



# FOREST FOR THE TREES

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It was early enough that condensation still clung to the moss-covered trees at the trail's entrance. Pushing off against my bike pedals, I was swallowed up by a palette of green cut through with shadows and shafts of light. Save for the darting movements of birds, and the occasional screech of a kākā, all remained still. It was hard to imagine there used to be a steam train running through here.

I was setting off on the Timber Trail, an 82-kilometre-long cycle route in New Zealand's central North Island. Once dense with ancient podocarp forest, in the 1940s this area became a working site of saws and steel; the Ellis and Burnand logging company creating productive industry from the ancient trees. Felling sites and sawmills were established, connected by purpose-built tramways and steam locomotives. All these years later, it didn't take me long to wheel past a century-old Caterpillar crawler tractor, abandoned and preserved for posterity.

The first five kilometres of the trail takes riders through the Pikiariki Ecological Area where towering rimu, totara and kahikatea form some of the country's oldest surviving podocarp forest. These ancient trees only survived thanks to a group of environmentalists who, in 1978, climbed into the canopy in protest. It was tree-huggers vs tree-fellers. The chainsaws stopped.

I pushed on uphill making a steady climb to the trail's highest point, Mount Pureora, 971 metres above sea level. Then a muddy, downhill run delivered me to the Bog Inn Bridge, the first of eight suspension bridges strung up through these mountains to complete the cycle path. I rolled myself across its planks, hanging 115 metres above Bog Inn Creek, glad the suspension bridges were a more modern construction.

That night's camp was in the tiny settlement of Piropiro. My legs ached, coated in a fine brown dust, and my fingers still vibrated from their grip on the handlebars. After pitching my tent I joined fellow campers around a fire, lulled by flame and fatigue, sipping wine from tin mugs.

On day two the grass glittered with the remnants of an overnight drizzle, and the fresh air felt good in my lungs, readying them for a half-hour climb. The reward was the longest suspension bridge on the route (the third longest in the country), some 141 metres hanging gracefully above the rugged Maramataha Gorge. I stopped halfway, looked over the edge, and for a moment felt the world drop away.

As the contours of the route continued to weave and change, I threaded through tree ferns, ducked under low branches and coasted along open sections of land. Industrial traces lingered here too, in rock walls once blasted out for tramways. A fluorescent sign urged: 'Do not stop for the next 50 metres due to possible rockfall'. No need to tell me twice – I quickened my pace and tried not to glance at the ominous boulders that loomed overhead.

The sawmills had closed by the 1960s, although it took half a decade for the scars of industry to become the foundation for a cycle trail; one that presented the forest in its natural glory. The labours and ingenuity of Ellis and Burnand are preserved as part of its story – most notably in the Ongarue Spiral, a feat of engineering that loops the trail up and over itself via a tunnel and bridge. As I strapped my head torch over my helmet I wondered what the men in their own hard hats would have thought of bicycles riding through it. I pedalled into the musky corridor of earth, a surreal plunge into gloom; a short, dark shift through another era.

Once I reemerged into open air I juddered down a gravelly track so pocked with potholes it dislodged my chain twice. But just as my backside grew numb, the path smoothed and forest became farmland, the trail briefly squeezing between paddock fences before delivering me, dusty and grinning, into the DOC carpark I'd set off from the previous day.

In addition to the Timber Trail's eight impressive suspension bridges, the route itself is a bridge: between the forest's age of industry and a second life of recreation and regeneration. I hope to cross it again sometime.