

NZ revealed – well, just a bit!

“Bucket list”. In my humble opinion it’s an ugly-sounding phrase. But everyone understands it, and my own ‘list’ included - amongst **many** other things! - touring NZ on a motorbike. I’d fancied doing it for ages. You’re 66, Paul, I said to myself - so unless you go and do it now, you probably never will!

Thus I planned and went on my self-designed “dream” trip last February and March, lasting two months, and taking in Dubai, New Zealand North and South Islands, Australia, Hawaii, and San Francisco. And while I was at it, I booked myself up on the ‘California Zephyr’ train too, spending three days and two nights on board, travelling from California all the way through to Chicago – birthplace of the modern skyscraper (I am a retired architect) – and where I finished my world tour before flying home. What a trip! What sights! What memories! But I’m going to tell you here a bit about the 3 weeks I spent motorbiking around New Zealand’s South Island.

I arrived in Christchurch, my bike pick-up point, by train, having previously crossed most of North Island also by train, and thence the Cook Strait by ferry. Christchurch was a genuine shock. Tales of it having been New Zealand’s most ‘english’ and possibly most beautiful city had to be taken on trust, as the devastating earthquakes of a few years ago have virtually knocked the stuffing out of the central square mile-or-so business area. Hundreds had tragically been killed in the quakes, and their memorials and testaments are there to see and hear. But I had not expected to see devastation on such a scale. The focal point of the disaster remains Christchurch cathedral, forlorn without its stone tower and spire, and with its fabric open to the elements, still shored up by massive scaffolding. There are many other buildings in an equal, or even more parlous state however. Such as the very badly damaged and unsafe Roman Catholic cathedral, and a theatre with its roof and walls mostly gone and the seats falling off the edge of the grand circle - which is itself hanging precariously in space. Considerable areas of central Christchurch are now open-air car parking lots, and of those buildings which still remain standing (it has to be said mostly fairly ugly creations from the last 30 - 40 years so) many are condemned and are due to be demolished. Often buildings outwardly seem OK, but clearly there are structural faults within. Thus wire fencing features strongly in any visit to downtown. Damage and destruction, I was told, was even heavier as you travel through the residential suburbs towards the coast. The authorities and the people have nevertheless put on a brave face and “container shopping” – shipping containers massed to provide a temporary adjunct to the shopping scene – now provides a colourful city centre backdrop in an otherwise bleak environment. The narrative suggests it may take 25 years to get the city properly back on its feet. Others say that even *that* forecast is optimistic.....

I picked up my hired shiny Honda VFR V-TEC from Casbolts Honda dealership, having arranged the deal a year in advance through 'VFR New Zealand' in the UK. Casbolts themselves had also suffered some light structural damage from the earthquakes. However, I was now ready for the open road and I decided I would navigate the South island in a roughly clockwise direction, but with no 'fixed' agenda. This would allow for bad weather, possibly not feeling up to the mark, or for stopping as and when the mood struck me. I was advised if I had it, (I didn't) that SatNav would be of very limited use here – as there was basically only one route around the Island!

I headed off south and inland to Twizel, this being my selected first stop for two nights. I did not know it at the time, but this was one of the many NZ locations used for the 'Lord of the Rings' films. Here, they filmed battle scenes on the local plain – and 'imported' the (real) mountains digitally from elsewhere in NZ! It is said that many of the extras used in filming work in the local pubs and bars.

After a good night's sleep I rode out to Mount Cook (about 40 miles or so away) and then took myself for a 4-hour trek in shorts and walking boots across to the icy lake at the foot of Mount Cook's glacier. The weather was sunny and hot, and so it was lovely to get the leathers off for a while and let the air get to my skin. Wonderful views – and the amazing thing I found about New Zealand mountains is that they are really quite accessible. They seem to rise more or less immediately out of the flat plains - unlike in the Alps for instance, where you often travel through valleys and lots of foothills before reaching 'the main event'. The clouds are also unlike anything I've seen anywhere else. Long white formations – well justifying New Zealand's translated Maori name – 'Land of the Long White Cloud'. This was indeed pure New Zealand!

But imagine my utter surprise at what happened next. I was riding my way back to Twizel in the late afternoon from the aforementioned walk, down the side of the lovely and incredibly blue Lake Pukaki when I stopped to admire the view. Another biker turned up, and because I thought it would be nice to get a photo of myself with this beautiful lake-and-mountain background, I asked the newcomer before he/she had taken his/her helmet off if he/she could oblige? The helmet was removed – to reveal – Dave Fears - from TVAM! I think we were both taken aback. Neither of us knew about the other's plans, and both bikes were hired from different outfits. What are the chances of paths crossing 'out of the blue', in the same foreign country, on the same island, on the same road, at the same place, and at the same time? Before my NZ trip was over, I was to have some similar uncanny experiences like that. Dave and I rode back to Twizel, and that evening we met up again to have a 'celebratory' meal and drink together, before departing on our separate biking ways once more.....

I continued south and followed a route towards, and around the coast, heading towards Dunedin. It seemed there was a rugby tournament on, so I had to head even further south in order to obtain any accommodation at all for the night.

Others I met had experienced exactly the same problem. After a night's rest I set off again, heading through the Catlins, a very scenic area on the south coast near Invercargill. Here I met extremely strong sidewinds – enough to almost blow me off the road – plus hail and heavy rain, from which I took shelter under tree cover. Yet another day of very strong winds and incredibly low temperatures followed, where log fires - yes, really! - provided welcome albeit temporary relief. I'd ridden through a temperature drop of **35C** in just two days. (You read that correctly – we're talking Centigrade here!) This was, I reminded myself, the southern hemisphere's 'summer' I'd travelled so far to experience! Hmmpf!) Eventually I hauled myself into Te Anau, where I stayed for a lovely three nights in a typical NZ self-catering motel, and where the weather gradually started to behave itself once more. Here I walked several miles around the beautiful lake, saw twinkling glow-worms in their eerie watery caves habitat, and watched a fabulous short film about the majestic Fjordland all around. I lastly took a mini-bus tour to iconic Milford Sound for a serene boat trip, complete with buffet lunch on board. And yes, I am pleased to say the weather on this most spectacular of occasions close to the very southern tip of NZ was fabulous! We even saw a couple of small penguins in their natural habitat.

On from Te Anau to Queenstown for another 3 night stop. Here I tried out the Shotover Jet jetboat, twisting at breakneck speed in shallow water (often no more than 100mm deep!) through a rocky canyon before HRHs Wills and Kate took their own royal turns a month or so later! I biked around the area, watched (emphasis on 'watched'!) bungee-jumping and lots of other crazy things. New Zealanders don't just look at scenery – they 'use' it! Before I left, snow had dusted the 'Remarkables' mountains on the far shore of the lake.....

After Te Anau I carried on my clockwise journey heading for Wanaka (pronounced Wonnaker, just in case you had other ideas!) at the head of the lake of the same name. I'd intended carrying on towards the coast that very same evening, but was informed that major road repairs ahead meant the closure of the road each night at 8pm, so I decided I'd stay over and do the trip the following day at a more leisurely pace. Glad I did.

Past Wanaka I visited an old goldmine, seeing fascinating remains left, amongst others, by Chinese prospectors - from a century or more ago. Then I reached the West Coast – one of New Zealand's least populated areas. I am told that only 30,000 – 40,000 souls live along this 500 miles of coastal strip, so as a consequence petrol stations are very few and far between here. Not a good place to run out of petrol then. Despite being fully aware of these risks, I had somehow miscalculated and misread the 'logarithmic' nature of the fuel gauge and allowed the tank to run virtually dry. Although my accommodation for the night ahead was booked, a traffic sign suddenly advised me that I was still 25 miles from my destination and in the middle of nowhere just as my fuel gauge simultaneously announced – **in red!** - that my tank was empty! I immediately dropped into the lowest gears, and 'coasted' wherever possible. No-one passed

me by in either direction, and I saw not a sign of any habitation – where, *'in extremis'*, I might have attempted to buy some petrol from a householder. How I coaxed my machine into the town of Fox Glacier after what seemed like an eternity I'll never know. Fumes don't even come into it. Someone had clearly been watching over me

In the morning, after the decidedly unwanted drama of the previous day, and with beautiful warm sunshine beckoning I headed by bike (I'd filled her up to overflowing the night before!!!) up to the glacier whose namesake town I'd stayed in, put on my walking boots once more and went for a mini-trek up to the glacier face. Incredible views, and a wonderful insight into the majestic and irrepressible forces of nature all around. Even a pair of large native *Kea* parrots showed up in their natural habitat. Later, back in town for a bite of lunch I almost chose a thick cheesecake, made, can you believe, with the NZ equivalent of a favourite of mine on top - Mars bars(!) However, I opted instead for a really deep slice of the finest, luscious, most glorious looking deep orangey-lemon meringue I have ever eaten in my life..... oh yes, the lad knows how to live!

Moving on, I eventually entered the town of Greymouth. I 'overnighted' but nothing in particular engaged me in this once busy coal port, and so I moved on northwards towards the 'Pancake Rocks and Blowhole'. (Before I explain that, I 'adjusted' my planned onward route because – over in Christchurch barely 100 miles to my east over the mountains - the weather was playing up again. Badly. Flooding and mayhem from high winds – as if the earthquakes from a few years ago hadn't been enough – were again causing major problems for that beleaguered city. I decided to stay on 'my' (west coast) side of the mountain range, where unbelievably it was still hot and sunny, and continue north instead of riding over one of the scenic high passes as I'd planned. That could come later, hopefully.

The 'Pancake Rocks' were a geological delight – masses of narrow horizontal layers of earth's history being mercilessly smashed by incoming waves, and the blowhole 'spouting' into the sky at irregular intervals with a whooshing animal 'snort'! (so difficult to catch at the right moment on film!) I could have spent all day here in the hot sunshine, mesmerised by the fascinating action of the sea. As it was, some Aussie tourists - whom I'd met in North Island weeks earlier - had caught up with me yet again for the 3rd time, so we had another long chat...

After that I rode north, to stop next at the Buller Gorge, where I crossed NZ's longest pedestrian 'swing' bridge – we call them rope bridges. It was hairy, I don't mind saying, and I really felt queasy, preferring to look ahead rather than down through the narrow metal open grid footway at the waters rushing over boulders below. I was clinging desperately to the low steel rope "handrails". The whole thing swung sideways as well as up and down, and more alarmingly for me, tilted when people passed in the opposite direction.....

I eventually reached the town of Motueka on Tasman Bay of the north coast. From here I went on through Nelson and Blenheim to end up in a really lovely B & B. I visited the nearby air museum set up by 'Lord of the Rings' film director and historical air enthusiast Peter Jackson. It was just my good fortune that they were static testing a brand new rotary engine replacement for historic aircraft on that particular day. I decided, alone, to stand **behind** the completely whirling engine and its propeller blades – *just in case things turned nasty!!!* (My IAM training?)

A visit to a local cemetery was planned for the next day (where I 'found' the grave of a long-lost relative for a friend in England) followed by a tour of a large, and impressive modern winery and a tasting! Here we were told the classical music playing from the loudspeakers on masts was not for the benefit of the visitors - who may picnic in the grounds – but instead for the **grapes** around the masts! The winery has its very own proof their grapes grow bigger and lusher when cosseted by Beethoven..... They admit there is no scientific back-up for this but the winery goes by results, however they may come about.... 'Outside the box' thinking indeed. So next time you have a glass of wine, think of it as some kind of concert!

Whale-watching at Kaikoura followed day or so later (I saw 4 whales close up on my particular trip – above the average count apparently!), and gazed as they arched their tail flukes and gently slipped to impossible depths with a farewell plume of spray from their blowholes . A dip in the sulphurous hot pools of inland Hanmer Springs was the next day's delight, from where I crossed the Lewis Pass back to the West Coast for a night, then a return over Arthur's Pass in beautiful sunshine back towards where it all started in Christchurch. With still just a day to spare, I ventured out to the recommended former French enclave of Akaroa, east on the Banks peninsula. A really windy and twisty but scenic road eventually revealed a most enchanting scene of little bays and harbours with the small town of Akaroa nestled at its heart. I settled down in a small open-air restaurant at the waterfront, to a late lunch of local green-lipped mussels washed down with a glass of Sauvignon blanc, watching the golden sun drifting slowly across the azure blue sky and making the yacht sails whiter than any toothpaste.

What a perfect way to finish my tour of NZ.