Walks along the Haast Highway
Mount Aspiring National Park walks – 5 minutes to 5 hours

This 140-km section of State Highway 6 is a spectacular and scenic road linking Wanaka and Haast. It reaches beyond wind-whipped lakes Wanaka and Hāwea, through golden tussock-covered hills, to wind among steep mountains cloaked in lush rainforest and cross tumbling rivers. It then skirts undulating forests that seemingly float in tea-stained swamps, to finally reach the foaming surf of the Tasman Sea.

The forested section of the highway passes through the mountain ranges of Mount Aspiring National Park, and provides a spectacular backdrop to much of the road. Formed in 1964, the park is the third largest of New Zealand’s national parks.

The road gives a good insight into the Te Wāhipounamu – South-West New Zealand World Heritage Area. Established in December 1990, Te Wāhipounamu covers 10% of New Zealand, from Westland Tai Poutini and Aoraki/Mt Cook National Parks in the north to Fiordland National Park and Waitutu Forest in the south.

Department of Conservation Visitor Centres at Wanaka and Haast can provide up-to-date information on what to see and do along the road, along with displays on the region’s natural and historic features.

Enjoy your journey.

Further information:
Tititea/Mount Aspiring National Park Visitor Centre
Department of Conservation
Ardmore Street (PO Box 93)
Wanaka 9343
PHONE: +64 3 443 7660
EMAIL: mtaspiringvc@doc.govt.nz

Awarua/Haast Visitor Centre
State Highway 6, Haast
PO Box 50, Haast 7844
PHONE: +64 3 750 0809
EMAIL: haastvc@doc.govt.nz

www.doc.govt.nz
Historic journeys

Haast Pass/Tioripatea has always been an important route between Central Otago and the West Coast. Māori from the West Coast, Foveaux Strait and Coastal Otago crossed the pass to trade pounamu (greenstone) and food, and named it Tiori-patea, meaning ‘the way ahead is clear’. They had camps around lakes Wanaka and Hāwea and in the Makarora valley, which they called Kaika Paekai, ‘the place of abundant food’. Some journeys weren’t as peaceful: Te Puoho, a northern chief, brought his warriors through the pass in 1836 to raid the southern Kāi Tahu and Kāti Mamoe tribes. Initially, Te Puoho’s raid was successful, winning an early skirmish near Wanaka, but further south all of his party were either killed or taken prisoner and used as slaves.

Charles Cameron, an explorer and gold prospector, is generally acknowledged as the first European to cross the pass, in 1863. A short time later, Julius Haast, Canterbury’s provincial geologist, led a party of four over the pass and on to the West Coast where they ‘stood in the surf giving three hearty cheers’.

By 1876 there was a narrow pack track over Haast Pass/Tioripatea. In the following decade a government grant paid for the first construction work to be carried out on what some hoped would be a railway as well as a road, as it was cleared to as much as 10 m wide. Prospectors and early settlers at Haast were the first to use the route. Next were our earliest tourists – on horseback – then livestock being moved to and from Haast on the coast.

Most of the work on the Haast Pass/Tioripatea road was carried out during the 1930s Depression when up to 400 men were employed. They lived in temporary camps and spent long, hard days with pick, shovel and horse-drawn carts. The onset of World War II stopped this and the road to Haast was finally completed in 1960. The last stretch, north of Haast, (that linked the rest of Westland with Otago), wasn’t finished until 1965.

At 563 m above sea level, Haast Pass/Tioripatea is virtually an all-weather road and the lowest of the three road passes that link Westland with the east coast.

A natural journey

Most of the rock along the Haast Pass/Tioripatea road is schist, formed under intense heat and pressure. An important geological feature, the Alpine Fault, which runs the length of the Southern Alps/Kā Tiritiri o te Moana, crosses the road just east of Haast, though unseen by travellers.

During the Ice Ages, huge glaciers scoured and shaped the landscape, including the pass, to leave U-shaped and hanging valleys in their wake and ice-smoothed granite outcrops such as Mosquito Hill near Haast. Silt and gravel spread by rivers since then, now cover the valley floors, creating the classic wide terrace flats of both the Haast and Makarora valleys.

Rainfall varies considerably in the area: 3800 mm a year at Haast to more than 8300 mm on the low western slopes, to drop to 4500 mm at Haast Pass/Tioripatea itself, and only 2000 mm at the head of Lake Wanaka. Combined with altitude, this has a significant effect on vegetation.

West of the pass, kāmahi is the most common tree, with swamp forests of rimu, kahikatea and silver pine thriving on the boggy lower slopes and terraces. From Thunder Creek to Makarora, silver beech/tawhai dominates, with remnants of matai, miro, kahikatea and rimu in places such as Makarora Bush. At the drier, lower end of the Makarora valley a few pockets of mountain beech/tawhairauriki survive among the scrub and pasture.

Insect-eating birds such as fantail/pīwakawaka, yellow breasted tit/ti/miroiro and rifleman/tītipounamu thrive in the invertebrate-rich forest. Mohua (yellowhead) and kākāriki (yellow-crowned parakeet), are locally common. The striking Australasian or paradise shelduck/pūtakitaki is a familiar sight on the open river flats.

Introduced brown and rainbow trout are found in the Makarora, Young and Wilkin rivers and provide excellent fishing – with the required licence.