

'You just can't wipe the smile off people's faces'

by Sue Burgin

Cycling alongside the mighty Waikato River, enjoying the natural scenic beauty of New Zealand's longest awa on a well-oiled German e-bike, puts smiles on people's faces according to Dee Tairaki, who along with husband Dan, runs River Riders bike rentals.

Dee and Dan started with just a few bikes, a marquee, some beanbags, a trailer and three kids, beside the river at Ngāruawāhia seven years ago.

But today they have an 'off-grid' hub in the Hamilton Gardens, two smaller operations at Ngāruawāhia and Cambridge, stores in Hamilton and Botany, and seven kids.

According to Dee, those smiles and seeing how much people love the experience make all the hard work worthwhile.

65 km of cycling pleasure

The Te Awa cycleway runs from Karapiro in the south to Ngāruawāhia in the north, and is graded at levels one and two making it suitable for all ages and degrees of fitness.

"Just last week we had an 84-year-old on the cycleway, and she loved it," Dee says.

"Some can do it in four hours, others will fill a day, taking it easy and enjoying lots of coffee stops along the way. It all depends on your preference, where you start the ride from and what you want to do."

River Riders bikes can be picked up from hubs in Ngāruawāhia by the Squash Club, Hamilton Gardens and Hamilton Depot in Hamilton, and Cambridge.

The Te Awa trail is the longest continuous concrete trail in the country, and at three metres wide there's plenty of room for everyone.

E-Bikes the way to go

Dee says the e-bikes are the wheels of choice for most river riders.

"We use Bosch, German e-bikes. They're high quality and a nice mid-range bike that offers a smoother and more authentic ride."

Training is offered to anyone wanting it before setting off, and riding with the electric power on or off is a choice.

There's also a full safety brief at the start of a ride and everyone is asked to download an app containing information about the cycleway, including the area's history and comfort stops and cafes along the way.

Te Awa highlights

Ngāruawāhia, the home of the Māori Queen is one according to Dee.

She says the Tūrangawaewae marae is always a popular sight. There are Te Awa signs along the way where you can take photos, and the Peacocks Bridge near the Hamilton Gardens is also a popular sight. People enjoy checking out the velodrome in Cambridge and Lake Karapiro.

There are many fabulous cafés along the way including Punnet Eatery, between Hamilton and Cambridge with its café, shop, playground and delicious locally grown strawberries in summer.

"But simply riding alongside the awa is the best endorphin-inducing experience," she says.

Dee and Dan hope to have new night tours and a cultural tour taking in the history of the awa, an historical pā site and the Tūrangawaewae marae up and running very soon.

Kaitiakitanga who care about sustainability

"After all there's nothing more eco-friendly than pedal power," Dee laughs.

"Our old bike tubes go to a group of women using them to create earrings and other jewellery, and we recycle all our scrap metal."

She says their off-the-grid hub in Hamilton Gardens runs on solar power, they collect rainwater and use an electric ute to shuttle small groups when necessary.

For more information on River Riders and the Te Awa cycleway, go to www.riverriders.co.nz

Photos left from top: The Awa River Ride includes trails Cambridge to Lake Karapiro; Hamilton to Cambridge. Photo credits: www.riverriders.co.nz
Right: Te Awa River Ride, photo credit: Hamilton Waikato Tourism

