



**“EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK THERE’S ANOTHER LINE OF SINGLETRACK”**



# **NAPIER AND HAWKE’S BAY, NZ**

## **DIRT AND WINE IN THE NORTH ISLAND’S GOLDEN TRIANGLE**

**O**n the east coast of New Zealand’s North Island is a grand sweep of crescent shoreline known as Hawke’s Bay. Tucked in at the southern end of the arc you’ll find the trendy town of Napier. It’s the third corner of the north’s Golden Triangle of Trails – the other two points are Taupo and Rotorua – and it’s home to one of the most extensive mountain bike parks in the country. It’s also home to some of the country’s best vineyards, but let’s not get too distracted by the wine tasting just yet, that can wait until lunch.

Like many towns in New Zealand, Napier has extensive pine plantations; in this case Pan Pac

owns the swathe of pine forest to the town’s north. Pan Pac is one of the biggest mills in New Zealand and fortunately for us mountain bikers they’re keenly aware of their social responsibility as a large corporation to reinvest in the local community. One of the ways they’ve chosen to do so is by opening up the forest to the mountain bikers. Lucky us; it’s prime mountain biking country, and the Hawke’s Bay Mountain Bike Club has not mucked about, digging in over 80 kilometres of prime singletrack. The end result is the Pan Pac Eskdale Mountain Bike Park.

Given the relatively condensed area of the forest

(just a couple of kilometres long and even less across) it’s amazing how much trail is hidden in those pines. With undergrowth nearly non-existent, the trail fairies had a blank canvas to carve in flowing lines that have left trails weaving across the hills in all directions. Everywhere you look there’s another line of singletrack snaking off down a gully or ridge line. Because of the steep terrain, many of the trails are benched into the hillside, and with the odd root poking through you’ve got to stay light and attentive or your front wheel could be down the slope before you can say “I’ll have the sav blanc.”

There’s plenty of variety on hand, with dedicated



words and photography  
Chris Southwood

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**01.** The view from Te Mata peak is awesome. Get your fill of the view before you begin the descent! **02.** Know of a better spot for lunch than overlooking the vineyard at Mission Estate? We don't. **03.** Revolution Bikes in Havelock North is the shop to see for all your spares. Get your three week permit while you're there. **04.** Eskdale's trails have great flow, with over 80km of singletrack laced through the pines.

so would probably be deadly, however, as you can pick up a lot of speed very quickly, and a tumble will definitely have consequences! The trail eventually pops you out, knuckles white and brakes cooking, at the carpark mid way up Te Mata Peak Rd. It's well worth a shuttle run or two (or you can pedal up if you're a masochist). Oh, and watch out for kamikaze sheep! One of our crew was almost sent flying off the side of the earth by a wooly dive bomber.

### DETAILED INFO

#### GETTING THERE

Napier lies about two and a half hours drive south east of Rotorua – it's a magnificent drive and easily day-trippable, but we'd suggest you stay overnight.

#### PAN PAC ESKDALE MOUNTAIN BIKE PARK:

Eskdale Mountain Bike Park lies right alongside the main road into Napier, the Thermal Explorer Highway, and the park's entrance is clearly signposted. Turn left off the highway onto Waipunga Rd. There are two access points along Waipunga Rd - one at the bottom of the hill, and one mid-way up – both with plenty of room to park your car. A third entrance and carpark lies at the end of Tait Rd. Continue on the highway, turn left towards Gisborne at the t-junction onto State Highway 2 and then first left onto Tait Rd. This entrance offers easy access to the flatter end of the forest and is perfect for beginners.

#### TE MATA PEAK:

From Napier, head south along State Highway 2, then take the turn off onto Napier Rd. Follow the signs to Havelock North. At the centre of town, head west from the main roundabout on Te Mata Rd, then right at the second roundabout onto Simla Ave. This will lead you directly onto Te Mata Peak Rd. Be careful – it's a narrow road up to the top, so no hooning!

#### ACCESS:

Because the Pan Pac Eskdale Mountain Bike park is private property all users need to buy a permit. They're dirt cheap; a three week permit is just \$7! The money goes back into trail maintenance and helping the Hawkes Bay Mountain Bike Club secure more trails, so do the right thing a buy a permit. You can buy a permit from any of the bike shops in town, or at a number of tourist centres, and the price even includes a trail map. For a full list of permit vendors visit [www.hawkesbaymtb.co.nz](http://www.hawkesbaymtb.co.nz).

#### LOCAL SHOPS:

Revolution Bikes in Havelock North is the best shop in the area for serious mountain bikers. Hilton



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downhill race tracks, long super-d style descents, ridge-running singletracks and gully runs galore. It's still a working forest, and so occasionally trails are lost to logging, but more areas of forest are planned to be opened to riders, and the club has been active in constructing new trails in recently felled areas. All the trails are signposted and graded, and there are plenty of forestry roads to keep the real beginners happy too. The trails are steeper, both up and down, than in Rotorua or Taupo, so you'll want to plan your ride to make the climbs as easy as possible. Grab a trail map and get a local to suggest some loops, or better yet tee up a ride with them, so you don't end up riding up the downs and down the ups. There really is a ridiculous number of short and sweet trails in the forest to be enjoyed and explored, but our favourites would have to be the Upper/Lower Apex

combo, and the incredible Cannonball Lector uber descent.

Once you've had your singletrack fix at Eskdale, it's time for something a little more scenic. Te Mata peak lies about twenty minutes drive to the south, just outside the small town centre of Havelock North. It's a dramatic bluff that rises straight out of the coastal plain below and from the top the views over the bay are simply incredible; you've got to make the trip up the peak to truly appreciate how stunning the region is. Of course, since you've come all the way up here, it'd be rude not to ride the dedicated mountain bike track all the way back down. This lairy singetrack clings to the edge of the valley on the peak's western side, offering a wild, fast ride that would be incredibly picturesque if you could take your eyes off the trail for a second. To do



## A LOCALS ONLY RUN DOWN TE MATA IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

**01.** The Te Mata descent is short and wild. Don't fall, it's steeper than it looks. **02.** At the peak of Eskdale with vineyards below and Napier in the distance. **03.** After surviving a tyre blow out and a kamakaze sheep, Pat had reason enough to grin.

and the team there are all passionate riders and a top crew. Joining them for a locals-only run down Te Mata is highly recommended. You can also purchase your three week permit for Eskdale while you're there. [www.revolutionbikes.co.nz](http://www.revolutionbikes.co.nz)

### EVENTS:

The Hawke's Bay region has more than its fair share of racing throughout the year. If you're in the mood for something epic and challenging, make sure you check out the Triple Peaks Challenge. The 47km route takes you up and back down the three largest peaks in the area; Mt Erin, Kahranaki and Te Mata. A couple of river crossings along the way will sort the wheat from the chaffers! The next running of the event is on 19 March, 2011. [www.triplepeakschallenge.co.nz](http://www.triplepeakschallenge.co.nz)

Hawke's Bay Mountain bike Club will also host the NZ Single Speed National Champs in 2011. They take their single speeding (read, drinking) pretty seriously in NZ, so this is sure to be a cracker of an event. It's scheduled to take place on 23 April, 2011.



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### CLUBS:

The Hawke's Bay Mountain Bike Club is one of the most active in all of New Zealand. Have a browse of their excellent website for the latest news, trail updates, events and maps of all the riding in the region.

### LOCAL KNOWLEDGE:

You'd be a fool to come to the Hawke's Bay region and not sample some of the region's incredible food and wine. The region is famous for its Syrah (Shiraz to us Australians), but you really can't go wrong whatever your choice of tipple. Mission Estate, one of New Zealand's oldest wineries, comes highly recommended – relaxing in the manicured gardens with a glass of vino is the perfect end to a solid morning of riding at Eskdale. They've got a great cellar door too. [www.missionestate.co.nz](http://www.missionestate.co.nz)

If you really want to experience all the local viniculture your best option is a self-cycling winery tour. There are cycleways all across the region and the terrain is largely flat so getting between the wineries is a breeze. Local outfit Takaro Trails can kit you out with everything you need (including bikes – perfect if you're taking your family/non-riding partner along with you). [www.takarotrails.co.nz](http://www.takarotrails.co.nz) They can also organise a local guide for you to show you around Eskdale Mountain Bike Park if you'd like the inside knowledge.

Napier is a very trendy little town. After being nearly completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1939, the town was rebuilt predominantly in art deco style, giving it a stylish vibe. There are a surprising number of great restaurants and watering holes too, particularly around the revitalised docks area, all of which use a great range of local produce throughout their menus. **AMB**



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### FACILITIES

TOILETS: No  
 DRINKING WATER: No  
 PARKING: Yes  
 TRAILS SIGNPOSTED: Yes  
 MOBILE RECEPTION: Yes  
 SHELTER: No  
 BBQ FACILITIES: No  
 CAMPING: No

### AT A GLANCE

TECHNICAL RATING 2.5/5  
 FITNESS LEVEL NEEDED 3/5  
 VARIETY OF TERRAIN 3/5

