



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

A family function was all the excuse Geoff Tompkinson needed to experience the majesty of New Zealand's South Island and magnificent roads around Mount Cook

Mount Cook towers over Lake Pukaki with its waters bluer and more vibrant than you can possibly imagine



What better way to explore NZ than on two wheels?

Who is Geoff Tompkinson?
 Geoff had 40-year career in photojournalism and videography before he and wife Liz discovered bikes. See more at: www.thehonoraryaustrian.com

Weddings are always joyous affairs, but when you get the news that your goddaughter is to be married in New Zealand, the occasion becomes all the sweeter; now we had the perfect excuse to do that South Island motorcycle trip we'd dreamed of. After a long flight from Vienna with a stop-over in Singapore, we arrived in Christchurch and met up with Paul and Liz, our good biking friends from Austria who were joining us for the trip. After renting a pair of Yamaha Tracer 900s and a Honda NC750X from Kiwi Motorcycle Rentals we soon found ourselves heading out of Christchurch into new territory.

'Memories of North Wales'
 Arthurs Pass - the highest in New Zealand and our route across the island from Christchurch to the west coast - would be our introduction to the bikes. With rain and high winds forecast for later in the day we didn't want to make too many stops and risk getting caught at the top. The weather got worse as the ride became more interesting. We passed through wide valleys with gently rising mountains reaching up towards the darkening clouds above, in many ways reminiscent of North Wales.

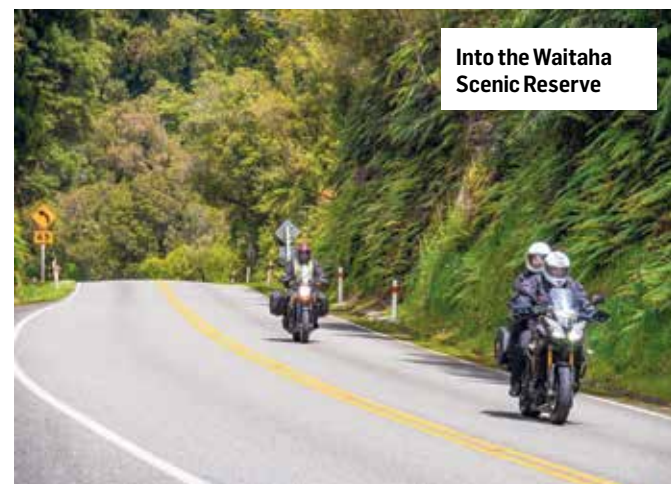
The wonderful long sweeping bends and straights encouraged a brisk pace whilst the strong gusty side winds encouraged the opposite. Traversing the vast glacially formed valley floors are single-track bridges with white wooden side fences stretching away across deserts of grey gravel to a centre point of turquoise blue water, like piers jutting out from a beach

towards a distant ocean. We eventually entered the tiny town of Arthurs Pass itself, and in the blink of an eye were through it and descending from the highest point of the pass towards the famously wet west coast. The wind was getting stronger as the sky ahead got blacker. As we approached the elegant Otira Viaduct, which spans what used to be a very dangerous, avalanche-prone section of the route, we could see a temporary traffic light had just been set-up. It was red. After what seemed like an eternity of inactivity, during which time the wind had increased to dodgy levels, we finally got the

'We emerge victorious in glorious sunshine on the west coast'

green light. Rolling carefully across the exposed bridge, whilst being buffeted by strong side gusts, I was at least pleased that no-one could come the other way. The remainder of the day was a race against worsening weather through increasingly lush surroundings to finally emerge relatively dry and victorious in glorious sunshine on the west coast and our overnight stop in Greymouth.

It goes 'Forest-River-Bridge-repeat..'
 After a great breakfast at the Seven Penny Cafe, the next morning *Continued over*



Into the Waitaha Scenic Reserve



Thumbs up for food and service



Time for food on day four

we headed off down Highway 6 towards Fox Glacier. The day started dull and overcast and the long straight road was relatively uninteresting. But that was all about to change.

After 60km following the coast the road turned inland and entered the Waitaha Scenic Reserve. The flat open land suddenly transformed into a dense, temperate rainforest crowding us on both sides. A wonderful snaking corridor through towering trees emerging from an impenetrable undergrowth of lush ferns, mosses, liverworts, orchids and lichens.

After a dreamy, traffic-free ride through this Disneyesque vegetation tunnel we passed Lake Lanthe and emerged from the forest to run alongside the vast flat Wanganui River basin. A few impossibly long single-lane bridges traversing glacier blue rivers running down from the snow-capped mountains to our left, brought us across the basin to the village of Hari Hari and a delightful lunch stop at the Pukeko Store and Cafe. Whilst eating our homemade goodies on the tables outside we noticed with amusement that many of the locals wore rubber boots which they respectfully took off and left in a neat line outside the

● 'The most intense, seemingly glowing, blue-green lake – as if someone had plugged it in'

door of the cafe before entering.

Back on the road we soon re-entered the rainforest and experienced one of the most enjoyable stretches of road for the day. Equally as lush as what went before but bending and twisting, rising and falling like a fantasy rollercoaster. The road condition in this part of the South Island is generally good but the surface is very coarse and sometimes it's difficult to be sure if the approaching corner is covered in loose gravel or fixed tar seal.

After several cycles of 'rainforest – river bed – single-lane river crossing – repeat' – we found ourselves climbing a series of

hairpins that would have been a lot more fun in different weather. The sky was darkening and it had started to drizzle. We just made it to the end of our day's ride at Lake Matheson Motel in the town of Fox Glacier before the real rain hit.

'So this is why they call it rainforest, then'

It rained all night and the next morning brought no respite. Donning our wet-weather gear we embarked on a moodily beautiful route snaking through the dark emerald forest. Behind us a backdrop of mountains shrouded in multiple layers of mist which often descended to envelop the road

as well. After tracking the Haast river for some 30km, including a brief stop at Thunder Creek Falls, we pulled in at the Wonderland Makarora Lodge where we met some local bikers. The weather was improving when we left so we continued towards Lake Wanaka accompanied by our new friends. On drying roads and under rapidly clearing skies we blasted around the eastern edge of this turquoise lake on a road that's simply made for motorcycles. It was the first chance I'd had to really put the Tracer through its paces along some decent twisties and I definitely appreciated the extra low-down grunt it has over my own Tiger 800.

'Plugged in and turned on'

After a 150km blast up Highway 8 towards Tekapo, we found ourselves on an altogether different ride. Gone were the coastal plains, rocky river basins, rainforest twisties, and lakeside perfection. Now we had the low-traffic, high-speed, sweeping bends and long straights through the pillowy hills and sunburnt grass of Lindi's Pass. It was reminiscent of parts of a ride we had recently completed along the Eastern Sierras in California.

Once over the pass the scenery flattened for another 90km before we turned off Highway 8 towards Mount Cook. The dense conifer forest soon thinned out to rolling burnt grass hills with the snowy peaks of Mount Cook in the distance. Coming over a rise we got a first glimpse of the lake as a fluorescent blue strip-light on the horizon. This rapidly grew to one of the most awe-inspiring sights I have seen. The most intense, seemingly glowing, blue-green lake – as if someone had plugged it in and turned it on – stretched as far as the eye could see until it merged with the snowy peaks in the distance. It was one of those moments you know no amount of words or images can truly convey. You just have to see it for yourself. **MCN**

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RIDING IN NZ...

As with any new location we arrived with our own vague preconceptions of what would face us. Here is what we actually learned from this trip...

There are far more very long straight roads than we ever imagined but, as in California, they tend to be worth it once you get to the end. Road conditions are generally very good but the surface is often a coarse gravel tar seal making it difficult to distinguish between loose and fixed gravel surfaces. The riding is generally easy and Dolomites-style hairpin sections don't really exist. The numerous rivers are crossed by

long, single-lane bridges which operate on a first-come-first-served basis. Some of the longer ones have passing points in the middle. Open roads generally have a 100km/hour speed limit. Traffic and police presence are both light.

We were there in late November and it was very windy with hazardous cross gusts. The west coast is rainforest and unsurprisingly tends to be quite wet. Having said that it is a great ride even in the rain. We were warned to beware of Kia birds who apparently like to peck away seat upholstery on parked bikes.

We rented machines from Kiwi Motorcycles in Leithfield (www.citymotorcyclerepairs.com) and a Yamaha Tracer 900 was £95/day. We took all our own riding gear but they do have jackets, trousers, helmets etc for hire.

Navigation on the South Island is pretty simple as there aren't many roads once you get out of the towns. We, as always, used Motomappers excellent Scenic app (scenicapp.com) on our smartphones and planned routes in advance.

Kiwi Rentals were quite happy to let us mount whatever we wanted to the bikes.



The Motomappers Scenic app is the one to go for



Bridges traverse the valley floors



Time for a selfie? Of course there is...



Along the shores of Lake Hawea



● 'Dense conifers thin to rolling hills then snowy peaks'

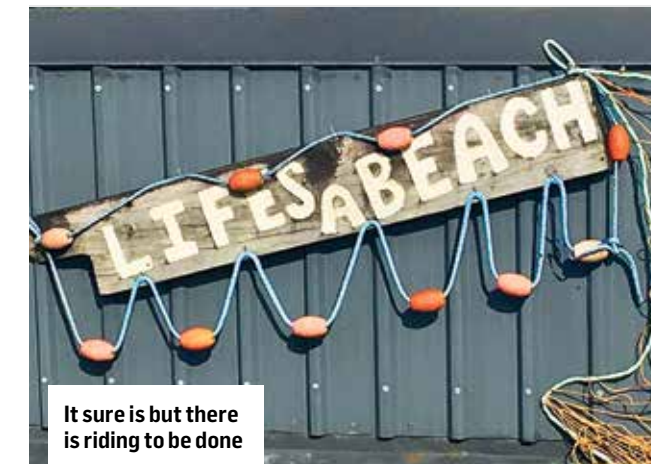
The trip

Five days around Mount Cook at 865 miles, this ride goes from Christchurch on the East Coast via Arthurs Pass to the West Coast of South Island, New Zealand. Then along the West Coast on Route 6 via Franz Josef Glacier and Fox Glacier, turning inland at Haast and then onwards to Lake Wanaka and Lake Hawea. Onwards on Route 8 to Lake Pukaki and then Lake Tekapo. Via Routes 79, 72 and 77 back to Christchurch. Aim for November to February.

Soaking up the beauty of Arthurs Pass on the first day of the New Zealand adventure



Crossing Waitaha Bridge on day two



It sure is but there is riding to be done



Sunrise in Greymouth is a sight to behold