

Shingle test: The party picks its way across a shingle fan in the Wilberforce River Valley.



Up-country splendour



Pleasing the eye: Views from the Wilberforce River.

>> From 3

If you are doing a full six-day experience with High Country Journeys, the Wilberforce day prepares you for the sorts of terrain you will encounter and provides practice at river crossings to build up your confidence.

Excellent food is provided, with all meals and accommodation included in the trip cost.

A full-on day was followed by an evening at the Meares' home in Coalgate, where Karen gives you a full briefing on the upcoming journey. Mike and Karen have meticulously prepared a manual for participants; they have driven each track on the journey and recorded navigation notes and obstacles down to the kilometre, making it easy and stress-free for your daily navigation.

Day two dawns with us heading off with the English fellow travellers in a two-vehicle convoy, on what normally would be the first day's journey. As we head around the back of Mt Hutt, we leave the main road



Quelling appetite: High-quality food is provided.

for the 17.7km Redcliff track.

This track offers spectacular views of the Rakaia River, Lake Coleridge and the power station, as well as the red cliffs the track was named after.

It is also the most challenging of all the tracks in the six-day journey.

You climb rapidly through some challenging terrain to a height of 990 metres, where you can enjoy the fantastic views before continuing across this alpine basin and coming back down the other side of the basin.

The Redcliff track is a great confidence builder, being probably

the worst terrain you will encounter on the journey.

After the exhilaration of the Redcliff track, we head further up the valley, following the Rakaia River through some of New Zealand's premier high country stations to start the Lake Stream track to Lake Heron.

This track would be one of New Zealand's hidden gems, and progress is slowed in order to take in the stunning views. The journey manual allows a hassle-free expedition.

After enjoying the picturesque Lake Heron and travelling through the Ashburton Gorge to Mt Somers, our travel is over. We head back to Christchurch, feeling quite envious of the English travellers Marcus and Margaret, who have a further five days of exploring the South Island ahead of them while we have to return to work.

Our two-day journey is part of a new concept Mike and Karen are exploring that should prove a winner because it offers a great four-wheel-drive experience if you have limited time. Combined with Overland Rentals' fleet of 4WD vehicles, it means you could fly in and pick up a 4WD without losing time travelling to Canterbury.

I never thought being bounced around in a 4WD could be so much fun.

Information: Highcountryjourneys.co.nz overland.co.nz



Braided: The Rakaia River.