

## All Aboard the Iron Horse

The TranzAlpine is a ride on the beguiled side  
by Karen Goa

As a dedicated train fan (not of the 'Is that a DX or DFT locomotive' kind) I'm near-ecstatic even before we're out of the predictably graffiti-ed rail yards. The robin's egg blue carriages are new enough to be warm and comfortable but vintage enough to make me feel as if I've stepped a satisfying pace back in time.

There are homely curtains framing wide windows, and a wooden fold-down tray. The train jiggles and wiggles like a snake with dodgy hips: chukka chukka clickety clickety chukka chukka chukka.

Paul, the never-seen but often-heard attendant, provides lively commentary and helpful tips. "Hold doors by the handle if you want your fingers to remain as they came from the manufacturer" is useful when navigating through the carriages to the service car for muffins and coffee.

My husband Ken is tickled to be a passenger not a driver for once. He points out trackside attractions: a flock of birds startled from the grassy verge; sheep the same bleached ivory as the paddock they're grazing, the grey-flanked Southern Alps beyond. At Sheffield the train passes St Ambrose Anglican church, a community hall and neat houses all in a row; the town's everyday life writ plain in the trackside buildings. It's almost 9:15 so the next town must be Springfield, birthplace of writer and Sinophile Rewi Alley. It's also the start of the most photographed part of the journey. Pulling on all available possumwear I head for the open-air viewing car, bearing in mind Paul the Invisible's advice to "Keep all body parts within the safety rails".

Passengers jostle politely for prime shooting position in the viewing car as the train climbs up the alpine foothills along the Waimakariri Gorge. The burnished tussocklands rolling to the mountains, that coppery-gold quality of light captured by so many New Zealand painters - it's all spread out before us, flickering past like a hand-coloured classic film.

A young North Islander on his first trip to the Mainland has one eye permanently stuck to his video camera. "I can't believe this is New Zealand," he says, with a kind of awe.

The Staircase Viaduct over the Waimakariri River is a short, sharp thrill for people who love scary heights. I don't, but it's over before there's time to think about how far down 73 metres really is. When the train rounds a bend I'm struck by how a train, unlike a line of cars, seamlessly fuses with the scenery.

These high country hills aren't just handsome; they're also history's observers. Fortune-hunters destined for the West Coast goldfields once travelled by Cobb and Co stagecoach from Christchurch to the West Coast along these valley floors, on a 36-hour trip the TranzAlpine covers in 4.5 hours. No wonder iron horses replaced hooped ones.

Beside the track Lake Sarah is a tiny gleaming disc named after the tiny wife of pioneering stockman and explorer Joseph Pearson. It's rimmed with bulrushes and, so we're told, brimming with trout. The cute wee red train station at nearby Cass (circa 1910) is almost all that's left of the once-busy railway town now that cars and trucks have reclaimed the mountain routes.

At Arthur's Pass the wheels squeal to a halt. The hustle-bustle on the platform at this popular sight-seeing spot is a bit of a shock after passing through hamlets like Cass. It's not Arthur's Pass without keas, so Ken and I dash through the pedestrian tunnel to the town side of the tracks. Two of these bodacious mountain parrots shriek and wheel overhead. We have to run like devils to catch the train, but it's worth it to see keas flashing their crimson underwings.

The viewing car is closed during the fifteen-minute rattle through the Otira Tunnel. Started in 1908, this marvel of digging took 15 years to build and is 8.6km long. It's also dark. "Please sit in your allocated seat when going through the Otira tunnel or you may get someone sitting on your knee," says the voice of Paul.

The train breaks out of the tunnel into a landscape so unlike the other side of the mountains it feels like time travel. Snakes of mist rise from a river the colour of cold steel and curl through hills thick with tree ferns. We flash past a sea of flax, banded cows, fences made of railway ties.

The century-old miners' cottages at Otira are painted in lively blues and purples to cheer up the small community of hardy railway locals who brave these mountain winters.

Further on Jacksons Tavern, est. 1868, stands alone at the foot of a mountain like a forgotten prop from a Wild West film.

Placid, vast Lake Brunner immortalises Thomas Brunner, who discovered coal when looking for inland access to Nelson. Legend has it the starving explorer was forced to eat his own dog after holing up for a month under a ledge to escape the torrential rains we've yet to see.

At Dobson the disembodied Paul points out a line of derelict Austin 4s. "They tell me there's an opening for a car groomer," he says, deadpan, before revealing that Dobson locals once used two WWI German submarine engines to power their town.

Before we reach Greymouth I grope my way through the swaying carriages for one last stand in the viewing car. I'm alone, watching the shifting mist, listening to the hiss and whoosh and chuckka chukka and the faraway ting ting of warning bells, smelling diesel and creosote rising from the rails.

Then I retreat to the warmth of robin's egg blue carriage 'L' for a hot cuppa. If there's a better way to travel, it hasn't been invented yet.