

The Land of the **LONG WHITE CLOUD** Ride

with Wild Women Expeditions

Story and photos by Shawn Hamilton, CLiXPhoto.com



Off grid, offline, and in sync with your breathtaking surroundings is the only way I can describe *The Land of the Long White Cloud Ride* with Wild Women Expeditions.

On this ten-day ride hosted by Adventure Horse Trekking New Zealand in the South Island, one quickly learns to trust their mount as it carefully manoeuvres the trails clinging to the mountainside with the lake below. Civilization and the realities of everyday life are left behind and soon forgotten as you bond with fellow riders lunching alongside a babbling brook, or belting out familiar songs around the crackling fireplace in a herdsman's hut. The remoteness of a four-day trek around the pristine turquoise coloured Lake Hawea, staying in huts typically used for sheep herders and fly fisherman, is paused only briefly for a day of tasting

local wines near the small town of Wanaka. You are then back in the saddle in the Ahuriri conservation area, climbing mountains for stunning views and galloping through the purple lupines and long grass of the valleys. Landscapes that can only be described as Banff on steroids, combined with traditional dishes slow-cooked with care and patience, makes this women-only riding vacation an unforgettable one. Although the South Island of New Zealand is a popular tourist hub, you cross flowing streams, climb high peaks, and ride along foxglove-bordered paths barely seeing a soul. Your four-footed transportation takes you to places that the average tourist never sees or even knows about. Passing the odd hiker or mountain biker while in the saddle, you remind yourself that they, too, are having the same exceptional experience.



The stunning view of Lake Hawea from Hunter Valley Station.



Mountain views on the day ride from Hunter Valley Station, one of the most picturesque places in New Zealand.



I am greeted by driver Mike in the Queenstown airport and whisked into town to pick up the others, including Helen a retired veterinarian and the equestrian representative of Wild Women Expeditions; the adventure company also runs kayak, hiking and other trips for women. There are seven of us in total, including a retired policewoman and a nurse. Mike carefully navigates the hairpin turns up the mountain as we wind our way past the historic Hotel Cardrona near Wanaka. We follow the highway alongside Lake Hawea until turning onto a dirt road leading us to



At Hunter Valley Station, tacked, packed, and ready for adventures.



Hunter Valley Station is a working farm and sheep ranch.

Wrangler Megan is a qualified chef. She also owns The Wetlands Café in Timaru, and The Boutique Farmhouse Barn Stay B&B. On her farm, The Kelford Morgan Farm, she breeds Morgan horses for colour, show jumping, eventing, and trekking.

Hunter Valley Station, a working farm and sheep ranch. After unloading our bags into our designated rooms, we gather on the deck overlooking the horse paddock, backdropped by the turquoise lake with mountains behind. The wind is rustling the trees ever so slightly. It was a three-day trip to get here but it was well worth it for this view alone.

John Wall, the owner of Adventure Horse Trekking New Zealand, sorts tack in the barn while his wife and business partner, Angie Leckey, preps hors d'oeuvres to be served with wine on the deck. Now in their seventh

year of business, John and Angie run approximately 25 rides annually in various parts of the South Island of New Zealand. (Don't worry men — only a few of their rides each year are with Wild Women Expeditions.)

Before dinner, Angie gives a slide show depicting the history of the area and some interesting facts about the 35 km long glacier-fed Lake Hawea. At 392 metres deep, it is the deepest lake on the South Island, covering an area of 142 square kilometres. Angie tells us that in 1958 the government raised the lake by 20 metres, cutting off access beyond the

station. While blasting out a new road, then-owner of the Dingleburn Station, Ian Sarginson, blasted himself into the water not once but twice, and was saved by a French fisherman. Lucky for us he managed to complete the trail, as it is the path we will follow when we complete our three-day trek around the lake.

After dinner it's quick to bed with jetlag and the desire to be energized for our first day's ride.

Sipping tea on the deck next morning, I watch the horses being brushed and tacked. They all seem to be big-boned. While sorting out lunches in the dining area, Angie explains that many of the horses are by a Shire stallion, Supreme.

"John and I leased Supreme for three years because he had wonderful conformation and a gentle nature. He was such a deeply caring, attentive 'Dad' to his foals, and a gentleman with his mares,"





Blessed are the pack horses.

she says. Now 28 of the 76 horses in their herd are direct descendants of Supreme.

When asked about his breeding program, John tells me: "A traditional Kiwi farm horse was always at least one-quarter and often one-half draft horse. This is so they could pull a plough, work the fields, then take their owner to church or to the market, or be saddled for a hunt."

After our hearty breakfast, we pack our lunches into our saddlebags and select the appropriate size of oilskin to carry in case of rain. Angie gives us her safety talk, addressing not only safe riding but also the care and respect they demand for their horses, which she says

are part of their family.

I am happy to learn that Wild Women Expeditions has made it mandatory to wear helmets on all of their rides. We sign our waivers and head out to the paddock to meet our mounts.

John has graced me with Hannah, a Shire-cross mare. She has a large bubble and needs her space, but she is very surefooted. I am extremely impressed at how she stands in the river allowing all the other horses to cross so I can take photos from her back.

Not long after leaving the farm we begin to climb. It is a steep and windy trail, but the breathtaking views at

the top where we stop for lunch make it worthwhile. Hunter Valley Station has been described as one of the most picturesque places in New Zealand, and I now understand why.

Unfortunately, the path leading down the mountain is overgrown, forcing us to lead our horses through the steep part. Once the terrain flattens out, we mount up and head back to the ranch where we untack and hose down our horses before leading them back to the paddock to graze.

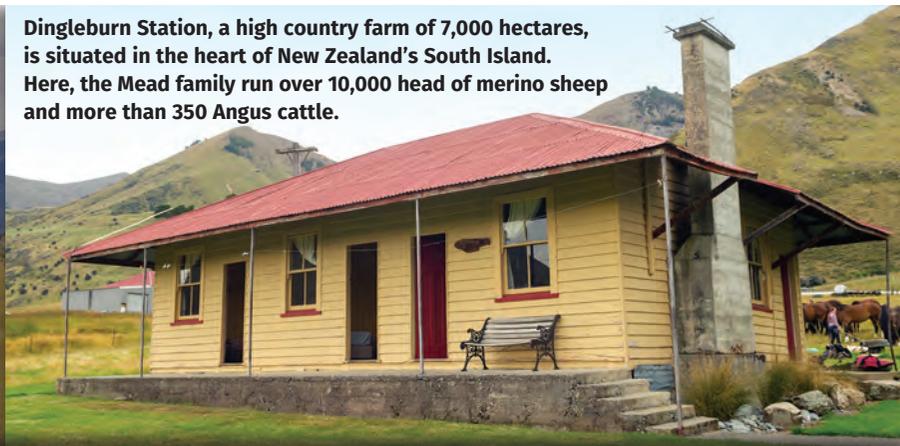
Megan, one of the wranglers and a qualified chef, is busy in the kitchen preparing her traditional family Kiwi Christmas dinner for us. The shrimp-and-smoked-salmon cocktail starter is delicious, and the main course of venison tenderloin with berry sauce is exquisite. But it doesn't stop there — Megan produces a pavlova for dessert! This is a meal to remember.

In the morning Angie, Megan, and wrangler Amy, who arrived on day one from Amsterdam, are packing our food for our three-day trek around the lake. We are busy stuffing our supplies into small bags for the packhorses to carry. We all watch Megan and John carefully weigh the packs, load them onto the horses, and tie the diamond hitch at the top.

We head north on the west side of Lake Hawea and enjoy lunch next to a small fishing hut where we watch a flock of black swans floating on the lake below. Shortly after passing a waterfall, I begin to feel the



The day ride from Boundary Hut into Hunter Valley.



Dingleburn Station, a high country farm of 7,000 hectares, is situated in the heart of New Zealand's South Island. Here, the Mead family run over 10,000 head of merino sheep and more than 350 Angus cattle.



Nicky Mead of Dingleburn Station demonstrates her Huntaway dog's sheep-herding skills

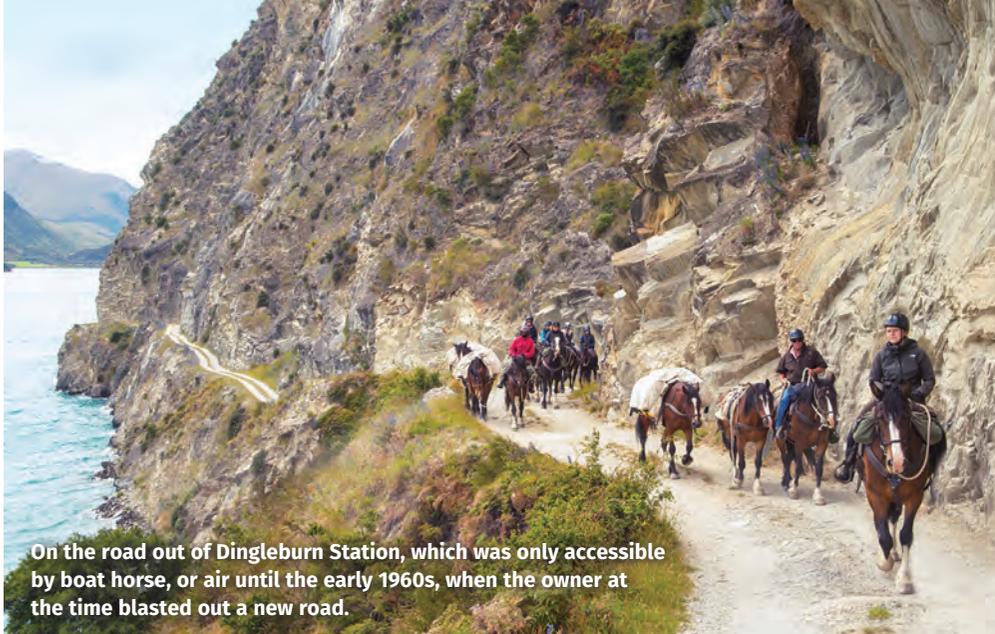
hours my body has been in the saddle. I am relieved to see Boundary Hut — our home for the next two nights — come into sight. Angie builds the fire in the three-room cabin and organizes the outdoor kitchen for dinner prep. The temperature drops as the sun goes down, so we dine by the open fire and then sing along as Angie plays her ukulele by candlelight.

The packhorses stay to rest, and we split into two groups so those who want to trot and canter in the meadows can do so. Following in the tradition of this old shepherd's hut, Angie has stayed behind to slow-cook the lamb over the open fire. After a wonderful day's ride deep into Hunter Valley, the smell of dinner welcomes us home. The temperature has warmed up, allowing us to dine outside on the deck surrounded by mountains. The lamb roast is served with mint jelly and roasted veggies, followed by rhubarb crumble and custard. The full moon starts to peek over the hilltops as we crawl into bed.

Just before leaving the cabin, I sign the guest book and chuckle at the comment "It's real good!" left beside the name George Bush, USA, who was likely there to fly fish.

With the packhorses ready to go, we mount up and head to the east side of the lake where we lunch on a beach. Amy braves the water and goes for a dip.

Our next destination, Dingleburn Station, sits in a valley on 7,000 hectares



On the road out of Dingleburn Station, which was only accessible by boat, horse, or air until the early 1960s, when the owner at the time blasted out a new road.

of land, and is an active Merino sheep and Angus cattle farm. I am looking forward to hot running water and hydro, both of which we have not had since leaving Hunter Valley Station.

Run by Nicky Mead, Dingleburn Station was only accessible by boat, horse, or air until the early 1960s. Before the road was blasted out, wool and other supplies were brought in by boat. The old shearers' quarters have been renovated and the cookshop serves as a kitchen, dining, and gathering area. We take our pick of the six cabins, which sleep 17 in total, and I make a beeline for the showers. It is amazing how we take for

granted the simple pleasures of life until we do without!

Nicky and her partner Tim join us for dinner and drinks. The wine is flowing and a conversation abundant as the sun disappears in the valley.

Next morning, as promised, Nicky gives us a demonstration of her Huntaway dog at work. Taking instructions from Nicky as she whistles and gives commands, the dog rounds up the large flock of sheep. The farm often uses a helicopter to drop off the dogs at the top of a mountain so they can herd the flocks down to the valleys.

Just past the waterfall that provides



River crossing on the ride from Boundary Hut to Dingleburn Station.



The spectacular scenery of the Ahuriri Conservation Area.



the power for the station, a bull decides to join us on our journey; we divert him at the gate. The lookout view is so beautiful it seems surreal.

Continuing on, the road turns into a wide cliff clinging to the side of the mountain. This part of the road, forged by Ian Sarginson all those years ago, is called "The Bluff." John tells me to go ahead and turn around to take photos, and I put my faith in Hannah, trusting she will not step off the edge and cause us to plummet into the water below. Herds of Merino sheep blend in with the rocks on the mountainside. When we reach the Dingleburn cattle yards, the horses are untacked and half of them are loaded on the trailer, while the others wait in a paddock nearby. We say goodbye to our mounts and hello again to Mike, who takes us to Hotel Hawea, where we bask in luxury for a night.

Our day out of the saddle involves wine tasting in two local wineries of Wanaka: Maude Wines, who recently won an award for their Riesling, and Nanny Goat Winery, where we purchase a bottle of *Basket-Case*, made with hand-picked bunches of whole grapes including the stems.

Back in Wanaka, Mike takes us on a bumpy dirt road with signs of washout, to Birchwood Station nestled in the valley

of the Ahuriri Conservation area. This spacious and inviting lodge is typically used for hunters and fishermen. The next few days are spent riding in the valleys and climbing steep pitches to stunning views of the mountain ranges. The horses carefully pick their path through the hairpin turns, taking us to a spectacular lunch spot amongst the clouds. The roads and meadows of the valley provide for wonderful cantering areas. The horses graze in the lush grass of the nearby paddocks, while the night sky glows with the Milky Way.

I have to pinch myself to make sure I am not dreaming. New Zealand is so natural and pristine, and one of the most beautiful countries I have visited. I am grateful for Wild Women Expeditions to have hooked up with Adventure Trekking New Zealand, making it possible for me to experience such an incredible country from the saddle. Angie and John run a truly unique experience and the Wild Women Expeditions bring an all-women perspective. I was blessed to be able to join them and the others on this incredible journey. 

> **Shawn Hamilton** is a regular contributor to this magazine — read her bio on page 84.

For more information, visit these websites:

> **Wild Women Expeditions** is a global leader in women's adventure travel, exploring many areas of the world by horseback including the wilds of Iceland, the sweeping landscapes of Mongolia, and under the big blue open skies of Scotland. WWE empowers women and communities around the world. www.WildWomenExpeditions.com

> **Adventure Trekking New Zealand** offers horseback riding holidays in New Zealand South Island high country, far from the tourist routes. Angie Leckey and John Wall invite you to explore hidden trails and awe-inspiring locations. www.AdventureHorseTrekking.co.nz

> More must-sees on the South Island, all of which can be booked through www.RealJourneys.co.nz:

- Milford Sound
- Doubtful Sound
- Glow Worm Caves
- Walter Peak Gourmet Dinner



The author, Shawn Hamilton, and her mount Hannah, a Shire-cross mare, on the ride out of Dingleburn Station.