



Chainlinks

MAGAZINE OF THE CYCLING ADVOCATES NETWORK (NZ)

2015, ISSUE 1, MARCH





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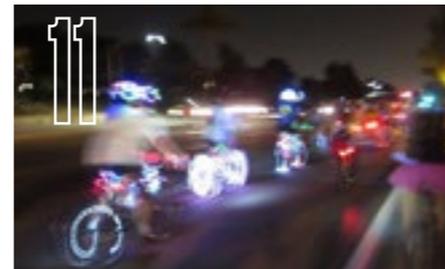
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Articles	29th May
Local group content	19th June
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Send articles to chainlinks@can.org.nz

Send images to chainlinks_5776@sendtodropbox.com

Images 500kb / 0.5Mb or more



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Front cover photo

Armchair trailer at the 2014 Santa Parade in Christchurch. See p4.

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The First Digital Chainlinks

David Hawke

As advised in the October 2014 Chainlinks, this magazine no longer comes to you in traditional paper-based form.

As well as removing the printing and postage costs (and associated page number and colour illustration limits), the change allows us to implement enhancements impossible in hard copy. This issue takes the first step, by simply providing the magazine as a PDF with in-text weblinks.

The post-paper Chainlinks is the latest step in an evolutionary lineage that began with a simple A4 printed newsletter. Production of Chainlinks has always been carried out by a small team, led by Miriam Richardson for the past seven years. Chainlinks has also been supported financially by a dedicated group of advertisers, to whom we offer our heartfelt thanks.

We expect that the PDF format will be a transitional phase. The media company Upshift is currently reviewing CAN's communications profile. Upshift's recommendations (due early March) will be implemented in a new CAN website. We will evaluate the range of possible platforms for Chainlinks in the light of Upshift's recommendations.

The CAN Committee will review the format of Chainlinks after 12 months. ■



Bicycle Jousting at the Santa Parade

Steven Muir

Join the crowds gasping in amazement as you watch the [Christchurch Biking Vikings](#) (You Tube), supported by Frocks on Bikes, with tinselled bikes, armchair trailers, bees and angels at the 2014 Santa Parade.

The highlight is brothers Sam and Johnny Stockwell dressed as knights, knocking each other off their BMX bikes with jousting poles. Well protected with body armour, they sustain no injuries. Jousting on tall bikes with little armour is popular overseas, which has got to hurt; but this version is safer.



Join the next parade in Christchurch on the first Sunday of December 2016! ■



Nga Haerenga, the NZ Cycle Trail Inc

Evan Freshwater

Nga Haerenga, the NZ Cycle Trail Inc (NZCT Inc) is an incorporated society that represents the interests of the 23 Great Rides in New Zealand.

NZCT was first established in 2009 as a part of the Ministry of Economic Development, which has become the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, before being broken away to stand-alone in 2014.

Since 2010 government has been working towards a long term goal of creating a national network of New Zealand Cycle Trails. This network will consist of Great Rides and Cycle Touring Routes. The network is growing. At this point in time there are 16 fully open Great Rides and another 6 Great Rides that are mostly open, with sections under construction. There are also 2600 km of cycle touring routes, known as Heartland Rides — with potential to add at least another 2000 km.

NZCT Inc represents a range of organisations, from the 23 Great Rides to the approved National and Trail Partners who, in turn, cover a wide range of tourism-related activities — hospitality, transport, accommodation, adventure and activities, attractions and retail as well as related tourism services.

there are 16 fully open Great Rides



The Queenstown Cycle Trail at Lake Hayes ©2012 New Zealand Cycle

The primary role of NZCT Inc is to be the representative of the trails and their partners. This includes working for members on advocacy, policy, communication, events and membership and business services. NZCT Inc works with trails whenever possible to build capability, share knowledge and strives for continual improvement of both the tourism products & services and the physical trail itself. We want Nga Haerenga (the Journeys) to be a world-class cycling experience that keeps riders coming back again and again.

Evan is the manager of Nga Haerenga,
The NZ Cycle Trail Inc.



Urban Cycleways Programme

Stephen Wood

The Urban Cycleways Programme was announced by the Prime Minister in August 2014, with the aim of making improvements to cycling infrastructure in the main urban centres.

Of the \$100 million Urban Cycleways Programme, \$10 million is available to progress projects in 2014/15. The remaining \$90 million will be spent over the following three financial years.

At the end of January 2015, the Minister of Transport announced 13 projects to receive funding in the 2014/15 financial year. This investment pulls together a range of funding sources and provides a total of \$37 million to expand and improve New Zealand's urban cycling networks.

- » [Questions and answers about the 2014/15 projects](#) (pdf, 155kb)
- » [Minister's media release announcing the 2014/15 projects](#)
- » [Prime Minister's media release announcing the Urban Cycleways Programme](#)

This is an opportunity for cycling advocates to work with their councils to get further urban cycling projects ready to the point that they can be considered for funding in the three remaining years of the programme. ■

Auckland Mayor Len Brown, NZTA CEO Geoff Dangerfield, Minister of Transport Simon Bridges at the Urban Cycleways Programme launch



Cycling Safety Panel Report — an opportunity for advocates

David Hawke

The Cycling Safety Panel released its 80-page [final report \(pdf 2.6mb\)](#) containing 35 recommendations just before Christmas 2014.

The Panel was formed earlier that year following several high-profile deaths and a coroner's call for a panel to review cycling safety. CAN was well represented on the 10-member Expert Panel, with Simon Kennett, Glen Koorey, Marilyn Northcotte and Axel Wilke all being CAN members. Other members were Richard Leggat from BikeNZ, Sarah Ulmer as New Zealand Cycle Trail Ambassador, Mike Noon from the Automobile Association, population health experts Alexandra Macmillan and Alistair Woodward, and human factors consultant Hamish Mackie.

The priority accorded by the Panel to "the provision of fit-for-purpose, connected and completed urban cycle networks [as making] the biggest impact on improving cycling safety" fits very well with CAN's view expressed over many years. Recommendations noted by [Associate Transport Minister Craig Foss in his press release](#) around trialling mandatory minimum passing distances, the fitting of side under-run protection for trucks and a "safe systems" approach to transport also fit well with CAN priorities.

The Ministry of Transport report covering implementation of the Panel recommendations is due with Mr Foss by mid-March. Given the wholehearted participation in the process by cycling groups and individuals, the government has the necessary mandate to fully implement the panel recommendations. However, governments of all persuasions have a long history of undertaking all manner of investigations then ignoring the findings. It is up to cycling advocates to make sure this doesn't happen, and the [CAN-Do](#) at the end of March will provide a platform for assessment of the government response. ■



SAFER JOURNEYS FOR PEOPLE WHO CYCLE

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CYCLING SAFETY PANEL FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DECEMBER 2014





Cycle Aware Wellington

Alastair Smith

It was supposed to be an easy win — take a wide promenade in a suburb with potential for increased cycling, move the parking out a smidgen and install a state of the art kerbside bike lane. This was the plan for the first stage of a Bicycle Super Highway that would connect Wellington’s southern suburb of Island Bay to the CBD.

But then the rumours started. Ancient pohutukawas would be removed to make room for the cycle lane, babies being unloaded from parked cars would be mown down by speeding cyclists, the budget would blow out and ratepayers left with cycle induced debt. The whole project was just to enable Wellington’s cycling mayor to bike from “bedroom to boardroom”, and was being imposed on the suburb by the all powerful “Cycle Lobby”.

A group of councillors, nervous about the local opposition, and resentful of a new committee structure



that was felt to lessen decision making involvement by councillors, called an extraordinary Council meeting. This decided that cycleway decisions (unlike less important issues such as roading and housing) would go to the full Council, potentially delaying the projects. A detailed master plan for city wide cycling routes was also called for.

As at February 2015, the Island Bay parade cycleway has been approved by the Transport and Urban Development Committee by a bare 4/3 majority, but will need to be approved by the full council.

What are the lessons for cycle advocacy? Although there was extensive consultation for over a year, neither the council or cycle advocates were able to change the views of a significant group of residents. Although submissions on the cycleway were overall in favour, submissions by some residents on the route were strongly against. Clearly implementing cycle projects, particularly in a residential area, requires support from affected non-cyclists, as well as current and potential cyclists. But the Island Bay experience shows that this isn’t easy. Perhaps the “New York” approach, of putting in facilities on a temporary basis with a commitment to remove them if they didn’t work out, might have allayed residents fears of how kerbside lanes work in practice.

In contrast to the drawn out Island Bay saga, a fast tracked project to transform central city Victoria Street, with lobbying by CAW, has resulted in a commitment to install at least one block of kerbside cycle lane.

Cycleway Development Programme

Also on a more positive note, WCC has started a Cycleway Development Programme, developing a master plan which could result in \$54 million (which includes NZTA and Urban Cycleway funding) being spent on a network of cycle routes over the next three years. Priority routes include the connection between the CBD and Ngauranga, to connect with NZTA’s proposed seaward cycleway from Ngauranga to Petone. This is a key commuter route from the north, and currently uses a shared path that crosses numerous business entrances and has a high crash rate. The Cycleway Development Programme looks very positive, but success depends on WCC having the political will to tackle issues such as removal of parking, and narrowing of traffic lanes.

Bikewise

Bikewise month features a number of cycle related activities — CAW’s normally well attended Go By Bike Day breakfast under

Continues next page

Contact the local group nearest you

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BikeWalk Marlborough

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Bike West Coast (SI)

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Spokes Canterbury

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paulindr@orcon.net.nz
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Spokes Dunedin

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spokesdunedin.wordpress.com

Cycle Aware Wellington continues

the iconic sails of Queens Wharf on 11 February, and the Miramar Peninsula Ciclovía, where a section of the peninsula is motor free on Sundays 8, 15 February and 8 March. The 2014 Ciclovía attracted almost 2500 people; and despite windy conditions, the 8 February event had 2300 cyclists, walkers, scooters, etc. This was a strong indication that an environment protected from motor vehicles will attract cyclists. Other events include Frocks on Bikes "Bubs on Bikes" on 8 February, and the "Love to Roll" ride on 8 March (logically these two events should be in the opposite order, but never mind...). ■

Web links

- » [Island Bay to City Cycleway](#)
- » [Cycleway Development Programme](#)
- » [Victoria Street Transformation Project](#)
- » [Miramar Peninsula Ciclovía](#)
- » [Go By Bike Day](#)
- » [Frocks on Bikes](#)

Join CAN

can.org.nz/join

Annual membership fees

Unwaged	\$20
Waged	\$35
Family	\$40
Supporting organisations	\$85



The Active Transport Toolkit

John-Paul Pochin

How many times have you come across a car parked in the cycle path or glass on the road but didn't know who to report it to or by the time you got to where you were going it wasn't worth reporting?

The Active Transport Toolkit is a free mobile application designed to encourage and support active transport. This initial version focuses on cycling and provides the ability to view cycle friendly routes, record trips and report issues such as objects blocking cycle ways, glass on the road etc.

view cycle friendly routes, record trips and report issues such as objects blocking cycle ways, glass on the road

Currently the app is focused on Nelson but it can be used anywhere and the hope is to get more councils involved.

The Android version has been launched during Bikefest Nelson and an iOS version is to follow.

The main features of the application are:

1. The ability to create markers to pinpoint issues such as cars/road signs blocking cycle ways. Details can be automatically sent to the relevant contact at the council for example and the markers also appear in real time to everybody else

running the app so that they're aware of the issue.

2. Cyclists can trace their routes giving them an indication of how far they've travelled as well as how much money they've saved (as opposed to using an average car). By creating 'heat maps' of cyclists routes, this information can be used by the council to prioritise cycling infrastructure and also see behaviour shifts when infrastructure changes are made.
3. The app has the ability to create and view cycle route maps that have been created from a cyclists perspective (by cyclists, for cyclists).
4. The app incorporates ways to promote cycle friendly businesses by allowing cyclists to accumulate points for visiting/purchasing those businesses.

More features are planned or are currently disabled for this release until further testing has been done.

As mentioned above, the app allows the creation of route maps primarily aimed to help less confident cyclists navigate around Nelson, with a particular focus on the schools and a heavy bias on safety. Current maps are often essentially road maps with cycle paths overlaid and don't offer enough detail at critical areas such as junctions. It's often the case for example that you'll have two roads that have cycleways but the link between them from a cyclist perspective either doesn't exist or isn't clearly defined.

The ATT maps are different and we don't believe they have been done quite like this anywhere else. Every stretch of track on the map has information



every stretch of track on the map has information regarding the type of cycle facilities

regarding the type of cycle facilities (on-road cycle path, sharrows etc.) and, if relevant, the road speed limit, how busy the road is, if there is car parking on the road and whether it's parallel or angle etc.

Because the routes are created from a cyclists perspective there is a heavy focus on junctions and all route combinations from the junction marked. This allows for a different safety rating for a right turn at a junction as opposed to a left turn for example.

As well as being useful for cyclists, because the map highlights gaps in the links between

key destinations such as schools, or missing links between cycle facilities from a cyclist's perspective it will be useful in planning future improvements to the network especially when combined with tracking data. Additionally, because the map can be edited from a smart phone, it can be updated on the fly from people on the ground ensuring the data is up-to-date, accurate and relevant to cyclists.

More information on the Active Transport Toolkit as well as the link to install on [Google Play](#).

John-Paul is a member of Bicycle Nelson Bays



Proposed motorway threatens cycleway

David Hawke

Compared with other New Zealand cities, Nelson city seems to this outsider the epitome of liveable urban design.

Following some determined and enlightened local political leadership, Nelson embarked early on separated cycleways. This enthusiasm was rewarded in 2014 with a [Cycle Friendly Award](#) to Nelson City Council for the St Vincent Street cycleway.

Unfortunately, this very area is threatened with a motorway project — the Southern Link. Perhaps more importantly than the elbowing out of the cycleway, the proposed route will cut through the suburb of Victory. This long-established local community is also one of Nelson’s poorest.

Like many Nelson roading projects, the original proposal dates back many years. An earlier attempt got as far as the Environment Court, where it was rejected due to air pollution concerns. Now, local MP Nick Smith is driving a [resurrected project](#). [Bicycle Nelson Bays](#) is one of the [local community groups](#) driving opposition to the project. ■



New Zealand Winter Solstice Night Light Bike Ride

Ian Wells

Join Christchurch in celebrating the New Zealand Winter Solstice Night Light bike ride.

Every Winter Solstice for the last 3 years, hundreds of hardy cyclists in Christchurch have turned up 5:30PM 21st June to ride around Hagley Park with bike lights to celebrate the beginning of longer cycling days. Some years it is tough, some years it is cold, some years it is balmy — it matters not — we turn up for a family fun ride

at the shortest day of the year with bike lights, good cheer and, most importantly, hot beverage at the pub afterwards with fellow cyclists.

Now we in Christchurch extend a warm invitation to other cities in New Zealand to join in running your own Winter Solstice Night Light Bike Ride. You can check out our previous rides on Facebook. ■

For information about how to organized your own Winter Solstice Night Light bike ride, contact Ian Wells venduco@gmail.com.

South Island West Coast Touring

David Hawke

Living in Christchurch, we take our bikes to the West Coast pretty much every year. What brings us back each time is the out-there scenery, the relatively empty roads, and the genuinely warm and easy-going local people.

Potential visitors are often put off by the reputation for rain, but temperatures lack the hot and cold extremes found further east; wet spells are usually only a few days and are followed by crystal clear days that defy description

The out-there scenery is a cliché, but is nonetheless real. For us, it is the empty beaches with surf one way, forest the other, and snowy mountains in the distance. On our last trip in winter 2014, we had only a few days so caught train and bus to Greymouth and Whataroa (30km north of Franz Josef) then biked the 25km to [Okarito](#). Mist-shrouded lakes and towering forest leading to snug accommodation compensated for the daily rain.

Some parts of the West Coast seem in a time warp. In 2013 we spent time at Rapahoe, north of Greymouth. The camp we stayed in was built around the old school-house; the beach is only a few minutes walk away. The local hotel combines delicious food with a genuine desire on the part of the hosts to not send people away hungry.

This year's post-CAN Do ride encompasses the Kumara-Hokitika section of one of Nga Haerenga's newer Great Rides, the [West Coast Wilderness Trail](#). For anyone who wishes to stay longer, the Trail south from Hokitika is truly breathtaking. The beach at Lake Mapourika offers truly outstanding views of Aoraki and the main divide, and the section from Ruatapu to Ross along the old rail bed to the Totara River feels utterly remote. We really encourage you to follow up your trip to Christchurch for the [CAN Do](#) with the post-conference ride. ■



Mahinapoua Creek



Whataroa-Okarito
in the rain



Lake Wahapo

CAN-Do 2015 in Christchurch 28-29 March

David Hawke

This year's *CAN-Do* has two days of sessions and events supporting the theme of "everyday cycling".

The conference will be opened by Christchurch Mayor Lianne Dalziel, which reflects Christchurch's recent commitment to a \$156m programme that will build a network of 13 separated cycleways over the next 7 years.

Cycleway programmes across the country face common issues and obstacles, so the **Saturday lunchtime ride** looking at *the first cycleway* under construction will be particularly relevant to all delegates. The ride will be led by Spokes Canterbury Chair Don Babe with City Councillor Phil Clearwater and Julie Anne Genter MP.

The CAN-Do venue is CPIT's new *Whareora* sports and health promotion facility, due to be opened by the Prime Minister on 3 March.

Saturday open session

CPIT generously gave CAN access to the facility for the CAN-Do free of charge, so we will include an **open-to-the public session on the Saturday afternoon** to give Christchurch people a chance to look around.



Bus with bike rack

As part of this, a **bus with bike rack will be on site** to allow people to practise putting their bikes on the rack. Although rack use is not complicated, many find it intimidating. There will also be an opportunity for the public to get discounted rates on the Whareora's wellbeing and fitness assessment programmes. *Ground Effect* and *Addington Coffee Co-op* are both offering spot prizes for people who come along.

Keynote: health in the urban environment

The formal sessions will include a keynote address by *Professor Simon Kingham*, who has an international reputation for his work linking health to the urban environment.

Discussion panels

Discussion panels will look at how advocates can engage with the transition to modern **liveable cities**; how advocates can engage with the **planning and design** process for transport infrastructure; and **addressing concerns** about the loss of car parks that accompanies cycleway implementation.

Full programme

To look at the full programme and to register for the CAN-Do, go to the [CAN-Do event page](#) and follow the links. ■

The CAN-Do will be held in the new CPIT Whareora building, seen here getting its final finishing in mid-February



Post-CAN Do ride

Kumara to Hokitika section of the West Coast Wilderness Trail. (Consider going even further south from Hokitika: it is truly breathtaking.) [MORE](#)

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to: <http://can.org.nz/can-roles>

For full contact details go to:
<http://can.org.nz/contact>



CAN Committee report

David Hawke, Stephen Wood

With a new government in place, we have been establishing contacts with Government and Opposition ministers and spokespeople.

As I write this in late January, we are booked in to meet Transport Minister Simon Bridges on 18 February. Along with meeting various NGOs such as AA and the Road Transport Forum, this mostly Wellington-based work relies heavily on Patrick Morgan (CAN Project Officer), Wellington committee members, and CAN volunteers.

The *Cycling Safety Panel Final Report* came out late last year. Many CAN members made submissions; now we need to make sure that its recommendations are implemented.

We are encouraged at the appointment of Dougal List at NZTA as National Cycling Manager, and we look forward to working with him in making cycling safer and easier for everyone. The liaison work we do with NZTA will become ever more important as the Government's *Urban Cycleways Programme* is rolled out.

People

People-wise, Will Andrews (Bicycle Nelson Bays) agreed to be co-opted onto the Committee to replace Jacqui Irwin. In her short time on the Committee, Jacqui made a major impact on CAN's policy development.

Elaine Richardson is stepping down at the end of June as CAN's financial administrator in the face of work commitments. Elaine has been an enormously



valuable support to Treasurer Don Babe by setting up the day-to-day invoicing and bill payments.

Richard Barter was appointed in June to run the Road Safety Trust work, in place of Jena Niquidet. Jena's setting up of the work with heavy transport operators and bus companies has given CAN a major credibility boost which will benefit all cyclists.

We are in the process of finding a temporary replacement for Patrick Morgan, who will take leave without pay May-August for an epic cycle tour across Turkey and points east.

Policy work

Our policy work continues, both updating resources and policy positions and providing new directions for our advocacy.

We have approved the *Health and Wellbeing through Cycling Policy*. This puts CAN's policy standpoint within the present Government emphasis on health promotion.

In terms of providing new directions, we are working on:

1. an e-bike policy that we will use in discussions with NZTA and MoT on likely e-bike regulation, and
2. a framework of how all transport infrastructure (roads, cycleways, shared paths, footpaths) users interact with each other constructively. ■

Buy from CAN

Lyneke Onderwater

Support CAN and cycling by buying gear from our website, www.can.org.nz/shop If you don't have internet access, contact us by phone or mail.

Hi-vis backpack cover

Keep your stuff dry and increase your visibility with our best-selling waterproof, incredibly loud yellow hi-vis backpack cover. One size fits all moderate-sized day-packs and panniers and holds tight with two rugged elastic straps and an elasticised hem.

NZ-made with a reflective strip and rear light loop, this cover carries CAN's web address and either 'One Less Car' or 'Think Globally, Cycle Locally' in big friendly letters. Remind those car drivers why they love you! \$30 if you're a member, \$40 if not.

Freedom t-shirts

Our 'Freedom' tee shirt features a 'Freedom' road sign, a coastal image and the CAN logo on the sleeve. It comes in bright orange, blue or red in sizes S, M, L and XL. Female sizes range from 8 to 16; and youth sizes are Youth L (YL) and Youth XL (YXL).

Be quick, because some size/ colour options have already sold out. Reduced to \$15 for members and \$25 for non-members.

High-visibility safety vest

CAN's orange high-visibility safety vest is lightweight and windproof with a mesh back and rear reflective stripe. It has a full length zip for rapid on-road deployment, plus three rear pockets, and carries the slogan 'Think Globally, cycle locally'.

It's made in NZ in sizes XS, S, M, L. The website has a sizing chart.

This vest was tested in extreme protest conditions on the great Auckland Harbour Bridge crossing, and passed with flying colours. Members \$90; non-members \$110.

Spacemaker flag

Need more space? Claim it with the Spacemaker flag, which will set your boundaries and discourage other road users from getting too close.

Its bright orange plastic arm juts out 30 cm from your bike with big round reflectors (front white, rear red) and folds when parked. Brackets for mounting to seat-stay or rear rack. \$20 if you're a member, \$25 if not. ■



can.org.nz/shop
shop@can.org.nz

Supporting Organisations

- Addington Coffee Co-Op
- Abley Transportation Consultants
- Adventure South Ltd
- Auckland Cycle Touring Association
- Bicycle Junction
- Bike Taupo
- Black Seal Imports
- Christchurch City Council
- Cycletech NZ
- Cycle Tour Operators
- NZ Engineering Outcomes
- Gisborne District Council
- Greater Wellington Regional Council
- Green Jersey Cycle Tour Company
- Ground Effect
- Kapiti Coast District Council
- Lincoln University
- Marlborough District Council
- MWH NZ Ltd Rotorua District Council
- Rotorua MTB Club
- Savanna Group Ltd
- Tasman District Council
- Timaru District Council
- ViaStrada
- Waimakariri District Council

Political tailwinds

Patrick Morgan

Political tailwinds from central government are strong, but advocates will need to put pressure on Councils to achieve wins.

That's our key task this year, says CAN project manager Patrick Morgan, after meeting with new Minister of Transport Simon Bridges in February. CAN volunteers Jane Dawson and Alastair Smith were also there to introduce CAN to Mr Bridges, and to discuss his priorities.

“pushing at an open door”

“It felt like we were pushing at an open door,” Patrick said.

CAN expressed support for the Urban Cycleways Programme, and told the Minister, “If you can deliver the Urban Cycleways Programme projects in just 4 years, you'll be the best Minister of Transport that cycling has ever had.” Mr Bridges confirmed his commitment to getting this done.

Also discussed were recommendations of the Safer Cycling Panel and how this might link through to other transport priorities, including the Urban Cycleways spending

- » CAN's 3 focus areas; cycle skills training, Bikes in Schools, e-bikes, mainstream support for cycling (AA, DomPost editorial); and NZ Cycle Trails
- » CAN's vision — not just advocating for people on bikes but for the compelling benefits: health, congestion relief, easier parking, economic benefits, climate change mitigation, and fun. ■

CAN volunteers Jane Dawson and Alastair Smith outside the Beehive

Of medressas, mosques, minarets and mountains: Lynn Sleath bikes in Central Asia

Lynn Sleath

'You're going cycling where?' my friends asked as I prepared for my great adventure. 'Hmm. Central Asia' I replied. I'd given up trying to explain which 'stan' I was visiting. No-one seemed to know where the six 'stans' were anyway, so I kept it simple.

At school I read the poem 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand' by James Elroy Flecker, who first saw the Bosphorus when he worked at the British Consulate in Istanbul. I was magnetised by the historic Silk Road, the great transport route that today invites travellers to the minarets and azure domes of the great cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan.

John and Mandy of Escape Adventures in Takaka specialise in cycle touring in unusual and challenging places. I booked their 12 day mountain bike tour of Kyrgyzstan, based around an anti-clockwise circuit from the capital city, Bishkek.

Central Asia is not easy to get to or to travel around. There's limited cooperation between the ex-Soviet states, with few road or rail links. Few international airlines fly into the region, and local airlines rely on rusting Russian jets. It takes almost two days to get there from NZ. To visit Silk Road cities after the biking tour I added a 3000km dog-leg via Turkey, with a day in Istanbul. An Uzbek company arranged a five day tour of the Silk Road towns. Almost my entire trip would be in the Muslim world of mosques, medressas and minarets.



Top of the pass, day 6

I spent two days in Dubai exploring the narrow streets and souks (covered markets) of Deira, buzzing with small shopkeepers and traders — a contrast with the crazy western glitz of other parts of the city. Along the waterfront were dhows loaded with whiteware bound for the islands of the Persian Gulf. It was the last week of Ramadan, so I had trouble buying meals during the day. After dusk, with the call to worship sounding, I ate at my hotel.

Ten of the twelve cyclists flew from Dubai to Bishkek and had a day to explore the city. I got lost amongst

Cyrillic street signs and hoardings, then bought a lunch of mutton stew and tea for about \$NZ6.

Our tour briefing emphasized that the key feature would be the road surface. The hard-tail MTBs had knobby tyres, but the deep corrugations needed much patience and choice words. Some of us caught rides over bad sections. We crossed three mountain passes at about 3500m, with some sections requiring a walk. There was little traffic.

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Of medressas, mosques, minarets continues

We had four wonderful Community Based Tourism home-stays, two of them in yurts, the traditional portable timber and felt homes of the nomadic rural people. We also spent four nights camping beside streams where our young Escape interpreter Nurai cooked for us. A highlight for me was camping in the Tuura Suu grasslands at 2300 m, with meals and an impromptu evening concert provided by a local family. After watching the sun rise over the mountains we had a late breakfast and several riders took the opportunity to swap bikes for horses.

One night under canvas four bikers suffered vomiting and took the following

morning off. A few of us also got the Silk Road trots, notably myself. A dose of diamide cured this, but the looseness was to make an unfortunate return when I arrived in Uzbekistan. I soon got used to taking precautions—bazaars can be useful when you need emergency underwear.

We spent a rest day at the frontier town of Kochkor where a café provided western meals and we spent our Soms on souvenirs in the bazaars. Escape arranged a presentation of felt manufacture, a curious process that consists of beating wool fibres and dancing on the rolled-up wet material. The outcome is an amazingly resilient product that can be used for clothing and house decoration.

Our last biking day took us down to Lake Issyk Kol, a 100 kilometre stretch of mountain water that never freezes. It felt strange to arrive in hot sun at the sandy lake shore and look up to the snow-covered peaks of the Ala Too that we had just left behind.

To visit my Silk Road Cities after the biking tour, a 3000km dog leg took me to Turkey, with a day in Istanbul, and back to Central Asia.

This looked crazy on the map, as Uzbekistan is next to Kyrgyzstan, However, the Istanbul visit gave

me a chance to explore a much larger Muslim city with a famous history and amazing architecture.

The final travel arrangement was to secure assistance in Uzbekistan, a country that has no links with New Zealand travel agents to book accommodation or travel. An Istanbulkart provided public transport for the day. I was soon trekking through the Grand Bazaar with its rabbit warren of shops. My guidebook warned to be wary of carpet sellers; but I agreed to a demo of Turkish carpets with a cuppa, and bought a small rug. Then, everywhere I went I was asked 'Mister — what did you pay for the rug?'

A highlight for me was camping in the Tuura Suu grasslands at 2300m

I stood with tired families for two hours in the cramped arrival area at Tashkent Airport before getting

clearance. I'd arranged a five day tour of the Silk Road towns with a local company, Advantour. First, I spent a day exploring Tashkent by efficient Soviet-built metro. Every marble-walled metro station is identical, down to the lady dispensing 1 Som tokens from her ticket kiosk and two policemen to check your bags before you enter the platforms. An earthquake in 1966 destroyed the city, which now has few high buildings and wide streets with fast traffic. Its public areas are reminiscent of Paris, and I even found a Parisian café in the Mirobod quarter for lunch. References to Amir Timur, the founder of modern Uzbekistan, are everywhere. My highlight was the Chorsu Bazaar in the old city, with its food hall, bread sellers and general goods traders.

The new Afrosyab express train whisked me from Tashkent to Samarkand at speeds touching 230 kilometres an hour. In Samarkand I was asked to engage in a Muslim ritual involving cutting the hair of a new-born baby, which is supposed to bring good luck. My tour guide Larissa had connections with the Ukraine and expressed strong views about the trouble

there. Because of links formed during the Soviet occupation, Uzbeks can travel freely to Russia.

The three Registan medressas in Samarkand reminded me of the British universities of Oxford and Cambridge, with the student quarters arranged around a quadrangle. The students spend at least ten years here studying Islam in very limited quarters. Since their closure, most medressas have been turned into centres for preserving local trades and skills, and I met painters and wood carvers working on pieces for display. I tried to capture the azure blue tiles of the Shah I Zinda mosques, but no camera can do them justice.

A three hour ride on the Sharq train took me to Bukhara. This was my first chance to view the vast desert area of Uzbekistan that stretches westward towards the Caspian Sea. On arrival I found my

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Of medressas, mosques, minarets continues

way into the old city and got my bearings before watching the sun set at Lyabi Hauz, the town square where the locals walk with their families.

The Amelia Boutique hotel had been lovingly converted from a Jewish synagogue. My guide Noyla had worked as a museum tour guide and had amazing knowledge. She was from neighbouring Tajikistan where the people have darker features. We walked for six hours in 42°C heat before the overnight train trip back to Tashkent. I conversed with my sleeper compartment companion, Akbar, using my limited Russian. He was a truck driver, carrying his week's earnings in a small suitcase. Because of exchange rate problems the local Som currency is mostly acquired on the black market. My US dollars were widely accepted. At my first opportunity to convert I'd naively handed over a \$100 greenback to the money changer, who passed me a huge bundle of 280 notes each worth 1000 Som. I had to carry them discreetly for the next four days.

I spent my last day back in Tashkent on another tour; this time with Zochid, an English teacher and father of two. We discussed politics and his view of Uzbekistan's future. Zochid showed me the symbolic earthquake memorial depicting a family group and commemorating assistance from other Soviet states. Officially, the 7.5 earthquake caused no deaths but displaced about 300,000 people.

I left Tashkent appreciating how hard it must have been for central Asian countries to organise themselves after many years of Soviet rule, replacing the concrete vestiges of the previous era with western-style buildings.

Probably I shall never return to Central Asia. However, at least I know now that it lies between the two great communist powers of Russia and China, that it has Muslim culture and traditions, and that its people are wonderfully open, honest, and warm-hearted. ■