



36 ALONG THE BULLER RIVER

DRIVING TOUR ■ 216 KM ■ 1 DAY ■ GOLD TOWNS, SPECTACULAR SCENERY

Much of the route on this trip follows the course of the mighty Buller River, through sleepy little towns that were once busy goldmining centres, to a dramatic gorge where the road is cut into a vertical cliff face.

When Nelson was founded in the 1840s, bureaucratic difficulties prevented the first settlers from taking up land to farm as they had expected and many almost gave up hope of making a living. However, when industrious German immigrants arrived and planted grape vines and fruit trees that flourished in the sunny climate they showed the way to prosperity. Horticulture became a thriving industry and many of the unemployed established themselves on smallholdings. The early settlers worked hard developing farms inland and opening up routes through to the Wairau River and along the Buller River to the West Coast. The discovery of gold in the area drew fresh hordes of prospectors and gold diggers seeking to make their fortunes, and further enriched the towns.

There is little left of many of these towns today, but the region remains lushly planted with stonefruit, berries, hops and vines, supplying the rest of the country with its rich harvest.



Myriad small streams feed the mighty Buller River.

1 HOPE

From Nelson drive 18 km south-west on SH 6 through Richmond to Hope.

Hope was founded by German settlers and originally named Ranzau. The town retains links with its German past. St John's Lutheran Church on Ranzau Road has a graveyard with the headstones of some of the early immigrants inscribed in German. Further along the road is a two-storeyed cob house built in 1863.

2 BRIGHTWATER

Continue 5 km south-west on SH 6 to Brightwater.

The name describes the sparkling waters of the Wairoa River and was given to the district by Alfred Saunders, who established a flour mill here in the 1850s. St Paul's Anglican Church was built in 1857 and the young wife of Nelson's first bishop, Bishop Hobhouse, was buried in this churchyard when she died in childbirth. Brightwater was the birthplace of Lord Rutherford, the founder of nuclear physics and winner of the 1908 Nobel Prize for Chemistry.



A refreshment stop on SH 6.

3 WAKEFIELD

Continue south-west 7 km on SH 6 to Wakefield.

The oldest surviving Anglican church in the South Island can be found by making a short detour signposted 'Pig Valley' to St John's Anglican Church (1846). A little west of Wakefield, the signposted Pigeon Valley Steam Museum is a fascinating collection of steam-driven machinery.

4 GLENHOPE

From Wakefield drive 24 km south-west on SH 6 to Kohatu then continue for a further 24 km south-west across the hills to Glenhope.

A cairn beside the road records the contributions of early pioneers in the settlement

of the Hope Valley. One of these, George Fairweather Moonlight, was a flamboyant character who retired in the Murchison area after making a number of significant discoveries of gold in Otago and became a local legend as self-appointed sheriff and extravagantly costumed publican.

5 MURCHISON

Continue for 40 km on SH 6. From Kawatiri the road follows the course of the Buller River. Kawatiri, the Maori name for the Buller River, means 'river flowing swiftly through a narrow gorge', an accurate description of this impressive waterway. The Nelson Lakes act as a buffer in times of heavy rainfall, collecting huge volumes of water from the mountains. This is then released into the





South of Wakefield, sheep graze peacefully around derelict buildings that a hundred years ago bustled with the busy daily life of a prosperous farm.

Buller, which swiftly becomes a raging torrent. Near Gowanbridge the road passes through impressive gorge scenery, then across the river flats to Murchison.

Located on an alluvial gravel plain formed by the Buller and Matakita Rivers, Murchison lies close to the Alpine Fault, where two sections of the earth's crust grind slowly past each other until they generate enough pressure to create an earthquake. On 17 June 1929 a powerful quake that was felt throughout New Zealand was centred on Murchison, with aftershocks continuing for 2 weeks. At the Murchison Museum on Fairfax Street you can see in graphic detail the devastation caused by the quake. The town was evacuated, but 17 lives were lost and the surrounding area was left in ruins. The earthquake changed much of the form of the land and caused the Maruia River to gouge out a new channel, creating a waterfall. Some of the upheaval created by the earthquake on the

landscape is still clearly visible, but the scars caused by extensive gold dredging, which continued on the Matakita River until the 1940s, have now been largely covered by scrub.

LYELL

Continue west on SH 6 for 37 km to Lyell.

Driving along this scenic highway, beside the forest-clad banks of the Buller River, it is hard to imagine that several thousand people lived here in the mid-1800s, lured by the prospect of finding gold and striking it rich. A short distance along the 3 km Lyell Walkway is a fascinating pioneer cemetery hidden in the bush. The

GOLD PANNING

A shovel and a pan are all you need to go in search of gold in many of the South Island's rivers. The gold-bearing shingle, known as pay dirt, is placed in the pan and submerged in water. A side-shaking or circular swirling motion causes the gold to sink, then the pan is quickly tilted to spill the stones over the rim. On the West Coast the gold is usually mixed with heavy black sand which is dried and then blown away, leaving, if you are lucky, small flakes of gold.

track follows an old dray road to the Croesus stamping battery. New Zealand's largest gold nugget was found near here, and the lure of gold still attracts people wanting to try their luck panning in local streams.

INANGAHUA

From Lyell drive 15 km south-west on SH 6 to Inangahua.

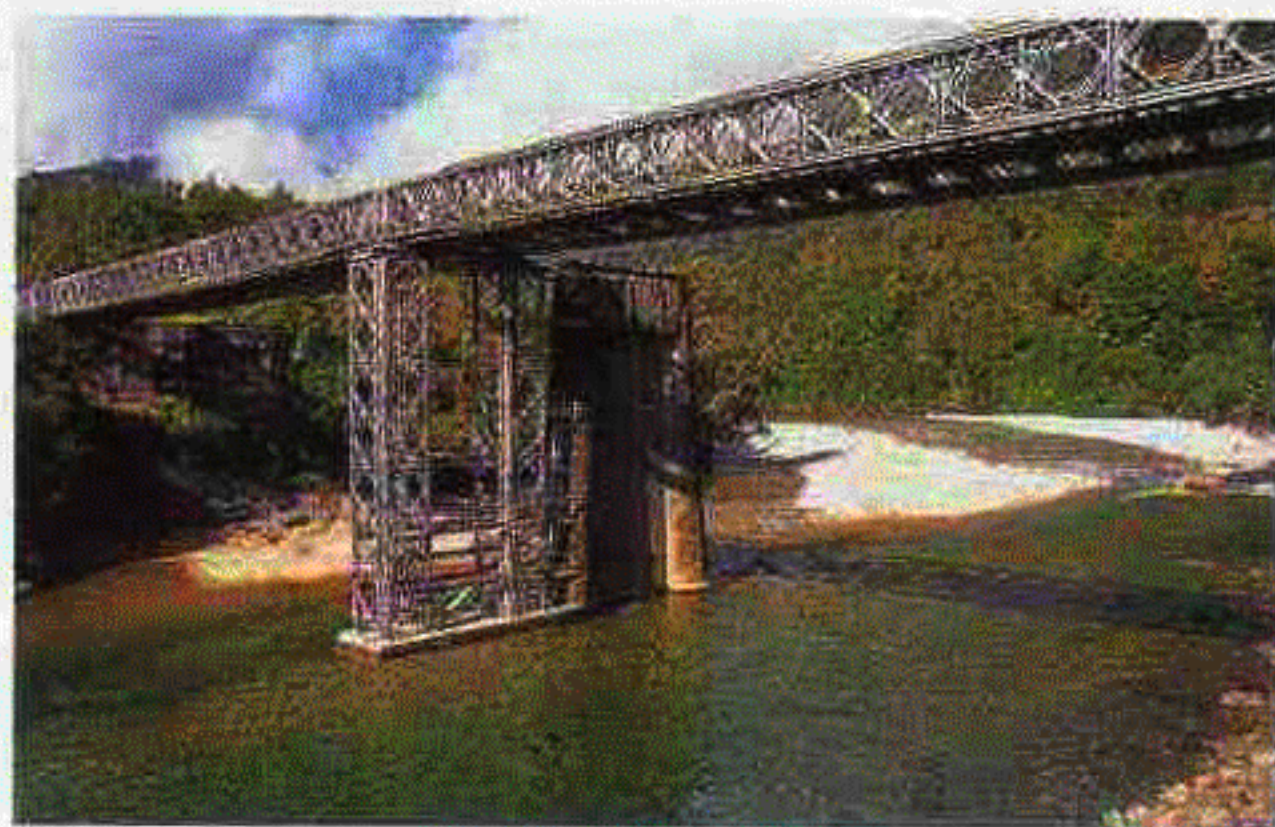
Here the Inangahua River joins forces with the Buller. Inangahua was once an important centre in the movement of quartz-crushing equipment brought up the Buller River from Westport en route to Reefton. It lies a short distance to the west of the Alpine Fault and the township has experienced numerous earthquakes over the years including one in 1968 that led to the evacuation of its inhabitants. The area has impressive limestone caves, including a system that burrows 5 km through a hill.

BULLER GORGE

Drive 11 km west on SH 6 to Berlins, which marks the beginning of the lower Buller Gorge, then continue 29 km west to the junction with SH 67.

The spectacular Buller Gorge is famous for its mist-shrouded forests and the notable section of roadway at Hawks Crag where the road has been blasted into a vertical cliff face, providing just enough space for buses to squeeze through. The crag is named after Robert Hawks, an early prospector who came to the area in search of gold.

Turn right onto SH 67 and drive north 6 km to Westport.



A lofty bridge spanning the Buller Gorge.