



Haast Pass / Tioripatea Highway



Otago

The Haast Pass / Tioripatea Highway is a scenic 140-kilometre road that links Wanaka in Central Otago with Haast on the West Coast. Haast Pass, an altitude of 563 metres is the lowest pass in the Southern Alps / Kā Tiritiri o te Moana, and rarely closed by bad weather. The mountains of Mount Aspiring National Park provide a spectacular backdrop for much of the way. Around every corner, another amazing vista awaits – towering snow-capped mountains, waterfalls cascading to the roadside, silver beech forming a canopy over the road, and the pristine waters of the Makarora and Haast Rivers flowing alongside the highway.

Young Valley,
Haast Pass Highway

Geological history

Most of the rocks along the Haast Pass / Tioripatea Highway are schist, formed under intense heat and pressure below the earth's surface. The Alpine Fault, which runs the length of the Southern Alps, crosses the road just east of Haast township, although it is not visible here.

During the Ice Ages, huge glaciers scoured and shaped the landscape, even flowing over the pass

itself. The glaciers have left their mark in the many U-shaped and hanging valleys, cirques and bluffs, and ice-smoothed granite outcrops such as Mosquito Hill near Haast. Silt and gravel spread by rivers since the last ice age have filled the valley floors, creating the wide terrace flats of the Haast and Makarora Valleys.

A history of exploration

The Haast Pass / Tioripatea has always been an important route between Central Otago and the West Coast. Maori named the route Tiori-patea, which means 'the way ahead is clear', and they used it to trade pounamu and food. They had camps around



the shores of Lake Wanaka and Hawea and in the Makarora Valley.



Haast Pass Highway c.1939

The first European to traverse the Haast Pass was Charles Cameron, a prospector who crossed the pass in 1863, just a few days before the pass's namesake Julius von Haast made the journey.

By 1880 a good packhorse track had been formed that was used by gold prospectors, cattle drovers and early settlers at Haast. This track remained unimproved until 1929, when road work began at Lake Hawea. Up to 400 men were employed to dig the road during the Great Depression. Work was slow and difficult, and the men spent long days working with picks, shovels and horse-drawn carts.

By the late 1930s, the road finally reached the 'Gates of Haast', but with the beginning of World War II, all work ceased

on the road. Construction recommenced in 1956 with modern machinery and in 1960, Wanaka and Haast were finally connected by road, ending a century of isolation for the people of Haast. The road also eased the problem of getting cattle to markets in the east.

The final stretch of road north of Haast linking the rest of Westland to Otago was not finished until 1965, and the entire Haast Pass / Tioripatea road was not sealed until 1995.

A transition zone

Haast Pass / Tioripatea Highway provides a link between Otago and the West Coast, from dry tussock lands in the east, to glacial terrain in the alps, to the wet, tree-clad West Coast.

Although both the eastern and western sides of the pass are covered in beech forest, the vegetation within the forests differs greatly. On the drier eastern side of the Main Divide, mountain beech predominates, with a sparse understorey of twiggy trees and shrubs. In the wetter forests on the western side of the Divide, a much more diverse silver beech forest dominates. Kamahi, rātā, tree ferns as well as various podocarps (rimu, kahikatea, mataī and miro) feature increasingly as you drop in altitude towards the West Coast. Swampland and forest extends from the West Coast to the base of the mountains.

These changes in vegetation are largely a reflection of changing altitude and rainfall patterns. The average annual rainfall in Haast is about 3400 millimetres, but this increases to over 8350 mm in the western foothills of the main divide, where moisture-laden winds are forced to rise up and over the steep mountains. At Haast Pass/ Tioripatea, annual rainfall is on average 4500 mm, with precipitation gradually decreasing as you move east from the main divide. Makarora receives 2500 mm per year, compared to 2000 mm at the head of Lake Wanaka and just 650 mm at drought-prone Wanaka.

Before many areas of bush were cleared in the region and predators were introduced, birds such as kakapo, kiwi and weka were plentiful in the area. Although most of these rare species are now gone, native birdlife is still plentiful and you may see kea, kākā, tui, parakeet/ kākāriki, wood pigeon/ kūkupa, tomtit/ miromiro, bellbird/korimako, fantail/ piwakawaka, rifleman/ titipounamu and other forest-dwelling birds. Paradise shelducks/ pūtakitaki are common on the open river flats.

Further information

For information about recreational opportunities along the Haast Pass Highway, contact the Visitor Centre at Wanaka (ph 03 443 7660, wanakavc@doc.govt.nz), Makarora (ph 03 443 8365) or Haast (ph 03 750 0809, haastvc@doc.govt.nz) DOC offices or visit www.doc.govt.nz

