

GREAT ADVENTURES

BENMORE HYDRO TRACK

Ride grade 5, taking no account for your stomach for heights

The Benmore Hydro Track crosses two historic Mackenzie high country stations, Black Forest and Te Akatarawa. Te Akatarawa Station has long been farmed by the Graham family and its on this property that most of the track is on. Both properties are on the shores of Lake Benmore, and access is by permission, you will have to pay a modest fee to cover administration costs, including details of the combination locks. There is by the way, no forest, this Mackenzie landscape is exclusively one of rocks, sun and tussock.

Traversing the track gives an excellent overview of parts of the Waitaki Power Project you can't normally get to and really rams home how big this dream was in the 1950s and how little balls we have for getting any kind of worthwhile infrastructure building done today.

Black Forest Station itself, at the head of the track, is over 60 km from Tekapo. It's a welcoming place and Ben and Caroline, the current generation of the Innes family, who have been farming the run since Adam was a stockman, have a range of accommodation (minimum stay 2 nights) available, from a converted shearers cottage, to spanking new holiday homes. Even in this region of exceptional views the lakeside setting of the homes has to rate outstanding. You will have to be a bit organised though, with your own towels, sleeping bags and something to cook in the fully equipped kitchens.

I would recommend making the Station your base for a few days and riding the track in each direction on two separate days by making loops west and east by including other rough roads in the area, like Tekapo River and Hakataramea Pass. Lateral thinkers will instantly see the potential for some of the party to lounge beside the lake for a few days, while others go out and get dusty.

The track starts at the homestead, following a valley, before beginning the climb up to Monty's Saddle. Overhead are the power pylons feeding our appetite for electricity north and which (according to locals) anchor the North Island firmly in position. It will come as no surprise that the track was built to install and maintain the pylons. Soon you cross the old rabbit fence boundary and pass into Te Akatarawa Station. Keep a watch out for wallabies, the bouncy pests are moving west from the Hunter Hills. Crossing Monty's Saddle opens a view that will bring you to a dead stop. Out below you is Lake Benmore, it's azure blue in brilliant contrast to the barren rocky moonscape of what is the driest, rockiest, terrain in New Zealand.

The track now remains high along the contour, at about 600 metres. Watch out for the drops and for rocks fallen on the track. At the second saddle there's another stupendous view, this time towards Benmore Dam itself. Here the track plunges down several zigzags to a cove beside the lake, a good spot for a rest or swim on a hot day. Continuing, now closer to the shore, the track winds its scenic way to Whalan Stream where the track crosses two hundred metres of rough river gravel before the final climb and descent to Benmore Dam, and head of Lake Aviemore

which you come on so suddenly it takes a few moments to grasp the scale of the place. You exit the locked gate to the surprised stares of motorists viewing the dam. Could they even imagine where you have come from?

JN ROUTE GRADING

- 1 Tar sealed, all weather road.
- 2 Formed surfaced gravel road, all streams bridged.
- 3 Formed surfaced gravel road, surface uneven in parts, surfaced fords and or bridges.
- 4 Formed unsurfaced road, rough fords and or bridges.
- 5 Moderate unsurfaced track, moderately rough fords and or bridges, no major climbs.
- 6 Rough unsurfaced track, rough fords and or bridges, moderate climbs.
- 7 Rough unsurfaced track, rough fords and or bridges, steep climbs.
- 8 Very rough unsurfaced track, difficult fords and difficult climbs.
- 9 Nightmare unsurfaced track, very rough fords and very steep climbs.
- 10 Don't go there!

Please note. my idea of challenging may not be yours. Conditions change constantly, the area is remote, travel in company, and be prepared for Adventure.

ROUTE DIRECTIONS BLACK FOREST TRACK

Start: Lake Tekapo

Finish: Benmore Dam

Distances: Lake Tekapo to Black Forest 63.0 km. Black Forest to Benmore Dam 30.0 km. Distances approx.

Route grade: 5

Obstacles/dangers: Massive kiss-your-arse-goodbye drops off side. Suitable only for settled weather – usually November to May, but the road can be closed by snow or for logistic reasons at any time.

Access and accommodation: Private property, phone booking essential, ph 03 6806795, 12.30-1.00 pm, or 7.00-8.00pm.

Black Forest accommodation website www.holidayhomes.co.nz/listing/3484

Directions: From Lake Tekapo ride 14 km towards Fairlie and turn right onto Haldon Road. Continue 41 km to Haldon Stn. Veer left through the Stn and continue 7 km to Black Forest Stn. Directions to the start of the Black Forest Track and current conditions will be given when you check in.

TRAINSPOTTING

Black Forest Station has been the home of several generations of the Innes family. The station grows fine quality Merino wool aided by a bracing winter climate and hot dry summers. Black Forest was first leased, by Hugh Fraser in 1858, From 1919 James Innes amalgamated Haldon and Black Forest Stations, though these were subsequently split again. The formation of Lake Benmore in the 1960s submerged the old Black Forest homestead covering the flats and gorge and the current homestead was built. Te Akatarawa Station extends some 11,597 ha. During the construction of the Waitaki Project the majority of Te Akatarawa's productive river flats were flooded beneath Lake Aviemore. The handsome two-story homestead however survives. Benmore Dam has head of 94 metres and consists of 12.2 million cubic metres of earth. It generates 540 mw through six generators. Lake Benmore is the largest man made lake in the country. It was filled in 1965 and covers 7,900 hectares, with a volume one and a half times that of Wellington Harbour.

