



HIGHLIGHTS

Stunning sub alpine native forest.

Challenging and original cobbled road built of sett stones in the 1880's.

Panoramic views of Mt Ruapehu, and the surrounding rural plans to the south.

Two historic railway viaducts including the Hāpuawhenua viaduct, one of New Zealand's oldest and tallest curved viaducts at 45m high and 245m long.

Great information panels connecting today with yesterday.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

The Ohakune Old Coach Road provided an essential all-weather link for horse-drawn coaches carrying passengers and goods between the two railheads of the North Island Main Trunk Line. Progress on the new main trunk line was slow due to the rugged landscape, and the road served as a crucial connection until the railheads were finally linked in 1908.

The trail mostly follows the original route of a bridle track completed in 1886 and upgraded to a dray road in 1895. Between 1904 and 1906, the road was paved with setts (rock pavers), creating a durable, all-weather surface capable of handling heavy horse-drawn traffic. Completed in November 1906, the road provided a link between the railheads when the gap was 39 km. It remained unused from 1909 until 2005, when a group of locals began the process of reopening it. By 2010, the road was ready for walkers and cyclists and became one of the first sections of New Zealand's Great Rides network, showcasing the country's diverse landscapes and rich history. (Some sections were lost due to the railway's deviation in 1987.)

The road is considered a significant example of early road engineering and was the finest rural road constructed in New Zealand up to that time. It passes through Tongariro National Park, a Dual World Heritage site recognised for its unique natural landscapes and deep cultural importance to local iwi. Its historical significance lies in the period when it linked the two railheads, and its disuse after 1909 effectively preserved it in time. Other than natural deterioration, the road remains in remarkably good condition.

ROUTE NOTES

- The trail follows an archaeologically significant old cobbled road. A mountain bike with good suspension is recommended.
- It is a Grade 3 trail, requiring a reasonable level of fitness and some off-road riding experience.
- The trail may be ridden in both directions, though riding from Horopito to Ohakune offers an overall descent of 170m. Another popular option is a return trip from Ohakune to the Hāpuawhenua Viaduct.



TRAIL GUIDE

Constructed in the 1880s, this cobblestone road was once well-used by horse-drawn traffic until it was superseded by the adjacent railway in 1908. Overgrown and largely forgotten, the road was rediscovered by locals in 2002. Revived, it is now one of the most popular day rides in the area, offering stories and historical insights along its length. It was also one of the first sections of New Zealand's Great Rides, showcasing the country's diverse landscapes and rich history.

Begin your adventure at the carpark and sign hub next to the North Island Main Trunk Line. Before you set off, consider visiting the legendary car wreckers, Horopito Motors, famously known as Smash Palace for its role in the 1981 cult movie of the same name. It's a treasure trove for motor enthusiasts, offering plenty of photo opportunities.

Head downhill over the double fords and follow a gravel road cutting through thriving rural horticulture and farmland—a reminder of the area's abundant bounty.

The trail changes dramatically as you pass through a cycle gate into Tongariro National Park, a UNESCO Dual World Heritage site recognised for its natural and cultural significance. From the signposted start, the trail cuts through a picturesque meadow and into lush native forest, abundant with giant rimu and tōtara, feathery toetoe, various ferns, and vibrant birdsong. The single-track crosses streams and winds through the bush, providing a serene experience.

After passing a stand of striking mountain tī kōuka (cabbage trees) and the ruins of Haeremarae Bridge, the trail crosses the modern railway line. A short ascent leads you down underneath the impressive Taonui Viaduct.

Both the Taonui and Hāpuawhenua Viaducts are the only remaining curved viaducts in the southern hemisphere. Completed in 1907–08 despite the challenges of weather and using oversized Meccano-like structures with perilously dangerous ladders, these viaducts are engineering marvels. Although half the size of the Hāpuawhenua Viaduct and in a state of disrepair, Taonui Viaduct is still an awe-inspiring sight.

Take a break at Bush Camp picnic spot, deep in the forest. Spare a thought for the pioneering road builders and their simple supper of cabbage soup and grog as you enjoy your modern-day snacks and fancy bike. What would they think of us riding their road today?

The trail ascends steadily to its highest point, revealing expansive views of the Ohakune basin. The reward for your climb is a thrilling 3km downhill ride on a well-maintained surface along the remnants of the old cobblestone road. This stretch includes signs sharing stories and insights along the way. Be cautious through the narrow winding corners with steep drop-offs.

At the T-junction, the main track continues to the right, but don't miss the must-see detour to the left: just 100 metres away is the magnificent Hāpuawhenua Viaduct. Here, you can see both the new (opened in 1987) and old Hāpuawhenua Viaducts. The old viaduct, which spans 284m, was once part of New Zealand's first commercial bungy jumping site (1988–1993), started by AJ Hackett. Bridging steep gullies on the railway route, it offers a fascinating glimpse into the region's engineering past and cultural significance.

This trail is a return journey, so do not use the scoria track underneath. Heading towards Ohakune (and Marshalls Rd), the trail continues through the bush past towering rimu trees. Take the signposted detour through the 200m-long Hāpuawhenua Tunnel, which was closed off at the end after the railway line was re-routed in 1987. Bring a torch for a spooky adventure.

Enjoy the ride over original sett stones, which may test your bike suspension but provide a great all-weather surface. Stop at the panels detailing the original North Island Main Trunk Line survey choices—fascinating feats of planning in an age before satellites and computers.

After a short uphill section, the trail descends a long grassy hill to the grand Dilemma Lookout (discover the story behind its name). Continue along the old cobblestone road, winding down and around the foothills, with beautiful views of the hilly Waimarino Plain.

The trail concludes at Dodges Bridge and the Marshall Rd carpark, where there's more information about the trail's foundation and history. Continue past the Rongokaupo wetland and the Ātihau farms, following Marshalls Road and turning left into Old Station Road. You'll pass Te Pepe Pump Track before reaching the official trailhead at Ohakune Railway Station—a perfect spot for another photo! Take a break for a coffee or head to a local bar for a refreshing beverage.

For those heading back into Ohakune, consider taking the scenic Mangawhero Stream Trail, which runs parallel to the road (entrance just before the road bridge).

MOUNTAINS TO SEA – ROUTE NOTES

If you are heading west on the Mountains to Sea – Ngā Ara Tūhono route, reverse the directions of the trail. Upon arriving in Horopito, follow the signs that will guide you a short distance down the opposite side of the railway line and around the back of the old Horopito School House. This will lead you to a safe crossing point for SH4 and onto the Middle Road section.

Riders heading towards the Last Spike will soon turn left onto Matapuna Road, following the planned Te Hangāruru trail. This trail will head north towards the future Pōkākā ecosanctuary, linking through the Marton Sash and Door trail and connecting to Waimarino - National Park.



This trail is developed and maintained by the Mountains to Sea – Ngā Ara Tūhono Charitable Trust. Feedback and support mountainstosea.nz/support

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