

KIWI: The Come Back Place

There may be better places on earth to ride a motorcycle than New Zealand's North Island, but until he's steered toward them, Robert Smith will go with Kiwi roads and "spectacular" ... everything.

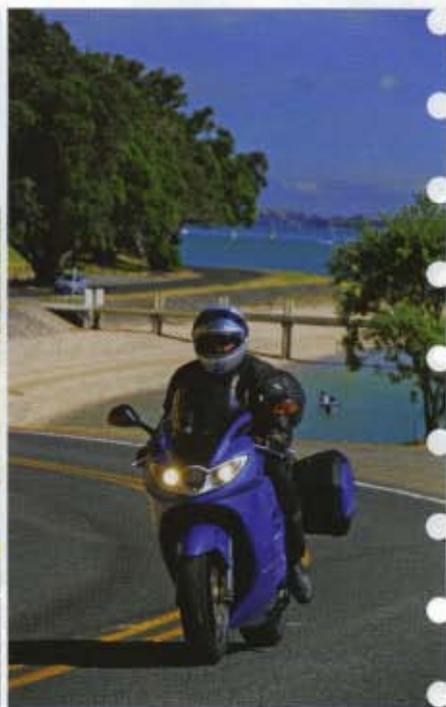
Story/photos by Robert Smith

We're sitting in Saturday morning sunshine outside the Headquarters restaurant in Westhaven, Auckland, munching through a huge plate of their signature hash browns—pan fried with onions, mushrooms, bacon and a grilled cheese topping—while Jim and I review our upcoming North Island tour.

After breakfast (if we can still move, that is) we'll collect a Sprint ST from Auckland Motorcycles & Powersports, on loan from Triumph New Zealand, and head north to collect Jim's R1100R from storage in Warkworth. On Monday, we'll round the Coromandel peninsula, then cruise the East Cape, followed by a couple of days in the Northlands. It's a plan.

AMPS's cheery Triumph specialist Patrick Stafford reviews the ST's controls, and I change into my riding gear in the parking lot. New Zealand's roads, says Jim, are fast, twisty and technically challenging—the kind of blacktop the Sprint was made for: 125 instantly available horses, surgical-precision steering and tire-howling brakes. New Zealand too, it seems, is a bike-friendly country, with much higher levels of acceptance and recognition of bikes as legitimate transportation. As we ride north on (the LEFT side of) State Highway One out of Auckland, I can't resist a smirk as we pass a line of cars at a toll pullout (bikes are free)





and my smile broadens as the freeway ends and the road narrows to two lanes with passing sections. I cut my biking teeth on the UK's narrow urban roads and London's chaotic streets, so mixing it with fast traffic is a treat.

But I'm astonished when cars in front of me pull on to the shoulder to let me pass. Am I dreaming? In Canada, if the driver ahead even knows you're there, they'll stick to the centre line like glue. Score one for NZ drivers! Equally exhilarating are the posted speeds: although there's a blanket 100 kmh speed limit all across "Un Zud," it applies equally to freeways and backroads—most of which would be marked 60 kmh here.

JIM AND I LEAVE OUR DIGS IN WARKWORTH EARLY MONDAY morning to collect the rest of the gang, and I run into a bake shop while we're waiting. There's a wide selection of meat pies, and I settle on steak and mushroom. Jim points out the essential characteristics of a good Kiwi meat pie: first, the temperature—hot enough to prevent bacterial growth, but not too hot to burn the mouth; the filling should contain identifiable chunks of steak, and the gravy should be mobile but not thin enough to spill; and the pastry shell

should remain intact throughout. I'm pleased to say that my first Kiwi pie passes each test with flying colours. And the taste? Scrumptious!

Mark (Fat Boy) and Dave L (ZZR1100) arrive and we set off for Auckland to collect Dave C (Sprint ST) and wife Gillian (Bandit 1200). Lloyd and Maria join us on their Tiger, and we're soon at the ocean at Kaiaua. Our lunch destination, a restaurant claiming to sell New Zealand's best fish &

shoreline: heeling the Sprint through each succession of turns, I feel like a pendulum. A roadside oyster bar just before Coromandel town offers shellfish of a freshness I've never experienced; so tangy and succulent I can taste the ocean. We turn on to the Heritage Trail across the peninsula to Te Rerenga.

It seems no one in the planning department here could find a ruler, because the road completely lacks



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chips, is closed, but there's a handy pub next door, and if my John Dory and fries could have been prepared any better, I'd be very surprised.

Spectacular is the word that keeps surfacing in my mind as we ride through the succession of bays and inlets on the Coromandel. Not just the rugged coast and turquoise ocean but the road, which faithfully tracks the coast, swinging along the

straight sections: it's just an endless series of deliriously playful curves that spike adrenaline and tempt recklessness as they swoop over and down to the sea. Here is the crack cocaine of canyon carving.

We follow the Trail south on roads that continue to buck and weave recklessly over the rugged terrain, past bluffs and steep cliffs, meandering inland through dense thickets of trees



and back out to the coast. A series of sharp showers damps our fun, and we cruise more cautiously down toward Tauranga.

What an introduction to NZ biking! California's famous Coast Road comes to mind, and while the Yanks certainly win on surfacing (their tarmac is more predictable and easier on tires than Kiwi chip seal), but for variety and entertainment, the Coromandel's Heritage Trail is a winner.

JIM AND I OVERNIGHT AT HIS MOM'S IN TAURANGA AND HEAD south next morning to join our group on the coast at Matata. While rattling

people. Apparently this is the week everyone goes back to work after summer vacation, but even so ...

The endless beaches lack even a lone surfer. I make a mental note to stop saying, "this reminds me of ..."

New Zealand's natural beauty stands on its own, and needs no comparison.

For our overnight stop we settle on a shabby, rambling rooming house in Waihou Bay, a sleepy fishing village set in a broad, dreamy bay with an ancient wooden pier. We watch the sun disappear behind the surrounding hills over quenching mugs of cold draft beer.

Early morning sunlight greets us as

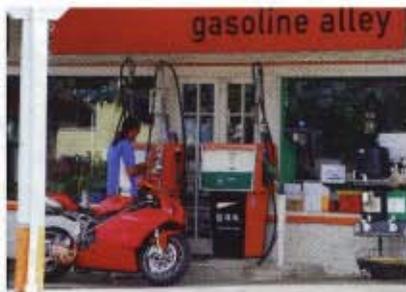
What must be some of the world's most beautiful beaches lie between Ruatoria and Gisborne, which is where we turn inland for a cross-country romp on switchback roads to Wairoa, before turning south to Napier on Hawke's Bay. Nowhere have I seen such a concentration of Art Deco architecture. A devastating earthquake in 1931 provided the opportunity, but most cities so damaged end up being rebuilt much as they were. Napier's city fathers took the unusually bold step of rebuilding in the current style, creating a magnificent living theme park.

On the waterfront is a statue of Pania, a female figure from Maori mythology, and—just like Copenhagen's mermaid—in her naked glory. Vancouver's waterfront figurine, of course, is clad more demurely in a wetsuit.

Hawke's Bay means wine. So after we've checked in to our motel, we book dinner at Craggy Range winery. The meal and the wines are ...er ... spectacular. Mark chooses the wines, which comprise a crisp Riesling followed by a dry Syrah and a huge Pinot Noir, much fuller and fruitier than the California style. My first course is a chunky country terrine and a selection of gourmet breads with olive oil, butter and roasted garlic. The seasoned roasted lamb shoulder with rosemary that follows is tender and succulent, and we round off the meal with local cheeses and a bottle of Taylor's 2001 port.

Home, James... fortunately in a taxi!

"We settle on a rambling rooming house in Waihou Bay, a sleepy fishing village set in a broad bay with an ancient wooden pier."



through a series of bends, I realize NZ's speed markings are less conservative: a bend marked 40 kmh in Canada can usually be taken comfortably at eighty. Not so in New Zealand.

That word "spectacular" pops up again as we ride south from Whakatane, and I'm struck again by the resemblance to the California Coast, except two things are missing: California's persistent sea mist—and

we mount up for a brisk ride to breakfast. We've decided to avoid reprising last night's freezer-to-fryer meal at the local restaurant and within an hour we're in Ruatoria. It's my first experience of a Maori dominated community—and an unusual one at that. Here the Maoris have adopted Rastafarian culture, blending it with their own. Finding dreads and doobies in rural NZ seems truly bizarre.



NEXT MORNING WE CRUISE TO THE 400-METRE SUMMIT OF LOCAL mountain Te Mata, the hazy humidity softening the surrounding view of rolling, forested hills. As we take our snapshots, a female Maori guide wearing the traditional moku facial tattoo is explaining the peak's prominence in local history. I've been struck by the equitable balance New Zealand seems to have achieved in its relationship between white and Maori, quite different from the North American experience.

"Think Lake Tahoe," says Dave C as we prepare to ride north to his hometown. I love California's crater-lakeside ski-, sail- and surf-community, so Taupo promises to be a treat, and I'm not disappointed. Tahoe's shoreline is mostly inaccessible because of private ownership, but Taupo's waterfront is gloriously open. Stopping at a wine store, I'm amazed to see an automated dispenser for wine tasting. I doubt any jurisdiction in Canada would allow such unsupervised consumption. The only other place I've seen coin-in-the-slot booze is in Japan.

I'm seduced by Taupo's breezy, lively resort atmosphere yet intimate small-town feel, closer to Penticton or Osoyoos, BC than Lake Tahoe, I think. I've also been trying to define what it is about the Kiwi culture that's so appealing. First, I haven't met any whiners. Most people I've met have a positive, endearingly naïve outlook

and seem very content with their lot, more altruistic than concerned about material gain. I've noticed also a distinct national pride: not the boastful, flag-waving patriotism that emanates from the US, but a quiet self-assurance that they're living in the best place on the planet. Difficult to argue with that!

Next day we spin around the north side of Lake Taupo pausing at Huka Falls to watch 220,000 litres of water a second drain into the lake, before rolling across open country and climbing toward Mount Ruapehu, Whakapapa ski resort, and its famous chateau, styled after Lake Louise's. We climb

So, wearing my tourist hat, I trail Jim into the City on our way back to Taurangi. Sadly we don't have time for the full \$50 "cultural experience," but settle instead for an ad-hoc tour of belching, bubbling mud pools in the public park, and the historic city features—like the amazing gothic bathhouse overlooking the croquet lawns. Cucumber sandwich anyone?

IT'S MONDAY MORNING WHEN JIM AND I MEET UP AGAIN WITH Lloyd to hit the Northlands. We detour on the road through Mangawhai Heads, and the beauty of the sandy coastline is arresting, such that I have



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above the tree line and swing across a barren landscape of graphite-coloured crags and rocky outcrops.

Ski resorts rarely look their best in summer; but Ruapehu, its crest draped in drifting cloud, has a uniquely desolate beauty, and the winding road down from the resort provides plenty of pavement entertainment, too!

The question everyone seems to ask of NZ visitors is did you go to Rotorua?

to pull the ST over for a few minutes just to take it all in. North of Whangarei, we head out to the coast again, but the clouds have coalesced, and a fine sea mist drapes the hills. By Helena Bay, the mist has become a persistent drizzle, and we take refuge at a charming Gallery & Café surrounded by semi-tropical gardens—a reminder of the North Island's steamy latitude. The Gallery specializes in Maori and



Pacific art, while the menu is creative and contemporary. A must stop for hungry culture vultures!

Back on the Russell road, the driz-

rats. Fortunately, the Duke of Marlborough Hotel has a room for us, and we're able to dry out our gear. I'm intrigued to learn Russell was once NZ's

biggest excitement is the weighing of the day's swordfish catch.

We planned to ride back to Auckland along the west coast through Dargaville, but, short of time and with the weather still threatening, we head across open country next day through Kaikohe in a steady drizzle, before the weather clears near Whangarei. It's the end of my trip, and next morning I reluctantly return the Sprint, caked in Northlands mud and grit to AMPS.

I've ridden bikes over much of North America, but never found such a concentration of challenging roads and natural beauty as I have on the North Island. And they say the South Island is even better.

I guess I'll be coming back! 

"A roadside oyster bar just before Coromandel town offers shellfish of a freshness I've never experienced."



zle is a drenching downpour, and we have to ride on tiptoes around the tight, winding curves, and though the steamy heat means we're not cold, we roll into Russell like three drowned

capital, and that the area had been once known as "hell hole of the Pacific" for its lawlessness: it seems hardly credible given the sleepy atmosphere of the seafront and pier, where the

