

Mountain Biking in Rotorua





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Mountain biking is a popular outdoor activity that has grown rapidly in the number of participants over recent years, with millions of people around the world regularly mountain biking. Mountain bikes are by far the most versatile of all bikes, able to be used in all weather types throughout the entire year. Mountain biking attracts people from all age groups, both sexes and is suitable for both individuals and larger social/family groups.

Located on the central plateau in the North Island of New Zealand, Rotorua

has some of the best mountain biking in the Southern Hemisphere. Rotorua's mountain bike tracks are located on free draining volcanic soil, offering superb all weather, all season riding. The numerous lakes, thermal areas, lush forest (native, redwoods, pine and eucalypts), stunning scenery and panoramic views make mountain biking in Rotorua a unique experience. The mountain bike trailheads are located only a few kilometres from the city centre, making them easily accessible without a vehicle.





Whakarewarewa Forest is one of the district's leading recreational facilities. It comprises 5,667 hectares of native and exotic forest, managed by Kaingaroa Timberlands Management Ltd (KTM) on Crown Forest Licence (CFL) land. It is a production/commercial forest (though considered a park by many residents and visitors to Rotorua) and is a multi-recreational resource. User groups include mountain bikers, walkers, runners, picnickers, horse riders and from time to time specific motorsport events.

The forest is located just five minutes from the centre of Rotorua and the world-class and world renowned mountain bike tracks contribute to the very high usage of the forest by mountain bikers. There are approximately 65 kilometres of purpose-built mountain bike tracks (note this has grown and is still growing rapidly) in the forest and a network of linking forest roads. The extensive terrain and varied network of trails and grades caters for riders of varying ability. There is a choice of beginner trails with undulating single tracks, through to challenging cross-country tracks and downhill trails. There is a Core Mountain Bike Track Network within the forest maintained by KTM. In addition to the core tracks there are the "outback" tracks, which are marked on official KTM maps but are maintained by volunteers. These tracks are intended for mountain bike use and other forest users are discouraged from using them. Signage is posted at both entry and exit points.

There is a wide range of infrastructure and facilities in place to support mountain biking within Rotorua. This includes purpose-built mountain bike tracks, maps and signage, car parking and picnic facilities, rental bikes, skills clinics, bike shops (including specialist mountain bike manufacturing), cafes, a wide

range of accommodation, mountain bike clubs and guided mountain bike tours.

Rotorua attracts local, domestic and international mountain bikers each year for an increasing number of events. In addition to the many people who overnight in Rotorua, many travel from other centres for day trips to the forest (eg, Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga, Whakatane, Gisborne and Taupo). In August 2006, Rotorua hosts the UCI World Mountain Bike Championships, the most significant mountain bike event in the world for the year. Other annual events include the Cat Eye Moonride, NZO N-Duro Mountain Bike Series, Adidas Xterra Rotorua Festival, Wild Moa, Rotorua Association of Triathletes events (eg Duathlon Series - mountain bike based) and various school events (eg, Lakes High School and Western Heights High School events).



A study of mountain biking in Rotorua

To assess how important mountain biking is to Rotorua and in particular the Whakarewarewa Forest, a survey of use was undertaken in September 2005. Key points arising from the Rotorua mountain bike research undertaken in 2005 are as follows:

- A head count undertaken during a September 2005 (spring) weekend showed around 350 people visited the Waipa car park each day. Of these, 75% were adults, 25% children and 80% mountain bikers. Morning (9.00am to 12.00noon) was the most popular time for forest visitors.
- In addition a total of 102 face-to-face interviews were conducted with mountain bikers over a September weekend. These results show that:
 - Three quarters of respondents (77.5%) mountain biked all year round.
 - Over half (51.0%) of respondents preferred to ride at weekends only, while 46.1% preferred both weekdays and weekends.
 - Two-thirds (66.7%) of respondents stated they prefer to ride between 6.00 am and 12.00 noon.
 - Almost two-thirds (65.7%) of respondents visited the forest with one, two or three others.
 - Nearly half (45.8%) of respondents visited the forest with friends.
 - Exactly half of respondents rated themselves as experienced or professional in their standard of riding (note riders own definition).
 - Respondents had also undertaken a large range of other outdoor activities in Rotorua over the past year including walking, boating/kayaking, running/jogging, fishing and picnicking.
 - Respondents were asked to rate the quality of six amenities and services at Whakarewarewa Forest. The following numbers reflect the combined ratings for 'Best in New Zealand' and 'Excellent':
 - Cleanliness/tidiness of forest (77.5%).
 - Quality of tracks (70.6%).
 - Drinking water/tap facilities (22.5%).
 - Parking facilities (49.0%).
 - Signage/maps (37.2%).
 - Toilets (9.8%).
 - The three suggested improvements mentioned most often were increased facilities (ie, toilets, drinking water) (28.4%), directions (ie, maps and signs) (14.7%) and more tracks/jumps/downhills (9.8%).
 - The top three factors respondents most enjoyed about mountain biking in Whakarewarewa Forest were the tracks (52.9%), nature/fresh air/outdoors/scenery (23.5%) and accessible/close to Rotorua (12.7%).
 - The top three factors respondents least enjoyed about mountain biking in Whakarewarewa Forest were the hills (15.7%), the drive/distance (13.7%) and other users/overcrowded (8.8%).
 - Of the 58.8% of respondents who had been mountain biking in other New Zealand locations in the past year, the three most popular regions were Waikato (50.0%), Auckland (43.3%) and Bay of Plenty (26.7%).
 - Over half of these respondents (51.0%) rated Rotorua as either the best mountain biking destination in New Zealand or an excellent mountain biking destination.
 - Of the 13.7% (14) of respondents who had been mountain biking in overseas locations in the past year, the most popular locations were United Kingdom (42.9%), Australia (28.6%) and France, Italy, Spain and the USA (each with 14.3%).
 - Over three-quarters of these respondents (71.5%) rated Rotorua as either the best mountain biking destination in the world, the best mountain biking destination in the Southern Hemisphere or an excellent mountain biking destination.
 - Respondents' awareness of mountain biking events in Rotorua included UCI World Mountain Biking Championships (83.3%), Cat Eye Moonride (79.4%) and NZO N-Duro Mountain Bike Series (76.5%). However only 30.4% of respondents had participated in one or more of these events.
- A total of 47.1% of respondents were local residents, 48.0% domestic visitors and 2.9% were international visitors.
- Over half of the surveyed visitors to Rotorua (53.7%) visited specifically for the purpose of mountain biking. When asked how important mountain biking was as a reason for visiting Rotorua (as a percentage), the average was 81.2%, with a minimum of 5.0% and a maximum of 100.0%.
- The length of stay in Rotorua by respondents visiting the area ranged from one day (50.0% of visitors) to over two weeks.
- Domestic and international visitors surveyed spent an average of \$647 per visitor while in Rotorua. This equated to the following average expenditure per person (note includes those who had no expenditure):
 - \$199 on accommodation.
 - \$168 on food and beverages.
 - \$22 on specialist mountain bike equipment.
 - \$37 on entertainment/attractions.
 - \$9 on shopping/retail.
 - \$211 on travel.
 - less than \$1 on other expenses.
- Local respondents estimated they would spend an average of \$1,822 on mountain biking over the next year. This equated to the following average expenditure per person (note includes those who had no expenditure):
 - \$1,372 on specialist mountain bike equipment.
 - \$294 on associated travel costs.
 - \$153 on events.
 - \$3 on other items.
- Of the total 102 respondents, 85.3% were male and 14.7% female.
- The largest proportion of respondents was aged between 20 and 29 years of age (31.4%).





Based on this survey and previous surveys undertaken (note that APR has undertaken two previous forest related surveys which confirm this level of use) it has been estimated that there are around 185,000 day usage activities in Whakarewarewa Forest (includes users in all areas in the forest). Of these, around 27% of user activities are mountain bike activities equating to around 51,000 mountain bike activities per year and around 6,500 mountain bike users. There was an average of 7.8 rides per year across all users (note that this recognises that while some users may use the forest over 50 times per year there are a number of out of town visitors who might undertake one to two rides per year. Overall mountain bike related spending in Rotorua (by both visitors and locals) is estimated to be around \$4.35 million annually.

It is noted that the data on overall forest activity and spending does not include the impacts of specific events in the Whakarewarewa Forest. For example, the Cat Eye Moonride regularly attracts upwards of 3,000 participants and supporters and the

Xterra event attracts mountain bikers from throughout the North Island. As an example, information from the organisers of the Cat Eye has revealed that they have limited the number of riders for their event (12 hour and 24 hour individual and team 8 km. circular events in the forest) to 2,000 and for the past two years they have operated with a maximum field. Over 1/3 of these riders have come from Auckland with a further 20% from Rotorua, 19% from Bay of Plenty/ Waikato and 17% from Manawatu/ Wellington with the balance from Hawkes Bay, Taranaki, Northland and South Island.

The forest has also likely been highly influential in nurturing promising junior, senior and veteran men's and women's riders and the success these riders have enjoyed in national and international events. This has been evidenced by comments by a number of riders in public forums on the quality of mountain biking in Rotorua. Also the forest has contributed to the ongoing success of the mountain bike and multi sport clubs and their activity in the district.





Future of mountain biking in Rotorua

Overall, this study has shown that the Whakarewarewa Forest is a major mountain biking recreational resource. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that the level of recreational use of the forest including mountain biking is continuing to grow (eg, night riding). This is likely to be due to the accessibility of the forest and range of recreational experiences available (eg, for mountain biking the extent and range of routes and grades of tracks). While use and ratings of the resource is growing there are still opportunities for the forest and facilities to be improved to create the “best mountain bike destination in the world”. Much of this is about providing infrastructure (eg, cycle lanes to the forest to improve safety), providing multiple entry points to the forest (to provide greater accessibility and distribute pressure – note that while Waipa car park is the main point of access for mountain bike riders to the forest a number enter off Long Mile Road) with associated facilities and recognising the importance of mountain biking in the community. Other ideas include:

1. Recognition by the Rotorua community as evidenced by Rotorua District Council and Te Arawa of the benefits to Rotorua, along with the opportunity to ensure retention of public access to tracks and look at the long-term maintenance and provision of facilities.
2. Improved toilets, drinking water and bike wash facilities are required at Long Mile Road and Waipa car park, including the need to maintain these facilities and tracks.
3. Ongoing development of mountain biking and walking tracks in the forest including the creation of networks of tracks.
4. Ongoing improvements to maps with highpoints and suggested loops and provide information on facilities on the maps (eg, drinking water).
5. Sealing the Waipa car park and improving other facilities at this location.
6. Provision of funding and/or personnel (eg, central and local government) for domestic and international marketing campaigns to attract mountain bikers.
7. Opportunity to promote mountain bike events to visitors with better information at the two main car parks.
8. The installation of permanent visitor monitoring equipment (light beams) at Waipa car park and Long Mile Road to provide more accurate usage patterns. They may also be useful on new tracks to gauge usage.
9. Allowing an expanded range of activities around the forest to service the needs of mountain bikers (eg, additional concessions such as coffee and food vendors).
10. Ensuring that the diversity of the landscape (eg, native and exotic vegetation) is maintained along with the scenic vistas within the forest.
11. Working with event organisers, mountain bike clubs, forest users, forest managers, forest owners, iwi, local government and the community to create a vision for the long-term future of the forest to accommodate the current range of recreational uses (eg, horse riding, mountain biking, running and walking). There is also an opportunity to extend this to look at mountain bike related facilities (eg, car parks and tracks) in other parts of the district to create a stronger mountain biking destination with a network of trails in other areas (eg, around lakes).
12. Rotorua groups working with national based organisations to promote mountain biking as a healthy, safe, accessible and affordable recreational opportunity for all New Zealanders.

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