

UPOKONGARO TO THE TASMAN SEA (WHANGANUI)



HIGHLIGHTS

Coastal ride along the Whanganui River

Whanganui River Markets (Every Saturday)

Untamed Tasman Sea coast with black sand beaches

Historic riverboats

Whanganui – New Zealand’s only UNESCO City of Design

Durie Hill Tunnel and Underground Elevator

Stunning street art and galleries

Quirky cafes and eateries

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Urban pathways guide riders from the historic village of Upokongaro along the banks of the Whanganui River, through the heart of a city rich in history and creativity, and finally to the black-sand beaches where the river meets the Tasman Sea.

With over 800 years of Te Ati Haunui-a-Paparangi occupation, the mouth of the Whanganui River has been home to iwi for centuries. Whanganui was also one of the earliest destinations for European settlers. The development of a bustling port and an expanding national rail network made Whanganui a key transport and trade hub from the late 19th century.

By 1916, Whanganui was New Zealand’s fifth-largest city. The city’s heritage is still evident, with beautifully preserved Edwardian and Victorian architecture lining its main streets. The Whanganui Regional Museum houses a significant collection of taonga Māori. Two authentic riverboats still cruise the Whanganui River, and the Durie Hill Tunnel and Elevator have been in operation for more than a century.

Today, with a population of around 48,000, Whanganui is a thriving community known for its vibrant creative scene, picturesque city centre, and welcoming culture. Riders will find plenty of reasons to stop and stay a while.

CONNECTING MAP:

WHANGANUI RIVER ROAD

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WHANGANUI

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TRAIL ROUTE

A stunning, mostly flat ride along the awa (river), where you can discover Whanganui's special moments in history, creative expressions, and more. The journey culminates at the awe-inspiring (and sometimes tempestuous) Tasman Sea, where the river's journey from the maunga (mountain) to the moana (sea) finally concludes.

Starting in the village of Upokongaro, where riverboats have plied their trade for over a century, transporting passengers (and sometimes bikes) to and from the city of Whanganui. This is a great place to stop for coffee and a bite to eat or try a gin-crafting workshop at the Papaiti Gin Distillery or if you time it right jump on the Waimarie Paddle Steamer and cruise back to town.

Head south towards the pedestrian/cycling bridge, across the SH4 bridge, take a sharp left under the road to access the Upokongaro Bridge. Connecting Aramoho and Upokongaro, this bridge has united these communities and enhanced locals' active habits. Pause for a moment to appreciate the mana (power and presence) of this special waterway as you are suspended above its flowing waters.

From here, the mostly concrete trail hugs the right-hand side of the river, meandering through the horticultural outskirts of the city. Mixing old and new, you'll pass the birthplace of New Zealand's kiwifruit industry (the Hayward variety was developed and grown here). The city suburbs open up as you cycle past the Whanganui Top 10 Holiday Park and Te Ao Hou Marae. The Hylton Mountain Bike Park is up in the hills on your right. On your left, you'll pass the Aramoho Whanganui Rowing Club and the railway bridge. The next landmark is the old Bailey Bridge (known as Dublin St Bridge), with an underpass so you can avoid the busy roundabout. On a clear day, look left for spectacular views of Mt Ruapehu—a satisfying reminder of where your Mountains to Sea journey began.

Passing the historic and culturally significant Pākaitore – Moutoa Gardens, you'll arrive at the pier where riverboats



dock. Along the way, you'll encounter public art that will intrigue and invite you to pause and reflect. Highlights include Balancing Act by Daniel Clifford (the iconic pencils), Mountains to Sea by Mikel Durel-Browne, Max Cody, and Kerry McDonnell, Protection in Adversity by Joe Morrel, Moorings by Pete Nicholls, Bearing (a perfect Insta spot with the river reflected in the stainless-steel surface) by David McCracken, Kererū by Paul Dibble, and Here My Train a Comin' by Brit Bunkley. For those inclined, the "Coastal Arts Trail" (www.coastalartstrail.nz) offers an array of artistic experiences.

As you ride along Taupō Quay, take advantage of the vibrant cafes and artisan shops. If you're here on a Saturday, the Whanganui River Markets are worth exploring—arguably one of the best markets in the country. Whanganui is New Zealand's only UNESCO City of Design, and the unique architecture along the way makes it easy to see why.

Pop off the trail and head up Drews Ave, with its outdoor seating and bohemian vibe—an ideal spot to relax. The local i-SITE Visitor Centre is a great place to discover more of what Whanganui has to offer, with a trail map and bike repair stand. Just up the hill is Te Whare o Rehua Sarjeant Gallery, offering one of the best views of your Mountains to Sea journey. Whanganui's main street, Victoria Avenue, is to your right, with boutique shopping along a picturesque, hanging-basket-lined avenue. This area also hosts Cooks Gardens athletics track, famous for Peter Snell's record-breaking mile in 1962, and the Royal Whanganui Opera House (1899). Cycling in Whanganui dates back to the 1870s, with locals racing and riding the aptly named boneshaker bikes!

Consider a detour across the City Bridge to explore the historic Durie Hill Elevator, New Zealand's only underground public transport elevator, built in 1919. At the lookout, enjoy panoramic views of Whanganui, with vistas stretching to Mt Taranaki and Mt Ruapehu.

Back on the trail, continue under the City Bridge, keeping an eye out for the nearby fountain. You'll head towards the traditional fishing and industrial zones of the city. Stop for a photo beside the leaning, upturned train sculpture made entirely of locally fired bricks. As the river widens, you'll notice the mixing of freshwater from the mountains with the salty brine of the Tasman Sea. A visit to Whanganui isn't complete without admiring the remnants of old wharves, driftwood, and the ever-changing riverbanks.

Keep an eye on the Mountains to Sea – Ngā Ara Tūhono km markers en route, as it's easy to get absorbed by your surroundings. Riding high on the stopbanks, you'll pass through the city's industrial heart, with Pacific Helmets (renowned for their world-class safety helmets) located just down the road. Stay alert for trail markers as you pass Q-West, a local business known for producing large aluminium boats and ferries.

Soon, you'll find your wheels gliding over the ubiquitous black sands of the North Island's west coast. The North Mole, a type of breakwater designed to protect the harbour entrance and minimise erosion, stretches into the Tasman Sea, providing a haven for fishing and surfing. This area is being restored as part of the Te Pūwaha port redevelopment project.

Take a moment to breathe in the fresh coastal air and reflect on your journey. Gaze west to Mt Taranaki, south to Kāpiti Island, and northeast towards Mt Ruapehu. Celebrate your achievement with your own driftwood creation on the beach, then explore Castlecliff village with its surf club, playgrounds, and café.



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GRADE 1+
Mostly off road, generally flat shared concrete path. There are short sections on suburban roads with lower traffic volumes. **There is one very short section on a higher volume road with shoulder and visible delineation.*
More details: mountainstosea.nz/trail-grades/

LENGTH
19 km

GRADIENT
Generally Flat

DURATION
1-2 hrs
(Or longer depending on how much exploring you do)

LOCATION
Whanganui

RIDE
Take your time and enjoy the change of pace.

DIRECTION
The trail may be ridden in any direction, most people choose to ride from Upokongaro to North Mole, or from the city centre in either direction.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE TRAIL AND SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE VIA OUR SHORT SURVEY.



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