



New Zealand Anniversary Tour

Surviving the coldest summer in 50 years

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My wife, Rochelle, and I had visited New Zealand twice with our children. On our previous trips we had spent time driving on the South Island. On one trip, Rochelle suggested that we take a motorcycle tour of the South Island for our 25th wedding anniversary in 2003.

About four months before our departure, we contacted Ian and John Fitzwater of Go Tour New Zealand in Nelson, and they assisted us in planning and booking lodging for an eight-day, self-guided tour for the end of the New Zealand summer season in February. We knew the route we wanted to take and they provided a list of attractions we could include along the way. They took care of booking the lodging, created a detailed itinerary, and provided good service in helping us finalize our plans. When we booked the tour, the exchange rate was about \$.50 per NZ dollar. Our cost for the tour was \$3,300 (U.S.), which included bike rental, bike and travel insurance, lodging (B&B with breakfast for the most part), and some of the excursions and side trips we selected. In addition, we also paid for lunches, dinners, incidentals and fuel (which was expensive, averaging about \$4 per gallon). The final tally without airfare was about \$4,300 for both of us.

We had both ridden BMWs since the 1970s. Ours were vintage machines; mine was a 1975 R75/6 (now with more than 100,000 miles on the odometer) while Rochelle rode a 1973 R75/5 with more than 90,000 miles. I had been thinking about buying an R1150, so we rented a 2002 R1150RT so I could take an extended test drive on our vacation. Rochelle decided to be a passenger on this trip, so we packed for a two-up, touring vacation of the South Island.

Getting there

We left our house in Denver, Colorado, on Valentine's Day at 3 p.m. and arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, at 7 a.m. local time, two days later.



In front of the Thunderbike shop with the R1150 RT in the foreground.

New Zealand is just on the other side of the international dateline, so another day got tacked on. By 11 a.m. we met Ian Fitzwater, who drove us to the Grampian Villa B&B where we were staying. Brother John and his wife, Jo, restored a Victorian house, the Grampian Villa, converting it into a B&B. The accommodations were very modern, spacious and the restoration used beautiful native New Zealand woods.

After some sightseeing in Nelson, Jo suggested the Oceana Restaurant for dinner, which was a short walk downtown near the botanical garden. We enjoy an excellent leisurely meal and got back to the Villa by 8 p.m. for some well deserved sleep in a real bed. It had been 35 hours since we last slept in a bed, and we were snoring in minutes.

The adventure begins

When Ian arrived at 9 o'clock the next morning, he went to the cupboard in the kitchen and handed me the keys to our R1150RT (what, no forms to fill out?). We inspected the bike while he quickly went over what I needed to know about an RT, and in passing, mentioned that the brakes were a bit "touchy" at low speed. After Rochelle and I loaded up the bike, I was a bit nervous. The fully-loaded RT seemed to dwarf my R75/6 and I hadn't even taken a test ride. As I eased the bike up the drive to the street to let Rochelle get on, I stepped on the rear brake and found myself almost sitting on the top of the gas tank. "Touchy" was an understatement. These brakes were like a toggle switch!

After following Ian to his Thunder Bike shop to pick up a missing tank bag (and ogling the vintage Norton, Triumph and BSAs in front of



Rochelle with the R1150 RT just about loaded and ready to go.



the shop), we negotiated the roundabouts and headed out of Nelson. Our first day was short at 160 miles. With the long flight the day before, and driving on the other side of the twisty roads, we had decided to ease into the tour. Our route took NZ60 along the coast of the Tasman Bay and then over to Golden Bay where our destination was the Golden Bay Lodge B&B. Wine vineyards surround Richmond since this is a major wine producing region for New Zealand. As we headed inland past Motueka, the road headed into the bush on its way to the top of Takaka Hill. Whereas the road was relatively straight through the flat wine country, it now dove through the bush and scrambled up hills like a cork

screw. I was starting to get the hang of the RT, but the sharp 10 mph, up hill, decreasing radius hairpins had me scraping things in the corners as we made our way to the top and pulled into a scenic overlook with a view of the Tasman Bay with Nelson in the distance.

The Golden Bay Lodge sat on a cliff above the beach surrounded by bush with several large, gorgeous rose gardens overlooking the water. We checked in with Ray and Mary, the owners, and then rode out to Cape Farewell and Farewell Spit, the longest sand spit in the world at some 20 miles. When we returned to the lodge, we headed for the hot tub on the front lawn to enjoy the panoramic view of the bay and a couple of Gin & Tonics. We agreed that this would be a great place to spend the next several years.

We enjoyed supper at a typical New Zealand roadside restaurant having a large courtyard in front with shade trees, shrubs, and flower gardens surrounding the outdoor tables. We dined al fresco, savoring the mussel soup, scallops and an outstanding stout or two brewed by the owner.

Storms and touchy brakes

The next morning, our host had told us that there was a storm coming from the west over the Tasman Sea. As we got ready to leave, the wind started to swirl the rain drops around us, something we would grow accustomed to over the next three days.

Our plan was to ride 230 miles to Hanmer Springs, retracing our route over Takaka Hill through Richmond and then south to Murchison, then to Springs Junction. From there, we would ride north to the Cheltenham House B&B in Hanmer Springs.

We took a dirt road to a limestone cave at the top of Takaka Hill for a guided tour. The grass parking lot was on a slope and as I touched the front brake, the “touchy” brakes immediately locked up and we went down in slow motion. As I picked myself up, a fellow walked over to give me a hand and we muscled the fully loaded RT back up on the tires. As I was muttering under my breath about “touchy” brakes and sloped parking lots paved with wet grass, I started to ease the RT down the hill towards a flatter area at the bottom. A sudden gust of wind hit me, my right foot slipped out from under me on the wet grass and this time the mirror broke off the faring as I somersaulted down the hill. The same gentleman helped pick the bike back up a second time. As we struggled to tip it up hill, he grunted “Next time Mate, ya’ gotta’ hire a lighter bike.” I was in low spirits as I reattached the scratched mirror with the broken turn signal lens and then rode the RT down the hill to park it on the side stand leaning into the wind.

An hour later after learning about the 28,000 year old Moa bones which had been excavated from the cave by the owner, we cringed while crossing the parking lot in the rain as a big gust of wind lifted the fully loaded RT and stood it upright on the tires. Then we breathed a sigh of relief as it gently settled back down on the side stand. Soon we were at the top of Takaka Hill and riding down the other side on the asphalt through the hairpins toward Richmond. South of Richmond, things started sorting themselves out and my confidence returned as the RT carved through the corners. Every trip should have adventures, and Takaka Hill had certainly provided one!



Sign post to the rest of the world at Cape Foulwind.



When we arrived at Cheltenham House about 4 o'clock, the sky had cleared and the temperature had warmed up 10 degrees. Cheltenham House was a Victorian home built by the founder of Hanmer Springs for his daughter. The hot spring in town had attracted folks from all over New Zealand for years, and four years ago Len and his wife Maree remodeled it into a marvelous B&B. We had a memorable evening with wine and cheese in the billiard room while we visited with the owners and several guests touring on Harley's.

Speeding through New Zealand

The next morning I saw the wind had blown over the wrought iron chairs on our patio. In a panic I ran out to check on the RT, but as they say in New Zealand, "No worries Mate." The RT was still upright on the center stand where I had parked it. There's nothing like an adrenaline rush to get you fully awake in the morning!

This day's trip covered 300 miles on our way to Mt. Cook, making it our longest day. Our route took us south where we skirted Christchurch on the west, and then over the bridge spanning the Rakaia Gorge, on our way to Geraldine and Farlie, and finally to Mt. Cook, the tallest mountain in New Zealand at 12,200 feet.

After a proper English breakfast cooked by Len and served by Maree, we waved goodbye as we rode in a light mist through the farmland while the sun peaked out of the clouds and created several rainbows ahead of us.

Northwest of Christchurch, we crossed the Rakaia Gorge Bridge and marveled at the impressive size of the water flowing under our feet in a gorge. It must be an impressive sight and sound when the run off from the mountain snow melt came roaring down that gorge in the spring!

After lunch in Geraldine, I let the RT stretch its legs getting up to 130 kph (about 85 mph) or so on the straights. As we came briskly over the top of a hill near Burke's pass west of Farlie, one of New Zealand's finest came around the corner going the other way. I rolled off the throttle and grabbed some brakes, but I saw its red stop lights in my rear view mirror.

The speed limits in New Zealand were simple. The maximum anywhere in the country was 60 mph and in town, it was 30 mph. The officer said she had clocked me at 70 mph and

Anniversary Tour Route



Key:
1 = Day's Destination
 ~~~~~ = Route



apologizing in advance, told me she had to give me a ticket as the grace was only 6 mph. She was required to have tickets which matched every time the radar unit showed a vehicle exceeding 68 mph. After I passed the breathalyzer test she smiled as she told me the fine was only \$80 NZ (about \$40 U.S.) and went on to say “It’s not so bad, Mate. If you were going 115, it would have cost you \$NZ 120. Enjoy the rest of your holiday.” I had 28 days to pay the fine at any branch of a WestPac bank.

We continued to Mount Cook (at 62 mph or less) past the incredible aquamarine color of Lake Tekapo with the mountain peaks hidden in fast moving, luminescent clouds. We turned north at Lake Pukaki in a cold, pouring rain toward our room at the Aoraki Mount Cook Alpine Village. After leaving puddles in the lobby while waiting to get our keys from the clerk, we found our bungalow with its covered car port. We turned the heater on full blast and headed for a hot shower throwing our clothes in the washer and dryer provided with our room.

On our way to the restaurant for dinner, we could see our breath in long white plumes. Eating in front of the three story high windows, we watched low hanging rain and snow squalls swirl through the valley obscuring everything, then clearing out so we could see the lower half of the mountains with snow just 50 feet above the parking lot, while the upper half of the mountains were hidden in the clouds. At that point I started mentally preparing for snow the next morning!

As we got into bed, we heard Kias (a member of the parrot family) calling to each other. They have been known to tear holes in tires, peel the rubber off of windshield wipers and on occasion rip out electrical wiring under the hood of cars. The best advice is to ignore them, and hope they go away. Although we quickly fell asleep, I was awakened several times during the night by the sound of the wind rattling the metal roof of our bungalow, and the cry of the Kias. I hoped they didn’t like German food.

## Glow worms

The next morning I was relieved to see only rain coming down, and to find the RT hadn’t become a Kia midnight snack. We were going to cover 280 miles today riding south past Queenstown on our way to Te Anau for an afternoon tour of a Glow Worm cave.

We left early and stopped for breakfast in Omarama at a combination art gallery and tea room where the clouds cleared and the sun warmed us up. Despite sunny stretches, we arrived in Te Anau about 2 o’clock in the pouring rain. We were booked on a 2 p.m. boat trip across Lake Te Anau to the Glow Worm cave, so we went directly to our B&B, The Cozy Kiwi. Virginia, the owner, called the tour company and got us booked on the 3:30 p.m. trip and then told us to park the RT in her garage out of the rain.

The sun came out for our 30 minute boat ride to the cave, where at one point the roof was so low I was holding onto my ankles. When the ceiling opened up and the underground river that had carved the cave came into view, we learned that the rest of the tour would be in a flat bottom boat. As our guide pulled us along the river using cables attached to the roof, he asked us to stay quiet so we wouldn’t disturb the Glow Worms. Then he turned out the lights. We were engulfed by total



**One dolphin splashed out while another dove in on Doubtful Sound.**

blackness and the roar of the river pouring through the cave. After our eyes adjusted, we found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of constellations of blue stars which were the Glow Worms. They lived in colonies on the ceiling and walls, each colony having between 20 to 200 members. The largest colonies looked like a nighttime satellite photo of a major city. Every so often we would see the faint glow of a hermit, as only a single blue dot was visible in the blackness.

Glow Worms were the larvae of a fly that had adapted to the total darkness of caves. Their gut created a bioluminescent glow much like a firefly. They dropped sticky threads down into the air of the cave to catch hatching insect larvae riding on top of water. When they flew towards the only light source, the Glow Worms, they got tangled in the sticky threads and were hauled up to become Glow Worm dinner. Eventually, the Glow Worm larva hatched into flies and headed off to a new part of the cave to lay their eggs. That was unless the Glow Worm fly happened to bump into one of the sticky threads of a Glow Worm larva, in which case it became Glow Worm larva lunch. It’s a tough world out there!

## Cruising with dolphins

On the fifth day, we booked an all day excursion to Doubtful Sound. Although it rains more than 200 days a year, dumping about 350 inches of water on the sound, we had mostly sunny skies. We rode two buses and took a boat across Lake Manipouri to get to the tour boat on the sound for the 3.5 hour cruise through the fjords. As the second bus chugged up and over the pass separating Lake Manipouri from Doubtful Sound, we had stunning views of the 1,200 foot tree-covered rock walls jutting out of the sound below. We were fortunate to see a pod of dolphins, and as the captain accelerated past them, the dolphins began flying out of the water. Enormous quantities of film and digital camera memory were consumed in a few minutes. As they swam beside the



boat looking up at us, each species smiled intelligently at the other.

On our way back to Te Anau, we toured the Manipouri power station which was inside a mountain 600 feet below the surface of the lake. Water spiraled down a helical rock passage, entered the turbines generating enough electricity to equal half the output of Hoover Dam, and then continued to the other side of the mountain where the lake water emptied into Doubtful Sound.

Back at the Cozy Kiwi, Virginia told us that it had been the coldest February day in Te Anau in 50 years. The Antarctic Southerly had broken cold weather records all over the South Island and was moving northeast through Queenstown. We would be going through Queenstown the next day, but we hoped the front would be far enough ahead and east of us that we would be in sunshine.

### The underwear fence

Our destination on the sixth day was the little town of Haast, 240 miles away. We rode north to Queenstown, then across the valley to Arrowtown where we took a “short cut” over the mountains to Wanaka on our way to Haast on the west coast.

As dark clouds gathered ahead of us in Athol, we stopped at the Lazy Bones for cappuccino and the best scones we had ever tasted. We struck up a conversation with a couple from Queenstown who, after listening to our saga, gave us their address and told us if the weather was bad to stop at their house so they could put us up. That was typical Kiwi hospitality. After we turned north on our way to Kingston, the sky began to clear. When we crossed the bridge over the Kawaru River, we got a spectacular view of the Remarkable Mountains east of Queenstown shrouded in snow down to the dark green of the bush on their flanks. It wasn't hard to see how this range got its name.

After stretching our legs in Arrowtown, we followed the shortcut over the mountains to Crown Terrace. There were jaw-dropping views with hairpin curves on the steep grade. My concentration was sharpened by the lack of guardrails and the 1,500 foot drop off on the left to the valley below. The countryside in hues of gold and tan were a stark contrast to the lush greens of Te Anau that morning and the snow of Mt. Cook two days earlier.

Near Makarora, we passed a 12-foot-tall deer fence covered with underwear, bras, and stockings. The locals created this “underwear fence” in response to a shoes and socks fence that had sprouted further south. Despite my request, Rochelle declined to make a donation.

As we followed the Makarora River up to the top of Haast pass and then wound down the Haast valley, we were entertained by some of the highest curves per kilometer we had experienced. Often, there was a rise in the middle of a corner with the asphalt darting off to the right or the left just as we crested. The road made a tunnel through the dense bush where we were surrounded by the vegetation right up to the edge of the road. Then suddenly, we would break out into a meadow with brilliant sunshine and golden grass, and then plunge back into a hole in the solid wall of greenery ahead, repeating this cycle for kilometers on our way to the Tasman Sea. It was 6:15 p.m. when we popped out of the last bush tunnel onto the flat coastal plain surrounding Haast and pulled into the parking lot of McGuire's Lodge.

### The Puké Pub

This morning we had a reservation to take a jet boat ride up the Waia-toto River with Roger, a local tour guide. Afterwards, we planned to ride 250 miles up the west coast just past Greymouth to our next B&B.

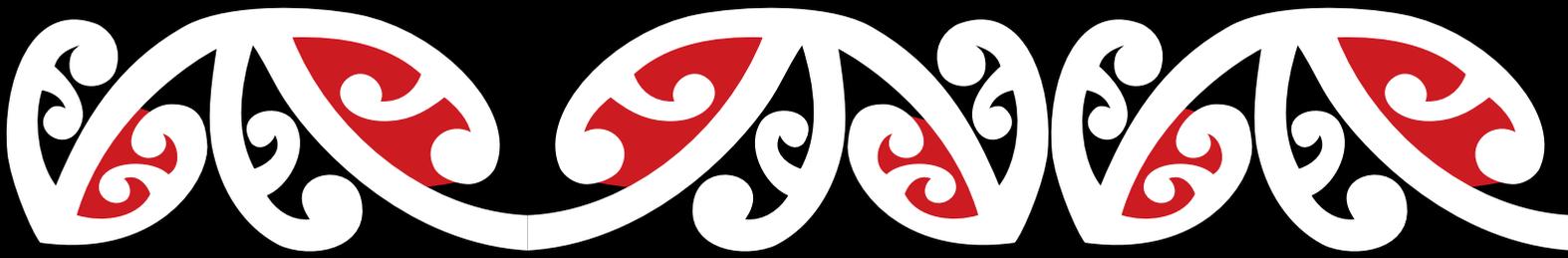
The story goes that at age 60, the designer of the first jet boat had



The “underwear fence” on NZ 6 north of Makarora.



Rochelle ready to go into the Puke Pub.



grown tired of paddling his canoe up the rivers into the bush, so he designed a boat that could be used to navigate as far up the shallow rivers as a canoe. Ours drew no more than three inches of water, was about 16 feet long and used a 350 cubic inch Chevy small block V-8 to spin the water pump.

As we skimmed up the Waiatoto, we crossed the intersection of the Indian and Pacific continental plates where Roger said a 5.5 earthquake had struck just the week before. We continued up a tributary of the Waiatoto, which had a Jurassic Park feel as the palms and large ferns created a lush backdrop, and then we jetted out onto the Tasman Sea past the swell where the Waiatoto met the ocean before returning to the landing where we had parked the RT.

By noon we were headed to Greymouth. Just past Lake Ianthe we headed into the little town of Pukekura, and saw the “Puke” Pub. With a name like that, we had to stop. We found the front door wide open and the pub completely empty. In a few minutes, the owner came running across the road from a gift shop on the other side to ask us what we would like to drink. He told us he owned the pub and the gift shop which had a large black metal sand fly sculpture



hanging above the entrance (they are numerous here). He corrected our pronunciation of the pub's name and told us it was pronounced “Poo Key” not “Puke” and emphatically told us, “You know, we don't let that kind of behavior go on in here.”

With our souvenir bar mats packed away, we continued to our B&B, The Breakers, where we turned into the driveway. Since our hosts, Frank and Barbara, had scheduled dinner for a half-hour later, we quickly dropped the bags in our bungalow and cleaned up before joining them and the other guests in the dining room overlooking the Tasman Sea. It was a gourmet meal with an excellent New Zealand wine, and afterward all of us went out on the patio in the warm evening to watch the light show as the sun sank into the Tasman Sea.

### A trip home in no time

In the morning, we saw the peaks of the Southern Alps and Mt Cook over 150 km away in the crystal clear sky. Today we were riding 230 miles from Greymouth to Nelson where we would turn in the RT keys that afternoon. But first, we rode back to Greymouth to find some jade and a WestPac bank branch so I could pay my speeding ticket.

On the way to Cape Foulwind, we stopped at the Pancake Rocks. The scenery was fabulous although we didn't get to see plumes of water shooting out of the blow holes as the tide was out. At Cape Foulwind (one of Rochelle's favorite places in the world) we visited the seal colonies and watched the sea birds. After a quick lunch, we turned east towards Murchison and followed the road as it swooped beside the Bueler River on our way back to Nelson.

We arrived at the Grampian Villa and took a picture to commemorate our eight-day, 1,700 mile tour. The next day we took the bus (with frequent narration by our driver of the points of interest and notable personalities who had lived along our route) from Nelson to Picton where we boarded the Lynx ferry to cross the Tasman Strait to Wellington to visit friends on the North Island. After spending several days with them, we boarded the 2:30 p.m. Monday flight to Auckland and arrived in Denver, Colorado, on the same Monday at almost precisely 2:30 p.m. Despite a trip that took no time, we were exhausted. ●



Brook and the RT at the end of the tour in Grampian Villa.

*Brook Reams and his wife, Rochelle Chartier, met at a BMW motorcycle club meeting in Denver, Colorado, a few years ago. Since their trip to New Zealand, both have added newer rides to their stable. They still maintain their vintage rides and Brook has plans to do restoration work.*

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