

VFR New Zealand – Feature in Superbike Magazine, May 2001

The Kiwi Connection – By Paul Lance

It's been ages since I've had a decent holiday (Yeah, right – Ed.) so when a man shoved a VFR New Zealand leaflet into my hand at the Brands Hatch World Superbike round last year, I made sure I held onto it for a rainy day.

And rain it did. With most of England's roads under water and the countryside a no-go area even for dirt biking, the UK was starting to suck. Come February I'd had enough of greasy wet salt-slaughtered roads. It was time to grab the missus and give Robin Hughes, the brains behind VFR NZ a call.

Chatting to Robin, he explained his reasons behind the venture. He's travelled a lot to NZ to visit family. Whilst there he had tried to hire bikes but always ended up with a tatty old 500 that had been used, abused and invariably threatened to dump him in the middle of nowhere.

That got him thinking and with a little collaboration from both Honda UK and NZ, VFR New Zealand was born.

The idea is quite simple. The roads in New Zealand are great and I don't just mean your favourite Sunday morning hack great, but like the best bits in France great. In addition, they go on forever, winding through scenery to blow your mind. The bikes are new VFR 800s, fitted with hard Givi luggage and backed up with full dealer and breakdown support. Add the roads, scenery, weather and bikes together and you have a holiday company. The NZ end of the business is based in Christchurch on the stunning south island, you simply call UK-based Robin, tell him when you want to go, part with some cash and he sorts everything. And we mean everything.

A special tie-up with Singapore airlines means Robin generally has more luck getting flights than you would. The airline is already briefed to expect motorcyclists, so when you arrive carrying tons of kit they are still helpful. The only problem I encountered was that a single bag man is only allowed to lift 31 kilos (the unions guv) so pack small bags rather than one biggie.

Now I know it's a hell of a long way to go for your hols but, once you get there, you'll wonder why you had never done it before.

The flight is a bit of an epic but Singapore Airline offer good service but, more importantly, have TVs in the back of all the seats. These don't only play films but also have Nintendo on them. Before you know it the hostesses are dragging you and your bleeding thumbs off the plane thus stopping you breaking your record score on Streetfighter 2.

Robin goes to every effort to make your life easier, so a week before you leave, your Givi luggage arrives at your base. Pack it, stick it on the plane, then clip it on the bike at the other side.

We actually split the journey by stopping in Singapore so the better half could do some shopping and I could get pissed in Raffles on Singapore Slings, which I thoroughly recommend.

And so to New Zealand. We met the chaps at Casbolts to collect a spangly new red VFR. Being the middle of February the temperature was a very comfortable 26 degrees and a long way from the UK in every sense. Colin the manager went through the ins and outs of the VFR, including showing me the chain lube and puncture kit cunningly placed under the seat. Any excess kit can be left securely at the shop and, with a handful of guides safely tucked away, it's time to explore.

The plan was to basically do a lap of the South Island but as it only had 60kms on the clock it meant a quick pit stop back at Casbolts for a first service after a 1000 kilometres. Unlike Australia where you will be travelling forever before the landscape changes, New Zealand has a remarkable variety of terrains. From long tree-lined straights to mountainous hairpins to moon-like volcanic scenes, it's got the lot. With only three and a bit million people in NZ of which two-thirds are in the north island, it doesn't take long to get out of the urban sprawl and into the country.

The south island is much like the UK but backwards. What I mean is that the further north the hotter it is and obviously south does the opposite. What you do have to watch out for is the west that makes the rain we've had here look like a small shower, but more of that later.

Out of Christchurch and within half an hour you are at the beginning of the Lewis Pass, a road so perfect for motorcycling that you would do anything to have it anywhere near your front door. An endless series of hairpins and sweepers that all have the benefit of an immaculate surface. Added to this dream scenario are road signs informing you of the speed the government think you can safely negotiate a corner. You soon learn that you can normally say, double this, and all of a sudden you have a knowledge of almost exactly what a corner is like.

The destination that day was Nelson and after seven hours of hard riding interspersed with leisurely photo breaks we arrived only to be confronted by a glowing sea of neon "No Vacancy" signs staring us in the face. So we learned lesson one the hard way. Book accommodation ahead.

As always in these sorts of dilemmas, it turned out well with the evening finally spent in a lovely motel run by a bloke from Lewisham. Typical. Morning dawned to another beautiful sunny day and a chance to visit the vineyards of Marlborough and Renwick whilst heading back down to Christchurch for the service.

Completed overnight, I checked the weather report to see if a trip to the West Coast was advisable. Not a cloud in the sky they said. After another fantastic journey along the Arthurs Pass which runs across the island from Christchurch to Hokitika, it became apparent that the Kiwis are no better at predicting the weather than we are. As soon as the coast was reached, the rain came. We endured a two-day deluge the like of which you have never seen. Unfortunately this made view the Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers a bit difficult due to cloud hugging the floor like its life depended on it.

Another lesson learned and it was time to head for Queenstown, land of jet boats and jumping from bridges. Travelling through scenery not too dissimilar to a rain-forest, as soon as the road turned inland, the clouds stopped, the sun appeared and off came the waterproofs. Mile after mile of joyous roads lead us to the thrill-seeking capital of the world that does not fail to impress. Driving through the gorge that leads to Queenstown is breathtaking enough until you see someone throw themselves off one of the bridges, only to be saved from certain death by a giant elastic band wrapped around their ankles. Obviously due to my old war wounds I was unable to try this bungee madness myself, but did give the jet boats a go which were a laugh.

After six days in the saddle we decided to treat ourselves and booked into one of the many lakeside five-star hotels.

Virtually everywhere has secure parking but the impression I got was that even if you left the keys in the ignition all night, chances are it would still be there in the morning. An evening meal at the mountain top restaurant overlooking Lake Wakatipu finished a perfect day before the long journey home.

The journey back to Christchurch took us up the centre towards Mount Cook, New Zealand's tallest mountain, recently seen in the film Vertical Limit. The scenery is guaranteed to take your breath away as you encounter mile after mile of fluorescent blue lakes. These are fed from the nearby glaciers which are constantly crushing the rock that supports them. This dumps silt into the water which produces this bizarre colour. Travelling across the plains that run at the foot of these mountains means long straight roads with few junctions and therefore secure flat-out touring. The VFR is good for over 200kms (160 miles) before a fill-up so the distances are dealt with rapidly and comfortably with both rider and pillion comfort excellent. Before you know it, Mount Cook is on the horizon and it's time for another stop-over.

As we had been unable to see the glaciers and the mountains from the West Coast, we decided to take an hour sightseeing flight from the local airport we stumbled across at Lake Tekapo. With just five of us in a tiny Cessna buzzing over the glaciers it was a great experience. In fact I reckon it's the best way to see the true size of these oversized ice-cubes. And how much for this luxury I hear you squeal? 70 quid.

And herein lies the true beauty of New Zealand. You can live like a king for not a lot of cash. OK, it's not cheap to get there, but once you arrive, you're laughing. Forget European prices, as the exchange rate is basically three New Zealand dollars to one pound, everything is dirt cheap. A flash dinner for two is 20 quid, a tank of fuel a fiver and beer is 70p – you just can't spend your money.

So, with senses frazzled, it was time to head back to VFR NZ base in Christchurch to drop the bike off. The trip had been fantastic, with not even a scratch on the bike, but we were on our best behaviour. Sometimes hooligan antics lose their appeal, especially when you've got amazing roads to explore.

A VFR and New Zealand, not a bad combination. Typically Honda and very typical of this holiday. Give it a go.