

Aotearoa

THE LAND OF THE LONG WHITE CLOUD



New Zealand

Into the Unknown

Highlights of a holiday with a difference 'down under'

by Tony Withers, photographer

ALTHOUGH I am fairly well travelled and have lived and worked in several countries around the world, I had not, until this holiday, visited New Zealand. Whilst working in the Middle East I had encountered several 'Kiwis' as they call folk from this country and I found them to be really friendly people. The Māori culture had also long been of interest although I had not studied it in any detail and had not intended to visit NZ until quite recently.

I believe that the success or otherwise of a holiday is down to several factors. Obviously the weather is important and the country itself, its scenery, food etc., but most important for me are the people that one meets along the way. My five week holiday was to be in two parts: firstly, a two week biking holiday around the South island of the country with a group of people most of whom I had not met although I knew the tour's two organisers, Marcia and Lucy. I had previously met them both in France where I used to live and Marcia was known to me for a very long time indeed as we had been best friends at Holy Trinity Infant School in Margate until we were both 10 years old! Thanks to the internet we were reunited in the 2000's after almost 50 years of lost contact as midwife Marcia had emigrated from Kent to NZ many years ago.

The other 6 members of the biking group were good friends of Marcia and Lucy and they had all enjoyed previous biking tours over the years but for me, this was to be a first. Would I get on with them all? Would I be fit enough to keep up with them on my bike?

*Poupou wall carving by the late Mauriora Kingi, Te Arawa Leader.
Seen at Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington*

Biking - the Great Taste Trail

This biking part of my holiday was to take twelve days during which a total of 320 kilometers (about 200 miles) would be covered. The terrain ranged from grade 1 which in biking terms is considered 'easiest' to grade 3 termed 'intermediate'. As this took place on New Zealand's South Island and I was based in Auckland at the top of the North Island, a drive of 650 miles south to Wellington was necessary where we spent a night before boarding a ferry to Picton on South Island. A short drive to our starting point of Nelson was then made where we had a rest day to prepare for the task ahead!

Our group of 9 with an average age of 70 all got on very well indeed and looked out for each other sometimes cycling together and at other times in pairs or on our own. We had a briefing every morning so we knew where we'd meet up for coffee so as to discuss the ride and recharge our batteries. For Marcia on her electric bike this was literally what she had to do at one stop; plug in her battery. In the evenings we would share pre-booked accommodation where our luggage would be waiting for us as it would have been transported ahead of us. This enabled us to travel light with just the bare necessities on our bikes.

I was pleasantly surprised by my own efforts as I managed to stay abreast of most of the others in the group although keeping up with friend Marcia and organiser Lucy on their electric bikes proved difficult! After stupidly twisting my ankle at the end of the first day's riding, I was forced to have just one day off and this was followed by a very wet and stormy day which we all took off. So my foot had two days rest and was fit enough to resume on the third day and continue the remaining 259 kms of the tour alongside the others.

New Zealand is a paradise for lovers of the outdoors. Specially dedicated cycle trails and paths abound and the first of these traversed is known as "The Great Taste Trail" which is around the Abel Tasman National Park area. At 139 kms, it provided an excellent way to see the countryside without encountering cars, trucks or any other traffic, just each other or the occasional other bikers. The scenery from our point of view, off the beaten track, was stunning and this first trail was a perfect introduction to biking in this part of the world enabling me to cover a fair distance without too much effort.

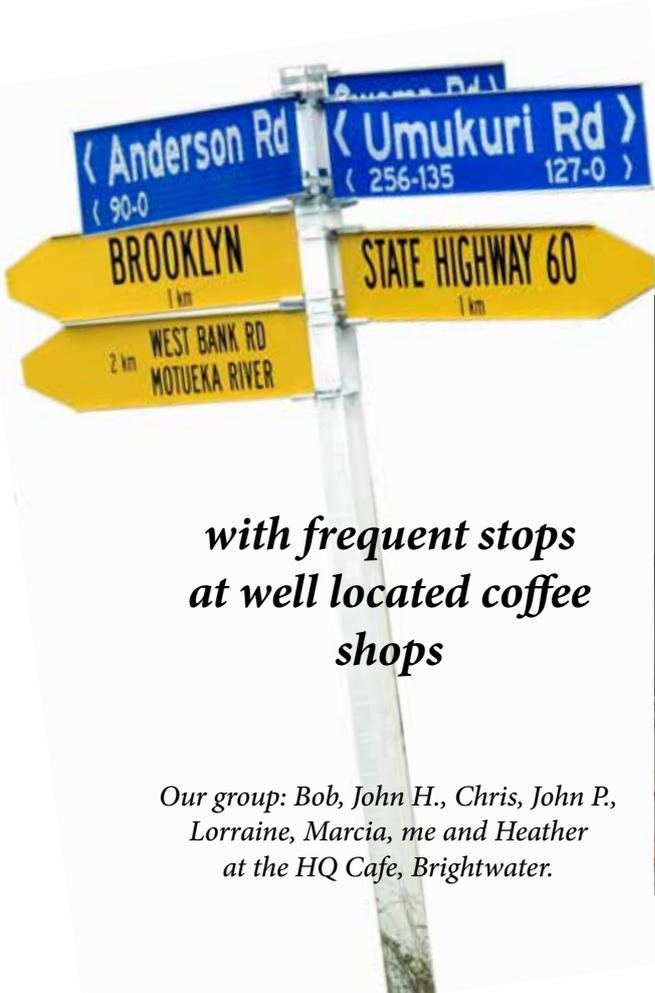


New Zealand

*Relaxed biking
through residential
areas*



*Over rivers, ravines
and gorges*



*with frequent stops
at well located coffee
shops*



*Our group: Bob, John H., Chris, John P.,
Lorraine, Marcia, me and Heather
at the HQ Cafe, Brightwater.*

Photos on this page by Lucy Casey

The West Coast Wilderness Trail

A few days later found us further south and on a very different leg - the grade 3 West Coast Wilderness Trail which took us up through virtual jungle known as 'native bush' and this was interspersed with large, beautiful lakes and reservoirs plus amazing views. Signs warn of abandoned gold mine shafts as this area was rich with the mineral which was mined here during the West Coast gold rush in the 1860's.

Birds thrive here and are everywhere, if not seen then surely heard. Other wildlife keeps its distance during the daytime and stoat traps are set at frequent intervals. New Zealand has a high proportion of ground-nesting and flightless birds, due to its long geographical isolation and a lack of mammal predators. Native birds have evolved to fill niches that are occupied by mammals in most other places and Stoats are the greatest threat to these ground-nesting and hole-nesting birds, which have very limited means of escaping stoat predation. They were introduced to control introduced rabbits and hares, but are now a major threat to the native bird population.

We encountered some additional excitement during this leg of our tour. After an extended period without telephone coverage - not uncommon when out in the wilds - our leader Lucy suddenly picked up a signal and learned that she had become a grandmother!



Stoat trap

Approaching the clip-on Taramakau bridge on the way to Kumara, the scene of New Zealand's last great gold rush in 1876. The bridge is shared by road and rail traffic and was subject to safety concerns until this new addition was constructed on one side for walkers and cyclists.



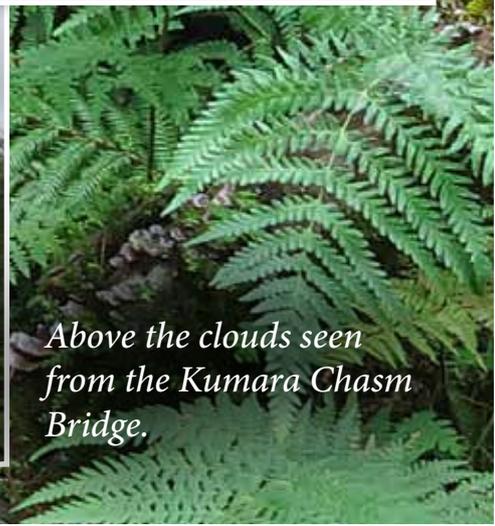
Warning signs advise you not to wander off track due to the many abandoned mine shafts left over from the days of gold mining.



Easy riding alongside Dilmanstown Reservoir.



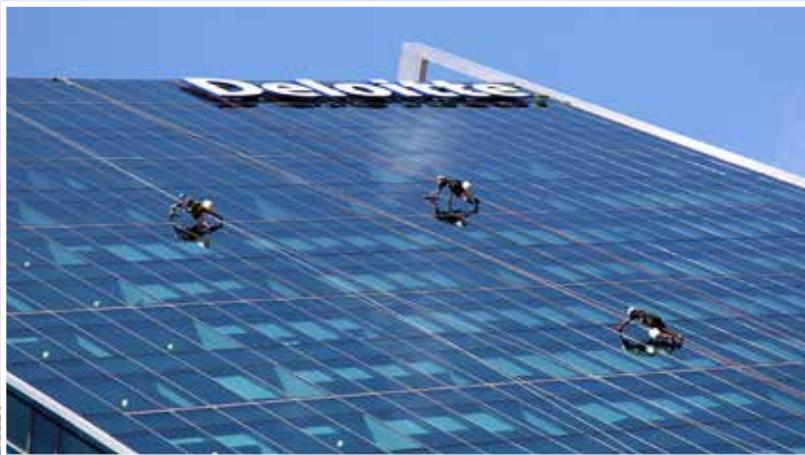
Above the clouds seen from the Kumara Chasm Bridge.



Sightseeing - Auckland

Tāmaki Makaurau

city of Sails



Almost unscathed after the global recession



The Queen Mary 2 visits Auckland



The big flag debate in which the public voted to keep the existing British version



It is clear to see why New Zealand's largest city Auckland is known as the "City of Sails" as the sailing and boating community here is prolific. Blue skies and clear blue seas, a good breeze and a fair bit of sunshine make this a mecca for sailing and motor boats of all sizes whether this is for sport or leisure. Due to the fragmented nature of the coastline many folk commute to work on ferries. A delightful way to get to work in the summer but I'm not too sure about the winter!

View of Auckland from a double decker bus on Auckland Harbour Bridge

North of Auckland



North of Auckland on what is called the “Matakana Coast” I found the Tawharanui Regional Park, beautiful beaches (they even have their own Omaha Beach), bays and coves, vineyards, farmers’ markets and some quite prestigious housing in stunning settings. This area is still just about commutable if you work in Auckland with some folk driving in whilst others take a ferry which gets them straight to the centre of the city. A great place to work and play hard!

Wellington - Capital City



Te Whanga-nui-a-Tara



Wellington is a major provider of outdoor sporting activities such as kayaking and boating. It also welcomes visiting warships like this Anzac class Australian Frigate the "Warramunga" which upset local fishermen and fish farmers by speeding through the Marlborough Sounds at a reported 20 - 25 knots, well in excess of maritime law for this area. The skipper didn't seem to give a hoot.

Te Papa Tongawera, the Museum of New Zealand was a highlight for me in Wellington. It has six floors of interest such as social history, people's impact on the land, natural environment, arts and 'Gallipoli - the scale of our war'. I have to return!



The grand Art Deco Central Fire Station

Aboard the very scary and very strange big wheel at the Tingalya human-powered retro funfair visiting from Spain. No Health and Safety inspector available.





Birds *manu*



Pied Sandpiper



Tui



Takahē

A variety of birds, some beautiful, others a little strange but most are delightful songbirds. Some, like the endangered Takahē once thought to be extinct, are flightless so they strut around on the ground like a kind of black and blue chicken but with big stubby red beaks to match their red legs. Others, such as the famous Kiwi, are nocturnal so I was unable to see let alone photograph one. Many birds are protected and the island of Kirikiri Matangi is a great place to see the rarer types and although within sight of the city of Auckland this scientific refuge serves as a sanctuary for many species. An environment without predators must seem like a paradise to them and watching and listening to them here is for us, a simple joy. I also managed to photograph a Grey Heron, Kereru, Weka and Quail.



In the many National parks, birds are carefully looked after and monitored

and Beasts

bararehe

New Zealand is renowned for its dairy produce, its butter and milk and also of course for its world class lamb and beef. There are plenty of cows and lambs there that's for sure and it's the climate that ensures success. Plenty of rain and plenty of sunshine, rolling green hills and well managed farms. Not surprisingly these are some of the ingredients for the favourite food here, roast lamb and beef!



Attractive young Belted Galloway bulls or "Belties" as they are known. This breed has adapted well to NZ from its native Scotland and is primarily raised for their quality marbled beef, although they are sometimes milked and purchased to adorn pastures due the striking white band around their middles giving them a unique appearance.



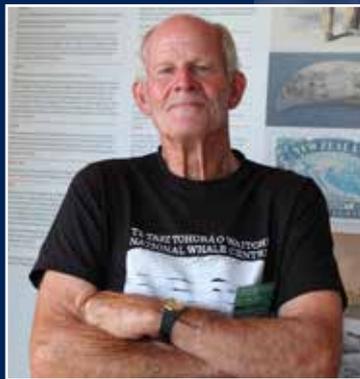
the People

iwi ataahua

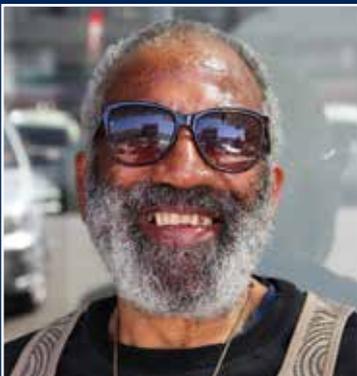
It's the people and what they do that make a country what it is. Some of the first folk to arrive in New Zealand were from Polynesia in the 13th century; the Māori. They are considered to be the indigenous people of the land but current research indicates they were not the first to settle. Despite the more recent erosion of their culture, one positive aspect remains and is shared by others; the respect and love for all things living and for the land itself and its surrounding sea. When I met my first full-blooded Māori, I was quite excited as it isn't something that happens every day.



Te Mana Tahi "The strong one"



Alan Izard, Whale conservationist



Jim Wafer musical instrument maker from Kings Lynn with roots in Gambia



South African William Steyn, Hokitika's stone painter



Māori woman at Auckland Museum's cultural show



Ray Walter, lighthouse keeper on Tiritiri Matangi Island for 30 yrs



Tiritiri Matangi Island's lighthouse was fabricated in England and shipped out to New Zealand in sections in 1864. It first shone the following year on January 1st. It is the oldest operational lighthouse in New Zealand and in 1956 when fitted with an 11 million candle power xenon light it was one of the most powerful lights in the world at that time. It now uses a 50 watt lamp powered by batteries charged by solar panels.



the Arts

nga toi

"Titipounamu" - A Necklace With Lost Gems by Bing Dawe

Living a stone's throw from the Turner Contemporary Art Gallery in Kent, UK, I get to see quite a lot of art and sculpture. Some of it I can appreciate but a lot is meaningless to me so I was keen to see what was on offer on the other side of the globe.

An exhibition of sculpture, held within the Auckland Botanic Gardens offered an opportunity to see something outdoors and as a visitor to the Gardens, vote on it, whilst the Auckland Art Gallery and Te Papa in Wellington contained some very interesting artworks from a broader period within their walls.

My favourite sculpture was this phosphor bronze work entitled "The Learning" by Lucy Bucknall



Untitled work from Para Matchitt's Te Kooti series, 1969. Te Papa, Wellington.



The 5.8 meter tall "Khulu" by John Ferguson was voted the Friends People's Choice award winner for 2016.

Geology : and the hot stuff

tātai

With so much of New Zealand sitting on a seismic zone it is inevitable that geothermal activity will be visible as it takes place continually. It can easily be seen at the Waiotapu Scenic Reserve where hot sulphurous mud bubbles day and night and has done for many years. In other areas, geysers sporadically let off steam. The Rotorua area on North Island is particularly busy with these events.

On South Island, the geology of the Pancake rocks at Punakaiki on the edge of the Paparoa National Park clearly shows in the rock layers of alternating hard and soft limestone forced up from the seabed by seismic action. The layers are quite dramatic on highway 6 on the way to Haast and at Hokitika, the main Catholic Church is closed as it is unsafe since the 2011 quake hit Christchurch with the loss of many lives.

Harnessing this largely untapped source of energy for the good of all is a priority for New Zealand.





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willingly or otherwise.

