



# GOING UP CENTRAL

**State Highway 85 offers an escape route from Dunedin's dreariest weather to the drier climes of St Bathans.**

By Eric Trump

To borrow a phrase from Janet Frame, the rain is rainier in Dunedin. When I arrived here in 2020, a refugee from Trump's rudderless America, strong winds blew day and night, shaking cabbage trees by the shoulders and whipping surface water off the harbour into tumbleweeds of spray. Then the rains came. Blirts and blouts, scats and smurs. If I whimpered about the cold and wet, I was reminded that "You live on an

island now." From behind crying windows, I watched Dunedin's greys go greyer, its leaves drip drippier. Even the mural on Bath St of a vacuously dour Ed Sheeran looked desperate for release.

Around this time, I heard whispers of "Up Central", as in, "I'm getting the hell out of this bedrabbled mess and heading Up Central." It was a place somewhere beyond the clouds, about 2000 feet above sea level. Sometimes in Dunedin the coastal sky erases the horizon to merge with the Pacific, transforming the world into a cloistered version of *The Truman Show*. No escape. This would be replaced Up Central by crystalline air, burning glass skies and hills lustrous with tussock. This lost horizon had four distinct seasons, and reports suggested towns in summer were smitten, for days at a time, with sun and dry heat. Eventually, Up Central glowed with mythic promise in my imagination, as Sun Domes do for the soggy astronauts in Ray Bradbury's short story "The Long Rain".

It took two years, but I finally got there, ascending one recent day along State Highway 85 toward the Maniototo Plain and St Bathans. During the gold rush of the 1860s, the highway was known as the Pigroot, the only viable supply trail to the goldfields until the Central Otago Railway was laid. It got its name from being so rough for coach and wagon that it might have been rooted by giant pigs. Today, the paved version offered a smooth ride under a quaking blue dome.

Beginning in 1864, St Bathans was a rushing hub of Central Otago's gold fever. Now, the fingerprints of the past run deeper than those of the present. The unpaved St Bathans Loop Road takes you off the highway and then splits the town in two, heritage buildings on one side, Blue Lake, or the "Glory Hole", on the other. (That a village named for an Irish saint nicknamed its star attraction the "Glory Hole" must be one of the finer ironies of Central Otago toponymy.)

I was immediately drawn from my campsite on the village domain

to Blue Lake, whose surface, like a mood ring, shifts from ice green to cobalt depending on time of day and cloud shadow. Sluice mining began here in 1864 on what was the gold-ridden 120-metre-high Kildare Hill. Water brought by race from 40 kilometres away was directed at high pressure out of monitor hoses, some of which are on display around town. The jets were so fierce a swung axe would bounce off them. After blasting the hill, miners separated gold from the quartz gravel. At the time, the St Bathans operation had the world's second-largest deposit of alluvial gold.

Almost 70 years, and more than 28,000 kilograms of gold later, the hill had become a hole 50 metres deep and 800 metres long. One edge threatened the foundation of the town itself, so mining ceased. An unknown amount of gold still lies beneath St Bathans. As soon as the monitor hoses were turned off for good, the pit began to fill with water.

The tailings that frame the lake are the white of old ivory, striated ashen grey and ochre and embedded with quartz pebbles. Emerging like giant fossils are a few of the rusted uptake pipes from the hydraulic elevation system that sucked gravel, sand, and water out

of the pit to sluice boxes above. Razorback ridges and sculpted pinnacles suggest ruins of an antique land, the sort of illusory backdrop a prog rock band might have tucked itself into for an album cover shoot. In 2019, captivated by this topography, photographer Derek Henderson perched models here in dresses from Eden Hore, the Otago farmer who during the 1970s collected high-fashion garments.

What was once the site of gold fever was placid the day I visited. At one end of Blue Lake, parents spread out picnics as children leapt from the small dock into citrine shallows or skipped the stones that once shared company with gold. Further along shore were possible intimations of St Bathans' next tourism wave. A group in thong bikinis, floppy straw hats and heels had mistaken basal quartz conglomerate for the sands of Ipanema. Their music was as loud as the vaping fog was thick and the sunglasses oversized.

In 1887, St Bathans had 13 pubs and a population of 2000. Today, it poses little challenge to a sightseer. It has six inhabitants and a handful of well-preserved historic buildings, including the post office, the Bank of New South Wales gold office (a gift shop now), the Cottage Hospital, community hall, a Catholic church, and ruins of a school and courthouse.

The Vulcan Hotel, along with its

well-appointed bedrooms, dining hall, curling stone doorstops and billiard nook, has a shady beer garden across the street where it is easy to meet people. The publican Sue Ingram introduced me to Tricia Batkin and Keith Hinds, both of whom can attest that St Bathans is a living village, not a relic.

Batkin is a retired stenographer in her early 60s who lives half the year in Port Douglas, Australia. She lived in St Bathans until she was 23.

"I love coming home. You're driving the Pigroot, you see the Dunstan range, and you think, 'Ah, I'm home.' You can leave this town, but it won't leave you." She remembers holidays with a small community, skating, curling, chasing a greasy pig or scrambling for lollies. In the winter her family sang to stay warm.

Hinds is a semi-retired stonemason who spent years restoring buildings in Central Otago. Now 71, he moved here when he was in his early 30s.

"This town is a national treasure," he says. "The buildings and the lake, but also the amazing mix of people. During Covid, the town sat here at the beer garden, at a distance, so no one would be alone." Hinds seemed to enjoy the fact that St Bathans had no cellphone service until a year ago.

On the road back to Dunedin, the Dunstan Mountains and St Bathans Range receded, weightless in the blue heat. I stopped at the Manuherikia River. Batkin said she'd found gold nuggets around Cambrians and St Bathans with her metal detector, but the only designated spot for gold fossicking in Otago is Gabriel's Gully near Lawrence. I walked through a stand of geysering cottonwoods and waded in. Under the moving glass of the river were bright pieces of schist, quartz, epidote and greywacke, dislodged, ground down by glaciers, rounded by flowing water, at rest for now. ■

The Blue Lake fills the old gold mine; below, buildings from the gold rush days.



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