

Broke Bike
MOUNTAINS



Disaster strikes once, twice, and nearly three times while Robert Smith and his mob make a tour of New Zealand's South Island.

Story & photos by Robert Smith

For a motorcyclist, it's one of the sickest feelings there is. I first notice that Jim is missing a couple of kilometres after we turn off the Southern Motorway into the Hunua Range. I assume he's stopped to take a snap or pull out some rain gear. He knows where we're headed—he planned the route, after all. It's maybe 10 minutes later when we pull over.

"Where's Jim?"

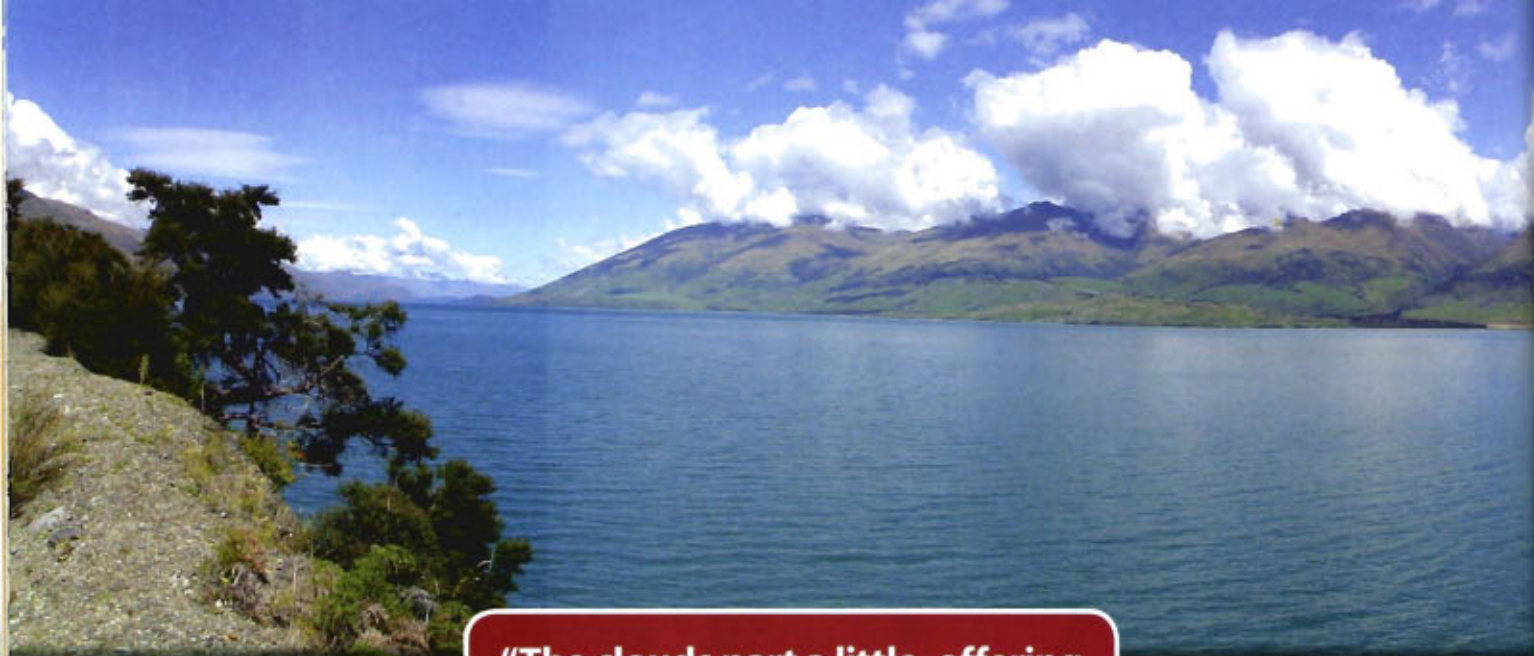
We retrace our tracks, and at a shallow rise on a blind bend is parked a police cruiser, lights flashing. Jim's battered BMW R1150R—oil dripping from a broken rocker cover, windshield shredded and headlight stove in—sits on the shoulder. The ambulance has already scooped Jim up and is on its way to Middlemore Hospital. The diagnosis: four broken ribs and a bunch of soft tissue injuries. The analysis: at the top of the curving rise, the chipseal has recently been patched with a slick layer of tar, now glistening in the drizzle. Unweighted and with little traction, the rear tire slid on



the wet tar, then hooked up on the chipseal, perfect scenario for a high-side. Jim's tour is done.

The irony is that Jim, an expat Kiwi, has prepared meticulous GPS routes for our tour. We'll miss his company, but my Zumo will take us to all the places he's planned. We're headed across New Zealand's North Island to the west coast, then south for the ferry to Picton on the South Island and a week on what I've been told are the best roads on the planet.

WE'RE STAYING IN BACKPACKER ACCOMMODATIONS, and Barnacle's in Paraparaumu is not untypical—shared rooms with a bathroom and showers down the hall. A heritage house, it's high on quaint and looks out over Cook Strait. Not that we can appreciate the view at 6:30 a.m. when we load up and head south toward Wellington—the ferry loads at 7:30. Fortunately NZ's traffic laws allow lane splitting, so we scythe through the dawdling commuter traffic. We're



"The clouds part a little, offering views of Lakes Wanaka and Hawea. It's scenery much like BC's West Kootenays."

seven bikes on the road. Pete and I are on rented Suzukis from Coleman's in Auckland: mine a tired 2000 GSX-750F; and his a new Bandit 1250S. John rides a local friend's SV650, and Steve is on Jim's

spare bike, a Ducati ST2. Local lads Darcy and Simon are Gixxer 750 and R1 mounted, while another co-opted Kiwi, Mark, rides his trick, touring Harley-Davidson V-Rod.

We secure our bikes with tie-downs on the ferry's lower deck and head for breakfast in the restaurant. I'm sharing a room with Mark, and his previous day's diet of meat pies, beer and onion bhajis meant he was snoring at both ends all night. I need revenge, so I choose the corn fritter and baked beans.

My introduction to South Island roads is abrupt and almost overwhelming. Queen Charlotte Drive is a wicked whiplash of narrow bumpy chipseal and blind decreasing radius turns that careens along the variegated coastline west to Havelock. After a couple of badly misjudged bends send me wide into the oncoming lane, I downshift a couple of gears and back off the throttle. The vague and heavy, flip-flop steering of the Katana doesn't help. After Havelock, we ride west on major roads to Nelson and admire the sunny seaside beachfront before turning north to Takaka, its notorious Hill and sublime Valley Highway. The road squeezes through narrow valleys and squirrels along slender ridges that evoke a heady mix of elation and terror. And while it's great fun, I'm not too disappointed when the valley opens out and the road assumes a more relaxed flow.

Pohara Beach offers the Top Ten Holiday Camp, a descriptor that echoes the dismal vacation compounds of British seaside resorts in the 1960s. But the TTHC is a collection of new, cheery one-room chalets with a toilet block and sandy beach handily nearby. And it's literally across the road from the back deck of the Penguin café & bar. A fish burger washed down with a couple of bottles of local Stoke Dark Ale from Nelson seal a perfect day.

Destination next day is the west coast port of Greymouth, gateway to glacier country. After a harum-scarum chase back over Pokara Hill, during which I manage to stretch not only my comfort zone but also

the Katana's, we stop in Motueka for breakfast at McDonald's. Kiwis are soundly carnivorous, and my "Monster Muffin" has two sausage patties, bacon and egg. It's really good!

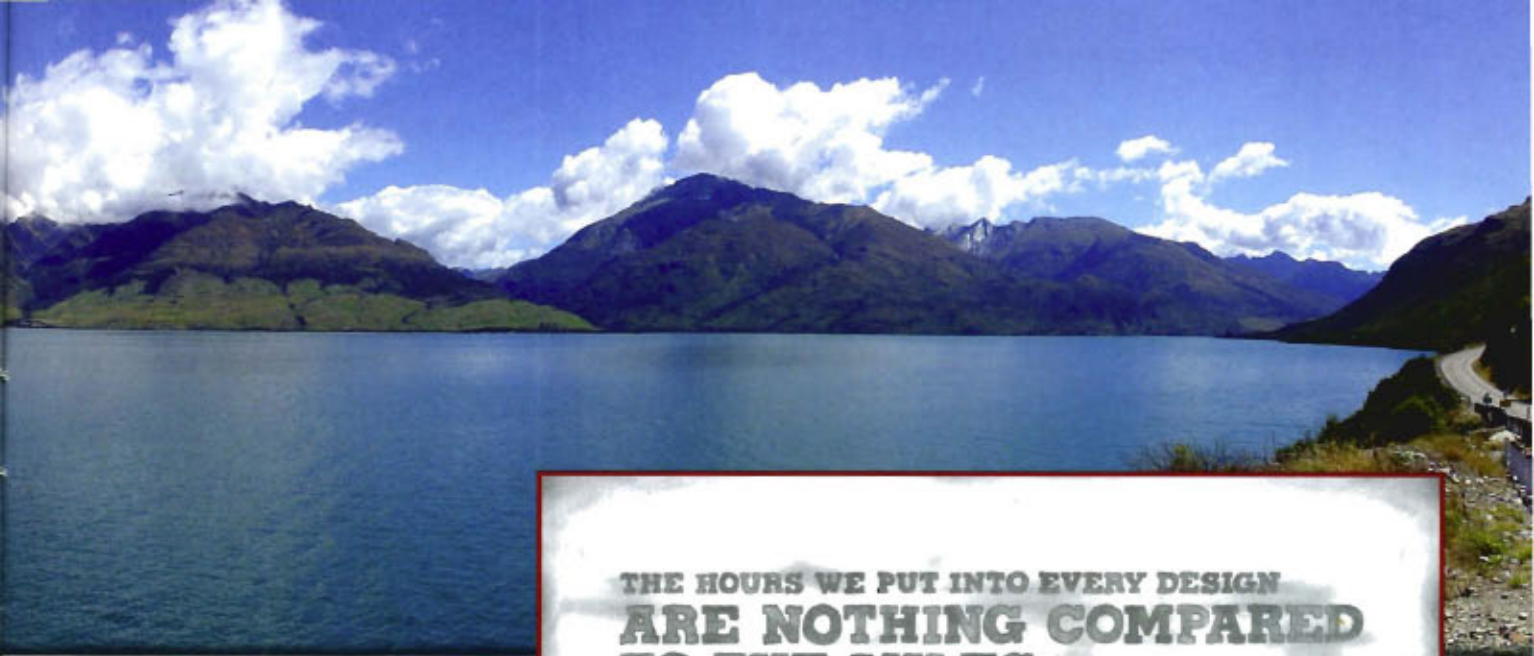
This is hop and orchard country, and we follow Motueka Valley Highway through a broad swath of lush, dense vegetation. By the time we get to Inangahua, Pete and Steve have pulled ahead of me, which isn't smart, because I have the GPS.

Seeing a sign to Greymouth, Steve turns left. The Zumo says right. I wait at the intersection, but he's gone, so I continue on Buller Gorge Road which, following a river course, throws a succession of fast sweepers at me. The bends get tighter as the highway scrambles downhill to the coast and mile after mile of white sand beach.

At Punakaiki, we stop to admire the coastal rock formations (natural bridges, blowholes and towers) and luxuriant vegetation before rolling south through the portside warehouses of Greymouth. When we get to our backpacker digs, Steve is already there—though he's acquired a speeding ticket from a ghost car on the way. A tour of the Monteith's brewery seems like a grand idea as the weather is closing in, so we order a minivan.

Monteith's modern facility, all stainless steel and glass, doesn't have the aesthetic appeal of traditional copper-and-wood breweries, but the tasting room makes up for it, though I find their cider more to my taste than the beer. Our minivan takes us to a Speight's Ale House (think: The Keg). My steak pie and mash is rich and savoury. Delicious!

A FEW SPITS HIT MY WINDSHIELD AS I'M LOADING THE Katana, and I struggle into my rain gear. A good idea, because by the time we stop for gas 20 km further south, we're in a persistent downpour. The scenery is irrelevant because



THE HOURS WE PUT INTO EVERY DESIGN
**ARE NOTHING COMPARED
TO THE MILES.**

FUEL IT. |  **VICTORY**

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it's hidden by the rain—a shame because we're heading into glacier country—and fortunately, it's a short day. We stop for breakfast in Franz Josef and arrive at our destination, another backpackers', in Fox Glacier.

I've stayed mostly dry in my rainsuit, but the air is chill and my "waterproof" BMW Pro Winter gloves are saturated. Our accomms are tiny shared rooms with bathroom down the hall and communal cooking and eating areas. Our riding done for the day, I arrange my gear around the oil heater in our room. Pete and I borrow an umbrella, collect some beer and victuals from the corner store, and spend the afternoon armchair touring with the gang. The median age of the other guests is probably low-20s, making me feel even more geezerly than usual.

The rain has stopped by the morning, but we are still in a rainforest, so the rainsuit goes back on. The Katana looks more like a recently-surfaced submarine than a motorcycle, but starts right up. We decide to detour to the Fox Glacier viewpoint, and glad we did. Pale sunlight squeezing through the clouds glares off the massive sheet of ice squeezed between towering cliffs.

Continuing south, the ride is like zooming down a long dark green corridor, the tall evergreens crowding the road, dripping with rain and shrouded with mist. I'm looking for a breakfast stop, but there's no hint of civilization until we see a sign for a salmon hatchery with a café. Score! Even better, we manage to arrive before the Edelweiss tour group that has been dogging us since the ferry, generally arriving at the few restaurants on our route before us, taking all the tables and tying up the kitchen. Sweet!

By Haast Village, a tiny coastal hamlet, the rain has stopped, and as we head inland, the clouds even part a little, offering views of Mount Macfarlane and Lakes Wanaka and Hawea—scenery reminiscent of BC's West Kootenays. In Wanaka town, we leave Hwy. Six and turn south for Queenstown, stopping at the 1865 Cardrona pub for lunch, by which time the clouds have completely gone.

Waiting for us is Jim, still on heavy pain meds but mo-

bile. He's flown down to Queenstown and rented a car. We'll be staying in a rented house in Arrowtown, much smaller than bustling resort Queenstown. The last 50 km or so into the heart of the lake country is a wild ride over switchback mountain roads. Arrowtown is reminiscent of the small mining towns in California, quaint, cutesy and with a strong heritage feel. Much larger Queenstown sits on Lake Wakatipu, and has a vibe and bucolic setting that reminds me of Nelson, BC. It's New Zealand's outdoor capital, offering jet boat rides, ziplining, and most lake and mountain pursuits. And it's where bungee jumping was invented!

Our time doesn't allow for the long haul to Invercargill, Milford Sound and Dunedin, but we do manage two excursions out of Queenstown. Glenorchy nestles in the mountains at the head of Lake Wakatipu, a 50-km sprint along the snaking lakefront that includes a couple of sphincter tightening moments where fresh "seal" (read: loose chips) is lurking in the middle of a fast bend. Kingston, at the other end of the Lake, was once home to the Kingston Flyer, a steam train passenger service. Sadly, the business is recently bust, and the locomotives and carriages sit dusty and decaying on rusty rails.

IT'S WHEN LEAVING ARROWTOWN FOR CHRISTCHURCH (the locals write "Chch") that the other shoe drops. Riding out of Cromwell in the dense, rosy mist of a summer dawn, Steve downshifts the Ducati to take a left bend, and ... bang! The rear of the Duc disappears in dense blue smoke. Steve coasts to the shoulder and parks. The Duc is done. The back of its transmission case now has a 5mm wide crack running across it. Not an unknown problem, it turns out. The ST2's swingarm mounts directly on the engine unit, and any weakness in the castings can cause the case to fail.

MEET THE BOYS: The New Zealand group totalled seven riders whose fate and/or machinery would endure varying degrees of luck: Mark Bond with a touring Harley-Davidson V-Rod, Peter Hardwick on a brand new Bandit 1250S, Jim Bush on a star-crossed BMW R1150R, Steve Gurry on a doomed Ducati ST2, John Bainbridge on a local friend's borrowed SV650, and of course Mr. Smith on a "tired" Suzuki Bandit 750F.



"A 50-km sprint along the snaking lakefront includes some bad moments where loose chips lurk in the middle of a fast bend."

So now Jim has two broken bikes, four broken ribs, and is sitting in the departure lounge at Queenstown waiting for his flight to Tauranga.

Taking our cellphone call, he cancels the flight and rents a van. He'll collect the bike and meet us in the tiny whistlestop of Tarras. There's only one thing to do while we wait: breakfast. A full house, NZ style (though the café owner is from Mexico), with succulent local sausage, bacon, grilled tomato, eggs and hash browns.

Pete, Mark, John and I roll on toward Chch. Snow-clad Mount Cook hovers above shimmering Lake Pukaki, and at Lake Tekapo we stop to admire a monument to famous sheep rustler James McKenzie, a sort of Kiwi Ned Kelly, I gather. The last miles into Chch across board flat farmland cause the Katana to lean precariously in a fierce blustery crosswind. We're staying in the old

Jail, now converted into a backpackers' hostel. Pete and I share a "room" with two bunk beds. I can touch both walls at the same time. John plans to stay with family and friends in Chch. Jim

and Steve pull in in the evening with the Duc in the back of a Toyota Emina rental van from "Jucy El Cheapo Rentals" (I'm not making this up). From then it becomes the Juicy Enema.

We spend Friday strafing the paved goat paths that swoop over and around the Banks Peninsula, a volcanic knoll fully a thousand metres high, ending up in beachfront Akaroa. The fish shop is supposed to have the best fish 'n' chips in the area, but my batter is soggy ("Cooked twice," says foodie Jim, who has finally caught up with us in the Enema), but the chips are excellent. As we're sitting there, a delivery truck is dropping off boxes of "McCain's French Fries ..."

What I learned about NZ

If you are thinking about New Zealand, plan your route and book ahead, especially if you're in a group. The group I traveled with stayed in backpackers' accommodations—mostly clean and well maintained, and great if you don't mind sharing a room and using a communal bathroom. Typically \$30-40NZ a night. Here are a few other considerations:

1. Meat pies provide hearty, inexpensive nourishment and are sold everywhere.
2. Coffee is always made from espresso: ask for a Long Black or a Flat White.
3. We rented bikes from Coleman's Suzuki in Auckland, which had a great selection and easily the best prices.

~ Robert Smith



Hanmer Springs, our overnight, is still a 100 km or so away, and the other side of Chch, meaning a Friday afternoon grind through the burbs joining the weekenders leaving town. From Hanmer, Hwy. 70 fires through twisting canyons and along broad valleys almost devoid of traffic or settlements before emerging on the coast at Kaikoura. This seaside marvel rivals the North Island beaches on the East Cape, and offers charming waterfront bars and cafes. I sink into a large cappuccino and a muffin at the Craypot Café.

The ferry back to the "mainland" awaits, and we blast north on blustery Hwy. One, Mark leading a sparkling pace as we fire past straggling holiday traffic. The ferry arrives in Lower Hutt in the dark, and my faithful GPS takes us straight to our cramped, seedy and musty motel.

FOUR DAYS AFTER WE LEAVE CHRISTCHURCH, THE EARTH moves—the 6.3 magnitude quake that strikes on Feb. 22 is one

of New Zealand's deadliest ever. But, thankfully, John's family and friends are safe.

The Duc makes it back to Auckland in the Juicy Enema. Mark buys it and already has a replacement motor lined up. Jim still has trouble lifting, but is back on two wheels. His wife has banned any overseas rides for 2011. The busted Beemer is sulking in a barn in Warkworth awaiting repairs. I own up to dropping the Katana while parking it and pay \$80NZ for a new turn signal. Steve actually quite enjoys the drive back from Taras in the Juicy Enema and will probably never buy an ST2.

So are the South Island roads the best in the world? For twistiness, remoteness and lack of traffic—possibly, but often the surface lets them down. Northern California has their equal. The mountains are eye-popping—but so are the Canadian Rockies. Where NZ really scores, though is in its climate, unspoiled beaches, great wines, excellent coffee and the best biker food anywhere. 