



# Riding New Zealand's Rugged Backcountry

By Jim Shields

*Lush grass  
valleys and crystal  
clear lakes give way  
to stunning peaks  
and ridges on New  
Zealand's South  
Island.*



C

latter clatter clatter!  
I jerked awake in my  
sleeping bag - "What  
was that and where  
the Hell am I"?

Coming awake I realized that this was the first day of a ride from Lake Tekapo 400 Kms to Waitohi Downs Station near Hawarden in Nth Canterbury, New Zealand. 15 of us from all over New Zealand and the USA, piled out of bed and joined Lawrie and Jenny O'Carroll and Yvonne Schuerpf in the kitchen of the sheep shearers quarters at Mt Gerald Station, Tekapo. The fire was crackling and a hot cup of tea was already brewed, and just as well, as an overnight snowfall had colored the tops of the hills and the air felt brand new and straight out of the fridge! Looking through the trees up to the cattle yards, we could see the horses eating their chaff for breakfast.

Lawrie and Jenny O'Carroll are the owners of Waitohi Downs, home of Alpine Horse Safaris. Both Lawrie and Jenny have been involved with horses all their lives, and each contribute different parts of their knowledge to the smooth running of the safaris. In addition to the work on the farm, Lawrie cares for and trains the horses to make them a pleasure for people to ride, while Jenny concentrates on keeping the business side going and cooking and baking to feed those hungry mouths once the day's riding is finished.

In 1992, they launched Alpine Horse Safaris, taking guests away for rides ranging from two hours to 12 days. Lawrie's in depth knowledge and experience of the area, gained from working throughout Canterbury, has proved invaluable for the longer safaris and Jenny's wonderful cooking has kept the guests full of energy at all times.

Together they have over 80 years of experience of breaking, riding, training and packing horses. Their unequalled knowledge of the area and understanding of horses has been a great asset in guaranteeing guests the 'Ultimate Ride' on a safe and suitable mount.

This trip was an accidental fulfillment of a long held dream to wander the back country of New Zealand's South Island. Raised on a farm in Murchison's backblocks and having spent most of a lifetime wandering bush covered hills here, in British Columbia, and Washington State as a logger, I finally had the chance to scratch this itch and see this country I had heard about from herders, hunters, fishermen and hikers. I'm no kid, but at 63 I wasn't the oldest make believe cowboy on this trip. Sandy, a grandmother from Illinois, took the honors at 65 years young and Nelson and Basil also headed me by a year or two.

With breakfast over, we rolled our swags, sleeping bags and clothes tightly and into canvas bags to go on one of the packhorses. That done we joined in to help saddle our horses, the packhorses, to weigh the swags and match them for loading, and then hoisting them onto the pack saddles. Lawrie and Yvonne kept a good eye on us and on this first morning patiently explained the finer points of why the load needed to be balanced - so it would stay even for the horse's benefit, and not cause sore backs. Jenny had packed our food and drink into the special boxes Lawrie had designed, and we weighed them also and then onto the packhorses they went, to hang on hooks and be strapped down.

We mounted our horses and settled into our comfortable stock saddles as the sun came through the clouds, heading up the slopes and ridges towards



*The horses are in excellent condition to get riders up steep slopes.*

*It's 400 Kms from Lake Tekapo to Waitohi Downs Station near Hawarden in Nth Canterbury, New Zealand.  
Image by NASA*



*The packhorses get some grazing in during a break.*

*Steep ridges are the only way to get down to the valley floor.*



Stag saddle, some 5000 vertical feet above us. Alpine Horse Safaris doesn't operate "Horsie rides." They are in the Adventure category! A lot of the ride follows stock trails, but they also ride across native country, freelancing their way up ridges and trekking crosscountry to join up the wild with the semi-civilized. Lawrie has worked as a herder on many of the properties we would ride over, and knows the owners personally. He would stop at appropriate times to give a comprehensive historical and geographical and topical account of where we were and what we were looking at. This made for a really unique part of our ride.

To say that I felt like a teenager as I rode "Rimu," my horse, was only half of it. At the end of this 11 day ride I would have every confidence in these big gentle giants of horses. I would trust them as

we crossed some of the major rivers, as we climbed shingle slopes or descended steep pitches, clambering up and out of rivers or zigzagging up steep snowgrass slopes. These horses are athletes with long free strides that eat up the kilometres effortlessly without needing to break into a walk. For me, it was a thrill a minute as we crested ridges to unveil great mountain basins with views for 20 miles down to Lake Tekapo. We rode up the Godley river, the McCauley river, across to the hills of Godley Peaks Station, Lilleybank Station, and Mt Gerald Station and it wasn't even lunch time!

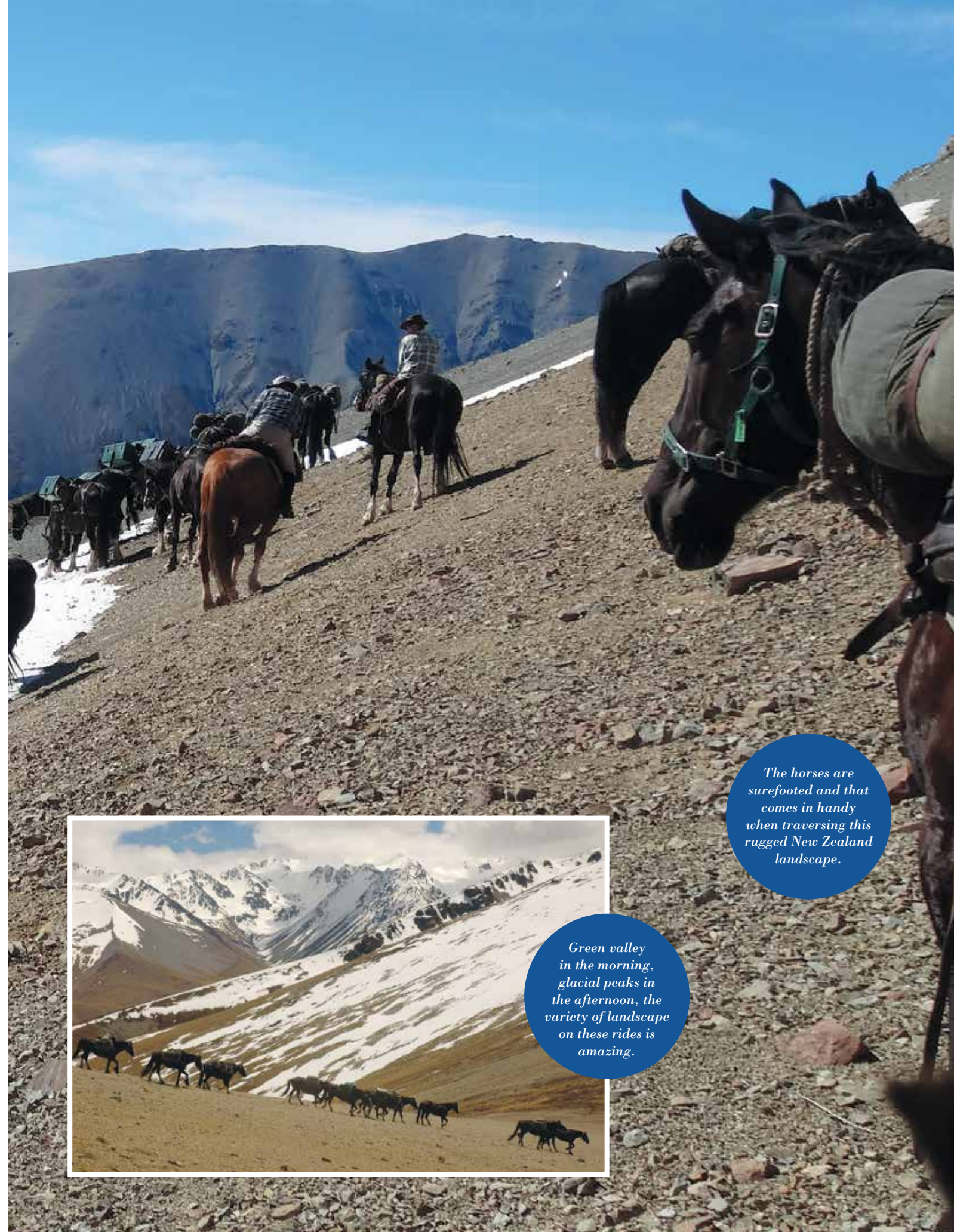
We crossed Stag Saddle in the snow, headed down to Royal Hut (once visited by Prince Charles and Princess Anne), and stopped for lunch and a stretch of the legs. Then it was back in the saddle and onward over Bullock Bow Saddle and down to Felt Hut, nestled in the native

bush right beside a rushing little creek with the freshest water you ever washed your face in!! Felt Hut is a herders hut, but only had eight bunks, so we pitched a couple of tents while Jenny cooked dinner over an open fire like our forefathers did. We ate, told stories, and then crawled into my sleeping bag where I slept like a baby!

Alpine Horse Safaris breed their horses specifically for what they do. All of them are interchangeable and can be used as stock horses on Waitohi Downs Station, herding sheep and cattle. The younger horses are first used as packhorses, and then, as they prove their reliability, they are ridden. The question mark is the potential rider, so Lawrie and Yvonne ask for honesty in filling out their pre-ride application-form in order to know how much experience each rider has and how much weight they carry.

They want you to enjoy the ride and be safe and they want the horse to enjoy it too! They do a splendid job of matching up rider to horse and as we rode along, Yvonne and Lawrie would gently coach us "greenhorns." Not only do they coach us as we ride, Yvonne also did a comprehensive briefing about safety before we left. She told us to watch out for the horses back feet and how to handle your horse on the trail. They explained their satellite phone and tried to make every one of us feel part of the team. Lawrie has a ton of experience in the back country but this is mountain country and there is a big weather factor, so they try to make every one aware. "Stay on the horse and the horse will bring you through," said Lawrie. It was good advice.

The Rangitata was our first river crossing. Lawrie explained what we were to do and then crossed first to find the easiest way through the river so there was no need to get our feet wet if we



*The horses are surefooted and that comes in handy when traversing this rugged New Zealand landscape.*

*Green valley in the morning, glacial peaks in the afternoon, the variety of landscape on these rides is amazing.*



*A break in the snow before continuing onto the ridge.*



*The views are breathtaking as you ride between mountains*

didn't have to. All the horses are big, strong and very dependable in the rivers, but it is still exciting crossing them. I never got tired of crossing those clear, cold, southern rivers!

Another highlight of this trip was when we rode into bush country and the native birds could be seen flitting from tree to tree. Fantails, tuis, bellbirds, bush robins and many more delighted us with their markings and callings. We even heard a kea at Manuka Point Station. Deer, wild pigs, hares and rabbits, were all seen as well on this stretch of the trip.

An expected pleasure was how the camaraderie of the group strengthened as the days passed, and in most places you could ride side by side and spend time talking with everyone as we rode. At the end of the days ride, after unsaddling and unpacking, there would come the time for pouring a wine, popping a beer, or sipping hot billy tea. Then the stories would flow, the jokes would be cracked, and the diversity of backgrounds, languages and slang, led to some fascinating discussions and insights into your companions - and yourself!

As I have been on three of the longer "Safaris," I feel I can enthusiastically endorse the adventure rides from Alpine Horse Safaris. They are not designed for someone who wants to canter around the flats in a tweed jacket and jodphurs, but for those adults who want to see some unspoiled mountain and river valley scenery, from the back of a capable horse, and be able to camp amongst the native bush and listen for bird calls in the morning. Most people tend to put on a little weight on this adventure-you're not going to go hungry, in fact, you might even pick up some recipes for particular goodies.

I thoroughly enjoyed the Tekapo Ride, it was country I particularly wanted to see and I was delighted with it. It's probably the most challenging ride with some longer days, -steeper climbs, and more cross country riding than the other trips. The Tekapo Ride is not for the faint-hearted.

Another ride option is the Magdalene Hope Kiwi ride, taking you through more native bush, with smaller rivers and really delightful scenery. With more valleys and wide expanses of country, the ride is easier going while still having parts to extend and challenge you. There is also a great swimming pool in the Hope River.

I rode with a great group of experienced riders on the inaugural Clarence Bluff Ride and really enjoyed it. You'll experience quite different country following the Clarence, with lots of river crossings, some ridges to climb in order to dodge the gorges, and historical stations to canter through with that last beautiful ride down from the ridge to Bluff Station, with the Pacific Ocean disappearing over the horizon! This is an easier ride than the other two, with accommodations a little more civilized, real hot showers, and shorter days with no stress, no phones, and no problems.

One warning however; these rides are habit forming and you'll want to come back and experience the other rides. You'll also form friendships with the people you ride with, sitting around the fire drinking coffee and beer, and telling horse stories 'till midnight. You have been warned!

For more information on adventure rides in New Zealand, visit [www.alpinehorse.co.nz](http://www.alpinehorse.co.nz), email - [alpinehorse@amuri.net](mailto:alpinehorse@amuri.net)



*New Zealand is truly a magical place to experience from the back of a sturdy horse.*