

New Zealand: The South Island

VBT Vacation Only

Delve deep into the heart of New Zealand's celebrated wilderness on dedicated bike paths and scenic dirt trails through the woods—far from car traffic. As you pedal along the shimmering coast of the Tasman Sea, you'll catch glimpses of distant mountain peaks and vibrant local bird life. We've designed this tour to let your hiking boots take you places two wheels can't—including the Franz Josef Glacier, a wilderness seacoast walk, and a nocturnal glowworm adventure. With VBT's deep roots in the region, you'll have unique opportunities to meet the locals during a visit to a traditional Kiwi sheep farm and a guided rainforest walk. Best of all, VBT's charming local trip leaders will be delighted to introduce you to the many cultural traditions and natural wonders of the island paradise they call home.

Cultural Highlights

- Prepare to be dazzled by the staggering beauty of the South Island's glittering lakes, lush forests, fertile farmlands, and alpine peaks.
- Hike up a valley carved by the retreating ice of Franz Josef Glacier.
- Spend a day at a wilderness resort, enjoying kayaking, canoeing, hiking—and perhaps strolling to a colony of glowworms.
- Experience life on a working ranch and savor a home-cooked meal during a visit to a sheep and cattle station.
- Sample local vintages during a wine tasting and learn about Central Otago's wine region.

What to Expect

The majority of rides and all walks on this tour are on purpose-built trails (the Kiwis have it figured out!). Trails are packed gravel, regularly maintained, and away from motorized vehicle traffic, and allow access to the beauty of the country. The roadways that we ride are secondary, quiet, and mostly paved. The VBT support vehicle is available for a head start, catch-up, or shorter options.

Tour Duration: 9 Days

Average Daily Mileage: 7-37 miles

Average Cycling Time: 1-5 hours

Group size: 14-20 max

Climate Information

Average High/Low Temperature (°F)

January 67°/53°, February 68°/54°, March 66°/50°, April 62°/47°, November 62°/48°, December 64°/51°

Average Rainfall (in.)

January 9.6, February 7.8, March 9.1, April 9.2, November 10.4, December 10

DAY 1: VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacation begins / Christchurch / Warm-up ride

Please plan to arrive at your Christchurch hotel by 9:00 a.m. for a safety clinic and bike-fitting session. If you are unable to arrive before 9:00 a.m., please contact the hotel so the staff may advise your trip leaders.

Trip leaders will be wearing VBT staff garments. After brief introductions, your group will go on a warm-up ride directly from the hotel, where you will enjoy the nearby neighborhood streets and local quiet trails in Hagley Park. Explore the bustling Riverside Market and select from many options for lunch on your own. Then travel by van out to Sumner Beach where you may watch for surfers and enjoy the small village before a van shuttle returns you to the hotel via the scenic Summit Road.

You have the afternoon free to explore "The Garden City." Early this evening, you will join your fellow travelers for a welcome reception, then dine with the group and toast your upcoming journey in wonderful New Zealand.

Today's Ride Choices

Morning: Hagley Park Warm-up – 12 km (8 miles)

What to Expect:

Enjoy a warm-up ride, beginning in the quiet neighborhood streets of Christchurch and ending in beautiful Hagley Park.

Cumulative Distance Range: 12 km (8 miles)

Included Meals: Dinner

DAY 2: Cross Southern Alps by train / Cycle to the seaside / Hokitika

After an early breakfast, shuttle with your trip leaders to the Christchurch train station to board the 8:15 a.m. TranzAlpine for one of the world's most scenic rail journeys. Your train takes you through the vast Canterbury Plains and traverses the scenic gorges and river valleys of the Waimakariri River. The snow-capped peaks of the magnificent Southern Alps soon appear as you climb 2,300 feet (701 meters) toward Arthur's Pass, the South Island's highest settlement, surrounded by steep-sloped mountains.

You depart the train at Arthur's Pass, rejoining your shuttle for a short drive to Kumara for lunch in a historic pub. This afternoon's ride is toward Greymouth and the coast. Off of the busy roadway, enjoy a scenic spin through lush forests and some of New Zealand's famed dairy farms, the soaring peaks marking your progress. Be on the look-out for local bird life that includes bellbirds, tui, kereru (the native pigeon), and kotuku, the white heron. Following the West Coast Wilderness Trail, you will gradually descend to the Tasman Sea before arriving in the region's largest town, Greymouth. At the end of your ride, hop the shuttle to the seaside town of Hokitika, a former gold-rush town once crowded with prospectors. At one time, the main street was lined with more than 80 hotels. Today there are only six.

This evening, you have free time to enjoy dinner on your own. Later, you might take a relaxing walk along the beach and look skyward for the Southern Cross, visible year-round from the Southern Hemisphere. The Southern Cross contains four stars that depict the extremities of a Latin cross. The stars are very bright and close together, making the constellation easy to spot.

Today's Ride Choices

Afternoon: Kumara to Greymouth – 30 km (18 miles)

What to Expect:

The ride is mainly downhill on unpaved trails. After reaching the coast, the trail continues north, paralleling the Tasman Sea. You will then shuttle 30 km (19 miles) to the hotel.

Cumulative Distance Range: 30 km (18 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

DAY 3: Explore Hokitika Gorge / Cycle the West Coast Wilderness Trail

After breakfast, shuttle a short distance to one of the West Coast's hidden gems—Hokitika Gorge. A gentle walk through lush rainforest along the Hokitika River leads you to the brilliant turquoise waters of the Gorge, surrounded by white limestone cliffs. Later, enjoy the best of the West Coast Wilderness Trail on an enchanting ride that leads you from the hills above Hokitika to the shores of the Tasman Sea.

Following the morning walk, a short shuttle brings you to Lake Kaniere where you hop on your bikes and join the West Coast Wilderness Trail, part of the New Zealand Cycle Trail. Enjoy a gentle descent through native bush back towards Hokitika where you can choose from many local eateries for lunch on your own. After lunch, continue riding south from there, tracing the dramatic coastline of the Tasman Sea. Your ride passes wetlands, native forest, and old mill sites, and stunning views of Lake Mahinapua can be seen with a short walk from the trail. On a clear day, you will see Mt. Cook and Mt. Tasman rising inland.

The ride concludes at the West Coast Treetop Café, where you can enjoy a refreshment as you take in the views of the Lake Maninapua valley beneath a canopy of ancient Rimu and Kamahi trees. An optional Tree Tops Walk allows you to explore a unique perspective of the West Coast forest.

This afternoon, shuttle to your accommodation in Franz Josef. Spend free time in this lively town before an included dinner.

Today's Ride Choices

Morning Walk: Hokitika Gorge Walk – 2.1 km (1.3 miles)

Morning Ride: Lake Kaniere to Hokitika – 20 km (12 miles)

Afternoon Ride: Hokitika to Tree Tops Cafe – 16 km (10 miles)

What to Expect:

Morning Walk:

An easy loop walk features a well-maintained track through mature native forest to the impressive gorge. A swing bridge offers incredible views of the aqua blue water and towering granite rock formations.

Morning Ride:

This ride features some moderately challenging terrain through wooded trails, yet the route's gentle descent adds a welcome ease to the scenic turns. The trail continues past the historic Kaniere water race

(hand-dug in 1875) before merging with the paved road and Hokitika River leading back into town. An alternative road-only option follows the quiet paved road from Lake Kaniere to Hokitika.

Afternoon Ride:

Leaving Hokitika, meander along Mahinapua Creek, past the Hokitika Golf Links and then alongside the state highway. It's then time to turn off onto the historic Mahinapua Tramline, a super-scenic (if sometimes narrow) section of today's trail. Pass through wetlands, native forest, and old mill sites before again crossing State Highway 6 to join the trail along the beach. Your ride finishes at the iconic West Coast Tree Tops Café, where you can relax beneath the canopy of ancient Rimu trees.

Cumulative Distance Range: Walk: 2.1 km (1.3 miles) | Ride: 36 km (22 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 4: Discover Franz Josef Glacier / Walk Okarito Lagoon

This is New Zealand's Glacier Country, and if the weather allows, your morning walk presents an opportunity to witness their majesty up close and learn a bit about glaciology along the way. After breakfast, walk up the valley carved by the retreating ice of the Franz Josef Glacier. At a viewing platform, marvel at the blue, marble-like sheen of the vast ice expanse. Perhaps you will see deep crevasses where ice floes have been ripped apart by the slow march of the glacier. Return via Peter's Pools and along the shore of the Waiho River.

The day's activities resume with a quick shuttle to the "wee" town of Okarito, home to just a few dozen residents. Booker Prize-winning author Keri Hulme lived here and eventually moved away when she found the town to be too big for her! Revel in a tranquil ambiance and view an abundance of birds during walk above Okarito Lagoon before lunch. Upon arrival, set out on a trail through native bush abundant with flora and local birds to the Okarito Trig viewing point. The Okarito Lagoon, below, New Zealand's largest unmodified wetland, is teeming with wildlife. More than 70 species of birds make their home here, including the rare kotuku, the Eastern great egret. Savor the peace and tranquility of this special place.

For lunch, gather with your travel mates on the scenic Okarito Wharf to enjoy a well-deserved picnic prepared by your trip leaders.

Back in Franz Josef this afternoon, you may choose to embark on a heli-hiking adventure of Franz Josef Glacier (at your own expense). You will board a helicopter and take wing over the massive ice field,

landing on its white expanse for a guided walk. It's a thrilling excursion in an unspoiled setting that few travelers experience. Should you prefer a scenic helicopter or plane ride over the glacier without the glacier walk, your trip leaders will help you make a reservation once you're on tour.

Tonight, you can enjoy dinner on your own at one of the many local restaurants.

Today's Ride Choices

Morning Walk: Franz Josef Valley Walk – 4 km (2 miles)

Late Morning Walk: Okarito Trig Walk – 5 km (3 miles)

What to Expect:

Morning Walk:

The Franz Josef Valley Walk is an easy walk that leads to a riverbank via the glacier, river valley, and surrounding mountains, sometimes featuring spectacular waterfalls. The route continues past Trident Falls to a lookout point with a view of the terminal face of the glacier, and returns through the forest passing glacial ponds, known locally as Peter's Pools. This part of the route is over the shingle and rock of the riverbed, and it can be quite rough underfoot. This is a beautiful yet volatile place—do not let the serene scene fool you. The glacier is constantly moving.

Late Morning Walk:

This super-scenic Okarito Trig walk winds gently uphill on a well-graded track before reaching the Okarito Trig viewpoint. On a clear day, the view is unbeatable, overlooking Westland National Park from the snow-capped Southern Alps across extensive native forest to the lagoons and beaches of the coast.

Cumulative Distance Range: 4 – 9 km (2 – 5 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

DAY 5: Fox Village / Lake Matheson / Cycle to Gillespie's Beach

Begin the day with a short shuttle to the Fox Glacier area, where embark on a scenic ride through Fox Village ending at a stunning Mt. Cook viewpoint. You may continue cycling from there and test your mettle on a stimulating dirt-road ride out to scenic Gillespie's Beach. Watch the lapping waves of the

Tasman Sea before returning to Lake Matheson for lunch on your own. You may also walk around Lake Matheson, the pristine body of water left behind during Fox's retreat millennia ago and an important food-gathering place for the Maori. The lake's excellent mirror-like reflecting properties are due to the dark brown color of the water, the result of organic matter leached from the humus of the forest floor. Walk among the ancient podocarp hardwood forest, also passing tall white and red pine trees. The temperate forest leads to the "View of Views" at the top end of the lake: On a clear day, the water's glassy surface reflects Mt. Cook, also known as Aoraki, New Zealand's tallest peak at 12,218 feet (3,724 meters).

Continue on to Lake Moeraki Wilderness Lodge. Surrounded by a thriving 1,000-year-old rainforest and a pristine seacoast, the lodge is perfectly situated for outdoor exploration and activity—or just relaxing and taking in the wonders of nature. The owner of the lodge, Dr. Gerry McSweeney, is the former president of the New Zealand Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, the country's largest environmental organization. Accordingly, the lodge is committed to the protection of the environment.

Dinner this evening is in the lodge's dining room, which overlooks the wilderness area. Later, you may wish to join your lodge host for a walk on the grounds to view a colony of glowworms!

Today's Ride Choices

Morning Walk: Lake Matheson Walk — 4 km (2.5 miles)

Afternoon Ride: Fox Village to Lake Matheson — 19 km (12 miles) OR Fox Village to Gillespie's Beach — 43 km (27 miles)

What to Expect:

Morning Walk:

The first section of the Lake Matheson Walk is to the Jetty Viewpoint. Continuing farther around the lake, find another magnificent mountain reflection shrouded in native foliage at the "View of Views" at the top of the lake and again at Reflection Island.

Afternoon Ride:

Begin your ride through forested Fox Village to a Mt. Cook viewing point before returning to Lake Matheson. Or, continue on a gravel road through rainforest, where undulating terrain will lead you to Gillespie's Beach on the shores of the Tasman Sea. A van shuttle will return you to Lake Matheson. For the keen cyclist, a third option would be to cycle back to Lake Matheson from Gillespie's Beach!

Cumulative Distance Range: Walk: 4 km (2.5 miles) | Ride: 19 km (12 miles) OR 43 km (27 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 6: Explore Lake Moeraki

Set your own pace today as you take advantage of the lodge's many outdoor activities. Two complimentary 60- to 90-minute excursions are available for you to choose from. Perhaps you will join a rainforest walk, learn about the inhabitants of the Moeraki River with a naturalist guide, or enjoy canoe or kayak instruction on the waters of Lake Moeraki. Additional activities such as a wilderness seacoast walk to see the world's smallest marine dolphin, or a Moeraki Rainforest walk, kayak, and beach discovery may incur extra costs. After a rewarding day of exploration, rejoin the group for dinner at the lodge.

Today's Ride Choices

What to Expect:

Non-biking and non-walking day: Choose from a range of optional and two included excursions from the lodge today.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 7: Mt. Aspiring National Park / Ship's Creek / Hawea River Track / Outlet Track / Wanaka

After breakfast, board a two-hour shuttle (the longest drive of the trip) to Hawea, on the southern shore of Lake Hawea. En route, you'll stop for a short but memorable walk to witness the amazing Dune Lake and stop again at a classic roadside café for an included lunch. On reaching the very blue Lake Hawea, get on your bicycle to join the Hawea River Track, part of a purpose-built cycling and walking trail linking Hawea to Wanaka via Albert Town. As you ride, take in spectacular views along the Hawea River and of the high peaks behind Wanaka. Pedal through kanuka groves and shady woodland and along river terraces. Continue on a dedicated trail into Wanaka—gateway to Mt. Aspiring National Park—riding along the namesake lake, through the township and directly to your lakefront accommodations.

Spend two nights in charming Wanaka. Your comfortable lodging overlooks the magnificent Southern

Alps.

Today's Ride Choices

Morning Walk: Ship's Creek Dune Lake Walk – 2 km (1.5 mile)

Afternoon Ride: Hawea to Wanaka – 28 km (17 miles)

What to Expect:

Morning Walk:

Follow the rugged west coast dunes before heading into a dense coastal forest of stunned, windswept trees. Take in spectacular views of the coastline and dune lake along the way.

Afternoon Ride:

The first half of this delightful ride is on the Hawea River Track, a well-maintained trail with a few uneven patches as it travels through kanuka groves and woodland and along river terraces. From Albert Town, the second half of today's ride is on the Outlet Track, following the Clutha River and Lake Wanaka into the town of Wanaka, and ending up at our resort. Note that this track can be very busy and has some rougher sections near its beginning. Don't hesitate to walk your bike where it makes sense to do so. Your tour leaders will provide you with an alternate route from Albert Town to Wanaka to bypass the busier sections of trail.

Cumulative Distance Range: Walk: 2 km (1.5 miles) | Ride: 28 km (17 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

DAY 8: Glendhu Bay / High Country Station visit / Wine tasting

Experience the very best of Wanaka and New Zealand's famed Otago region today, marveling at sweeping wilderness views and visiting with locals at their charming ranch. After breakfast, lace up your hiking boots and walk directly from the resort, following the winding shoreline of Lake Wanaka. A bird's-eye perspective affords breathtaking views of the glacial-fed lake water below, while the looming snow-capped peaks extend far beyond the lake. Look for Mt. Aspiring in the distance on a clear day!

Midday, you are welcomed into the sheep and cattle station home of VBT friends Allannah and Duncan.

At their sprawling ranch, they breed and raise livestock and tend to a lush garden of local vegetables and fruit. Enjoy a tour around the property, see the shepherding dogs at work, and enjoy a home-cooked meal, hearing about life on a Kiwi ranch. Later, sample more of Otago's and Wanaka's products at Bistro Gentil restaurant, just outside of town, where you will have time to stroll the grounds and admire vistas of the lake and mountains before toasting to your leaders and fellow travelers over a final farewell dinner.

Today's Ride Choices

Morning Walk: Glendhu Bay – 11 km (7 miles)

What to Expect:

Pick up the Glendhu Bay track directly outside the door of the Edgewater Resort. The well-established trail hugs the shoreline of glistening Lake Wanaka, from which you'll enjoy excellent views of the Pisa range, the Upper Clutha Basin, Lake Wanaka, and the Southern Alps/Kā Tiritiri o te Moana.

Cumulative Distance Range: 11 km (7 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 9: Arrowtown / VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacation ends / Departure

After an included breakfast, shuttle to nearby Arrowtown, a quaint "wild west"-style village with a rich gold-mining past. There'll be time here to walk along the banks of the Arrow River, getting a picture of life in the days of the pioneers who settled here during the height of the Otago gold rush. Relax with a mid-morning coffee in a charming café, or look for a keepsake by which to remember your journey. Then, continue to Queenstown's airport, arriving at around 12:00 p.m.

Included Meals: Breakfast

Accommodations

May vary depending on departure date.

Chateau on the Park (Day 1)

The Chateau on the Park is a resort-style hotel tucked between Hagley Park and the beautiful historic home and gardens of Mona Vale, just minutes from the center of Christchurch. Nestled in five acres (two hectares) of beautiful and tranquil gardens, the 193-room property offers a unique escape, seemingly a world away from city life. The hotel is not air conditioned but does offer WiFi throughout.

Beachfront Hotel (Day 2)

This seaside hotel on the South Island's west coast has been in the same family for 120 years, making for a unique experience of true Kiwi hospitality. Its location in the center of a historic gold-mining town offers the best of two worlds. Charming streets are right outside your door for strolling. And since it overlooks the Tasman Sea, the beach is your backyard. Its comfortable restaurant and bar offer great ocean views. The hotel is not air conditioned but does offer WiFi throughout.

Scenic Hotel Franz Josef Glacier (Days 3-4)

Set on the edge of tiny Franz Josef village on the South Island's west coast, the warm and welcoming Scenic Hotel Franz Josef Glacier provides quality accommodation for visitors to the glacier, rainforest, and Westland World Heritage Park. The hotel makes the most of its alpine location and offers spa pools to soak in, wireless Internet, and two restaurants. Each room has a refrigerator and a minibar with tea- and coffee-making facilities. The hotel is not air conditioned but does offer WiFi throughout.

Lake Moeraki Wilderness Lodge (Days 5-6)

Owned by local ecologists, this nature-lover's riverside paradise is set amid the rainforest of South Westland. The luxury lodge is landscaped into the rainforest with lawns flowing down to the river's edge, where there are jumping trout, water birds, and stunning reflections. View them all from the Riverside Restaurant and Lounge, where you can relax, read, enjoy a drink from the wine cellar, and savor great wilderness food. The hotel is not air conditioned but does offer WiFi throughout.

Edgewater Resort (Days 7-8)

As its name suggests, the Edgewater Hotel lies right at the water's edge of Lake Wanaka. It is the perfect destination to experience all that Central Otago's seasons have to offer. Here you'll find genuine local knowledge that complements inviting accommodations and an enticing seasonal menu. The hotel is not air conditioned but does offer WiFi throughout.