



Bike trail boom

Small towns are striking gold as cyclists follow scenic historic mining paths to pedal through Hauraki heartland in record numbers.

WORDS SUE HOFFART / PHOTOS SUPPLIED

A new kind of gold is reinvigorating Hauraki's former mining towns, as two-wheeled tourism replaces digging and sluicing.

When visitors ventured into the region's winding, verdant canyon to reach Karangahake township 120 years ago, they found a bustling, newly-formed commercial hub crammed with prospectors and pubs, barmaids, bankers and mine staff.

Present day cyclists encounter a vastly more serene scene when they pedal the Hauraki Rail Trail. A disused railway line ambles alongside fast-flowing Ohinemuri River, flanked by native bush and passing a waterfall, the rusting remnants of gold processing plants and abandoned cliffside tunnels.

It's remarkably accessible beauty and, thanks to hordes taking to their bikes – many on electric models – this is one of the most popular cycle paths in New Zealand.

These recreational cyclists are visible year-round now, refilling their drink bottles in Waihi and Paeroa, perching their padded bottoms in cafés from Thames to Te Aroha, helping to fill local business coffers. No doubt, they'll collectively smash a few more records this summer, when the newest leg of the trail opens beyond the mountain of love – that's Te Aroha – ushering them through to Matamata.

Only two years ago, a survey clocked almost 85,000 users on the Hauraki trail and it was estimated numbers would rise to around 125,000 by 2029. Within a year, counters had already recorded 142,000 pedallers.

No one predicted this kind of growth, including rail trail boss Diane Drummond.

"I remember 10-odd years ago, when someone was telling me about the cycle trails, thinking 'that's not going to take off,'" Diane says.



Now she's chief executive of the Hauraki Rail Trail Trust, she sees the impact first-hand. After all, it was Diane who signed off on the \$6.8 million construction bill to build the newest leg of the 160km trail. Last year alone, the trail generated an estimated \$24 million in revenue, including spending by both business owners and tourists on accommodation and petrol, dining and groceries, bike hire, bike repair and trinkets to take home.

Diane says electric bikes have put more people in the saddle, with the burgeoning baby boomer cyclist demographic supplemented by families and young overseas tourists.

“But it’s also about the location; visitors can leave Auckland in the morning and be riding through the stunning Karangahake Gorge by lunchtime, through the tunnel, alongside gold mining sites which date back to the late 1800s. It’s close to Tauranga, Hamilton and Coromandel.”

When Hauraki Rail Trail opened in late 2012, it immediately became part of something larger. It is among 22 great rides that collectively form *Nga Haerenga* [the journeys] or the New Zealand Cycle

Trail which include the nation’s first major off-road cycle touring route in Otago.

Nga Haerenga general manager Janet Purdey says the trails have helped dozens of communities through job creation, by promoting health and recreation, and by sparking multiple conservation projects. Of course, they are also a fantastic way to explore New Zealand.

Janet says the Otago Central Rail Trail is now the second largest income earner behind farming in that part of the South Island. “It’s the ultimate in sustainable travel,” she says of the national trail network. “Riders from here and overseas can see New Zealand with a light carbon footprint and contribute to smaller, out-of-the-way communities through the money they spend.”

Paeroa residents Fiona and Murray Pennell have built three businesses on the back of the Hauraki Rail Trail which collectively employ more than 20 staff.

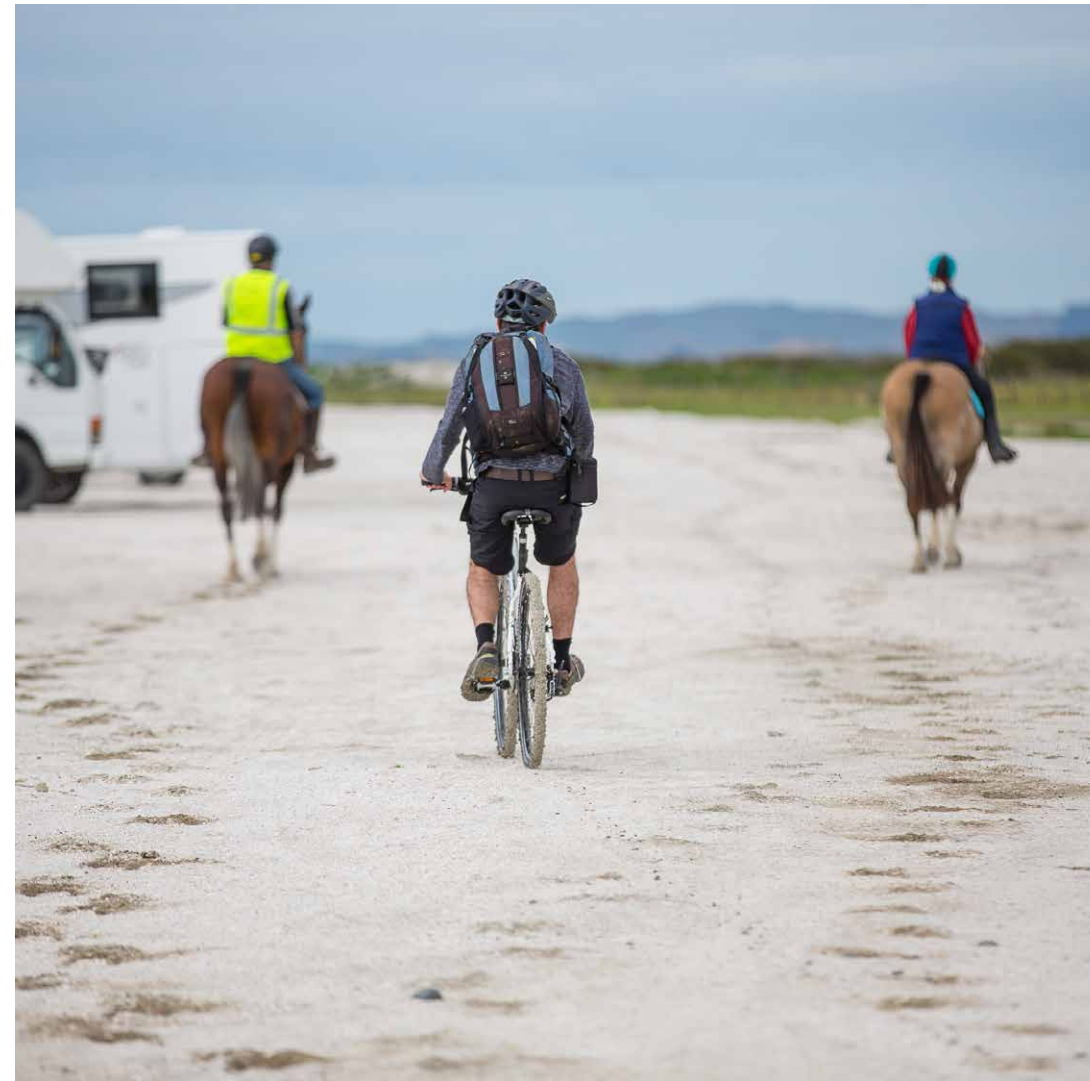
In recent decades, the home of New Zealand’s most famous soft drink – Lemon and Paeroa – has also become a magnet for antique shoppers.

“We could see the rail trail was going to be a big thing,” Fiona says of their decision to develop their restaurant, One 3 One; a Subway fast-food franchise; and the aptly-named Pedlars Motel.

Fiona and Murray, who also own a construction business in the Hauraki town, spotted a run-down pub for sale in 2013 and bought it the same day. Within 13 weeks, they’d gutted the interior, stripped the exterior and reused rimu timber to line what became One 3 One – a restaurant, café and wine bar. Naturally, cycle racks were also installed outside the front door.

The Subway franchise was next and, a year later, they built their cycle-friendly motel, complete with lock-up bike storage, bike hire and a puncture-mending service.

“There was a huge need,” Fiona says of the motel development that sits just back from SH2 and only metres from the cycle trail. “But people didn’t believe it would work. No one wanted to lease it so we put a manager in and run it ourselves, which is the best thing we could ever have done. It’s been so successful.”



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OPPOSITE PAGE Enjoying the shade with a well deserved beer at the Waikino Hotel en route.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The Shorebird Coast; Ohinemuri Riverside; parked up at Falls Retreat for a wood-fired pizza lunch; pit stop at the Karangahake Gorge bridge.





“THERE ARE TOURISTS IN THERE EVERY DAY FOR THE SCENERY, RIDING THROUGH THE BIG TUNNEL AND, IN SUMMER, THEY CAN SWIM IN THE RIVER OR UP THE WATERFALL. IT’S HEALTHY, IT’S FREE AND IT’S BEAUTIFUL.”

FOODIE FINDS

Wood-fired pizza at Falls Retreat (and cooking workshops and gardening classes) in Karangahake Gorge. fallsretreat.co.nz

A craft beer or cider at the recently-renovated Waikino Hotel. waikinohotel.nz

Grilled sourdough sandwiches from The Refinery, the-refinery.co.nz

Multi award-winning organic cumin seed gouda from The Cheese Barn at Matatoki. thecheesebarn.co.nz

Raw food and healthy smoothies from Villa Nine Health & Coffee Shop, Te Aroha

Kowhai Creamery ice cream from Fantails at Wairere Falls on Old Te Aroha Road. kowhaicreamery.co.nz

EN ROUTE

Trail development has enabled trappers to reach previously inaccessible parts of wetlands near Thames, so they can lay traps to catch stoats, hedgehogs and other pest animals. The area is one of six in New Zealand deemed wetlands of international significance.

Aroha Mountain Lodge, a favourite accommodation stop for cyclists, was once owned by prime minister Jacinda Ardern’s grandparents.

Take a soak in the silica-rich waters of New Zealand’s original spa town. Te Aroha’s pools were the first that Māori bathed in and it was popular with overseas visitors long before Rotorua became a tourist destination.

The northernmost section of trail, between Kaiaua and Miranda, has been carefully constructed to avoid the nesting sites of endangered bittern birds and native lizards. Visit Pūkorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre to find out about the migratory Arctic wading birds that spend summers here.

Watch for glow worms while cycling through the Karangahake Gorge tunnel and get off the bike to weave in and out of gold mining tunnels along the historic Windows Walk.

The four-star motel runs at 80% occupancy. But it isn’t only the cycle tourists who benefit from the Pennells’ investments.

“Before, there was nowhere nice for families to come, or a place ladies could go for a wine after netball,” she says. Now the wine bar is always busy after netball training or games and local families are just as likely to dine as tourists.

Fiona says fellow Paeroa businesses are far more busy since the cycle trail opened and both she and fellow locals use the paths too. “There are tourists in there every day for the scenery, riding through the big tunnel and, in summer, they can swim in the river or up the waterfall. It’s healthy, it’s free and it’s beautiful.

“And there’s still massive growth to come,” she says. Plans are afoot to introduce a river boat cruise, which will cater to cyclists, from the town’s historic maritime park.

A 100-seat restaurant has sprung up on the southern outskirts of Te Aroha, beside dairy cows and a defunct school.

District councillor and Te Aroha businesswoman Teena Cornes planned to build a small 30- or 40-seat daytime café but opted for a much bigger venue when the bike trail extension was announced, running beyond her town and past the eatery doorstep en route to Matamata.

Teena says the existing trail has been a significant benefit to Te Aroha, with new businesses emerging to service the cycle tourists.

“The impact is huge,” she says. “You used to be able to stand in the middle of the main street and see two or three cars on a weekend. Now, you see bikes and people in lycra and most shops open on the weekends. You can’t get a seat at the local café at weekends and it can take two or three weeks to get a booking to have a spa.”

Teena and husband Richard are sinking \$1.5 million into the new venture, called The Old Forge Kitchen in honour of the original building on the site.

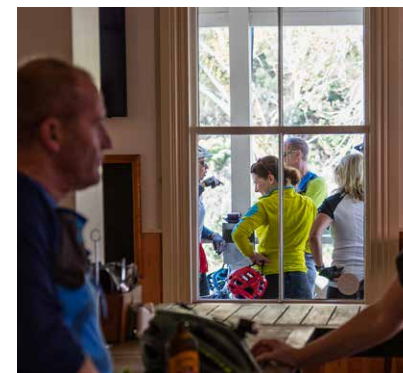
It’s a 20-minute ride from the town’s charming central domain, at the foot of Mount Te Aroha. The domain is home to a soda water geyser and hot springs and a historic bathhouse and it is the start-point for a cluster of walking trails that loop up and over the mountain.

The Cornes’ eatery is also an easy ride from the spot where gold was discovered on this side of the Kaimai Ranges, in the Waiorongomai Valley.

Teena expects the new section of cycle trail will deliver Hobbiton visitors and domestic weekend riders to her restaurant, along with day-trippers from neighbouring Matamata, Morrinsville and Te Aroha.

“It’s going to bring a very interesting mix of people every day but especially on weekends; families and semi-retired, with a lot of e-bikes starting to come into the district.”

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THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT Waikino Hotel; Falls Retreat wood-fired pizza lunch; map of the trail. **OPPOSITE PAGE** The Waikino leg of the trail.