experience filled with golden moments, says **Josie Stanford***

STEP BACK IN TIME

1 The Goldfields Cavalcade in Otago is a uniquely Kiwi annual expedition. Organised by the Otago Goldfields Heritage Trust, nine trails for horse riders, wagoners and walkers retrace the routes of the gold miners who sought their fortunes in inland Otago at the end of the 19th century. The event, which this year attracted close to 600 participants, offers a week-long opportunity to step out of the trappings of modern life, travel across otherwise inaccessible high-country and imagine how life was for the early pioneers. Launched by the trust in 1991 as part of its programme to promote and preserve the gold mining heritage of Otago, the cavalcade visits a different area each year, with all trails ending in the host town on parade day. This year, all routes led to Wanaka.

HORSES

2 If you ride, you simply have to experience the cavalcade. Offering the opportunity of riding for a full week through stunning countryside with back-up, accommodation en route and

catering, this is a real chance to bond with your horse. Riders talk of a sense of satisfaction that comes from long days in the saddle. If you're not a rider but you love horses, parade day will be a must. From the tiniest Shetland pony pulling a light wagon to big Clydesdales, there are horses of every colour, shape and size.

WAGONS

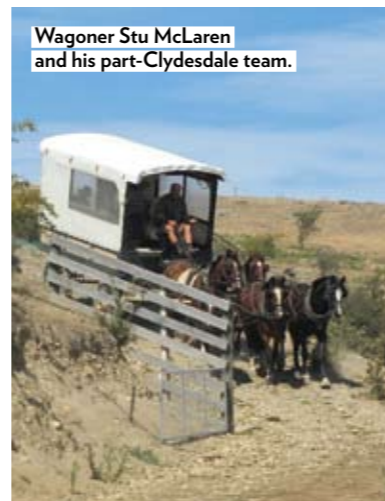
3 If you don't have a horse or you don't ride, you could get a rather special experience of the cavalcade as a passenger on a heavy wagon. I travelled with long-time cavalcadors Stu and Jennie McLaren, who were wonderful hosts and watching and helping with the team of horses was a real treat. Rigging a team of five or six horses is an art in itself – “harder than rigging a yacht”, a fellow passenger observed. For the wagoners, the cavalcade offers a rare opportunity to work a team of horses all day for multiple days, put the wagon through its paces and travel in convoy with other wagons. There are all types of wagons here – from a small gig pulled by two Fjord ponies to an historic Cobb and Co gold coach manned by Lester Rowntree from Cromwell. Stu's is an old flatbed lorry that used



Riders on the Makarora trail climbed the ridge between Wanaka and Hawea with stunning lake and mountain views.

View from inside the wagon.

Josie swaps her seat in the wagon for a horse.



Wagoner Stu McLaren and his part-Clydesdale team.



Smoko.

to cart produce from the wharves in Dunedin to cart produce from the wharves in Dunedin. It's a treat to travel this way: At times it can be a bit bone-shaking and it's slow progress, but you notice so much more of the scenery. You're lulled into peace by the rattling and clinking, and you really get that feeling of retracing the steps of the early settlers as they first ventured across the land.

WALKING THE HILLS

4 It's not all about horses. There are two or three walking routes, which offer one of the best ways to tramp across Otago, giving you access to land that would not otherwise be open and the chance to experience varied terrain and marvellous views. “It gets into the blood,” says walking trail boss and 16-time cavalcader Sandra Cain.

“Each trail is totally different. The camaraderie is huge. Of 65 walkers on my trail this year, 50 had walked with me before.”

Among them was 80-year-old Tom Faulkner, who has done 16 cavalcades on foot. This year there were three walking trails varying in intensity; the hardest covers 20km a day, and you carry all your gear to experience how the miners travelled. No back-up vehicle, travelling bar or catering on this one.



The cavalcade crosses stations in hill country that usually only musterers see.

THE CHALLENGE

5 Make no mistake, the cavalcade is far from luxury travel. Days are long – up to eight hours in the saddle or on foot – and accommodation is usually in woolsheds, community halls or tents. A high level of fitness is required for all trails; the rewards are many, not least a very real sense of satisfaction. ▶



Wanaka welcomes the 2010 Goldfields Cavalcade on parade day.

CAMARADERIE

6 The social aspect of the event is huge. People return year after year so that large ‘families’ are formed. On the heavy wagon trail I’m advised to hide my D’aucklandness with these rural folk but I get full points for simply being here. Although the majority are South Islanders, the cavalcade attracts people from all walks of life, all parts of the country and even from overseas. On our wagon we had Karolina Lundahl, an exchange student from Sweden who brought her guitar and sang a cute song about her impressions of Kiwi life. Everyone is friendly and eager to help each other enjoy the trip and a certain amount of Kiwi ingenuity is always called for at some point in the trail. Evenings are spent story telling and sleep comes easily after a few beers and a long day. Even the call of nature in the middle of the night becomes a joy when you look up and witness the Milky Way beaming at you against a jet-black sky.

SCENERY

7 Thanks to support from landowners who open up access across their stations, the cavalcade offers participants the rare privilege to get up into high country that would only otherwise only be seen by musterers. “You can drive through Central Otago on the tarseal and think you’ve seen it, but just up over the range to your left or to your right there’s a different world, and you see that on a horse,” says 16-time cavalcader and two-time trail boss Winston Parks. This year, riders crossed the ranges surrounding Lake Wanaka, rode high tussock country and marvelled at views toward peaks including Mount Aspiring.



Walkers return year after year.



Dressed up for the parade.


HISTORIC SIGHTS

8 Traces of the gold mining era are littered across the region: Mud and stone buildings, examples of mining equipment and machinery, deep mine shafts and tunnels, and impressive sluiced cliffs. One of the highlights this year was arriving at the Lindis Pass Hotel – the partly restored stone-built hotel dating from the gold mining era – and passing the Lindis River, the site of the first gold discovery in the area in 1861.

THE HOST TOWN

9 Each year, a different town across the region takes its turn to be the cavalcaders’ destination and to host celebrations. This year the host town was Wanaka, with its lakefront and mountain backdrop. It makes sense to extend your holiday here and take advantage of the wealth of outdoor activities – perhaps a skydive to get different views of those magnificent high peaks. Next year, the host town is Oamaru with its collection of grand old Victorian buildings built with gold rush money. The Waitaki District that surrounds Oamaru boasts some fantastic scenery, including limestone outcrops formed 24 million-26 million years ago and the famous Moeraki Boulders.

PARADE DAY

10 Parade day is a sight to behold. This year, hundreds of spectators lined the streets of Wanaka to welcome 600 horses and their riders and drivers into town. A memorable end to a memorable trip. I enjoyed that sense of doing something that others marvel at – all week long we’d been a spectacle bringing a keen sense of life, history and fresh stories to the areas we passed through. After the parade the excitement continues with dinner and hoe-down – a chance for cavalcaders to mingle and compare notes of their trails. *Josie flew to Queenstown courtesy of Air New Zealand. The 2011 cavalcade runs from February 26 to March 5 and ends in Oamaru. Cost ranges from \$60-90 a day and trails range from three to seven days. See www.cavalcade.co.nz. *