



 PLACES

QCT V2.0

Boats and batteries offer a new take on an old classic

Words Rod Bardsley | Images Jeff Carter



If you've ridden the Queen Charlotte Track before, you would have to agree that while it's a "must do" of iconic New Zealand rides, there are times when logging up yet another steep hill, legs protesting and lungs burning, you'll find yourself wishing you'd chosen to shuttle Wairoa Gorge or take in a flat, wine-filled vineyard tour instead.

Ever since Jeff Carter and I busted out this trail for the Bluebridge Bike Club in 2017 we've been discussing better ways to enjoy the stunning beaches and mountainous terrain that make this track a phenomenal adventure. We wanted to have the time and energy to explore the side paths and camp spots off the main trail that push the two to three day ride into the four to five day arena, an unrealistic break for a couple of family men.

With the arrival of the decent electric off-road bicycle, everything changed. A new sport was born: backcountry adventure riding.

Okay, so it's not all great. If an e-bike could go forever that would be grand. The big problem here is battery life. Jeff owns a 500 watt/hr 2017 Specialized Kenevo, good for two hours of mixed mode riding. Jeff is an impatient man so he's pretty much in continuous turbo mode.

The Queen Charlotte Track is about 70km long. It's an aggressive 70km too, with big ascents and screamingly fast descents. We had no idea how long a battery would last. I was much more relaxed with my 700 watt/hr 2019 Specialized Levo—and I have a spare battery. I was thinking I could do the track as per a non-powered bike, with a battery recharge overnight at a decent halfway point, but that would mean eco mode riding, giving me a yawn-inducing 5km/h up the hills—not much better than a good XC bike but definitely more relaxing.

Jeff's idea (as always) was to run full turbo for maximum fun but miss out on some of the less exciting parts of the trail, and if he pinched his wife's battery then it would be all systems go. But those batteries are heavy and we're all about manly bum bags. What we needed was an Uber that could go on water. We researched water taxis that could drop and collect us where and when we deemed appropriate, then we needed to sort accommodation.

But what if we couldn't get there with enough juice? Especially as we planned to ride trails man or beast hadn't set foot on since Captain Cook landed and sent the locals scattering.

Sometimes things are just meant to be. Jeff got a call out of the blue from a mate of an old varsity mate inviting us out on his new custom-built boat, to ferry us around the Queen Charlotte Sound. We had to get moving quickly as lambing was about to start, closing the track to bikes until March, so with no research at all, we jumped on the ferry with no real idea of what was in store.

Old mate's mate Captain Grant Orchard met us off the ferry and we followed him around to his boat at the jetty. What a sight: a newly finished 46-foot, six-berth motor launch dubbed the Katabatic (named after a high density wind flow rushing down a slope to the sea), equipped with a diesel stove, hot shower and a toilet. We loaded up, dumped the van at Grant's place just

down the road, and hit the water. We wanted to start at the same place as Captain Cook and try the new climbing trail out of Ship Cove before nailing the descent into our first diversion to Schoolhouse Bay. We had a pleasant one and three quarter hour cruise up the sound while admiring the incredible detailing of a homebuilt boat, taking in the work done by Grant himself over eight years. The ship's wheel has steered all five of his father's boats, starting life back in 1923. Some of the framing is laminated timber from the family home that burnt down years back.

Grant is a Picton boy from birth who, after training as a chef, went to Florida to work on superyachts, so we were in good hands. He's now back home and making a go of custom trips on the Katabatic, with on-board or resort accommodation available, and a bike rack on the roof so mountain bikers can pick and choose how they ride the track—with Grant cruising alongside waiting for the call or meeting at pre-arranged pick-up points.

Arriving at Ship Cove at the same time as the rain, we hit the new climb out, with me keeping an eye on Jeff's display to make sure turbo mode stayed unlit. Memories of grovelling/pushing up steep inclines were washed away as we hit an average speed of 13km/h and crested the saddle a mere twelve minutes later—oh, this is good. One of the many advantages of e-bikes is the added weight and being able to run enduro tyres with inserts, so the rock-infested high-speed descent off the back was sheer pleasure, and we diverted into Schoolhouse Bay, a stunning private campsite, though a weka and its chick tried to eat my stowed jacket while I took a walk.

Next diversion was to the private cabins in Resolution Bay. There's a whole heap of trails in this area but, respecting their privacy, we had a gander over the fence at their serenity, then hit turbo for a steep technical climb back up onto the main trail. We were really starting to realise the potential of this format.

Because we were chewing up the miles quicker than expected, Jeff realised he could now go turbo full-time and took off, razzing the descents faster than the 40+ category at the 2W Enduro. So it was no surprise to me when he took a wet clay corner on a 45 degree lean to discover that elbow and hip pads were invented for a reason and maybe he should invest. Luckily he'd found the only corner without embedded rock, so back on turbo it was until we hit the lower slopes of Endeavour Inlet, taking time to explore the side paths and admire the tucked away cabins that you normally only get glimpses of as you struggle to keep your legs turning after a tough day of riding. What takes some people four hours we did in ninety minutes, with diversions.

We cruised into Furneaux Lodge, with Jeff on empty, for a beer and bike wash before loading up on the Katabatic and motoring to Bay of Many Coves, taking a hot shower on the fly following by a spot of deep sea fishing for dinner.

Turns out Grant is something of a fishing guru. Every time he threw out a line, two perch would jump right on and in ten minutes we had enough for dinner. I struck out but Jeff and Grant caught perch and two stunning blue cod, though

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we had to release them as they were spawning. We had plenty, and with rumours of steak I was feeling pretty pleased as we sat back with our hors d'oeuvres and a quiet drink while Jeff edited photos.

Preferring not to moor in a choppy bay, Grant changed plans and we motored on autopilot across the sound to calmer water while he prepared a gourmet meal of fresh beer-battered perch fillets. We hooked a mooring in Hitaua Bay and ten minutes later we were drinking Cloudy Bay and dining on steak, battered fish, and seared vegetables. We pondered the next day's adventure while the charge lights of our batteries blinked further into the green.

We're not talking sailor's hammocks on this fine boat; three double beds meant a great sleep before waking to the gentle lap of water on the hull and birdsong from the surrounding native bush. Before we knew it, toad in the hole with a hot cup of tea was served. Then for the sake of social media and the pull of oily calm water, I threw myself off the cabin top into the freezing water to wake up properly.

With the wizardry of satnav, the Katabatic sailed itself back to Bay of Many Coves Resort while Grant cleaned up breakfast and reorganised his day. Sliding up to the jetty, we were met by resort manager Graeme for some inside info on the two-hour trek up the ridge to join the Queen Charlotte Track. With fine Kiwi hospitality, he sat us down to fresh coffee and another breakfast of pancakes to fortify us for the steep climb and then 800 metres of an old slipped trail. Hang on, what's this? "You'll be right," he said. "Just a bit of gorse and you may have to push up a bit".

I may have bitten my foot off with an earlier statement of our e-bike climbing prowess, because after one of the steepest, most prolonged climbs ever with rear wheels spinning in the damp clay, we were met by a hike-a-bike rarely seen outside of a heldrop-worthy mountain in the Pelorus Range. Too

janky to push, that 800 metre distance took us over an hour. Slippery beech roots, fallen trees, and jagged rocks meant for every second step we had to lift a 25kg weight up and over some form of obstacle. Do not attempt this route on a bicycle.

Once we hit the main trail some ninety minutes later, the exhaustion evaporated as we hit full turbo again and sprinted west to meet the Katabatic, moored at Torea Bay, for a battery swap. This section of track is a rollercoaster ride along and around the hilltops—quite a struggle on a pedal bike but our whoops of excitement defied any reservations about going electric and were a great warning for the odd hiker and suffering cyclist we passed along the way.

Unfortunately the forecast rain showers morphed into a heavy downpour and the big climb up from the Cove had drained more juice than Jeff cared to admit, so we had to back off our blistering pace and cruised into the bay with the Kenevo's red light blinking again. With the weather getting worse, high wind lashing the trees, and a quick weather check of our afternoon destination at Jentree bike park showing hot, dry trails, we canned the phase two option and jumped back on board for a hot shower and a snack for the short crossing back to Picton.

After a quick bike hose-off on the jetty while I picked up the van, it was goodbye to the Katabatic e-bike adventure and hello to Blenheim sunshine shuttles at Jentree. Life could certainly be worse.

Our only regret: not convincing our wives to join us. Even without bikes they would've had a great time on the boat, exploring the beaches and cafes while we were up in the hills. 🍷

More info: www.kcandm.co.nz or @katabaticchartersnz