

# A CYCLING ADVENTURE:

## OTAGO CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL



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Portions of this guide first appeared on the blog Adventures of American Julie (<http://americanjulie.com>).

## J.A. PIEPER: ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.A. Pieper is a writer from Northern California. With children grown, no garden to tend, and many interests, she pursues adventures around the world and shares them on her blog, Adventures of American Julie (<http://americanjulie.com>).

"I travel to discover more about the world and myself. I mostly travel solo. I am not young or super fit, if I can do it so can you."

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## Introduction

**ANYONE WHO KNOWS HOW** to ride a bike can ride the Otago Central Rail Trail. Every year an estimated 100-120,000 people ride or walk a portion of the 150-kilometer trail through the beautiful and rugged Central Otago region of New Zealand. It can take two to five days to ride the entire length of the trail from Clyde to Middlemarch. Central Otago winters are bitter cold, so you will enjoy your experience more if you plan your adventure between mid-October and mid-April.

The best reason to experience the rail trail is your reason. Looking for a physical challenge? Want to enjoy spectacularly beautiful scenery? Interested in places where the Lord of the Rings was filmed? Want to pan for gold in the afternoons? Looking for a great relationship building activity for your team or family? All of these are good motivations to ride the rail trail. This short publication is intended to inspire you to design an adventure that will meet your expectations.

My goal is to share my experience with enough additional information for you to plan your own trip. There are many businesses offering their services and a little guidance can make it easier to plan your own experience. With support from Off the Rails Cycle Tours, I completed the Rail Trail riding solo over four days in December 2014. It is one of my favorite adventures in my many trips to New Zealand. Give it a go.

## Be Prepared

I normally ride a beach cruiser for my daily errands around town and a road bike for longer rides. I did not know what to expect riding a mountain bike and did not read the websites very carefully. By day 2 I was kicking myself for not packing any of my many bike shorts—just my Terry board shorts without the chamois. Mistake. On day two I made a beeline for the general store in Otarehua and bought proper bike shorts and wore my Terry shorts over them.

Here are some other essentials:

- Sunscreen. Sunscreen. Sunscreen. (Reapplied throughout the day.)
- Gloves (to protect from the sun and wind especially)
- Bike shorts
- Layers of t-shirts, sweatshirt or fleece, and raincoat to change up throughout day
- Athletic shoes (pedals are NOT clipless and you want to be able to walk about when you stop along the trail)
- Your favorite snacks or picnic lunch plus cash for beer/coffee and hot lunch.

Off the Rails provided these additional essentials:

- Water bottle and water.
- Pannier and bag for camera.
- Chocolate bar and other snacks. (Judy made a phenomenal whiskey cake!)
- Helmet (required!)

I assume you have your smart phone. Camera is optional. Nick with Off the Rails took lots of photos of me (something he does for all his guests).

## Day One: Clyde to Lauder

The Otago Central Railway was closed in 1990 and opened as the first New Zealand Rail Trail in 1994. Today the rail bed's shale rock is well broken up for most of the trail. I easily pedaled along enjoying the landscape's natural beauty and the delights of sheep, birds, and ever-changing cloud formations. I stopped often for photos and to pinch myself for the sheer joy of riding my bike in New Zealand.

I woke up in Queenstown feeling a bit nervous about my physical ability to pedal around 44 kilometers (27 miles) a day for three or four days. I wasn't worried about doing it on my own although it was a big part of why I searched out a company that would provide full support. Riding in the first week of December limited my options for tour companies as the season does not hit full stride until school holidays begin later in the month. Web research led me to one of the few companies that will support a single rider even when no one else signs up for the week.

I was eating a divine omelet at the Dairy Private Luxury Hotel when Nick Simpson, my Off the Rails proprietor and guide, arrived in Queenstown to pick me up. My host Paul told him, "Madame is eating breakfast," so he cooled his heels outside, and I chuckled at being called "Madame".

Around 10:30 a.m. we were at the Clyde trailhead fitting my mountain bike and getting me ready to go down the trail. I stamped my Rail Trail passport and made note of the kilometer markers on the side of the trail. I was riding backwards in that the numbers were going down. Nick explained that most tours start in Clyde because the prevailing winds are at your back for most of the trail.

I was soon whizzing down the trail, stopping frequently to take pictures and drink in the beauty. Nick calls the trail "intensely scenic," and it is designated as an area of outstanding beauty, which is saying a lot in



a country where there are no ugly places.

Nick promised to be just up the trail to make sure my equipment fit and was working well. He popped up several times before I reached Chatto Creek pub for lunch. I was glad to have the reassurance.

Twenty-five kilometers later, I parked my bike at Chatto Creek ready for a rest. The pub is a fascinating piece of history as is so much of Central Otago. Scottish settlers began migrating to the region in the 1840s. Gold was discovered in the 1860s, and many of the towns in the region grew up almost overnight. The boom bust cycle that characterizes mining and agriculture has left its mark on the region, and it reminded me very much of the towns along Highway 49 in California. Many abandoned buildings have now been lovingly restored as restaurants and other venues serving tourists. It seems as though the rail trail offers some economic diversification; at the same time, many of these businesses are for sale.

I ordered the Bacon Buttie sandwich and a half pint of Guinness. The sandwich was huge and delicious. I ate it all and then lived with regret as my blood sugar rushed to my stomach. The next couple of kilometers were more challenging because my legs felt like lead. The food at restaurants along the ➔



route is high quality, but heavy on the fat and carbs. I craved a simple bowl of soup and bread, maybe a little cheese—a ploughman's lunch—and could not find it because all the local chefs were cooking a summer menu.

I pedaled sluggishly out of Chatto Creek and encountered both a rockier trail and a gentle incline. Just as I approached Tiger Hill, the trail turned and I felt the wind blowing hard from the side. I stopped to take pictures frequently and even walked my bike up the hill for a few hundred yards on two occasions. As a converted steam railroad bed, its steepest incline is 1 to 50. It can feel steeper due to other factors. I was definitely re-energized when a couple rode up behind me and provided a pace for making the rest of the climb.

It was 12 kilometers to Omakau and then just 7 kilometers to Lauder where we stopped for the day. Nick said I was making good time but it was still about 5 p.m. when we loaded my bike on the trailer. The trail signs suggest to expect a speed of 10 kilometers an hour, which is slower than the 10 miles per hour I can average on my beachcruiser or half as slow as I ride my road bike. It was a mental adjustment to not measure my trip by kilometers traveled and speed. I was there to cycle and enjoy the journey.

Nick drove me to Ranfurly where Off the Rails has one of their accommodations—a lovely cottage from 1906 that has many of its original fireplaces, paneling, and doorways. It would have been roomy enough to share, but I had it to myself. Judy with Off the Rails helped me with my laundry and stocked the fridge with breakfast options.

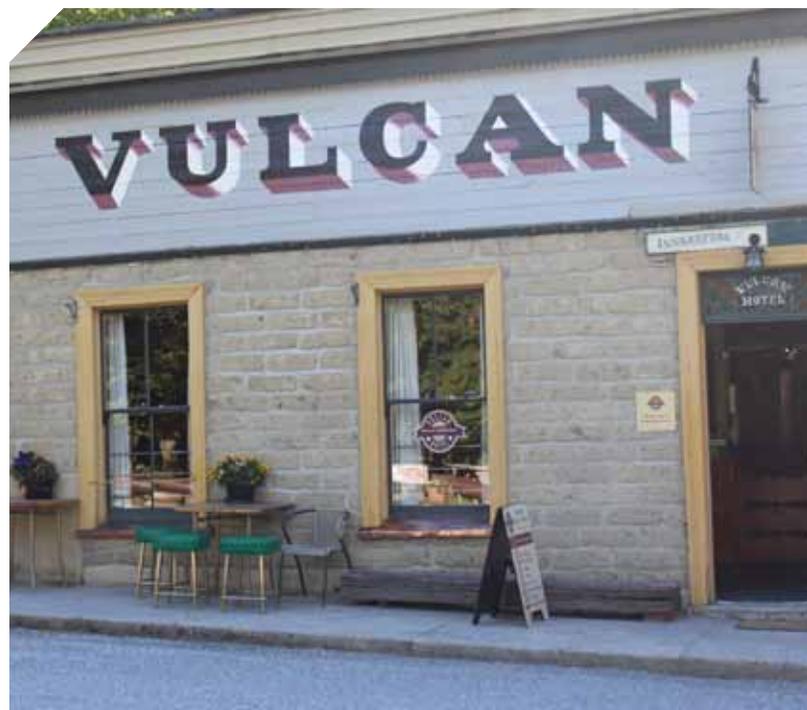
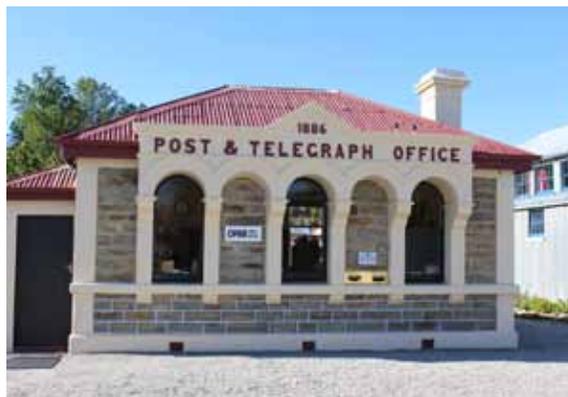
By the time I cleaned up and went to the Ranfurly Hotel for an unremarkable but satisfying dinner, I was ready to rest. I set my alarm for the next morning. Sleep came easily.

## Lord of the Ring Scenes

One of the bonuses of cycling through Central Otago is that you will be surrounded by the scenery that featured prominently in the Lord of the Rings movie trilogy. If you are a fan of the movies, you will find yourself thinking, "These rocks look like Mordor," or more specifically, "This looks like the hills where Legolas did his very acrobatic leap onto the horse." You would be correct. Locals will tell you stories about the time when the LOTR cast and crew descended on Central Otago. If you are really keen you can read more about it in *The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook* (available in most information centers).



TOP: The Blue Lake at St Bathans is a stunning lake created by gold mining. Take a walk around the lake, swim, or take a picnic.



LEFT: Enjoy a drink at the Vulcan Hotel's historic bar then retire to the dining room for a HUGE meal. Call ahead and make it part of your St Bathans adventure. RIGHT: Ancient Ophir was one of Solomon's ports where rich minerals entered the kingdom. Not surprising then there are towns named Ophir in many goldfields. This small village in Central Otago is rich with historic buildings. This post office is part museum, part post office, part souvenir shop. Buy a postcard and post it from here.



## Day Two: Lauder to Ranfurly

After a quick flat white coffee stop at historic Ophir, I restarted my journey in Lauder. Nick unloaded my bike and handed me a torch (bike light) for the tunnels I would encounter on the trail between Lauder and Oturehua. The weather was cheerful with a hint of the sunshine to come later in the day. I set out with my camera, water, and some of Judy's whiskey cake in my front bag. After Day One, I knew what to expect and I was more confident in my ability to tackle it. I was not the least bit sore in the limbs but my bottom was feeling the contours of the seat even with the gel pad.

The renowned beauty of Central Otago inspires artists and dreamers, and the sections between Lauder and Wedderburn do not disappoint. Whenever I paused to take photos, I was also serenaded by the chorus of ewes and lambs calling to one another. Maaa! Baaa!

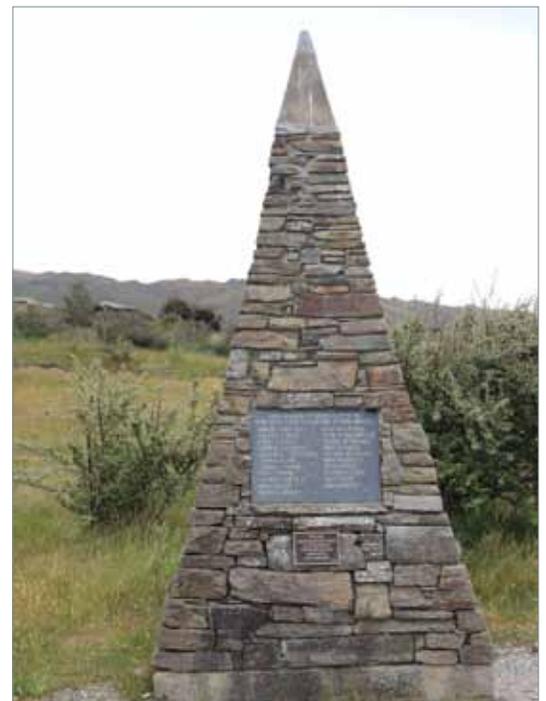
Between me and my lunch stop was the first of two 7-kilometer inclines. Climb is an exaggeration. I decided to take my time and make steady progress. Nick mentioned that *The Lord of the Rings* was filmed in this area, and I spent happy hours trying to guess what scenes might have been filmed in this rock outcropping or that river gorge. (I am almost certain I saw where Aragorn fell off the cliff and into the river on

his way to Helm's Deep.) Sheep were still my main companions as I only saw about six other riders in groups of two along the rail trail.

The first of two tunnels was exciting. I thought about my work colleagues in Sacramento and how fascinated they would be with the tunnel engineering and it helped to distract from entering the tunnel with just my little bike torch. It got darker and darker then pitch black. I was glad I heeded the sign and got off and walked my bike. The sign suggested horses go around and I wondered if any horses would go through without fuss. The darkest bit did not last long, and suddenly I could see the actual "light at the end of the tunnel"! The second tunnel was not nearly so long or dark, and Nick had met me by then.

At the end of the day, I was sorry not to have worn gloves. I applied sunscreen several times throughout the day, but the backs of my hands were wind and sun burned.

I cleaned up in plenty of time to meet Nick and travel to St Bathans to see the pools and eat dinner at the locally famous Vulcan Hotel.



*The 4 June 1943 Hyde rail accident was horrific. Of the 113 people on the train, 21 were killed and 47 injured. The train engineer ought to have reduced speed before Straw Cutting but because of his own fatigue failed to do so. The engine and 5 carriages jumped the tracks, several of them telescoping into one another. Passengers were thrown onto the cold ground and at risk of dying from exposure. Rescue efforts were hampered by wartime petrol rationing, lack of manpower, and busy telephone lines. Locals will share some of the remarkable stories of survivors.*

## Give Curling a Push in Naseby

Curling is the winter Olympic sport that inspires both fascination and ridicule. Naseby in Central Otago boasts the only Olympic standard indoor curling rink in the southern hemisphere.

Why you may ask? Because Central Otago was settled by Scottish immigrants in the 1840s and they brought their curling stones and love of the sport with them. Most winters the lakes freeze over sufficient to send out the call and assemble teams for a Bonspiel.

The rules of the game are similar to bowls, kube, or bocce ball. You can throw the stone with your arm or you can push it with a stick. Your teammates can use the broom to sweep the ice and encourage your stone to reach the target. Your opponents can use the broom to sweep the ice and keep the stone moving past the target. I joined some other visitors for some practice and a lot of fun.

If you book a tour with Off the Rails, Nick ensures that you enjoy an evening lesson and curling session. If you are unassociated with a tour you may book your own session.



## Day 3: Ranfurly to Rock and Pillar

It was a pleasure to wake up and roll out of town on my own schedule. I ended Day Two in Ranfurly, so I began Day Three just behind the Information Centre. I borrowed a pair of gloves from Off the Rails to protect my sunburned hands and to provide some extra warmth since the weather had turned cooler.

I was more tired than sore from cycling. I was looking forward to cycling the 44 kilometers to Rock and Pillar since it was likely that most of the trail might be downhill. Sure enough, I spent the better part of the day in third gear. The plan was to ride to Hyde for lunch and then finish the day mid afternoon at Rock and Pillar, giving me ample time to get cleaned up and go curling before dinner in Naseby.

I packed my rain jacket in my pannier everyday—a wise precaution in New Zealand where the weather is changeable. That day I wore it to ward off the chill and just in case—although it never actually rained.

I stopped frequently to take photos as the scenery changed again. The place names are sometimes Maori and sometimes reminiscent of somewhere in Great Britain. I loved the names Daisybank and my destination Rock and Pillar. I saw some picnicking couples, but otherwise I had the trail to myself.

There was another tunnel and quite a few bridges. It seemed like no time before I was rolling into Hyde. We stopped at the charming café in the Otago Central Hotel after quickly admiring the World War I memorial. The women in the teashop were very friendly and the cheese scone yummy. I warmed up with some tea and a little time out of the wind.

As I had been whizzing along lost in my thoughts, I had ridden right past the passport stamp stop at Tiroiti and later did not see the sign that indicated the memorial for the 21 victims of the Hyde rail accident. Fortunately, the café in Hyde had the stamp for Tiroiti and Nick was happy to stop at the Memorial after loading my bike on the trailer.

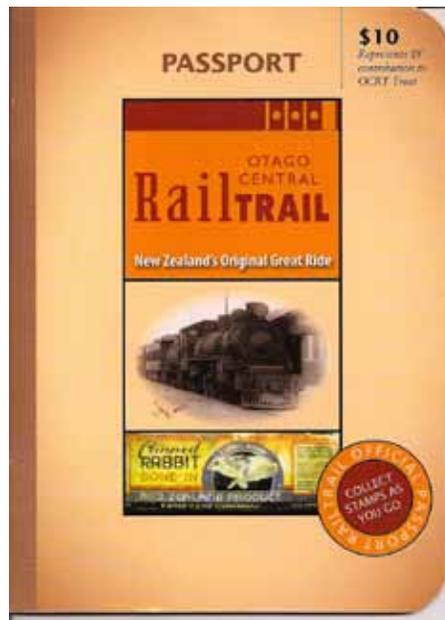
After lunch at Hyde, there was just 14 kilometers to Rock and Pillar. The clouds in the sky were spectacular. I felt like I was flying along.

I finished in plenty of time to clean up and change to go curling at the dedicated ice rink in Naseby. Later we ate another delicious dinner at the Ancient Briton Hotel. Great food, yummy local wine, and good conversation by a lovely fire—what more could anyone ask of an evening?



## Rail Trail Code of Conduct

- Share the Rail Trail with others.
- Young children should be accompanied at all times.
- Cyclists are required to wear safety helmets.
- Exercise caution at all road crossings and prepare to stop and dismount (vehicles have the right of way).
- Leave gates as you find them and do not disturb any stock along the Rail Trail (take extra care during lambing time-September/October).
- Always use toilets where available. (Pack your own toilet paper.)
- Open fires and firearms are not permitted on the Rail Trail.
- Observe local fire restrictions and be aware of Total Fire Ban days.
- Do not venture onto private property.
- Take all your rubbish away with you. Be a tidy Kiwi.
- STAY ON THE RAIL TRAIL.



TOP: Leave animals as you find them. LEFT: The Otago Central Rail Trail Trust created a passport you can purchase and stamp along the way to chart your progress if you are riding the whole 150 km in one go or if you are returning to do sections with time between. RIGHT: Kilometer markers along the trail help to track your progress.



TOP: Certificates are available at information centers and generally provided by tour operators. BOTTOM: Toilets are available along the trail and at pubs and coffee houses. Please hold it until you reach one of these facilities!

## Central Rail Trail and Trust

This trail is the first of the Great Rides. Built and maintained by New Zealand's Department of Conservation. Nga Haerenga—The New Zealand Cycle Trail offers 23 "Great Rides" varying in difficulty from easy to advanced. You can discover all of the trails at [www.nzcycle-trail.com](http://www.nzcycle-trail.com).

The Otago Central Rail Trail Trust is the nonprofit local partner with the Department of Conservation encouraging community support and seeking funding for the continuous improvement of the Rail Trail. [www.otagoctrailtrail.co.nz](http://www.otagoctrailtrail.co.nz)

# THE CENTRAL OTAGO RAIL TRAIL - MAIN MAP



- MAP KEY**
- WC TOILETS
  - A ACCOMMODATION
  - M MEALS
  - CP CAR PARKS
  - I INFORMATION



## Day 4: Rock and Pillar to Middlemarch

The note in my journal for this day's ride was, "Too short." At this point, I was feeling very strong, though a little tired. I only needed to ride 12.5 or 13.5 kilometers depending on the signs you read. Nick designed the days so that on Day Four I could ride to Middlemarch and still catch the late morning train to Dunedin.

I felt very melancholic about completing the ride. It was also one of my final days for my adventures in New Zealand. I did my best to savor each moment. In no time, I was in Middlemarch. Nick recorded my feat with photos at the official signs and I made my final passport stamp.

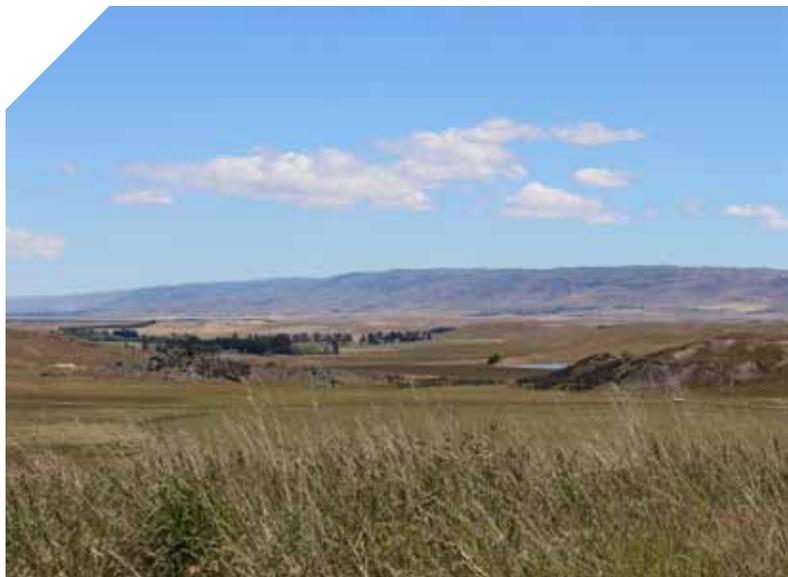
To finish up my ride, I rode further in to the old rail station buildings and Quench Café. We loaded my bike in the trailer and walked to Quench to get a flat white where I also pulled out my Picnic candy bar to celebrate. Nick presented me with a certificate celebrating my accomplishment.

I had already packed my bag, so once I returned my cycling gloves, there was little else to do but head to the train station.

I loved cycling the Otago Central Rail Trail. I would do it again, although there are 22 other great rides to do in New Zealand.



TOP: Nick Simpson with Off the Rails was a super host and photographer.



### TAIERI GORGE RAILWAY

Riding the train from Dunedin to Middlemarch is the most picturesque way to reach the trailhead or conclude your adventure. Dunedin Railways ([www.taieri.co.nz](http://www.taieri.co.nz)) offers several daily trips from the majestic Dunedin Railway Station to Pukerangi (short drive from Middlemarch) or one train to/from Middlemarch on Sunday and Friday. The fare (as of January 2015) is \$89 per adult. Tickets can be booked on line and I recommend you purchase in advance especially during summer season.

## Planning Your Own Adventure

If you are a Kiwi reader, and you are more inclined to be DIY, good on you. However, there are still merits to paying a bit more for support. First, by the time you pay for your lodging and other services you may find that you have not actually saved money and you have less time to relax and enjoy the experience.

As a visitor from abroad I did not want to juggle the myriad of reservations I would have to make if I rode without support: bike rental, pick up/drop off, lodging, food. More importantly, I would have missed out on all of the rich conversations with my local guide, Nick Simpson, and the people he knows. This became even more important as a solo rider.

A couple of people I met commented that I must be very brave cycling alone. As an American, I immediately thought of the safety issue—which, as it turns out, is really nonsense in Central Otago unless you have an irrational fear of being attacked by sheep. Upon reflection, it does take some courage to take on the physical challenge day after day of riding a bike for six or more hours. I could not have done it without Nick's support. Priceless.

I have made my case. I will share with you my matrix so you can find the level of support you need for your adventure.

## Otago Central Rail Trail Operators

	Days of Cycling	Full Support	Bike Service/ Bike Hire	Booking Services (hotel, transport)
Adventure South <a href="http://www.adventuresouth.co.nz">www.adventuresouth.co.nz</a>	5 days	X		
Altitude Bikes <a href="http://www.altitudeadventures.co.nz/">www.altitudeadventures.co.nz/</a>	1 or 4 days	X	X	
Bike it Now! <a href="http://www.bikeitnow.co.nz">www.bikeitnow.co.nz</a>	1 to 5 days	X	X	X
Cycle Surgery <a href="http://www.cyclesurgery.co.nz/">www.cyclesurgery.co.nz/</a>	To Suit		X	X
Luxury Rail Trail Tours <a href="http://www.Luxuryrailtriltours.co.nz">www.Luxuryrailtriltours.co.nz</a>	Recommend 5 days	X		
Off the Rails <a href="http://www.Offtherails.co.nz">www.Offtherails.co.nz</a>	1 to 5 days customized	X	X	
Pure Trails New Zealand <a href="http://www.puretrailsnewzealandco.nz/">www.puretrailsnewzealandco.nz/</a>	5 days	X		
Rail Trail Active <a href="http://www.railtrailactive.co.nz">www.railtrailactive.co.nz</a>	1 or 3 days	X		
Rail Trail Planner <a href="http://www.railtrailplanner.co.nz">www.railtrailplanner.co.nz</a>	1 to 5 days		Will arrange	X
Ranfurlly Bike Hire <a href="http://www.ranfurllybikehire.co.nz">www.ranfurllybikehire.co.nz</a>	To suit		X	X
Shebikeshebikes <a href="http://www.shebikeshebikes.co.nz">www.shebikeshebikes.co.nz</a>	To suit with equipment for families		X	X
Trail Journeys <a href="http://www.Trailjourneys.co.nz">www.Trailjourneys.co.nz</a>	1 or 5 days	X	X	X



## Resources

- Ian Brodie, *The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2002.
- Gerald Cunningham, *Guide to the Otago Central Rail Trail*.
- Owen Graham, *Otago Central Rail Trail from Steam Trains to Pedal Power*. Otago Central Rail Trail Trust, 2004.
- Tourism Central Otago - [www.centralotagonz.com](http://www.centralotagonz.com)
- TripAdvisor: Otago Central Rail Trail - [http://www.tripadvisor.co.nz/Attraction\\_Review-g3692815-d1754126-Reviews-Otago\\_Central\\_Rail\\_Trail-Otago\\_Region\\_South\\_Island.html](http://www.tripadvisor.co.nz/Attraction_Review-g3692815-d1754126-Reviews-Otago_Central_Rail_Trail-Otago_Region_South_Island.html)

## Could the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Host a Successful Rail Trail?

All of the basic elements are present in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to create an extended rail trail. The retired railroad levees have host towns dotted along the way offering potential lodging and retail space for services to cyclists and walkers. Numerous state agencies can grant the catalyst investments to put a rail trail together. Such a project just needs local vision and leadership.

There is one mile of rail trail already at the Delta Meadows State Park. In the State Parks and Recreation "Recreation Proposal for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Suisun Marsh", the agency noted the many existing trails that could be connected or expanded in the Delta. An off-road Delta Rail Trail for mountain bikes, and walkers offers a region-friendly solution.

### Rails to Trails Conservancy Supports Efforts to Create and Maintain US Rail Trails

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy provides technical assistance and policy action for local groups seeking to transform unused rail corridors into vibrant public spaces that "engage, inspire and empower communities from coast to coast." There is a tool-box to get started on a local project as well as blogs and case-studies of success stories from around the nation.

[www.railstotrails.org](http://www.railstotrails.org)

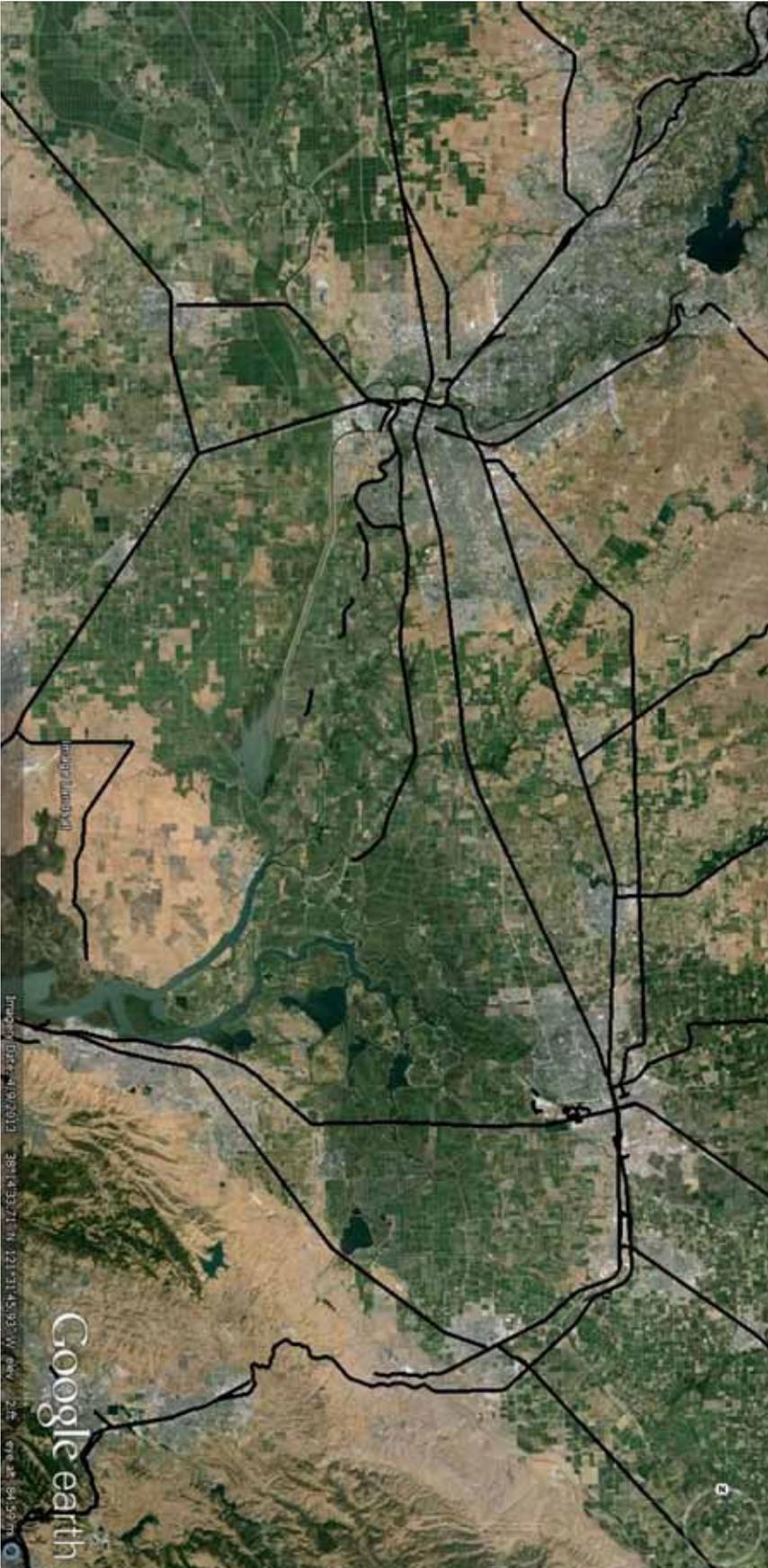


Figure 1: Railroad right of ways in the Delta (map from Department of Water Resources)



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