

For my Dad, Charles William Dennis Mitchell, born in 1920, who rode and raced a Reynolds 531 framed, fixed-wheel single speed, and saw his first mountain bikers riding the jungle trails of Burma in WW II. He still rides his mountain bike.

MOUNTAIN BIKING NORTH

34 GREAT RIDES IN NEW ZEALAND'S NORTH ISLAND

Text and photographs by Dave Mitchell
Maps by Geographx

craig potton publishing



A wild sky on the Old Coast Road, near Wellington

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I want to acknowledge those enlightened members of the Department of Conservation who see mountain biking as a legitimate recreation in our national parks, forest parks, recreation reserves and the vast public lands we all own. They have built new tracks and upgraded old ones for us to enjoy.

I would also like to acknowledge the New Zealand Cycleway Project, which has already created some great cycle trails and will eventually add hundreds of kilometres of riding to the national trail network. Thanks to all the local volunteers, councils and clubs who have raised funds and participated in track building and maintenance around the country. I also want to thank the Ground Effect crew

for creating a track-building slush fund and for providing encouragement and advice.

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Forgive me for any errors, omissions and misdirections, and please inform the publisher so that corrections can be made to future editions.

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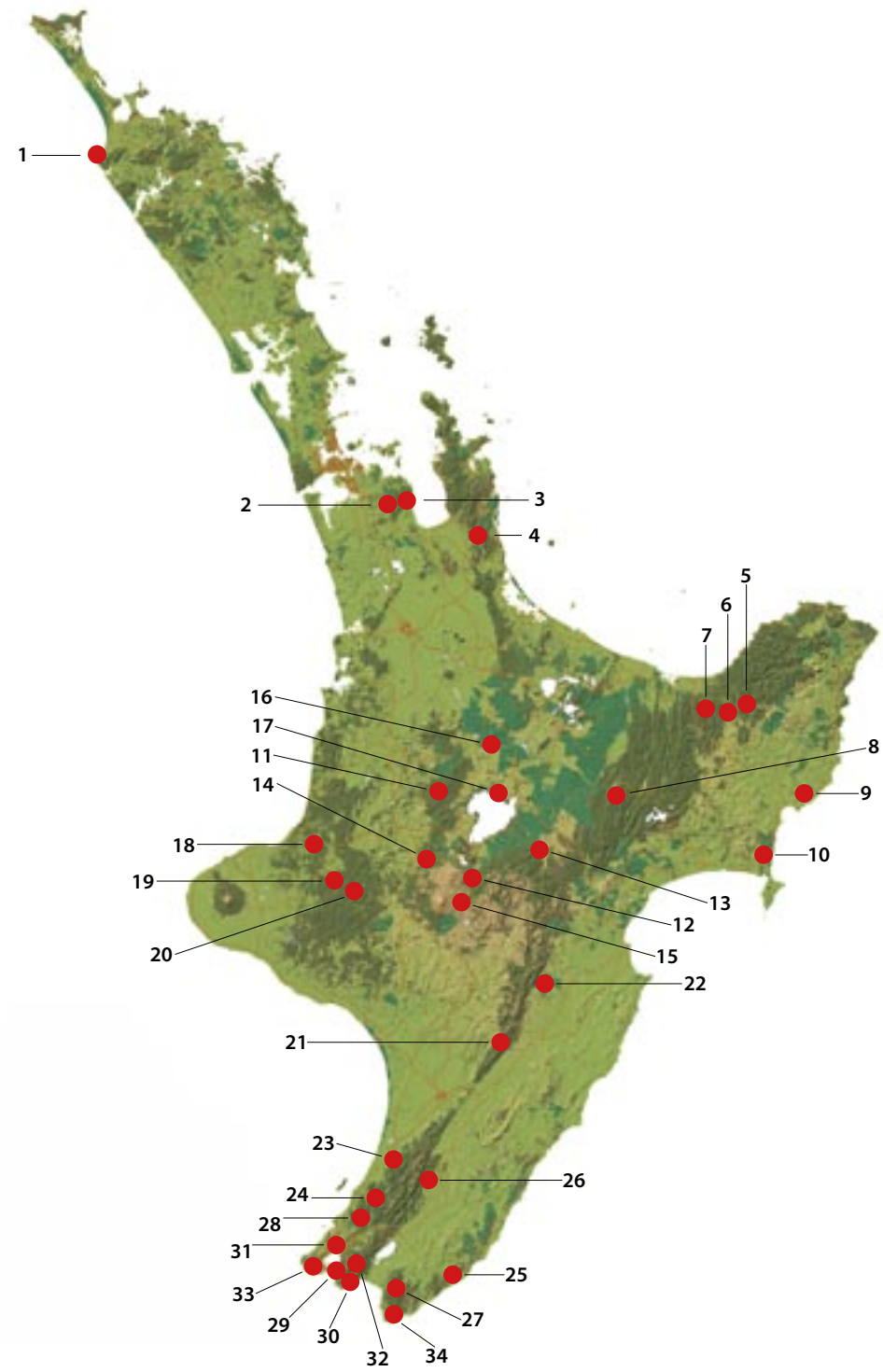
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INTRODUCTION

The North Island is a great place to mountain bike. Primeval jungle covers much of its squat mountain ranges, with tall podocarps towering above the lower canopy, and a huge variety of ferns and broadleaves along the tracks and trails. The warm climate and regular rainfall sustain plants and birds found nowhere else on the planet. The rugged beauty of the coastline contrasts with open farmland in the east and west, while the massive volcanoes of Tongariro and Egmont national parks dominate the central region. Geothermal activity has created the lakes around Taupo and Rotorua, along with hot pools, springs and geysers. North of Auckland lies kauri country and the winterless Tai Tokerau, where miles of sandy beaches stretch to the very tip of New Zealand.

In the mid 1980s mountain bikes became yet another piece of recreational equipment introduced to New Zealand. Many of the early bikes, resplendent with carriers and pannier bags, were lugged over by American tourists and merely used to cycle-tour New Zealand, based on a perception that we had a rough and ready second-world roading system. Instead they found a network of roads more suited to European touring bicycles or cyclocross mounts. When their owners left the country, most of these bikes were traded or sold into the hands of Kiwis looking for a faster and more efficient way into the back country.

This was by no means the first time pioneering Kiwis had used fat-tyred bicycles in the backblocks of New Zealand. Indeed there are stories of adventurous cyclists piloting penny-farthings on little more than goat tracks along the South Island's wild and rugged West Coast in the late 1800s. The many cycling clubs that thrived around the turn of the nineteenth century had a history of epic trips on rugged tracks and trails, which at the time made up much of the country's roading network.

The specialised mountain bike provided a strong frame of chromoly steel and a group of components that could take the rough and tumble of off-road riding. They could climb steep hills and descend them without the fear of brake fade or failure, broken forks or bent frames—a perfect recipe for long distance trips into the unknown with the possibility of returning in one piece.

They have evolved rapidly to become lighter, stronger, suspended and more accessible to the average rider. They

float along riverbeds, swoon sweet single track, descend huge mountains and climb some of the steepest tracks you could imagine. But let's not forget it takes a rider to push things along, and many of us rose to the challenge and still keep it going to this day.

Alexei Sayle once said 'They are the most efficient form of movement on the surface of the planet', and I guess he's got a point. In fact some experts say it is the most efficient machine ever invented, returning a calorific equivalent of 3000 miles per gallon, in automotive terms. They are a stand up, sit down, walking, running and tramping machine. Hopefully this book will inspire you to turn the pedals and explore New Zealand on your mountain bike, whether it be local tracks or far-flung ones in the remotest part of the high country. Their magical ability to amplify one's physical efforts still amazes me after all these years.

Length and Difficulty

A few of the rides in this book are downright hard and gnarly, requiring a high level of skill and fitness, but most are well within the realms of the average rider. Even the hard ones can be broken down into manageable chunks so you can still enjoy them. They will build stamina and moral fibre, expand your horizons and hopefully help you appreciate what a wonderful place and time we live in.

Weather is the most important factor to consider for any trip, and New Zealand seems to have very variable weather at any time of year. The cornerstone of any ride is to book fine weather with light winds, maybe even a tail wind for

the returning leg. River crossings can be just as dangerous for mountain bikers as they are for trampers; soft snow will stop you dead, and strong winds can sometimes make riding impossible, especially on the tops.

Maps and Navigation

The Department of Conservation (DOC) as well as regional and local councils produce some excellent pamphlets on mountain biking areas. From my experience they provide good general information but you will still need a New Zealand topo map to navigate your way in detail. This is especially important in the back country, as pre-ride planning with topo maps can give you a good indication of the terrain, river crossings, alternate tracks and expected distance and climbing. I take a GPS and compass, and am regularly surprised that where I thought I was on the map was not where the GPS indicated. A GPS can get you out of trouble when the clouds roll in, but remember, it is electronic and can fail at the drop of a hat.

Huts

New Zealand's hut network is ideal for overnight mountain bike trips. Without huts, the tents, sleeping mats and extra paraphernalia required for a night out make biking so much harder and less accessible. To arrive at a hut with a lightweight sleeping bag and extra food is pure pleasure in comparison, and opens up all sorts of riding possibilities. Treat huts as if you own them, and make room for others as if they own them. Carry out all your rubbish and leave them as you would like to find them. Buy the appropriate hut tickets and expect to pay for private huts.

Water, Footprint and Responsibility

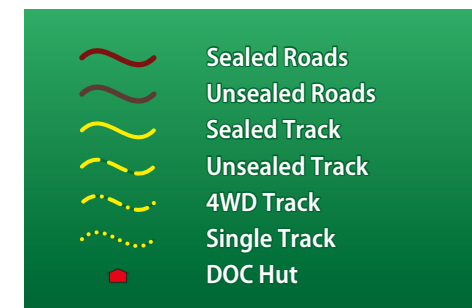
Most New Zealand streams and rivers provide safe drinking water, just avoid those in farm country that don't come from a bush gully or the high tops. When doing a tops trip carry adequate water and pre-plan for the fill up points along the way using your topo map. Leave only tyre tracks, and take only air, water, memories and digital images. Ask permission to ride on private land. Most landowners are more than willing to share their back country if it doesn't interfere with their day to day farming. Leave all gates as you find them and don't run stock.

Safety and Equipment

The key to survival and having a great trip is firstly preparation, followed by fitness and equipment. Your body, like your bike, should be well maintained and fit for the purpose. The ride should be planned and the weather gods and oracles consulted, and their predictions duly noted and acted upon. Gear taken should match the conditions and expected terrain. Plans B, C and D will give you alternative options to head for the best weather and riding conditions with less pressure and more pleasure. Pick your riding buddies accordingly. Have fun and ride hard, but don't be shy about turning back if conditions make it necessary.

Grading

- 1 Flat and relatively smooth, suitable for those starting out.
- 2 Mainly flat, with short gradual climbs that require some fitness and skill.
- 3 More challenging climbs and terrain requiring a medium level of fitness and skill.
- 4 Challenging climbs, descents and technical riding requiring a good level of skill and fitness. May involve some bike carrying.
- 5 Gnarly and long climbs with challenging descents and technical riding requiring a high level of skill and fitness. Some bike carrying required.



TAUROA PENINSULA TRAIL

NORTHLAND

Fourteen kilometres west of Kaitaia at the southern end of Ninety Mile Beach sits the town of Ahipara, the surf-casting capital of New Zealand, which has a long history of Maori settlement. Ahipara means 'Sacred Fire' and is in the tribal area of the Te Rarawa people, who are descendants of the people who migrated across the Pacific in the waka Tinana. By the late 1800s the town had over 1000 residents, mainly Dalmatian immigrants who were attracted by the kauri gum fields and the high price gum fetched for commercial varnishes and linoleum.



The Tauroa Peninsula Trail, also known as the Tutu Trail or Crunchy Trail, circumnavigates the Tauroa Peninsula, but the coastal section can only be ridden three hours either side of low tide. The ride starts from Ahipara and crosses Wairoa Stream on Foreshore Road, heading west around the long curve of Ahipara Bay. You then climb steeply and cross Pukerua Creek continuing up to a Y intersection. Take the left track onto the metalised Gumfields Road (which may not be signposted) and climb up into the gum fields. There are excellent views north up the long stretch of Ninety Mile Beach to Cape Reinga.

Continue down this well-worn gravel road for a few kilometres to a large corrugated iron building and a gum field museum. This is all that remains of a once thriving community, at one time numbering over a thousand gum diggers, who supported three hotels and a number of shops. Check out the museum and ask about the beach access and track condition.

The track starts just after these buildings and wanders west over a wide 200-metre-high plateau of stunted manuka to the sea. It's a very rough, rocky and sandy 4WD track that has weathered down to bedrock for most of the way. After 3 kilometres a short side track climbs north to a strategic look-out with commanding views across the extensive sand hills to the coast. Green pockets of regenerating native bush thrive along the streamways, contrasting with the white sand.

The main track now climbs steeply next to a row of gnarly old-man pine trees to the edge of the dunes. From the end of the track a rocky outcrop overlooks the descent down

the face of a dune to a long line of waves breaking along the beach. Find a route between the Waitaha and Tanutanu streams, but aim for the more northerly Tanutanu Stream mouth. There is usually a set of quad bike tracks to follow.

Push or carry your bike down the dunes if the integrity and long life of your drive train is important to you. If you have the tides right, the lower section is rideable on the hard-packed sand of the beach, and with a bit of luck the prevailing wind will help push you up the coast. Beyond Okura Creek rocky outcrops extend as shallow shelves into the sea, with the outgoing tide leaving many colourful rock pools behind.

Lighthouse 62 is perched on a limestone bluff just before the first of dozens of baches comes into view. Some of these are the original huts that have served generations of seaweed pickers, who collected agar seaweed from the rocks and kauri gum washed up by the sea. There are some short sections where you may have to push your way through the soft sand as you head for Tauroa Point, where Ninety Mile Beach and Ahipara come back into view. The rocky outcrops continue to Shipwreck Bay, where one of its victims is still visible at low tide. From the bay continue around Te Angaanga Beach and carry your bike over a large rocky outcrop at its eastern point. On the far side you can ride the lower end of Ninety Mile Beach back to the Ahipara township. They have great ice creams at the dairy and there's a good motor camp at the north end of town.



On the edge of the dunes before the sandy descent to the beach



Encountering the first of the Peninsula's baches

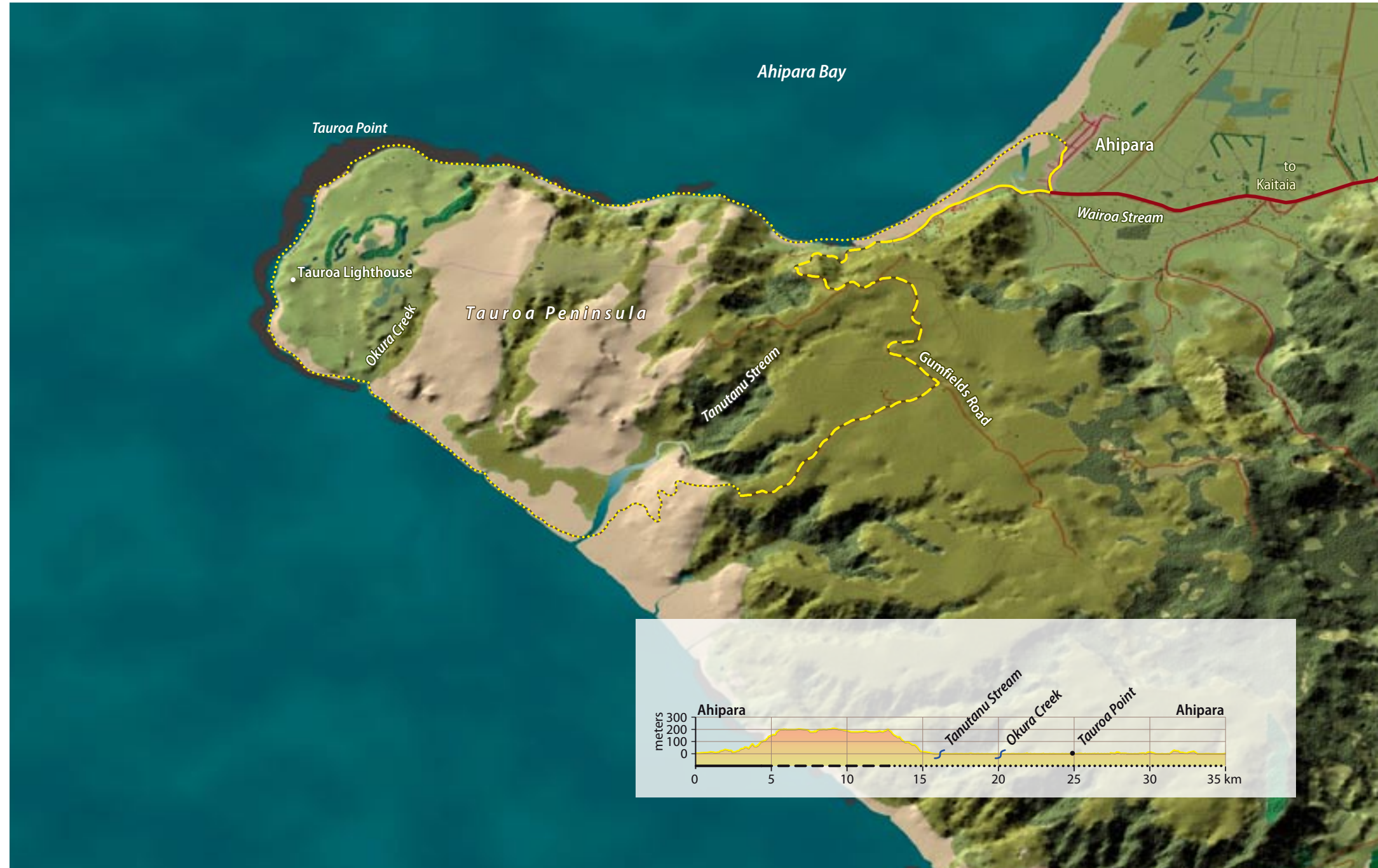
Map: AV25 Tauroa Peninsula

Distance: 35 km

Climbing: 350 metres

Grade: 2-3

Notes: Check tide tables as the coastal section can only be ridden three hours either side of low tide.



MANGATAWHIRI–MOUMOUKAI TRACKS

HUNUA RANGES

Five large reservoirs and dams have been built in the Hunua Ranges, with another five in the Waitakere Ranges west of Auckland. Together they form an integral part of the greater Auckland water supply network. Their vast catchments were initially set aside to preserve water quality, but soon became important recreational reserves. The first were built in the early 1960s, with additions and improvements added as Auckland water demands increased.



Circling around the Upper Mangatawhiri Campground are the Mangatawhiri Challenge Track, the Mangatawhiri River Track and the Moumoukai Farm Track. They can be easily connected to form a challenging day ride. To get there, head to Hunua, which is approximately 10 kilometres south of Clevedon or 11 kilometres east of Papakura City. Turn east off Hunua Road 5 kilometres south of Hunua onto Moumoukai Road. This narrow sealed road soon turns to gravel and climbs to the park entrance. Descend carefully to the Upper Mangatawhiri Campground. This is an excellent spot below the dam, with the campsite in a large, open paddock edged by a stream and tall, shady manuka trees.

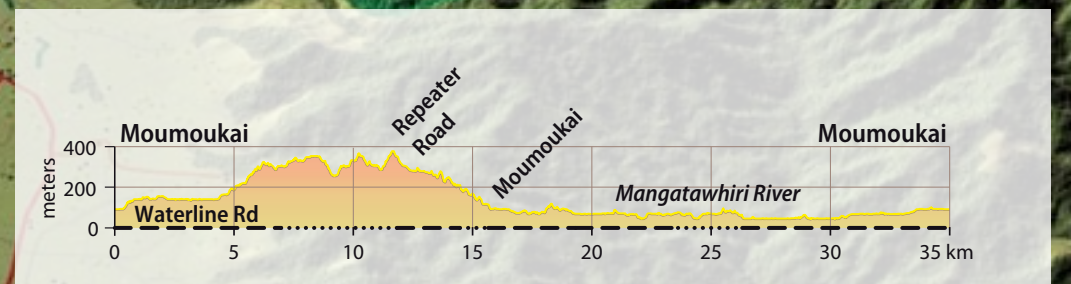
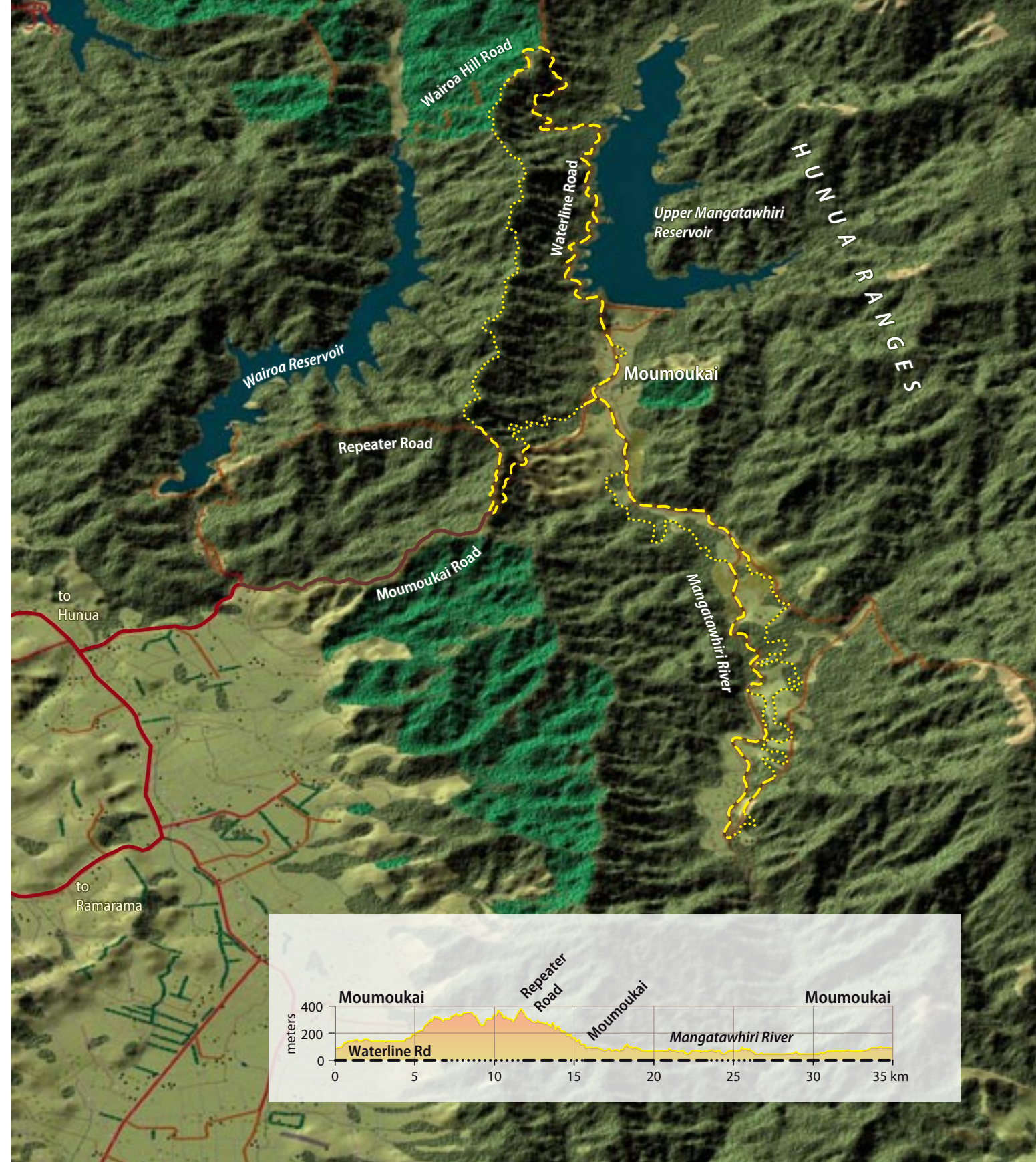
Start the Mangatawhiri Challenge Track by riding north up Waterline Road to the dam, then climb up to the reservoir and round its perforated edge to the far end. Regenerating bush growing down to the water makes it appear like

a natural lake, and the track around the shore is shady and cool. At the end of the reservoir, climb to a Y intersection and go left onto Wairoa Hill Road. This area was once extensively logged, and still sports pine plantations on its western slopes. After about 500 metres, select granny gear and hang a left up an old skidder track next to an MTB marker.

This piece of single track climbs very steeply to the 370-metre ridge top and provides a panoramic view across the Hunua Ranges and west to the Wairoa Reservoir. It's a pretty gnarly grade 4 track that undulates along the ridge, offering up some awesome and often slippery descents on slick clay. Much of the surrounding bush has regenerated above the view line as the track travels south to a basic shelter and lookout. The final descent is a fast pylon road that plummets down to Repeater Road.

Turn left on Repeater Road, and at the Moumoukai Road intersection head back towards camp through the park entrance. Ride down the hill for about a kilometre to turn left again at an MTB marker onto an amazingly tight but short section of single track that links back up with the road at the bottom of the hill. Head towards camp and take the first right onto a major gravel road. Follow this road south for a kilometre, then go left at the River Track sign. This superb piece of single track flows through mixed bush to join Manning Road. Head left and then right onto Mangatangi Hill Road for a short distance. Red MTB markers direct you to the right and back onto the single track of the Moumoukai Farm Track.

Slicing through the regen on River Track





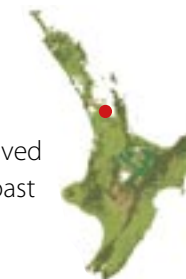
Steep slippery ridge top section between the Wairoa and Mangatawhiri Reservoirs

This is a mix of open country and old farm tracks joined by sweet single track that wind their way south through beautiful bush and then loop around to return on Moumoukai Road and Mangatangi Hill Road back to camp. There are some cool river crossings, steep climbs and gnarly descents thrown into the mix, with a fantastic variety of scenery to enjoy. A few old kauri trees and some young ones can be spotted from the track, with rimu, totara and kahikatea also pointing skywards. These are the sort of tracks that make you want to stay the night and do it all over again the next day.

Maps: BB33 Hunua, Auckland Regional Council Hunua Park Map
Distance: 35 km
Climbing: 850 metres
Grade: 4 & 2+
Notes: The official park map is the best one to navigate by (<http://www.arc.govt.nz/parks/our-parks/parks-in-the-region/hunua-ranges/>). To camp, contact the ARC Parks Dept by phone on 09 366 2000. The Challenge Track is not recommended in the wet.

WAHARAU RIDGE TRACK FIRTH OF THAMES

The land that eventually became Waharau Regional Park was originally purchased in the early 1970s by the Auckland Regional Authority to provide access to the water catchments that stretch from the Firth of Thames into the eastern foothills of the Hunua Ranges. Maori first arrived in the 14th century, with Ngati Whanaunga occupying the land from the 17th century. The coast became the summer residence for the Maori king from the 1890s, and Tainui still maintain a campground in the park.



From the 1860s vast tracts of kauri and beech were logged and shipped to Auckland and the Coromandel mining towns. The lower slopes of the Hunua Ranges were eventually cleared and are still farmed today. Appropriately, the Maori queen opened the park in 1979.

The park entrance is 38 kilometres south of Clevedon and 9 kilometres north of Kaiaua on East Coast Road, which runs along the edge of the Firth of Thames. Blackberry Flat Campsite and picnic area is the perfect place to start the ride from, only a few hundred metres off East Coast Road.

From the camp, follow the red-, yellow- and blue-topped marker pegs northwest up the hill. This old farm track heads

through a few sheep paddocks and into bush. Tall kanuka line the narrowing track as it climbs steeply and heads up the Waharau Ridge. Select granny gear for this single track climb, which affords excellent grip on the well-draining leaf-litter surface. The regenerating forest is lush and green, full of ferns, broadleaves and hard beech. Tawa, rimu, rata and totara are also re-emerging in favourable spots. The Lower Link Track (blue, 4 km) peels off less than a kilometre up the ridge with the Upper Link (yellow, 5.8 km) peeling

View from the Ridge Track of the Firth of Thames and the Coromandel Ranges



off a kilometre further on. Both loop back around to camp and are ideal for those wanting just a short spin.

The red markers continue to a T intersection where an old forestry road is reached at the very top of the climb. The Waharau Ridge Track swings left and you ride south downhill through a tunnel of forest to the second T intersection. Ignore the red markers and pedal along the single track that traverses mainly uphill through a damp, dense forest. This is the southern section of the Waharau Ridge Track and has some great technical riding thrown in. At the third T intersection hang a left and head to the east coast on a well-formed forestry road. This is now the Whakatiwai Track, which runs through an extensive regenerating forest before emerging into farmland with stunning views across the Firth of Thames to the Coromandal Peninsula. It's a fast, and in places rough, downhill, with a few gates to shut behind you on the way to the sea.

The track ends at the East Coast Road carpark with a couple of ride options to consider. Head north up the coast for 5 kilometres and back to the main park entrance, or better still ride back up the gnarly, steep Whakatiwai Track. You can then revisit the superb single track section of the Waharau Track back to the second T intersection, but this time in a downhill direction. Go right and follow the red track markers towards the Blackberry Campsite. The track plunges down a narrow bench between tall kanuka on hard clay and fine scree. It seems to go on forever until a final river crossing, then a farm track emerges and takes you back out to Blackberry Flat. In a short space of time the track has descended from a primeval forest to rolling farmland; a great way to finish the ride.

Map: BB33 Hunua

Distance: 24 km

Climbing: 1200 metres

Grade: 3+

Notes: There is a camping ground at Blackberry Flat you can book into, and a picnic area with water and toilets.

