

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

For those who may be interested in the geography of our journey, place names are in capitals.

It really is impossible to encapsulate all our holiday experiences into less than a 'War and Peace' epic, instead here's a pick-and-mix we would like to share with you.

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And there we were, 23rd January 2008, 40 degrees C, flight weary and a little hot under the collar! Our long haul destination was AUCKLAND, a thriving metropolis with an impressive harbour and jam packed marinas. Well rested we went in search of R & R Cycles to pick up our hire bikes. Following a cursory inspection it was obvious that one was more fit for purpose than the other. Having deemed myself unfit for purpose at this stage you can guess which steed I was allotted on compassionate grounds! Thus started our nomadic 47 days cycle rambling through New Zealand. A wavy line on the map indicated our intended route, however, accommodation was booked as our adventure unfolded and therefore nothing was 'written in stone'.

I think I should say at this point that there were occasions when we made use of the excellent bus network when distance, lack of accommodation or wet weather necessitated. We enjoyed these interludes which afforded the chance to take in the scenery. Our first journeying was indeed by bus taking us north to PAIHIA and the Bay of Islands. This beautiful area, almost subtropical in nature, has a total of 144 offshore islands and considerable historical significance as it was at WAITANGI, on the mainland, that a Treaty between the British Government and Maori Chiefs was signed in 1840 "an agreement between two peoples to live and work together in one nation" - aspects of which, lost in translation, are still contentious today. What a pleasure it was to be on the bikes and quite by chance we came upon a waka (canoe) training day, Maori children enthusiastically honing this skills and of course keeping traditions alive. We took a short ferry to RUSSELL on the headland enabling us to cycle amble our way back to Paihia before returning to AUCKLAND and an interesting evening meal. We dived into a basement totally dedicated to oriental cooking where we were joined by a small bird on the wing no doubt providing the basic ingredient for the bird's nest soup!

Cycling proper started at CAMBRIDGE proclaiming itself 'A Town of Trees and Champions' (Ulman won cycling gold at the 2004 Olympics). We rode on to our stopover, a delightful farm stay on this occasion. The weather remained hot our tyres pop popping as contact was made with melted tar. Moving on and with a steady 30km climb behind us we rolled blissfully into ROTORUA and Sandi's B&B where Brian had stayed on a previous occasion with his pal Jim. This was a very welcoming family who bestowed much kindness upon us. Hubby, Mark, took us on a tour of the area where we wandered around geothermal springs, the smell of sulphur heavy on the air as we watched the antics of the languid mud. Leaving Rotarua, (very reluctantly on my part!) we rode along Highway 5 towards Taupo.

The Highways were busy and quite hairy at times. In the more rural areas logging trucks were an experience in themselves. At times I felt there was a national 'who can get closest competition' with many contenders for first prize. This was of course accompanied by a tremendous back draft as these modest little vehicles passed. There were, of course, many coffee stops (at any time of the day!), one taking us into an Apiary and a chance for Brian to have a bee chat. I for my part watched a lorry coming in laden with box upon box of less than pleased bees, the lorry driver and passenger swathed in protective scarves - very expedient I thought.

We came upon hot springs (minus mud on this occasion) which we had a dip in - knee height only you understand - damned hot. A notice extolled bathers not to 'Place Your Head Under the Water'!

I ruminated upon the outcome of such a reckless act! This was at a time when we were receiving texts from home informing us that snow had fallen, New Zealand on the other hand was in the midst of a serious drought. TAUPO was situated by a lake which the locals rightly used to its full advantage. Our stay here was a backpacker's cabin and a chance for Brian to tweak the bikes. We took in the Huka Falls which rushed mightily despite the drought. Another bus hop was booked and this time we were required to cover the bikes. Brian had hit on the idea of cadging a couple of mattress covers before we left the UK which proved invaluable and at 60z. each they were no great burden to carry. Dropped off at PALMESTON we cycled to HIMATANGI on the East Coast; a wonderful sunset heralding the most magnificent night-time display. The 4th February found us in OTAKI where our accommodation was an atmospheric cottage dated c.1879, built in the main from timbers retrieved from a shipwreck. We had at this stage become addicted to 'flat whites' – delicious coffee, and 'handles' – equally delicious half pint beers. By now we were getting nearer to Wellington and an invitation to stay with Penny, the daughter of Brian's friends, and Stephen. WELLINGTON was cold and windy but this was more than offset by the warmth and kindness shown by our hosts. The following day was more cycle friendly as we made our way to the ferry. Soaking up the sun we sailed across Cook Strait through fiords to PICTON and South Island. The ride out of Picton was quite hilly, however, we were rewarded with magnificent views and a chance to pause and refresh courtesy of a bench dedicated to Rose Eatwell – and we did. NELSON beckoned with our B&B perched high above the town (it would be wouldn't it!). The sun was our companion again and we sauntered around the market before sitting under a sunshade to enjoy savoury pancakes.

GREYMOUTH was indeed grey when we arrived. This was a B&B with Mary. A delightful lady who had taken advantage of the Assisted Passage some fifty years earlier when it was possible to emigrate to Australia or New Zealand for £10 (family of four £25), the only stipulation being that you had to stay for at least two years. It may give some indication of the community spirit when I confess to having left bits and bobs behind. A lady from the minuscule Information Centre sauntered over to the bakery, where we had been spied, to relay the information. Back up to Mary's (another hill!) to collect the offending items. I must mention ROSS and our stay at the Empire Hotel. It sounds very grand but in fact it was obviously living on past glories when gold mining had been at its height. Here we had memorabilia by the ton, animal skins dangling from the ceiling, the odd boulder propping up a long lost table leg, and the distinct feeling that this was the set for an American western. The locals, some very whiskery, fitted the bill seemingly dressed ready for the cameras to roll, almost all sporting a half pint glass (handle) with an attendant quart jug primed to replenish.

We did, on more than one occasion, come upon a group of American cyclists who seemed to have the job well and truly sewn up. They travelled by coach, bikes and luggage on a trailer. Of the 22 in the party, only 2 were expected to complete their chosen rides. The rest coached up the hills then sailed majestically down on their bicycles to ride on until some fearsome vertical protrusion (!) showed itself again. I wonder if they gazed, as we did, upon the Pohutukawa (known as the New Zealand Christmas tree); the approximate size of a Rowan, bedecked with magnificent red blooms. Or if their speeding coach passed over bridges by the score, all named, without a second glance. My favourites were Gentle Annie, Mad Meg and well - Windbag! Males were acknowledged in a more formal manner – stiff upper lip and all that! Did they see the giant agapanthus, geckos scurrying elusively in the shrubs; bellbirds (aptly named), or cycle through thistle down wafting on the breeze? Were they mile crunching along the Canterbury Plain, with its seemingly endless straight roads, vehicles vaporising into oblivion. Did they see a bird of prey swooping down to take a closer look, the sun casting a huge menacing shadow over us, or

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There are always interesting anecdotes when meeting up with cyclists and one such gathering, on

our way to Franz Josef, was no exception. Merry chatter ensued as a cyclist related how he had been caught up in a marathon. Having set off early he eventually found road closures preceding him. However no one stopped him, and much to the amusement and encouragement of onlookers, had found himself crossing the winning line first to the accompaniment of a Piped Band.

We reached FRANZ JOSEF in pouring rain, booked a cabin, and were kindly chauffeured to the local supermarket by Herb and his wife (our adjacent neighbours). They've kept in touch via the web and have extended an invitation for us to visit their home in Canada. We all know that at such times as these there can be amazing coincidences and this was no exception. Dressed in our DA gear we were asked if we knew Tom Hall – his sister and husband having taken Herb's cabin! We cycled and gazed upon the glacier still impressive although markers indicated how it had receded over the centuries.

It was still raining heavily the following morning and so it was decided to coach to WANAKA – a very sensible decision as apart from the rain the terrain was very demanding. Here we were nudging up to the snow-capped Southern Alps – not an intended route for our American friends I feel! The Crown Range was looming ever nearer (sounds pretty daunting doesn't it) and when Brian told our landlady we intended tackling this little obstacle she gave me a quick astute physical appraisal and with not a little compassion in her voice, asked, “Is he trying to kill ya”!? There's a hotel, the Cardrona, dated 1863, situated conveniently part way up, or down, the range perfectly sited for cyclists and needless to say quite a few were enjoying repast. The final part of this 45km climb was demanding with a head wind to contend with. At the top we met a young Canadian, an avid cyclist/professional journalist, who had spent 2½ years cycling in 23 countries. What a pleasant way for the young and energetic to earn a living. Having regained my composure (Brian didn't seem to lose his) there was the ultimate reward, an exhilarating swoop, this time into ARROWTOWN, another former gold mining settlement pleasantly adorned with trees, historic buildings to explore and once again glorious sunshine. We ventured into the library to send an email home. Following a few questioning mumbles between Brian and me as to the next step to take we were approached by a self confessed 'expert' who managed to lose our script, paused to take a mobile phone call and then promptly disappeared! I noted with some pleasure the stool provided for little ones eager to have their books stamped.

Our wobbly pencil line took us to CROMWELL through vineyards, cherry orchards and a gorge dedicated to those into bungee jumping, the rescue boat strategically poised in the swirling waters below. Between CLYDE and ALEXANDRA we came upon a delightful Polynesian lady standing outside her property. Asking if we would care to collect pears festooned in her boundary hedge, way out of her reach, Brian adopted a Masai warrior stance lycra leaping impressively to obtain the fruits of his labour – and very nice they were too. At this juncture we joined the Otago Railtrail, a 150km track retracing the pioneering steps of intrepid engineers, too late for the gold rush period but extensively used for the transportation of livestock and produce until eventual closure in 1990. Part of the rail track was saved and we made good use of this later to hitch a lift from Middlemarch to Dunedin. 44km into the ride we stopped off at The Old School House, LAUDER. No one home when we arrived, a board outside inviting other guests to stroll in and make themselves at home. A judicious inquiry confirmed that Ryan and Elaine were in fact us so in we went. A charming stop and conveniently sited opposite a hotel where we had supper. The track was almost all shale of variable size, not always amenable to pannier laden bikes. My panniers were in fact showing serious signs of wear and tear and had to be replaced in Dunedin. Diving into former rail tunnels demanded concentration as we plunged from bright sunlight into complete darkness. Further down the track it was time for a rest and a wander round the general store at OTUREHAU, functioning adequately for modern demands and was also a fine example of how life, and the staff of life, had been in the 1930's.

We reached MIDDLEMARCH on the 23rd February, booked our tickets for Dunedin and then made our way to Blind Billy's to book a cabin. Billy was indeed blind, however, his daughter runs the site now. The office at Middlemarch station was a trestle table in the sun with hand written notes to identify the rightful recipients a harp playing melodiously to all and sundry. Now it was time to relax with bikes safely stored in the goods van. We gazed out on spectacular scenery and down into a precipitous gorge truly admiring the engineering skills affording us this tremendous experience. I think we slightly lowered the tone of our DUNEDIN stay at the Mercure Motel as we marched through the carpeted reception to park our bikes in the strongroom! Dunedin is known as 'the Edinburgh of the South', attributed to the Scottish settlers influence and development of the town. There is the most stunning railway station. The guide book tells me that it is a Flemish Renaissance-style building opened in 1906. Baldwin Street was a must visit as it claims to be the steepest street in the world. We looked and mused over why anyone would wish to live there and took photos of houses which diminished dramatically from one end to the other to compensate for the ground angle. The weather was very pleasant adding to the enjoyment of a wander round the botanical gardens. We were booked to see Royal Albatross in the afternoon but sadly the coach didn't turn up. However following a phone call there were profuse apologies which resulted in a coach arriving to take just the two of us to our intended destination – surreal.

With twelve days remaining we began a leisurely journey north taking in OAMARU and KUROW. There was a hard ride into OMARAMA and then on to TWIZEL where we had booked a cottage for two days. We were informed that the owners would be away but that this wasn't a problem and we were to make ourselves at home – once again incredibly trusting. We had a ride out to Lake Pukaki, glimpsing Mt. Cook in the distance. I was blown away by the colour and opaque nature of the water and just had to find out. It appears that as the glacier moves over the rock friction creates a very fine powder (known as glacier flour). Because it is so fine it mixes with the water which, coupled with light refraction, creates a 'you wouldn't believe it' milky turquoise. We had hoped to stay in the Lake Tarpo area but a myriad of local happenings - a rowing regatta, vintage car rally, coast to coast marathon, a fishing competition and two weddings but, thankfully, no funerals, prevented this and instead we stayed at FURLIE with the Warburtons (no relation to the famous ones).

Close to METHVEN we spent three grand days on a working farm (not working I hasten to add). Who wouldn't like a place within a stones throw of Pudding Hill and Mt. Hutt the peak covered by a smudging of snow. With 2,000 sheep this was the place for chronic insomniacs and those wishing to dine on fine steak – still on the hoof at this point. Again, friendship was abounding and Helen, the farmer's wife, took us on a tour of the farm obviously very proud of all that they had achieved. Leaving Methven we came upon a herd of fearsome looking cattle. However a modern day herdsman made sure we had safe passage as he manoeuvred around on his quad bike.

We reached CHRISTCHURCH on the 7th of March and as you would expect (!) met a cyclist who knew Tony and Elsie Huntington – his wife was a Bygone Bykes enthusiast. In need of a trim I ventured into the Sleek Salon to be greeted by two stylists both eyeing my less than immaculate mop eager to get scissor snipping. An oriental gentleman drew the short straw and set to work with much enthusiasm, scissors, and an implement closely resembling a mini hedge trimmer leaving me wondering when brain surgery would take place! Neither of us was able to communicate fully but by the time the job was done the look on his face suggested that he, at least, felt a minor miracle had been performed! Gebbies Pass and Dyer's Pass (aptly named on my part) signalled the end of our cycling adventure – an amazing experience. The Maori name for New Zealand is – Aotearoa - 'the land of the long white cloud' which we left with reluctance, ah but for where?

Having disposed of our stand-by stores, porridge oats, honey etc., to like minded travellers we made our way to the airport and a flight to Sydney. Tasmania was our intended destination as Brian was keen to visit family and friends, however, there is no direct flight from New Zealand hence our dip into Sydney. We had time to stroll and take in the iconic sights which of course included the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House, great to see them 'in the flesh', and take a brief ferry trip to Manley Island to watch the scuba divers preparing and squiggle sand through our toes. Our wanderings took us into the commercial area, pleased to be out of the sun, and into a shop selling musical instruments where we were treated to an impromptu didgeridoo recital performed with much aplomb by a young man who obviously looked upon us as potential customers.

Kathy was very generous of spirit and looked after us really well whilst we were in Tasmania. Rested and homemade muffin filled we drove to a market garden to pick strawberries which tasted luscious and rested under a tree sampling ice cream made on the premises. We called to see Kathy's friends who had very recently emigrated to Tasmania from Derby to be near their son and family. It was interesting to hear of their plans for a new home and all that entailed. One of the burning issues was whether or not to go for the traditional corrugated roof rather than tiles. Local knowledge prevailed – corrugated won the day. Kathy magicked a couple of bikes up for us and whilst she was beavering away in her Launceston wool shop we two holiday loafers meandered to Evendale noted for its international involvement with the 'ordinary' (penny farthing) movement. Kathy had invited Brian's family and friends over for an evening meal when catch-up chatter and reminiscences flowed in equal measure.

Pals of Kathy, Richard and Mo, invited the three of us to an evening meal. We cycled over to Deleraine stopping off for a coffee on the way. Here we met a Frenchman, a cyclist, who was busy installing a commercial oven capable of turning bread buns out by the score. Our hosts made us very welcome and having quickly assessed we were more than a little hot from the ride supplied towels for showers. Richard was busy preparing 'roo meat on the BBQ. It struck me that we'd seen wallabies and possums but no kangaroos as we travelled around – perhaps the poor old 'roo were either in sausage form or skulking somewhere out of sight for fear of a terrible fate! You will gather that our lifestyle had become very decadent by now and this continued as we ventured to visit Brian's family whose home was deep in a wood 'far from the madding crowds'. Here we saw duck billed platypus swimming in the tranquil pond. Another sumptuous supper, this time with Malcolm and Barbara, and all of a sudden two whole months had melted away. With heartfelt thanks to Kathy we jetted off to Sydney on the start of our journey home where incidentally Immigration insisted on checking my cycle shoe cleats to verify they were thoroughly clean.

So many folk had wished us well on our departure and I am personally grateful to all those who kept their 'eye on things' in our absence. Alan cheerfully ferried us to and from Manchester Airport – what a luxury. He did seem to have a slightly bemused expression as we prepared to depart which suggested to me that he thought it rather strange to go to the other side of the world and get on a bike! Isn't that what our 'second childhood' is all about?!

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Eileen

