

GREAT ADVENTURES

LEES VALLEY

Ride grade 3-8, depending on river flows

One of the great things about Adventure riding is the sense of getting away from the crowds. Canterbury's remote Lees Valley is populated by no more than 20 people, so there's a good chance traffic will be light.

The valley can be accessed from either Oxford, or Lowburn near Rangiora, but though this public road is nominally a through road, there's no guarantee that you will get through. The problem is the Okuku River and its rough ford, roughly halfway through the loop. The Okuku's flow can vary from a trickle to a flood and is dependent on rainfall higher in the mountains, so even in good weather it's a case of not knowing the situation for sure until you reach the river, an uncertainty which, to me, heightens the sense of adventure.

For that matter, from the plains there's no indication that this wide valley even exists, hidden as it is between the Puketeraki Range, Okuku Hills and Mt Richardson. The valley was settled by George Lee in 1856, when he established the 31,700 acre Wharfedale Run, named after a valley in his native Yorkshire. Early pack tracks were established over the Okuku Hills and north through McDonald Downs to Waikari, the road coming much later. Though subsequently split up into several properties, many of the farms, including Wharfedale, have been lately merged into a new 58,000 acre station company, called Mt Pember.

Those who take the trouble of riding into the Lees Valley will be rewarded in many ways. On top of almost 80 km of glorious gravel, there's the rugged Ashley Gorge, where the road winds around precipitous bluffs, with splendid high country views in all directions. Later, there's the surprise of the wide, lonely plains of the hidden valley, with the dramatic backdrop of the Puketeraki Range.

The summit of the ride is the Okuku Saddle at the head of the valley, though this is a tame feeling high point compared to the steep country of the Ashley Gorge. Just on the far side of the pass comes the Okuku River ford, which must be treated with utmost respect. I am just one of many who have been turned back by this river. DO NOT cross if you have any doubts and do not do so alone. For those who safely cross, the road drops again before climbing the Lees Pass, another low saddle. Then it swings southeast, skirting the Okuku Range to begin the gradual, but ever tortuous, descent toward Lowburn and the gentler country of the Canterbury Plains.

The route can be done from either direction, though I favour going in from Oxford, as you get the best variety of views should the Okuku River not be fordable and you need to return the same way. Oxford is also a good staging point with fuel, pie shop, pub, or if you like fussier food, the acclaimed Jo Seagar Café.

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.

LEES VALLEY

Start: Oxford

Finish: Loburn (nr. Rangiora)

Total distance: 95km approx

Route grade: 3-8, depending on river flows

Distances are approximate

Obstacles/dangers: From near Oxford the road is well-surfaced gravel, but becomes less tidy and a bit rough in places as you go on. The Okuku River ford is however only roughly bulldozed through shingle, subject to change and often impassable. Do not attempt this ford if the river is flowing fast, dirty or approaching axle depth, or on your own. Take warm clothing whatever the conditions, parts of the road are remote and don't forget the camera.

Odometer (km)	Instruction	Notes
reset odometer here	Oxford main street intersection – take High Street north	Filled your tank?
1.0	Becomes Ashley Gorge Road	
6.0	TL Lees Valley Rd	Gravel starts
7.0	Caution big drops from now on!	Check the views at the first saddle!
16.0	Cross bridge	Cross the Ashley River, nice lunch spot
25.0	Cross bridge	Entering Lees Valley
32.0	Wharfedale Rd	Station on right
43.0	Okuku Saddle	High point 624 m
50.0	Okuku River	Reset speedo
reset odometer here	Check crossing	Dangerous ford!
4.0	If continuing	Lees Pass
29.0	TR Quarry Rd	
33.0	SA Loburn White Rock Rd	Cont. on Loburn White Rock Rd
42.0	Loburn North	
45.4	Loburn	SA to Rangiora and SH 1, or R to Oxford

