

» OUR OWN BACKYARD

World-class scenic transport



Where are we? High-definition screens show the progress of the Tranz Scenic Coastal Pacific journey. Photos: ROY SINCLAIR

New Zealand-created carriages get high marks from rail buff ROY SINCLAIR.



New deal: A train of new AK carriages rounds a bend near Dashwood Pass, Marlborough.

New rolling stock (carriages) for South Island scenic rail journeys are as good as, or better than anything I have experienced anywhere else. They rival equipment used on Switzerland's premier scenic rail journeys, including the famed Zermatt to St Moritz Glacier Express. And, best of all, the new rail vehicles, classified AK, are New Zealand-designed and built.

The first set of five carriages went into service on the Tranz Scenic Coastal Pacific (Christchurch to Picton) on November 3.

Designed by KiwiRail's Mechanical Design Group and built in Dunedin by KiwiRail-owned Hillside

Engineering (formerly the New Zealand Railways Hillside workshops), they are the first locally designed and built passenger carriages since 1941, apart from three carriages built for the Otago Excursion Train Trust in 1987. (The Otago excursion train carriages used existing frames and bogie wheels).

The \$39.9 million contract for 17 KiwiRail carriages was let to Hillside Engineering in 2009. When completed early next year they will replace all carriages previously used on the Coastal Pacific and TranzAlpine rail journeys. Between them, the trains carry about 250,000 passengers annually, a majority of them visitors to New Zealand.

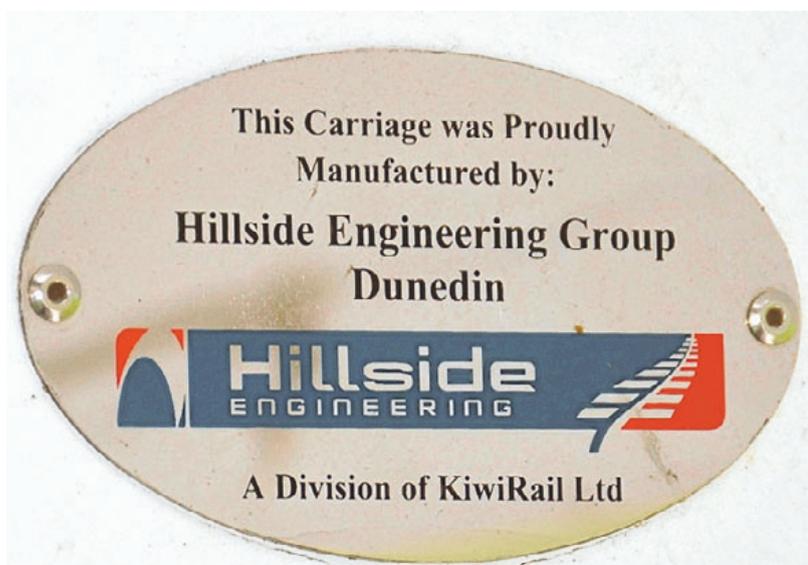
Longer than the present

carriages, they have 52 sqm of glass in generous panoramic side and roof windows, enabling passengers the best opportunity to enjoy passing views. Other obvious visual differences include ceiling-mounted high-definition screens displaying safety messages as well as a map plotting the journey's progress.

An impressive feature is the quieter, smoother, ride provided by the newly-developed P13 bogie wheel units having a combination of primary synthetic elastomer axle springs supplemented by a secondary airbag suspension. The latter is in common use on heavy road vehicles. The P13 units were designed by Christchurch engineering firm Motovated Design & Analysis and constructed by Hillside Engineering.

Motovated founder Greg Morehouse says the KiwiRail project was one of the most satisfying projects he has been involved in. He praises KiwiRail for resisting international pressure and keeping the AK carriage project in New Zealand.

An alternative type of buckeye automatic coupling prevents carriages from the jerky bunching previously infamous for overturning wine glasses or coffee cups. The coupler design, originating in the United States, is in common use on European passenger trains. Forged steel wheels for the AK carriages were imported from Australia.



Proud maker: Hillside Engineering manufacturer's plate.

Aboard the AK equipment's Coastal Pacific launch service, I spotted several passengers using their laptops, plugged into power sockets wired to the train's power supply. (Internet use relies on the train being in cellular-coverage areas). The pre-recorded commentary was GPS-triggered as the journey progressed. It is presented with a choice of five languages and will be listened to via headsets.

The intention is for train managers to also present their personable live commentaries, an ideal way of catering for non-English-speaking passengers while retaining the sometimes legendary presentations.

The launch train comprised two AK carriages,

each seating 63 passengers, a licensed cafe carriage (AKC) a refurbished luggage van (AKL) and redesigned existing open-sided viewing carriage (AKV) which, on the day of brilliant weather, proved to be the popular location for camera-wielding passengers.

The train, hauled by a locomotive resplendent in new KiwiRail livery, made for a very smart turnout.

Complemented by a well-stocked cafe car and friendly onboard staff, it promises to provide admirably for discerning global travellers as well as New Zealanders seeking a different travel experience.

The TranzAlpine is likely to be re-equipped with AK carriages during the first quarter of 2012.



Simply the best: Interior view of a new Tranz Scenic AK carriage, offering world-class design and comfort.