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# NZ's Great Integrated Rides

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# NZ's Great *Integrated* Rides

Research Paper

March 2024

Paul Callister and Heidi O'Callahan



Hāpuawhenua Viaduct, reached from the Old Coach Road, with the modern rail viaduct on the right

## **Abstract**

Aotearoa New Zealand has a superb network of cycle trails. Travelling to these by train is a way to experience the best of Aotearoa's natural beauty, enjoy some healthy recreation, and to do so in style, while feeling good about your carbon choices. Other trails can potentially be reached by coach, and combining coach and train can open up another raft of holiday options.

Trains, supported by coach travel where trains cannot reach, should be at the centre of any low emission tourism strategy. Bikes and trains especially are a perfect mix.

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## NZ's Great *Integrated* Rides

Here's a satisfying holiday idea. It's...

**Comfortable** — *without the stress of driving.*

**Active** — *for a boost to your health.*

**Pleasingly low-carbon** — *for your peace of mind.*

Aotearoa has a network of cycle trails that offers adventure the sustainable way. Whether using an e-bike or leg power alone, the use of fossil fuels while biking is minimal.

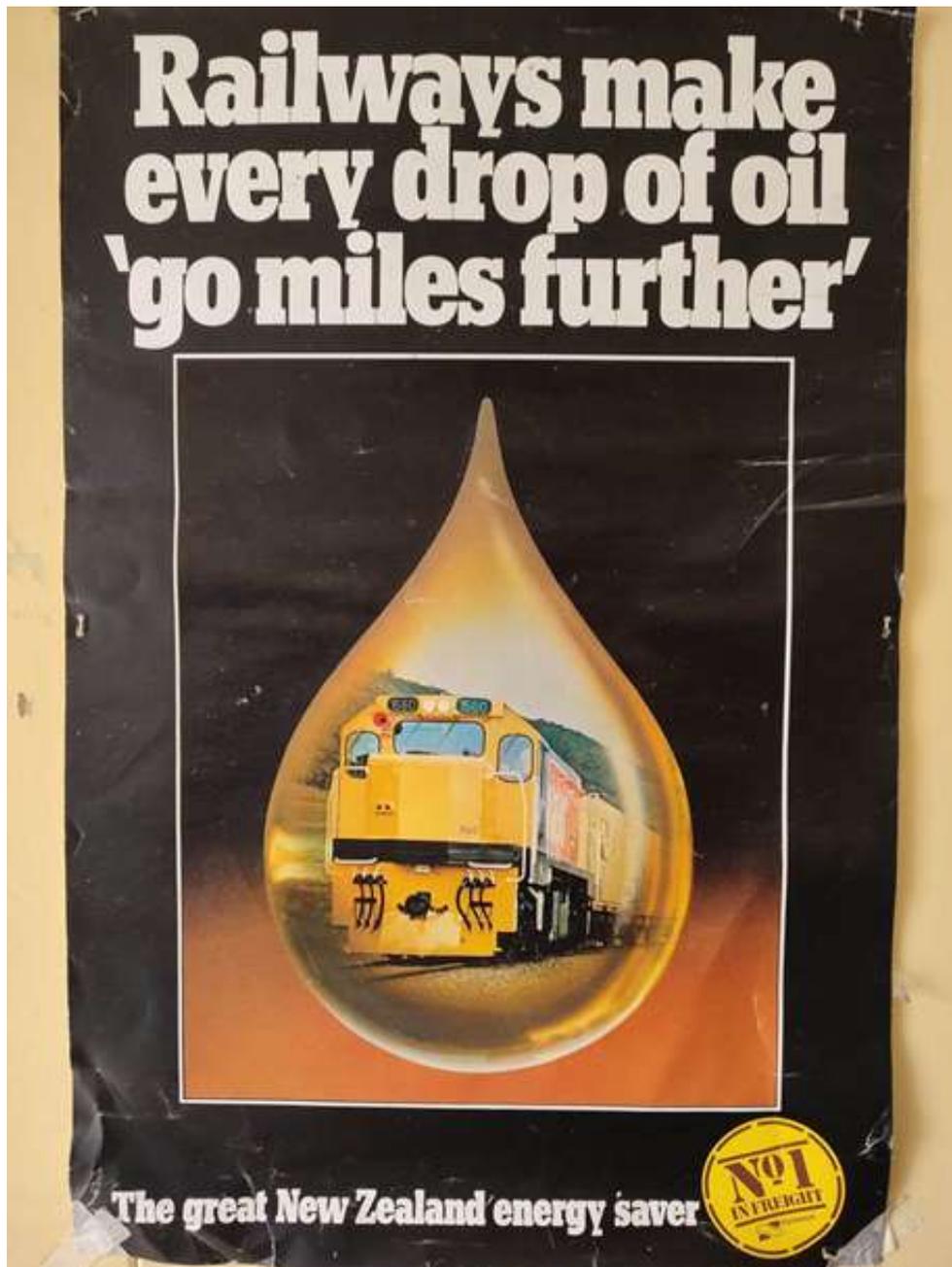
But how do you get there without contributing to climate deterioration?

New Zealanders have some superb options for taking the train right to the cycle trail. It's a way to experience the best of Aotearoa's natural beauty, enjoy some healthy recreation, and do so in style. Other trails can be reached by coach — and combining coach and train can open up another raft of holiday options.

Either way, coach or train, the whole experience will barely nudge your personal carbon footprint. It's a great option for the many New Zealanders who do not own cars, do not drive, or simply want to continue to have fun without compromising their children's future. Furthermore, travelling this way supports the systems that need rapid improvement and scaling up.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Trains and coaches have a very low carbon footprint on a passenger per kilometre basis. Even **ICE** trains and coaches are more efficient than private **electric** vehicles, and electrification of trains and coaches will further improve their emissions profiles. Source: Hannah Ritchie (2023) Which form of transport has the smallest carbon footprint? Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/travel-carbon-footprint>'. The international organisation *Tourism Panel on Climate Change* highlights the benefits of low emission rail travel, particularly if the network runs on renewable electricity <https://tpcc.info/stocktake-report/>



Poster at Ohakune Rail Museum

We like to promote the wonderful opportunities already available to New Zealanders to enjoy the delights of our country in a low-impact way.

However, we are well aware of the barriers. The train will cost you dearly, and the bus has accessibility issues. Neither network is extensive or reliable, so travelling this way can be difficult for many people. This creates a very inequitable situation: travelling by rail or bus imposes way lower costs on society than flying or driving do, but can cost much more and offer less flexibility.

It doesn't have to be this way. After decades of public spending on roading and aviation, it's time to balance the networks, with some serious investment in a national public transport network. A biking holiday in Aotearoa should not have to involve an SUV, an expensive bike rack and a long puff of emissions.

We believe Government-owned KiwiRail should be at the centre of enabling this transition to better options for everyone.<sup>2</sup>

### **Ngā Haerenga New Zealand Cycle Trail network**

Ngā Haerenga was first proposed at a government 'jobs summit' in 2009. The idea was *"to build a network of world-class cycle trails that would not only provide a safe and **sustainable** way to explore New Zealand's special places, but also generate lasting economic, social and **environmental** benefits for surrounding communities"* (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

The Otago Central Rail Trail was an early inspiration for these new bike paths.



Otago Rail Trail. Source: Department of Conservation

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<sup>2</sup> In a time of a climate emergency, the partnership between the Department of Conservation and Air New Zealand to promote Great Walks to the international community works against our goals. A partnership between KiwiRail and Ngā Haerenga seems much more appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nzcycletrail.com/about/the-new-zealand-cycle-trail-story/>

Opened in 2000, it used a former railway to link small rural towns. The bike trail quickly became the second-largest income earner in the area, after farming.



Map of main cycleways. Source: Waka Kotahi

Ngā Haerenga now numbers 23 cycle trails. In addition, there are many other local cycle trails throughout the country, including shared pathways between towns, such as on the Kāpiti Coast, and mountain bike parks.

The local revenue possible from local cycle tourism is already clear, but a perfect marriage between bikes and trains<sup>4</sup> could bring substantial further economic benefits.

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<sup>4</sup> [Bikes and carriage, the perfect marriage \(thefutureisrail.org\)](http://thefutureisrail.org)

## Ohakune as a cycling destination

The benefits of cycle tourism have been recognised in Ohakune, the small central North Island town facing dwindling snowfall. Climate change presents a huge threat to the town's economy, which has relied on income from the skiing industry.

Ohakune has started to diversify its economic base by offering a number of excellent local rides, and is busy building more. Becoming well known is the iconic 15km grade 3 *Old Coach Road*, which links the town with nearby Horopito. Ohakune is also the starting point for the much longer *Mountains to the Sea* cycle trails, both of which end up at Whanganui.



Source: Te Hangaruru

Two trails currently under construction near Ohakune are shown as dashed lines on the map above. The first comes down the mountain from Turoa to Ohakune. The second is a section of *Te Hangaruru* trail, which will link Horopito to Waimarino (National Park).<sup>5</sup> With the *Old Coach Road*, these new trails will connect Turoa, Ohakune, Horopito and Waimarino. There are also plans for a cycleway from Ohakune to Raetihi.

These connections will add to the tourism offering, while also providing more transport options for local people travelling for work, visiting friends, recreation or shopping.

### **Ohakune's Rail Connections**

Both Ohakune and nearby Waimarino have functioning railway stations on the main North Island railway line that links Wellington and Auckland.

The Ngā Haerenga website suggests bikers can come by train, but for most people this is currently unrealistic, as:

- 1 The service is infrequent
- 2 The ticket price is high
- 3 There is inadequate bike capacity on the train if travelling in a small group

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<sup>5</sup> [Te Hangāruru | Mountains to Sea NZ](#)



Staff are helpful when loading bikes, but lifting to this height may still be off-putting

And, although the train can get you to the *start* of the Mountains to Sea trail in Ohakune, there's no train *back* from the end of the trail in Whanganui. These stopped running in 1977.



The infrequent timetable also poses barriers. Not too many years ago, trains ran daily both north and south. This made it possible for groups to meet in

Ohakune at roughly the same time, for a long weekend. Firms with premises in Auckland and Wellington, Hamilton and Palmerston North, had the perfect opportunity to mix a formal meeting with a social weekend get-together.

Today, this isn't practical. The train runs north on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. It runs south Monday, Thursday and Saturday. Meeting up in Ohakune would take people out of the workplace too many days for too little overlap between the groups.

### The cost of a rail trip to Ohakune

A holiday in Ohakune by train should be affordable. Travelling by train imposes starkly lower impacts on society and the environment than driving does:

- minimal impact on the climate, air and water quality,
- low renewals and upkeep costs, and
- much better safety outcomes. This means less tragedy, less traffic trauma, as well as much lower personal and economic costs.

Yet, for a family of two adults and two children with four bikes, the cost (in March 2024) for travelling Auckland to Ohakune return, is **\$1,048**.

#### FARE SUMMARY (NZD)

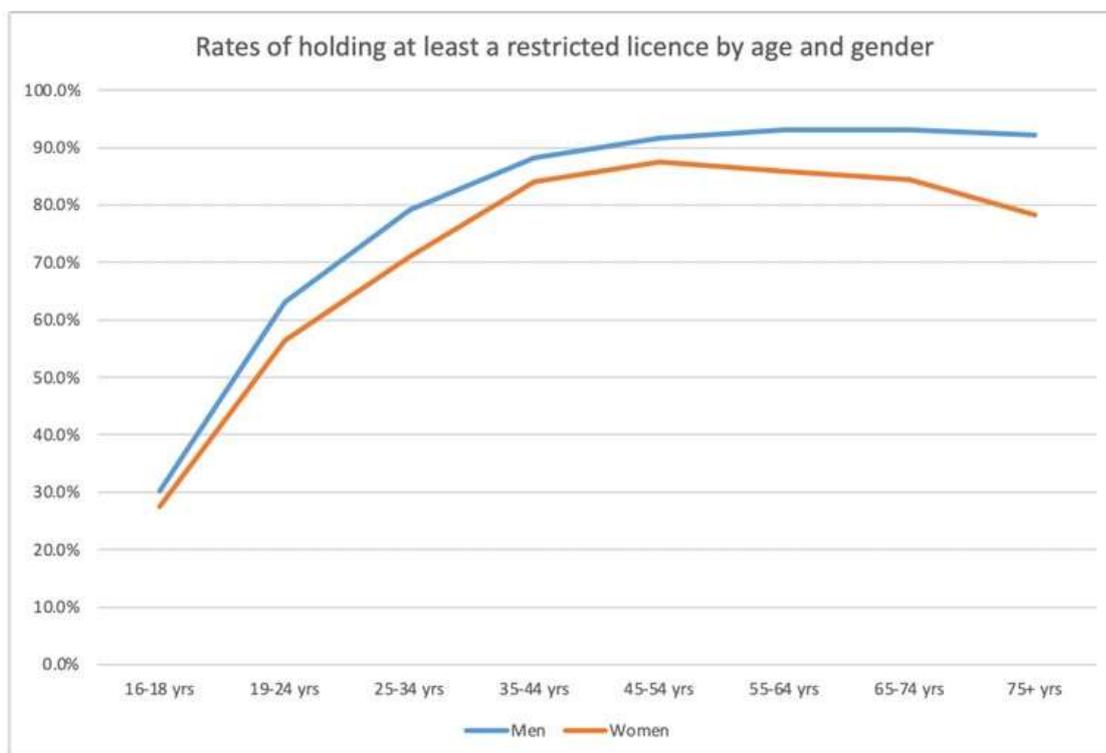
Wellington to Ohakune		NZD \$502
2 adult fares	2 x \$124 adult fares	NZD \$248
2 child fares	2 x \$87 child fares	NZD \$174
4 Bike	\$20 ea	NZD \$80
Ohakune to Wellington		NZD \$546
2 adult fares	2 x \$137 adult fares	NZD \$274
2 child fares	2 x \$96 child fares	NZD \$192
4 Bike	\$20 ea	NZD \$80
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>NZD \$1048</b>

CONTINUE

Most families would put this into the “luxury” category.

Most families would have to drive instead.

Plenty of people don't have that opportunity, and simply miss out on the chance to enjoy our country's beautiful cycle trails. In fact, it has been estimated that over 20% of our population 16 years of age and older do not have driver's licences.<sup>6</sup> This may come as a surprise to many people; lack of a driver's license is several times more common in some demographic groups than in others. For example, in all age groups women are less likely to hold a licence than men. The data also shows that a significant number of young people, many who would appreciate a biking holiday, do not have a licence.

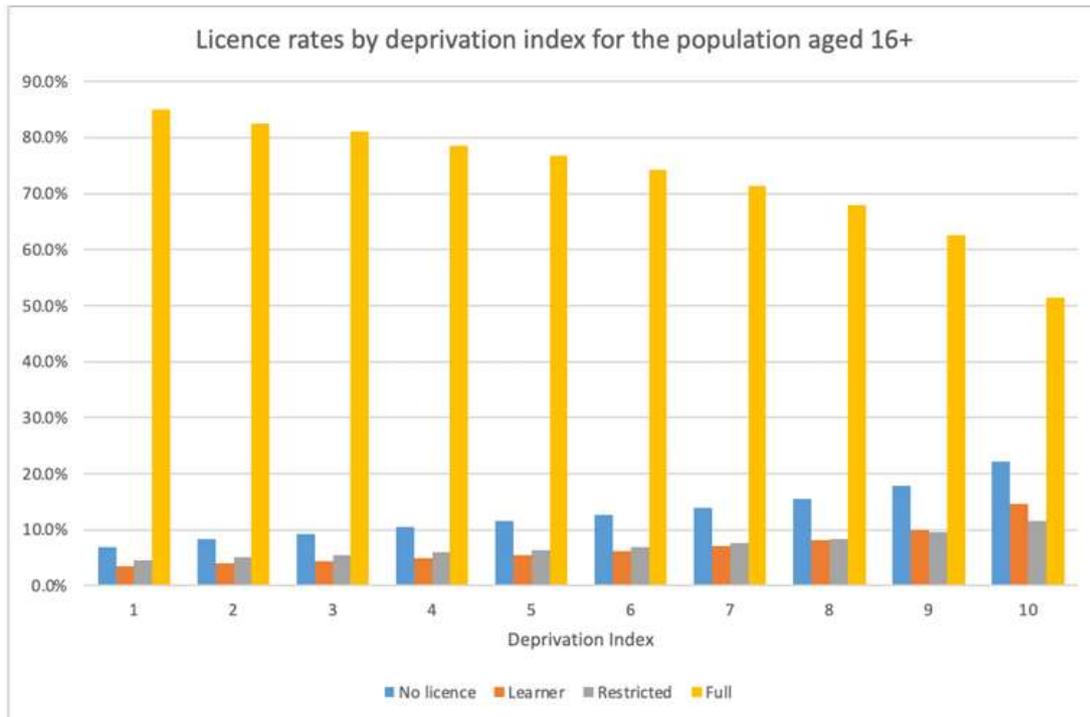


Source: Sin, I (2021) Rates of driver licence holding in Aotearoa New Zealand, Motu Research Note #44, <https://www.motu.nz/assets/Uploads/Motu-Research-note-44-Rate-of-driver-licence-holding-in-Aotearoa-NZ.pdf>

There are also ethnicity and deprivation dimensions to holding a licence. For the least deprived members of the population, over 80% of adults hold a licence. This drops to only a half in the most deprived.

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<sup>6</sup> Sin, I (2021) Rates of driver licence holding in Aotearoa New Zealand, Motu Research Note #44, <https://www.motu.nz/assets/Uploads/Motu-Research-note-44-Rate-of-driver-licence-holding-in-Aotearoa-NZ.pdf>



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In addition, plenty of people who do hold licenses cannot drive because they:

- have started medication or developed medical conditions,
- have no car, or
- are too concerned about the risks on the open road to find a driving holiday relaxing, or even possible.

People with no driver's license, including children, rely on safe paths and public transport for their independent mobility.

### How can we make this work better?

Bike holidays in the central North Island in a low emissions way would be made more possible by:

- 1 Running the Northern Explorer — or the proposed connector train — daily in both directions, north and south.<sup>7</sup>
- 2 Offering affordable fares instead of targeting international tourists.
- 3 Allowing more bikes to be carried, with easy access on and off the train.

<sup>7</sup> North Island Regional Passenger Rail Study, Aug 22.pdf ([ruapehudc.govt.nz](http://ruapehudc.govt.nz))

The bike train running between Toronto and Niagara Falls in Canada provides one model of trains and bikes working well together.<sup>8</sup>



Source: Toronto-Niagara Seasonal GO Train Service (biketrain.ca)

Ohakune is not the only location that would benefit from better integration of bikes and trains.

### **Waikato - Te Awa River Ride and the Waikato River Trails**

The 65km Te Awa River Ride is advertised as *“one of the most scenic cycling and walking trails in New Zealand.”*<sup>9</sup>

*“Winding between the towns of Ngāruawāhia, Hamilton, Tamahere, Cambridge and through to Lake Karapiro, the multipurpose trail allows for a comfortable multi-day ride.”*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.biketrain.ca/toronto-niagara>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.te-awa.org.nz/>



Source: <https://www.te-awa.org.nz/trail-map/>

From Karapiro (at the southern end), the trail connects to the Waikato River Trails, which are part of the Ngā Haerenga National Cycle Trails.



Source: <https://www.te-awa.org.nz/>

Aucklanders can ride these trails without a high travel cost, because getting to Hamilton by Te Huia is much more affordable than by the Northern Explorer. Ideally, though, Te Huia would stop at Ngāruawāhia. Also, in a vision set out by Greater Auckland, rapid passenger rail would go as far as Cambridge.<sup>10</sup>

### **Rotorua rides - getting there by train**

Rotorua is a popular tourist town and is an easy distance from Hamilton, Tauranga and Auckland.

It offers many biking opportunities.



Source: <https://www.nzcycletrail.com/find-your-ride/23-great-rides/whakarewarewa-forest-loop/>

The Whakarewarewa Forest Loop is one of the 23 Ngā Haerenga great rides.<sup>11</sup>

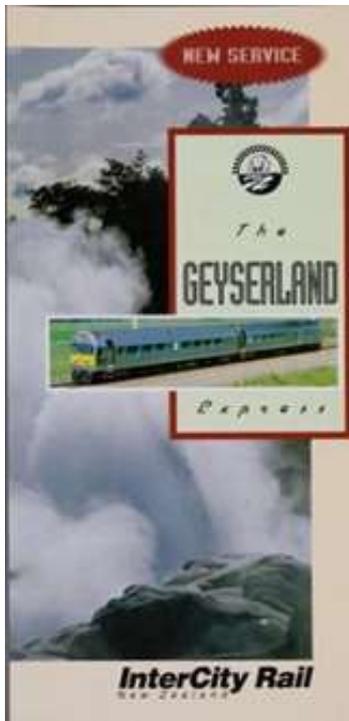
*“The world-renowned network of approximately 200 kilometres of mountain bike trails in Whakarewarewa Forest consists of expertly built trails crafted to suit everyone, from absolute beginners (there’s even a kids’ loop, great for working out any pre-ride wobbles) through to extreme downhill competitors, and for any age and fitness level.”*

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.greaterauckland.org.nz/regional-rapid-rail/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nzcycletrail.com/find-your-ride/23-great-rides/whakarewarewa-forest-loop/>

It was possible to travel to Rotorua by train, but the Geyserland Express was cancelled in 2001. Bringing trains back to Rotorua would support local residents, wider environmental goals for tourism, and connect people and their bikes to these great trails.



Source: Motat

### **Hawkes Bay - exploring wineries by bike**

*“Hawke’s Bay Trails are also part of Ngā Herenga’s 23 Great Rides of New Zealand and one of the most popular. It’s known for its beautiful scenery, relaxed cycling, world-class wine, great hospitality, rich cultural history and numerous outdoor activities.”<sup>12</sup>*

There was once a train from Wellington to Napier. But like other passenger trains in Aotearoa this was stopped in 2001. There is now a campaign to bring back the Bay Express.<sup>13</sup> Again, this would be an ideal service to allow cycling and train travel to be combined.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.hbtrails.nz/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://baybuzz.co.nz/bringing-back-the-bay-express/>



Source: John Bovis

### **The Timber Trail - reviving an old station**

The usual starting and end point of the Timber Trail is Ongarue. Currently, riders park their cars there, and they and their bikes are taken by shuttle van to the start of the track.

Yet, Ongarue could offer much more, as it has an abandoned station on the main line between Auckland and Wellington.

This could be a stop for a Connector train, even if it only stops when there is demand. The key would be to ensure it is designed to carry many bikes.



Source: Wikipedia

## The South Island

Aside from the tourist trains linking Picton with Christchurch and Christchurch with Greymouth, the South Island no longer has passenger rail. The Tranz Alpine service is listed on the Ngā Haerenga New Zealand Cycle Trail website as a way to bring bikes to the West Coast Wilderness Trail. However, this is an expensive train with limited bike carrying capacity.

The towns and cities south of Christchurch could once again be connected by train, with opportunities for combining bike and train travel. Even Queenstown could be reached with a rail and ferry link.

Bringing back passenger rail across Aotearoa would open up many opportunities to connect with cycleways across the country.

## Vision – Completed National Network By 2040's



A quality high frequent core network of fast **(Red)** trains supplemented by electrified NI regional connectors **(solid Black)**. Complimented by longer distance trains **(Grey)** spanning the entire nation progressively by 2040's

66

Heriot-Edievale.com

### Long distance coaches

Coaches are the perfect partner to rail, reaching places outside of the rail network.

Unfortunately, carrying bikes on coaches is a very hit and miss business in New Zealand — mainly because InterCity's bikes policy is not followed by all its drivers, so success relies on the bus driver's attitude towards bikes. Sometimes this is excellent; sometimes it is not. It's currently a difficult way to plan cycling trips.

Europe shows what is possible. There are also other ways to carry bikes such as trailers for buses.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> How to improve coach travel in New Zealand is discussed in more detail in this article <https://www.greatauckland.org.nz/2020/04/03/better-long-distance-coaches-design-regulation-and-community-public-health/>



Source: <https://global.flixbus.com/>

### **A transition to low impact tourism**

Trains, supported by coach travel where trains cannot reach, should be at the centre of any low emission tourism strategy. Bikes and trains especially are a perfect mix. Yet, within the many reports talking about ‘sustainable’ or ‘regenerative’ tourism, passenger trains and long-distance coaches barely get a mention.

KiwiRail is overtly focused on providing train travel for overseas tourists, with advertising and high prices to match:<sup>15</sup>

*“Great Journeys New Zealand is set on a trajectory of growth, ensuring their tourism business thrives and continues to enchant travellers from around the world.”*

This encourages international travel, creating an outsized effect on climate change. It seems odd for a government-owned entity’s actions to conflict

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<sup>15</sup> [Promoting the Great Journeys of New Zealand - 90 Seconds](#)

directly with the country's environmental and social goals. The policy certainly doesn't serve New Zealanders, current nor future.

KiwiRail could be playing a major role in the transition to low emission tourism and to a more accessible transport system. We encourage them to reflect on the wider benefits of making this pivot now.

### **Of course, tourism is just one part of the market**

Tourism has too often led to a degradation of the local environment while providing few benefits for local communities beyond a few low-wage jobs.

These Great *Integrated* Rides could turn this around. Affordable, reliable and frequent train and coach travel, along with more local safe biking paths, would bring freedom of mobility to local communities. It's an ideal way to improve the wellbeing of all New Zealanders equitably.

A holiday, a workout, a climate solution.

And a transport transformation.