TE IRINGA - GET YOUR EPIC ON

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Deep in Kaimanawa Forest Park, with neither a berm nor tabletop to be found, there exists a hidden gem of adventure. Starting 40km from the nearest town, the 38km return, out-and-back, Te Iringa trail offers a challenging and exhilarating ride through ancient, untouched forest.

Following an old Maori route, the Grade 4 / 5 trail has been a 'must do' tramping track for years. The Department of Conservation finally opened it to mountain bikers two years ago as a trial. Since then, the combined efforts of the Hawkes Bay Mountain Bike, Taupo Mountain Bike and Bike Taupo clubs have been hard at work, with help from sponsors and Trail Fund NZ, making the trail less hike and more bike.

"The trail, which had already been dubbed a 'favourite' for many adventurous riders thanks to its rewarding and technical terrain, saw a vast improvement in rideability earlier in 2015 thanks to the $11,000 grant it received from the Community Conservation Partnership Fund through Trail Fund," says Carl Larsen of the Hawkes Bay Mountain Bike Club.

"We managed to complete a significant amount of work including clearing windfall, opening up ruts, clearing old slips, cutting back brush and putting water control in place."

Since the clean-up, feedback has been extremely positive, prompting the clubs to carry out further work on the backcountry track.

"The first grant allowed us to clean up the trail from the carpark through to the Tikitiki Stream crossing, which is just over the halfway point," says Larsen.

"Thanks to a second CCPF grant of $17,500, we are planning to complete the job all the way through to the hut, making it more feasible for mountain bikers to complete the entire track and/or take advantage of the overnight option."

The grant will enable a significant amount of work to be done, including vegetation control, re-aligning the track around boggy areas, fixing up hill climbs, repairing water cut-outs, clearing windfalls and establishing a single-track line that rides well without taking away the backcountry feel of the route.

"Te Iringa is, and will remain, an epic adventure ride," says Larsen. *"Our goal isn't to lessen the technical aspect, and it should only be ridden by skilled and fit riders, but we do want to encourage less walking and more biking, as well as getting more people to enjoy this pristine and remote experience."*

With giant roots, loamy soil and some inner encouragement required, this relatively secret backcountry trail is worth the effort. Giant ferns and ancient trees line a technical climb over loamy soil and roots towards the old burnt down Te Iringa hut. Roots as big as small trees meander across the trail in just a couple places, without so much as a chain ring mark on them – an indication to the traffic these back country trails see.

As an *'out and back'* ride, riders get a really good chance to scope some lines up the first climb for the return descent and, while some of it looks unrideable, if you have the skill, it's just about manning up and sticking to your line. This first 4km section up to the old hut site clearing can also be done as a return ride on its own for the intermediate level riders, as the grade 5 terrain isn't until later up the trail.

Continuing on from the old hut site, the trail climbs a little more, before traversing Mt Te Iringa (this section contains the rugged bike-carrying and is where the grade 5 Epic rating of the trail is contained within), before it descends into fast, flowy fun across the ancient beech forest dirt for a 30 minute descent, ending abruptly at the tight switchbacks above the Tikitiki Stream – a great challenge for those wanting to prove their trials skills.

From here, it's another 1.5 hours to reach Oamaru hut, which has just been refurbished and sleeps up to 12 people, for an overnighter and the return ride back the next day. Or, for those just doing a day trip can either turn around at Tikitiki Stream, or continue on as far as the swing bridge (another 30 minutes along the trail, at about 12.5km from the carpark), before the return ride. (Before the improvements in 2015, this took about three hours each way).

Located just 40 minutes drive from Taupo, or 90 minutes from Napier, (including 15 minutes drive west off SH5) Te Iringa is not to be missed!