

NORTH ON THE SOUTH

The South Island of New Zealand packs all you would ever want into a destination. You just need the keys

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April 1, 2014, was a watershed date for me. I broke a few in-built, non-negotiable rules that needed to be broken. Rule one was to avoid re-running foreign roads I have previously toured. Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud, has beckoned before — the South Island in 2005 and the North Island in 2013, both sensational experiences on a rented BMW R 1200 GS (brilliant) and a rented Suzuki DR650 (painful) respectfully. The riding

and weather surpassed all expectations. Put me down for another trip.

Rule two, which I downright demolished, was to never carry a pillion for more than a couple of hours once a year as a birthday treat. I like a solo life on a bike. With a BMW lined up at Nigel Howard's Motorcycle Rentals NZ and a number of planets aligned, I wasn't squirming out of this ride without sharing it with Adele, who is learning the ways of motorcycling from the pillion seat.

This trip was governed by a couple of factors — budget and the fact we'd both ►



■ For such a small place, New Zealand can be pretty big

“By detouring onto any roads denoted as sealed with crammed-in wriggly bits, you’re assured of some of the best biking in the world”

previously scoured most of the South Island. We chose to take our time, do fewer kilometres, relax and take in the ride at a slower rate. Exploring the northern half of the South Island had appeal, especially as my debutant is a serial art and craft snooper. We flew into Christchurch, which is still recovering from the 2012 earthquakes. In Nigel’s car, as he ferried us to the bike, the roads felt rippled and damaged, like I imagine war-torn Damascus might. The soft-riding BMW F700 GS seemed a very logical choice in hindsight. Out of Christchurch we adjusted to a life on the road, living out of two small bags, staying in hostels and

cheap hotels, and giving Jack Kerouac a lesson in economy. Still, the hallmarks of our adventure were the “wow” moments from the breathtaking scenery and stunning sweeping roads, even at conservative speeds. You need to build in time for those moments — there are many of them. We’d prepared for NZ’s questionable and changeable weather. Our gear covered everything from potential freezing and torrential rain to the possibility of hot, humid weather. One pannier took the full complement of camera gear. The other pannier housed nibbles, toiletries, books and spare shoes for stepping out. We shared the travel-bag — sitting on the rack — and worked on four sets of undies, socks and T-shirts, a jumper and a pair of jeans each. Our riding suits doubled as our day clothes and as jackets for night walks or meals. As Nigel’s packages cover roadside assistance, we only carried a small puncture repair kit and a cable-lock. Nigel’s bikes are all very new and in top condition so tools and spares seemed a waste of space. Smaller all-weather, high-performing cameras these days mean a camera only

needs to be in your jacket pocket. I went overboard in the optical department and this is why I used a makeshift tankbag, which was my handy Zac hydration pack. I needed a camera handy around almost every bend. The vistas are mind-boggling and we soon tired from struggling off to access the Nikon in the pannier for a quick shot. We must have stopped 20 times on the afternoon run from Christchurch to the



little west-coast town of Hokitika, home of driftwood on the beaches. There are superb sunsets over the ocean and rivers that are full of stones which provide jade. The souvenir shopping for jade necklaces for two sets of offspring halved our entire eight-day budget! The weather was closing in so we rode north up the coast and across. Flexibility is useful in NZ. On the way I realised all roads feel entirely different heading in the opposite direction to my original visit. Riding clockwise through Greymouth and Westport produced great views and better



■ Blue skies, winding roads and dramatic scenery — all in a day’s ride, really

“The weather was closing in so we rode north up the coast and across. Flexibility is useful in NZ”

bends than I remember, and a reminder that mining and fishing during winter on the west coast must be full of hardships. Our mid-sized GS was proving to be very comfortable for our 300km days and we were grateful for the 4.6L/100km fuel-sipping. At \$NZ2.14, 95 premium was costing us about \$40 a day. The upright riding position and lazy, torquey power-plant made for relaxing touring, and the BMW handled it well loaded. Given the variety of choice Motorcycle Rentals NZ offers, I think we almost stumbled onto the ideal saddle. Buller Gorge is a treat. It carves a slice from the north-western coast up towards Nelson and provides views and roads labelled “please don’t miss”. By detouring onto any roads denoted as sealed with crammed-in wriggly bits, you’re assured of some of the best biking in the world. From the map or at a distance they will look like peg-scratching nirvana, but they’re not quite that good for a couple of traction-robbing reasons. The narrow and relatively unused Kiwi roads have unhealthy deposits of fine white gravel

between wheel tracks in each lane. It is slippery and traction is compromised at lean angles. Cars sweep the mess onto the roads by clipping the verge. Occasionally there is a made-in-motorcycle-heaven stretch of road devoid of crap and with the grip of Mugello, but they are rare. Quaint little villages and towns feature heavily up north. They are not the rugged mining outposts of down south. Tourism sustains their lifestyle of crafts, organic produce and food outlets. We met people from all around the world who had moved in, set up camp and were running little business to enjoy the quieter life and the rich reward of simple living. Where do you reckon the best pizza we have ever sampled was made? Adele and I have spent months (not together) ambling around Italy and have never tasted one as good as in the Dangerous Kitchen in Takaka. All the walking and riding meant we could justifiably order two! If calorie shedding is related to riding twisty roads, then load up and enjoy the weight loss across the north from Taraka Hill, following the more circuitous route ►

FLEETING MATTERS

Motorcycle Rentals NZ offers an amazing array of motorcycles. From classic styled Triumphs to a decent spread of BMWs and big-bore Japanese sports-tourers, they have it covered. Nigel Howard says he has to cover an eclectic and broad range of tastes, from the sensible Americans who, as Nigel says, are “unprepared for the ever-changing landscape on a grand scale and the empty roads” to the wilder Germans, who don’t beat around the bush and go exploring ASAP. Aussies represent the largest slice of his clients.

Prices start at \$89 per day off-season for a KLR650 up to more than \$200 a day for top-shelf larger machinery. Those prices include soft or hard luggage, unlimited distance, full breakdown cover and full comprehensive insurance. For rentals over 14 days, Nigel’s company also provides full motorcycle clothing free of charge for those visitors from overseas who do not wish to fill a suitcase full of motorcycle gear. You can store surplus gear with him.

If you mention Australian Road Rider and plan to book a motorcycle for more than eight days, Nigel will cover the first night’s accommodation in a Christchurch B&B.

See motorcyclental.co.nz or call +64 21 147 5990.



via the Motueka Valley, through Nelson and Havelock, Queen Charlotte Drive to Picton. The ride is different to the southern part of the South Island. North is “spectacular”, south is “gigantic”.

One of our highlights (there were way too many to list) came after a meal of local mussels in a pub at Havelock. It was a “don’t miss French Pass” moment. The ride up to the French Pass, which is one of the peninsular fingers that prod into Marlborough Sound, is gigantically spectacular. It will take something very special to top this ride, with its feeling of connection with scenery so expansive and remote even though it’s only a short 60km long. It was bathed in sunlight,

greens, vivid blues from the sky and seas and a ruggedness I’d claim is as good as it gets. It is stunning. (It’s also a gravel road, and in many cases you are not allowed to take a rented motorcycle on unsealed roads, so check the fine print.)

From Nelson we decided the smaller back roads heading south looked attractive. We hugged the east coast from the ferry port to the wine growing district of Blenheim. The predominantly gravel road hugs little bays and climbs and winds its way up and down picturesque ranges, with views forever. If you like the feeling of solitude and of times gone by, detours like this will give it to you.

We joined the people-movement for a ▶

■ Like the world’s best pizza, the rented F 700 GS proved very satisfying



THE VIEW FROM BEHIND

What an amazing opportunity. Wide open spaces, beautiful nature and blessed with fantastic weather. We were both excited for an adventure. We were out to follow the sun, nothing booked except the bike and the flights in and out. I love that kind of travel — it enables the freedom that aligns so nicely with motorcycling.

Having both travelled the South Island in the past, I was keen to go where I hadn't been before, but happy to venture north or south, so the deal was to chase the sun and avoid the rain. We did it very successfully.

Each evening we would rock into a town, scan for vacancy signs, then pick a place to stay. It was really that easy. The breathtaking scenery we saw during the day set us up for a great meal, a few tales over a wine and an early night. The photos capture every aspect of the amazing trip, from dirt to tar, from built-up to remote. All we needed was a map, some snacks in the pocket, and a good coffee to start each day of adventure.

As the pillion, I felt spoiled. I was able to take in all the breathtaking scenery, New Zealand's nature at its best. And relax as we took the next turn, only to find more stunning views and endless sights. I daydreamed about who else might like to travel alongside us next time. It was the kind of trip you just want to share, a bit like great chocolate — it's always good to share the experience.

Would I do it again? Too right!
When's the next flight?

— ADELE JOHNS

transport section down Highway 1. The Kaikoura Coast is a cracker for views and its sense of freedom, and it's well known for accessible colonies of seals and possible glimpses of whales. Another couple of days avoiding the main road ticked off some exquisite rural touring through the North Canterbury region.

Backtracking north into Hanmer Springs for hot-springs pampering (guys, there were plenty of solo riders there enjoying the hot pools too), we rounded one corner for the postcard photo of a bridge over a well-known bungee-jumping location. We stopped for the

■ You'll come across countless little one-lane crossings on the South Island



“Adele and I have spent months ambling around Italy and have never tasted pizza as good as in the Dangerous Kitchen in Takaka”

■ The NZ coast is renowned, especially the South Island's west coast



obligatory photo, remarking how funny it is when, in an unplanned way, you fall into great locations just by deciding to head that way.

One day left and we needed to celebrate and not feel we hadn't done our best. Away to the east, Akaroa beckoned. We picked the perfect day of sunshine and warmth. The sterling ride to Banks Peninsula and back was like two kids spending their last few dollars on the best ride in the fun park. Roller-coasting around the rim of the harbour and snoozy inlets, and

riding through sea mist with next to zero visibility, time just disappeared.

Every day of our trip to the South Island was better than the last and was as good as the next and equal to the first. It was epic.

Next visit to New Zealand I may take in the same roads. I may even take Adele in November and I will definitely hire a bike. And I will go to the town in the Hawke's Bay region whose name doesn't fit in one column — Taumatawhakatangihangakoau auotamateapokaiwhenuakitanatah. **ARR**