

Fear & roaming

in New Zealand

The country promises riding heaven but, for reasons we can't recall, we sent a hormone-riddled lunatic

Words and photography by Rich Beach

With the VFR's throttle pinned in third, I close in on the V6 Holden Commodore. The driver's eyes flash in his rear view mirror as he peels into the tight, downhill left-hander. He doesn't slow for the bend, baiting me to make a mistake. I'm almost knee-down round the corner. In first gear. I'm concentrating so hard my brain can barely take in what is happening. This doesn't make sense.

Still the black Holden piles on speed. If the chance to overtake presents itself, I won't. I did earlier, at 230kph – 130kph more than the national speed limit. The black car is an unmarked police patrol carrying my licence and passport. Its driver has kindly postponed my arrest for dangerous driving until we get to Nelson where he'll impound my bike. Thank God this didn't happen two weeks ago, at the start of this trip of a lifetime...

Christchurch

The first night, after 24-hours of sleepless travel, I sat in a restaurant, horrifically jet-lagged. Yet the sheer number of attractive young girls around the city hadn't passed me by. A very simple side-mission to the trip was already forming in my head: must get laid. This objective would, to an extent, dictate where I went and how long I stayed. My penis would be my co-pilot.

That first night I got drunk watching a local band play in the bar of a Backpackers (NZ's youth hostels). The lead singer was stunning. Reading my drunken notes back from this night, it seems I claimed to be a journalist from *NME* when I approached her after their set. 'You're my enemy?' she questioned. 'What are you talking about?' The music was loud and I was slurring badly. 'No, I work for the *NME*,' I spat.

'Well, why are you talking to me if you work for the enemy?' she scorned, perplexed by this jet-lagged creature wobbling before her. She then turned and walked off, her hand in the muscle-bound guitarist's back pocket. Not the best start.

The first leg

The next day I escaped Christchurch and hit Interstate 1, a boring straight road up the south-east coast where, apparently, I would be sure to pass a police car. Two hours of paranoid bumbling choked my first ever foreign motorcycle tour with anxiety. But when I finally hit Rangitata and turned off onto I-79 towards Geraldine and Lake Tekapo, everything changed.





Silky black strips of paradise wind through the Crown Range of New Zealand's South Island

The road went from featureless highway to a devilishly fast, twisty and eerily empty road with ever-changing elevations. Without so much as a sniff of bacon I was keen to step up the pace. I opened the vents in my jacket and pants to let out all the accumulated stress and pinned the throttle.

I was still getting used to the VFR and its weird V-Tec burp at 7000rpm. With the full panniers and top box weighing down the back, gunning out of corners lightened the front and set off a weave. Top gear through the fast sweepers, where visibility is extended for miles, was making the bike wobble when leant over. I was struggling for a fast riding technique that kept the bike solid. Eventually I chose to ride it like a 600, revving the nuts off it to keep the needle above the 7k burp zone where the V-Tec can cut in aggressively and take me by surprise: it started feeling like a sportsbike and I soon forgot about the luggage.

Even at a brisk pace it was possible to soak up the incredible scenery. The reflecting sun gave away streams glinting through evergreen pines and fire-dry brush as the road swept me from one stunning vista to the next. The air changed every 20 or so kilometres, from the fresh clean breeze meandering off the lakes to invigorating pine scent and then the perfume of wild mountain flowers. As I rounded a fourth gear bend and straightened up I passed a fence with hundreds of pairs of girls bras tied to it. A blue sign flew out of the distance: Omarama 10km. 'We'll stop here,' ordered my co-pilot.

Queenstown

I left Omarama early the next day having found no bra-less girls. Queenstown was the next objective. With a full tank and a massive English breakfast in my gut, I rolled out of town and settled in for a long stretch of riding.

The blat out of Omarama took me through the imposing Lindis Range along the very twisty Interstate 8, cutting through the towering rockscape like a black snake, twisting back on itself, dropping down, climbing up, all in second and third gear. The counter-steering work-out was keeping me warm in the mountain shadows. An hour of throwing the bike around flew by and I was soon at Cromwell, my turning for Queenstown.

At the end of the road I turned a corner into civilisation. SUVs, big V6 cars, people everywhere and the first police car I'd seen since Christchurch. I circled the busy lakeside town a few times before stopping at Bumbles Backpackers. 'I can put you in a private room off one of the dorms,' said the English guy behind the front desk. I didn't mind sharing a kitchen and lounge area with backpackers, but I needed my own room.

As I opened the door to my dorm, a pannier in each hand, three Japanese girls all turned from the beds they were sitting on and nodded to greet me. I unlocked the door of the dorm marked 'private' and slung my stuff on the bed feeling like a pimp in an eastern harem. Konitchiwa. I'm the daddy now.

I had expected to stay for a while, but was left a little cold by the commercialism, squarely aimed at milking dollars from the hundreds of trust fund babies who flocked here. Having read 'insufficient funds' on an ATM screen, I decided to move on the next day and waited for the office to wire me more funds.

I did this, of course, in a bar. The Scottish barmaid spoke with a soft Edinburgh accent and I was fixated.

'It's a shame you're not staying around,' said Scottie (I never got her name), leaning over the bar. I hoped this was a disguised request for me to take her back to my private room and make room in her for my privates. But I was sure she only meant Queenstown was a great place to stay and party. I sat in the bar for about half a bottle of whiskey until it got too busy for Scottie to talk to me. I was delirious with fatigue and so made my way

home to my Pimp Dorm to sleep before tomorrow's ride to Te Anau. I fell through the door and woke all my bitches up. They apologised for waking and one of them was now a boy.

Queenstown to Te Anau

In the morning I left early, dispatching the Queenstown traffic in no time and hitting the twisty road that hugs the jagged rock face of Richardson Mountain. To the right, below a plummeting drop behind the Armco, was Lake Wakatipu. I had been warned this was a great road to die on as camper van-wielding tourists often get distracted by the scenery and veer across the road.

By lunchtime the roads had straightened into fast long runways, kinked every now and then with a fifth gear bend before straightening up for the next kilometre. Either side of the tarmac were wide, open plains smattered with herds of cattle.

Within 10km of Te Anau the sun made a dramatic appearance, painting a thousand tones of red on the mountains, while warming the air and charging my soul.

I rolled slowly along the main road into town alongside Lake Te Anau's edge, hiding a beaming smile behind my lid. After hours of mind numbing open plains I had entered a small paradise, a vast lake its centrepiece, with the town on one side and a dense green covered mountain on the other. The pin sharp reflection of the mountain on the lake turned to fuzz as a seaplane touched down on its glassy surface and skimmed towards one of the jetties.

Within an hour I was sitting outside a bar, in the sun, with a piece of paper in my hand listing all the must-ride roads in the area. It had been handed to me by two Crown Court judges who'd escaped a dull conference on their bikes. There wasn't enough time to ride all the roads and spend time off the bike. And there was plenty do off the bike. Like sit shotgun in a car while a spatially numb English girl tries to drive it into the lake.

I had met Hannah and her German friend Nina, while sitting outside my digs after dinner. They were buying a used car and wanted my help to check it wasn't a dog. I walked around the Mitsubishi Lancer, kicked a couple of tyres, bounced the bonnet and took a cursory look underneath. I had no idea what I was looking for but gave the nod and they bought it.

But before the money was handed over I suggested a test drive, something I wholly regretted five minutes later after my head hit the dashboard the second time Hannah stamped on the brake thinking it was the clutch.

'There is no clutch, this is an automatic,' I seethed. 'Oh no!' Hannah shrieked. 'I don't know how to drive an automatic!'

By the time I had explained the basic operating procedure of an auto, ie stop, go, we were well out of town along a dark, tree-lined road on the lake's edge. Not having gears was affecting Hannah's steering, braking and thinking skills. 'You're in the middle of the road Hannah,' Nina pointed out as her vacant Cornish pal fiddled with the instruments, marvelling that it had a CD player. 'You can turn round here,' I shouted as Hannah turned the headlights off in her investigation of all the new buttons she would soon own. 'Put the fucking lights back on and turn around ferchrisakes!' I'm a nervous passenger at the best of times and that's when the driver has half a brain and the road ahead is illuminated. Right then my arse was practically chewing a hole in the seat cover.

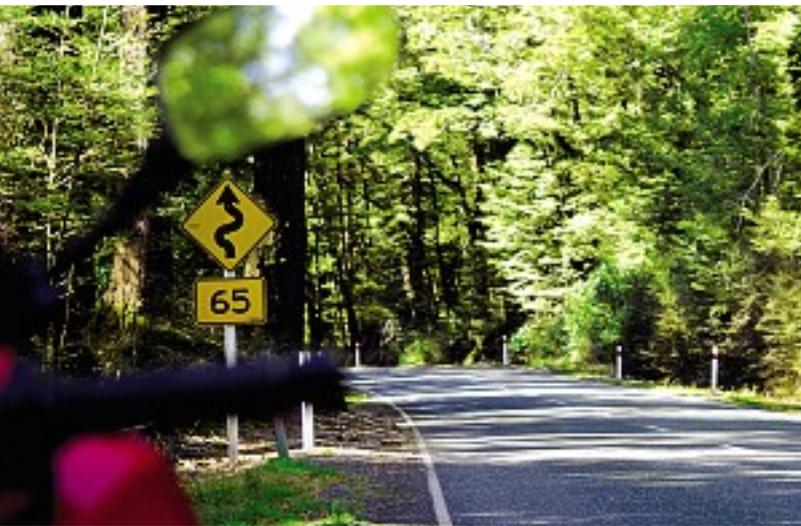
When we finally turned around, Hannah failed to find reverse and selected second instead, shooting us through some brush at the side of the road towards a large open area with the moon reflected off its surface. 'The lake!' Nina and I screamed. I yanked the handbrake and the car stopped just short of the water.

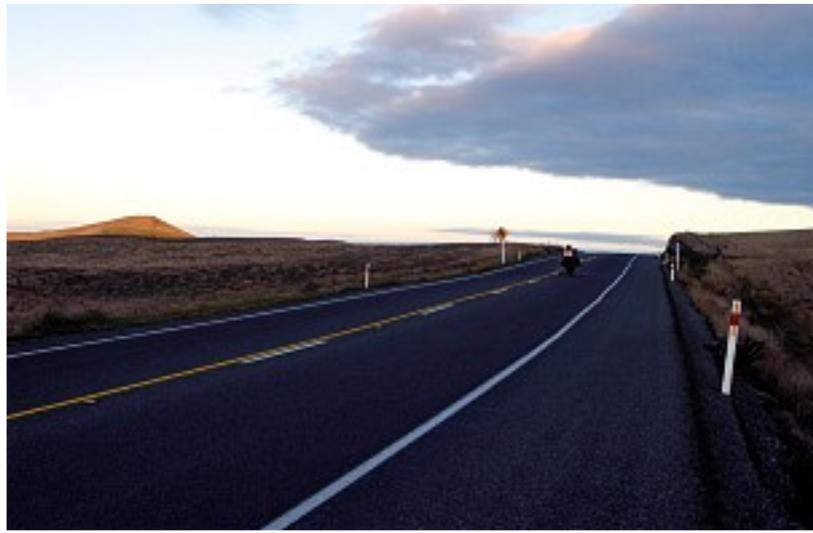
Before we managed to back track into town we veered off the edge of the road twice and passed the wrong side of a traffic island. Nina looked at me, wide-eyed, from the back, probably

Rudyard Kipling described the place as the 'eighth wonder of the world'



The sun-kissed north coast mountain roads contrast with the lush tree-lined road to Milford Sound (below left)





Monster scenery en route to Milford Sound (main), monster trucks on the Crown Range and monster seals at Kaikoura



regretting her decision to use half her remaining cash to buy a car with someone who shouldn't be allowed to operate an electric toothbrush let alone pilot a two-tonne lump of metal. Twenty minutes later we pulled up where the seller stood waiting for his money. Then hopped forward two metres, stopped, then lurched up the kerb, where Hannah decided it was parked, with one wheel in the road. I needed a drink to calm my nerves and Nina knew exactly where to go.

The Redcliffe Café was a cozy bar at the edge of the small town. I made a number of ex-pat friends here and liked the place so much I made a plan that night to stay in Te Anau a while. I'd use it as a base and then travel to Milford Sound and Invercargill in the following days, leaving the bike luggage free.

Hannah and Nina left and went to bed. I stayed, laying back across the bar while the barmaid poured vodka cocktails into my open mouth. When I took my sweatshirt off, a blonde called Mary put it on. It wasn't until I took the wobbly walk home that it dawned on me I had missed a huge opportunity. I turned around and headed back to the bar. Her and her mates were all sitting on the couches on the front porch. I drank with them. They giggled.

Minutes later Mary suddenly got up and left. She was as white as a sheet and bouncing off the lampposts like a pinball as she staggered home. I assisted. We stopped and stuck tongues down each other's throats, a natural and classy punctuation to our flirty, drunken conversation. Then she pointed to the motel behind, next door to the Backpackers. 'I live there. Me and my husband run it'. I went cold, but the added potential danger only gave piquancy to the moment, so I encouraged her back to mine, telling her about the empty double room I had in my cabin.

Once inside we burst into the bedroom, only to discover a young couple in bed. Shit. They had booked in after I went out. We continued sucking face in the kitchen when Mary suddenly pulled away, her eyes still closed, and slowly dropped to her knees. Back of the net! I looked up, beaming an ear-to-ear grin and gazed out the window. *Thwump!* I looked down and Mary was collapsed on the floor, out cold. *No!* I managed to rouse her but when she nearly vomitted in my mouth I thought it best to get her home.

Milford Sound

I was on the road in good time the next morning and had been blessed with a beautiful day – hot, sunny and cloud free. Milford Sound, despite its name, isn't actually a sound but a true fjord carved by glaciers in the ice age. The road there is the only land-based route in. There's nothing but a café, airport and the dock that cater for tourist trips through the fjords. The only petrol station is automated and only accepts Kiwi credit cards. Once there, you can only take in the awesome scenery, one way or another, and then turn around and come back on the same road.

For miles and miles the mountain walls flanking the high-speed road hid the blue sky. Only green-coated rock and imposing jagged sculptures filled my peripheral vision while golden plains laced with silver streams stretched before me, disappearing on the horizon where the two rock walls appeared to meet in a 'V'. The road and scenery vied for my attention. Both were a feast and I was gorging myself at 160kph.

The great thing about Kiwi roads is every corner is preceded by a sign suggesting the maximum corner speed. Once you've developed your own conversion scale these wonderful signs tell you exactly what kind of corner you're barreling into. The best are 85kph and 75kph corners, which I doubled. But when they say 30kph or even 15kph, it's best to take it seriously as these are *Italian Job* hairpins and often on a gradient.

When I arrived at the sound, I parked up and took a walk along the waters edge, watching the tourist flights soar off the runway

every five minutes while giant boats ferried wide-eyed visitors through the geological masterpiece.

Maori legend tells us the great demi-god Tu Te Rakiwhanoa carved all the fjords, improving his technique as he moved from north to south. Milford Sound was his *pièce de resistance*. In fact Rudyard Kipling described the place as the 'eighth wonder of the world'. I'd say the roads are the ninth.

I had used a little over half a tank getting there and without a Kiwi credit card the nearest fuel was back in Te Anau. I had to change the way I rode for the return journey, short shifting and torquing through fast bends in a higher gear, at a pacey but not ballistic speed. By the time I returned, I hadn't had two rides on the same road but two incredible and completely different riding experiences. It was a perfect day.

Invercargill

My trip to Invercargill the next day was delayed by a hangover and I didn't hit the road until 1pm. I was determined to visit this historic town where Burt Munro tested his Indian before taking it to Bonneville. On the damp, cold ride along roads that failed to

excite, I decided to scrap finding the Burt Munro museum and just go straight to the beach where he speed tested his bike and bomb up and down it like the man himself.

I had no idea whether I could do this but when I reached the end of Beach Road, which simply disappeared into the sand, there were a handful of cars parked up and

an endless stretch of empty beach to the left.

I rode the VFR parallel to the shore, drifting across the beach from the water's edge to the higher, harder sand, trying to find the smoothest section. There wasn't one. How Munro did this on his ancient contraption at over 150mph, I have no idea. Tucked in I got the bike up to fifth and saw 155kph on the clock before the minor bar tremor increased frequency and started to rattle my hands loose. After an hour, I cruised to a stop and sat in the sun. That day, on that beach, I had The World's Fastest Honda.

Wanaka to Arthur's Pass

The next day, with Invercargill and Wanaka behind me, I checked the map to confirm I was on the right road but there was only one red line from Wanaka, north towards the west coast and up through the tropical rain forest to the western coastal road. This would take me away from the valley retreats of the past few days and into the dense forests of the Westland National Park, through the shadow of Mount Cook and past the Fox Glacier.

I had been told by the motel owner I could make it to Haast in four hours. I passed through it in two, exhilarated by the asphalt racetrack that was Interstate-8, and ploughed on towards the rain forest, acquiescent to the likelihood of getting a good soaking at some point. It's not called rain forest for nothing.

But the rain never came. Just a plague of sand flies.

Deep in the fertile wilderness, I-8 twisted and turned through green tunnels of tree cover, regularly doubling back on itself in 15kph hairpins that dropped 200-feet to the next switchback. From above the section of multiple hairpins looked like a giant folded fire hose lying in the thicket. Stopping to photograph these corners exposed me to the rampant sandflies, who, against the realms of feasibility, managed to bite me on my knee and calf, despite my triple layered pants, long touring socks and secure boots. This would happen on every stop through the forest until the last coffee break, at a remote Koi Carp farm where I ran around the car park like a fool trying to get my lid back on without trapping bugs against my head. I failed and got bitten on the ear.

When the road started to straighten and the landscape began to open up, I was running parallel with the coast with nothing but Australia to my left. The frenetic riding was over and the coastal

I saw the blue lights and realised I had passed a police car at 130kph over the limit

The calm before the storm:
Rich relaxes before his final ride, to jail.



road was faster with 85kph and 75kph sweepers. However, this part of the road was another hotspot for speed cops, so I relaxed and sat in top gear, enjoying the view of rich farmland.

Arthur's Pass

I passed through the monochrome doldrums of Greymouth to get to Arthur's Pass – a well-known biking road that stretches from the west coast to Christchurch on the east.

By now the VFR and I had become good friends and I'd discovered I could gas it and use the V-Tec lurch to flick the front wheel up and hoist a minger past the bus to the rampant delight of its easily impressed passengers.

At times on this road through the sky I felt like the only person on earth, riding a road I was designing in my mind, three corners ahead at a time. I could go at any speed and scream as loud as my lungs would allow. There was no law, no retribution, no paranoia.

North-east coast

Back on the east coast, heading north up Interstate-1, it took half an hour of dull highway to turn into traffic-free country twisties. My cop-paranoia subsided and the sun came out, directly affecting my solar-powered throttle and seeing me fly through the Waipara valley on fast, open sweeping roads with few straights.

Approaching Goose Bay, the scenery turned from green fields to the ordered matrix of vineyard after vineyard. As I hooned through a kink, suffering a gentle wobble on the exit, I figured if the VFR was to jackknife me off deep into New Zealand's wine country, I'd rather be laying in a vineyard than a ditch.

I reached Kaikoura County just after lunch and set about a half hour work-out through the windy narrow road that hugged the jagged rock wall along the coast. At points there wasn't enough mountain shoulder for the road to sit on so it cut through the rock with crude, short tunnels. Eventually I reached the peninsula town of Kaikoura that's home to a colony of seals, sperm whales, dolphins and the owner of VFR NZ, Robin Hughes.

Kaikoura to jail

That afternoon, Robin and I set off on a ride up towards Golden Bay on the northern tip of the island, via Blenheim and Picton, the sea port connecting North Island and South Island.

The twisty road out of Picton lasted for ages and recent resurfacing had left it precarious on downhill bends. By the time the road morphed into a stock fast sweeper, I tucked in and gunned away from Robin.

The road got grippier as the tarmac turned to older stuff through the Rai Valley. I came up over a crest doing a comfortable 160kph and saw a long straight section that dropped away from me down a fast hill. Up ahead I could see two other motorcyclists with fully loaded tourers, tentatively overtaking about three cars.

For whatever reason, I decided to accelerate up to light speed and rocket past the bikers once they'd completed their slow and unskilled overtake. As I hit the bottom of the hill with the throttle

pinned, I glanced at the clocks and saw 230kph.

I processed the cars and bikers in an instant, disappearing over the next crest and into a set of fourth gear bends. I had got my silly exhilaration fix and had backed off once my mirrors were empty again. But as I tipped into a right-hander, a black car appeared in my right mirror. Huh? Where did he come from? I saw the blue lights in the grille and realised I had just passed an unmarked police car at 130kph over the speed limit.

'Are you trying to get yourself killed,' blurted the officer as he stepped out of his Holden. Apparently he hadn't seen me in his mirrors and almost shit himself when I fired past.

I was looking at a six-month ban and a nasty fine, which had to be paid after the hearing and I had no idea whether I'd be able to cover it. I had two pedestrian days before the court hearing.



'Mr Beach admits his error,' my duty solicitor said, describing my extenuating circumstances and higher-than-average skill-set.

But as I watched the judge, I saw him rubber-stamp some paperwork long before my solicitor had finished.

'I had a GSX until recently,' said the judge suddenly, to no one in particular. The solicitor stammered, paused and then carried on reading from where his flow had been interrupted.

'As he executed his manoeuvre...' continued the solicitor.

'Had a couple of Ducatis too,' piped the judge, directly at me.

The solicitor gave up on his pitch and looked at the judge, who eventually said: 'Even if you were Valentino Rossi, Mr Beach, you would still be banned at that speed. You cannot use New Zealand roads for six months and will pay a \$600 fine.'

Halle-fucking-lujah! The fine could have been up to \$6000.

I had almost missed my flight. I had almost got laid. I had almost had to escape town from an enraged husband. I had almost drowned in a car and almost jumped out of a plane. There were many things I had almost done. But making the trip out to New Zealand to ride those perfect roads wasn't one of them. I found biking Nirvana – New Zealand's South Island.

GUIDE TO BIKING IN NEW ZEALAND

■ HOW TO BOOK

Call VFR New Zealand, up to 18 months in advance, to book your bike hire which includes full Givi luggage, guide pack with maps plus full Honda-backed service and AA breakdown cover. Riding season is September to May.

■ HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Bike hire is £787 (£700 plus 12.5% Kiwi tax) per week. We recommend no less than two weeks with three being ideal. There is a £50 per week pillion supplement. A 25% deposit is required with full payment made three months before departure.

Return flights cost around £700 and accommodation

ranges from £10 a night in a B&B up to £40 for a luxury motel. On average, a two-week trip will total £2500 or £3500 two-up.

■ KIWI FACTS

Distance, England to New Zealand: 12,000 miles
Journey time: 24-hours
Luggage weight limit: 20kg (or 30kg on Singapore Airlines, VFR NZ's commercial

partner)
Cost to fuel up a VFR in NZ: £9
National speed limit: 100kph

■ CONTACTS

Call VFR New Zealand on: 07779 656253 or visit www.vfrnewzealand.com (and view more pics from this trip).
Virgin Flightstore: 0870 7577747 (quote VFR NZ)
NZ tourism: www.newzealand.com

SOUTH ISLAND

