

New Zealand

My first bike was a Honda CB350. It was unregistered, failed to proceed, and I got it for a song. The plan was to get it going, get it registered, and take it on a cheap trip around New Zealand. Steps 1 and 2 were relatively simple in the relatively simple early 1970's, but Step 3 freight costs were a reality check and Step 4, the NZ government bond, became the show-stopper.

The trip was done in a hire car, and the CB350 was quickly replaced by an XL trail bike, a CB750 (for a trip around Tasmania), another XL, then another CB750 (for a trip to Cairns and Darwin).

Fast forward 50 years and it was time to do New Zealand on a bike. We arrived in Auckland on Sat 5 Nov and had the weekend to look around before collecting our hire bikes from Te Waipounamu Motorcycle Tours on Mon morning. Archer and Philippa chose a BMW R1200 RT similar to their R1250 RT, while David and I elected for BMW F700 GS's, the low seat options comparable to my lowered Tiger Sport but not quite the same as David's Rocket 111.



Auckland, viewed from the Auckland Eye

Unfortunately NZ bike hire companies were still recovering from the covid enforced hiatus and the bikes were 2016 and 2017 vintage, but still in good mechanical nick.

Aiden from Te Waipounamu picked us up from our Auckland motel to take us to their storage depot, paperwork and packing took an hour, and we were on our way to Paihia.

We had an early lunch at Wellsford, encountered a brief burst of heavy rain at Whangarei, and another stop at Kawakawa for coffee and refuel. Route planning using Google Maps had us riding to Russell via Waikare, and Aiden programmed my bike's GPS to include the "Old Russell Road". Russell was New Zealand's first capital, but we never did see an "Old Russell Road", nor did either Google or Tom-Tom identify approx. 15km of rough unsealed road, safely negotiated. The same couldn't be said for one car well off the road and stranded in the undergrowth.



the Okiata-Opua ferry crossing from Russell to Paihia

A mix-up with the motel booking was quickly resolved, and a robot delivering food to our restaurant table at dinner was an interesting touch to complete our first day on the road.

Heavy rain overnight proved the weather forecast 100% accurate, as did rain continuing well into the morning. The radar showed it was clearing to the west, and eventually we set off around 11:30am in the rain, later easing to light showers. Again the forecast was accurate, and the clouds cleared before our lunch stop at the Little Kitchen in Mangonui.

With the late start and the slow going, we decided to abandon the ride up to Cape Reinga Lighthouse but still finish the day as planned in Pukanui. It was a great ride through rolling hills, good road surface, sunshine, and lots of comfortable 55kph and 65kph signposted bends.

Tom-Tom was being temperamental, and somehow we all missed the sign to our motel, had almost reached the Cape before we realised it, and arrived back at Pukenui just in time to order dinner before the chef went home at 7:00pm. Another good day despite the early rain.



Cape Reinga Lighthouse

Pukenui to Dargaville promised more good riding and the weather forecast was favourable. Roads to Ahipara and first coffee break were good, a lot of sheep and cattle farms, a short stint on Hwy 1 with an equally short burst of rain then back onto secondary roads to Horeke Hotel, with claims to being the longest surviving hotel in New Zealand, and our intended lunch stop. Unfortunately there was a significant gap between the hotel website and reality, the hotel now trading as accommodation only for bicycle groups and hadn't served meals since before covid.

We'd also planned to stop at the nearby Waimere Boulders tourist attraction, but decided to carry on to Omapere for lunch. A chap at the hotel told us not to go down the unsealed Waimere Boulders road at the intersection, and said the road to Omapere was unsealed for 7km then sealed the rest of the way. This wasn't obvious on Google and I was still coming to grips with Tom-Tom so we followed his advice. The unsealed section started out with reasonable hard-packed gravel but became muddy, then wet clay, so I turned back after 10km.

Eventually we arrived back at the intersection, saw a small road sign inconspicuously located high on a light pole, safely tackled the correct unsealed road, then had a good ride to Omapere.



losing direction at Horeke Hotel



and an ominous sign at Waimere Boulders turn-off

The lengthy delay had us arriving at Tane Mahuta just before closing time, but the helpful ranger allowed us access to see the giant kauri tree in a gathering of many giant trees.



Tane Mahuta, the giant kauri tree

Dargaville was reached around 6:15pm. The nearest restaurant was 1km away, but we were happy to walk rather than ride. After a day like that we certainly needed wine with dinner, and it didn't sprinkle too much on the return walk. Dargaville is the sweet potato capital of NZ, passing many sweet potato farms on the way out next morning.

There were a few sprinkles before Brynderwyn, then a good ride to Helensville for lunch. Traffic became denser approaching Auckland's northern outskirts then a few more sprinkles, turning to proper rain on the Auckland motorway where Tom-Tom took us on a dubious route through Auckland's southern suburbs, forcing me to stop and consult Google. Naughty Tom-Tom.

After finally escaping Auckland we had a reasonable ride around the Firth of Thames to Coromandel Town, with strong gusty winds down the west side of the bay, a bit of sunshine while hugging the picturesque shoreline up the east side, and showers for the last 10km.

Coromandel was the first rest day of the trip, and it bucketed down all night and all morning. Compounding that, strong winds and fallen trees had taken out power lines around 6:30am, not expected to be restored until 5:30pm.

We walked the short distance into town around 2:30pm during a break in the rain, and had a hamburger for brunch in a café with gas cookers. We also noticed the Star and Garter Hotel had power from a generator, so our venue for the previous night's dinner was duly noted and unanimously accepted as the best option again.



a wet outlook and an even wetter lookout before Coromandel Town

With power restored early I updated Tom-Tom, a slow 4 hour process that seemed to give no noticeable improvement on its erratic performance, and the wet weather had introduced a condensation shadow in the screen periphery and a reluctance to respond to input on the touch screen, particularly on the “Start” icon, despite trying the three sensitivity settings.

We set off around 9:30am next morning, rain pants on more as protection from wet roads than impending rain. A road closed barrier was in place before Whitianga, but a road worker said the route was open. Slipping past the barrier, we encountered several partial road closures from fallen trees and land slips, so took it easy on this otherwise good ride.

Paeora was lunch stop and a photo of the giant Lemon and Paeora Bottle, then a great ride through Karangahake Gorge following the Ohinemuri River. Rather than detour into Tauranga we intended to have a break at any suitable venue along the route, but none materialised.

Another good ride through Mangorewa Gorge, a brief stop at Hamurana, and soon we could detect an unmistakable odour. After checking in at our hotel, we went to Kairau Park to see some active mud pools and thermal springs. Wouldn't be a visit to Rotorua without it.

While having a pre-dinner drink in the hotel, someone commented this was the first day without rain since setting off. Right on cue, it started pouring down outside.



giant Lemon and Paeroa Bottle at Paeroa



unmistakable Rotorua

With more rain forecast, Archer and Philippa decided to take a shorter route to Taupo next day, while David and I took the planned route via Tongariro National Park around the western side of Lake Taupo. Tom-Tom initially had other ideas and took us on a winding route through the Waikite Valley, beautiful scenery and lots of farms, but time consuming.

Lunch at Taumarunui, more beautiful scenery and good roads, and a few patches of mist rather than rain until Tongariro. There the dark clouds and rain moved in, eased slightly for the short walk to Tawhai Falls (Gollum's Pool), then more patchy rain along the "Volcanic Loop Highway" until Turangi. The town's cafes were closed despite it being only 3:00pm on a Sunday, but the remaining ride beside Lake Taupo had occasional sunshine and was a good way to end the day.



Tawhai Falls (Gollum's Pool) in Tongariro National Park



and a touch of blue sky over Lake Taupo

Taupo was another rest day, with an afternoon cruise on Lake Taupo to see the Maori Rock Carvings. The environmentally friendly cruise yacht had a battery powered auxiliary motor, captain Chris gave an entertaining commentary to the 11 tourists on board, the finer weather had sufficient breeze to allow Chris to heel the boat over on occasions, and several ducks on the open water entertained us by taking morsels from our outstretched hands.



Maori Rock Carvings on Lake Taupo

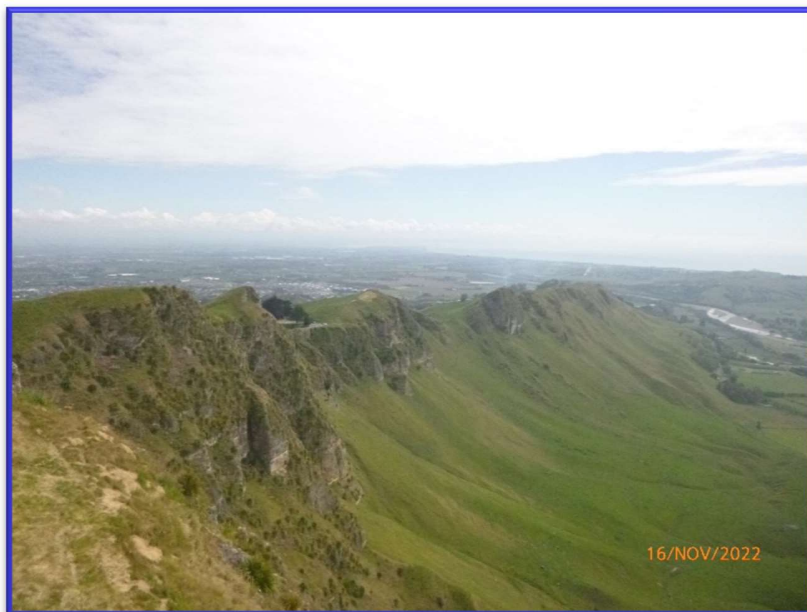


Huka Falls

Taupo to Napier was a short riding day, stopping at Huka Falls on the way out then Rangitaira Tavern for lunch. The weather was again kind, and the road long open straights mainly through pine forests, so I wasn't surprised to see many hand-made signs protesting the 80kph speed limit on this "Thermal Explorer Highway". We called in to view Waipunga Falls but missed the Pungahuru Falls turn-off. Towards Napier the skies became overcast, and the wind picked up as we climbed a mountain range and passed a wind farm construction site.

Arrival in Napier was around 2:30pm, giving plenty of time for a wander around this "Art Deco" city, and a visit to the excellent museum where we watched a documentary film on the 1931 earthquake. This included interviews with people who had experienced the quake which levelled the town, giving rise to the predominant 1930's art deco style architecture.

Next day's ride to Wellington would be one of the longer days on the bikes, but we still took time to ride up to Bluff Hill Lookout overlooking Napier port, and then to Te Mata Peak near Hastings for the spectacular views.



Te Mata Peak outside Hastings

From Havelock North, Middle Road was a great ride, lots of 55kph and 65kph curves, good road surface and little traffic apart from a lone cyclist who suddenly decided to do a U-turn right in front of me. Lunch was at the interesting Patangata Tavern, decorated with all sorts of sporting, motoring and other quirky paraphernalia, before meeting up with State Hwy 2 at Waipawa.

Plan A was to continue down State Hwy 2 to Masterton, but patrons at a coffee stop in Woodville suggested a shorter route over "the saddle", assuring us the road was fully sealed.

Indeed this was a good ride but heavily trafficked due to major roadworks closing the primary road, and it was obvious why a wind farm had been erected on the top of the saddle.

There were many more major roadworks along Hwy 1 towards Wellington, with Tom-Tom wanting me to take a newly completed section of motorway. There was a narrow gap in the barricades but without scissors to cut any potential ribbons I declined the invitation. After that, Tom-Tom wanted me to take every Hwy 1 exit approaching Wellington, which I also declined. I will admit Tom-Tom was helpful finding our hotel in the centre of the city.



Wellington Cable Car

The Wellington rest day started off with a ride on the Cable Car to a scenic lookout above the city, and a visit to the Cable Car museum. Rain sprinkles dampened other tourist activities, although we did go to Wellington Museum, trendy Cuba Street, and the harbourfront restaurant/bar area, before deciding on an Irish Pub for dinner that night.

Ferry check-in time was 12:30pm next day so we had a ride through the hilly outer suburbs to Mount Victoria Lookout before making our way to the ferry terminal, not easy with a wicked set of street closures for a festival that evening. Departure was closer to 2:00pm than the 1:30pm schedule, the crossing was smooth, and the rain started during the 5:15pm docking at Picton. Hedged in by cars we were late off, giving time to fit rain suits before disembarking.

Rain persisted during the 25 minute ride to our accommodation in Blenheim, but fortunately the motel had plenty of drying facilities, and a planned catch-up with an old mate provided transport into town for dinner, a couple of drinks and a reminiscence of good times past.



approaching Picton Harbour, and more ominous weather

Blenheim was another rest day, gratefully accepting my mate's offer to drive us to Omaka Aviation Museum in the intermittent rain, then taking a mini-bus tour of several Marlborough region wineries in the afternoon. And a good day was had by all.



Aussie soldiers looting the Red Baron's WW1 fighter plane, in Omaka Aviation Museum

In what was becoming a familiar pattern, the weather forecast for our ride to Hanmer Springs was not in our favour. We set off early to confront the predicted light showers in the morning, hoping to minimize exposure to heavier rain in the afternoon. It was a good ride following the coast towards Kiakoura, calling in at the Karaka Lobster Café for coffee before another quick stop at Ohau Point Lookout to play spot the seals. The rain held off and we were all winners.



playing spot the seals at Ohau Point Lookout



threatening clouds on the way to Hanmer Springs

By-passing Kiakoura, the clouds darkened over the nearby mountain range but only a few sprinkles materialized. This was another good ride, State Hwy 70 passing over mountains and through valleys, sheep and cattle farms, and also paddocks of deer, goats and alpacas.

We stopped at Mt Lyford Lodge for lunch, read a brochure on Rodin FZED Cosworth V8 race cars (www.rodin-cars.com), and passed by the race tracks custom-built for the fortunate owners' enjoyment. It occurred to me the adjacent section of State Hwy 70 would have provided a short but excellent hill climb track to complement the race circuits. I'd also put my rain pants on during lunch and wore a few sprinkles, but reached Hanmer Springs around 2:30pm still dry.

Showers were forecast next day so we wore full rain gear, getting some relief from the cold for the great ride along Lewis Pass Road (State Hwy 7), surrounded by magnificent scenery with glimpses of snow evident on mountain tops between the clouds and the mist, following the wide Maruia River, and negotiating more of the ubiquitous one-lane bridges.

The original itinerary had us going up State Hwy 65 towards Murchison, but the darkening clouds urged a shorter route towards Reefton and coffee. Sprinkles started as we set off again, turning to rain approaching Westport. The roads were good but the fun was compromised by rain and fog, as was our appreciation of the mostly hidden scenery.



Pan-Cake Rocks at Punakaiki

With the shorter route, Punakaiki appeared around 1:00pm so we had lunch in the only hotel in town, then checked into our nearby motel. The rain eased later in the afternoon so we walked to Pancake Rocks and the Blowholes, then back to the motel and again dined in the hotel.

More rain was forecast for next day but there was one patch of blue sky so David and I rode back along the coast for approx. 15km, doubling our appreciation of the road and the scenery we'd missed while riding in rain and fog the previous day.

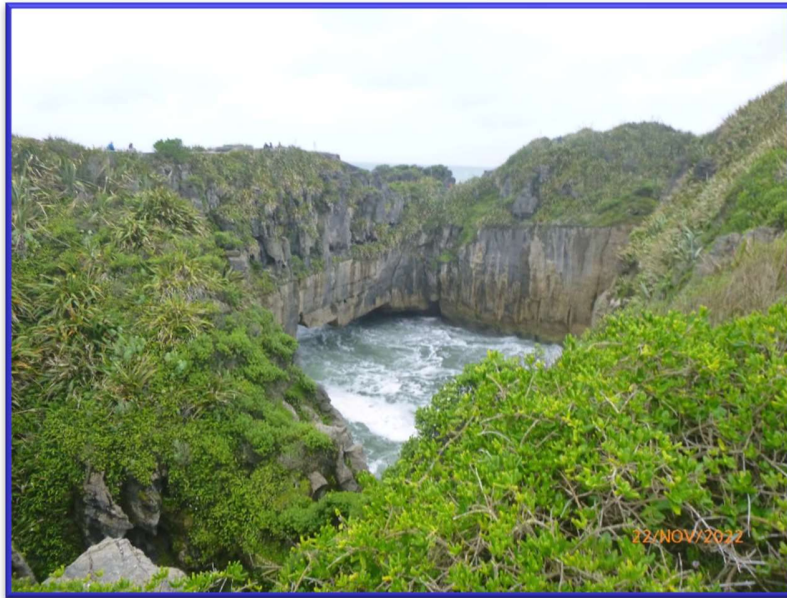


rugged west coast near Punakaiki



and enjoyable west coast roads

The Blowholes perform best at high tide, due 10:00am that morning, so we made a second visit. I felt the previous day's performance was just as impressive, possibly due to the rougher swell, and the many people gathered with cameras at the ready seemed equally underwhelmed.



Punakaiki Blowhole

With more rain forecast, we abandoned plans to visit Shantytown, had lunch at Hokitika, then rain started before Ross and persisted for the rest of the day. We reached our Franz Josef motel around 3:30pm and went through the now very familiar procedure of laying out boots, gloves and helmets in front of the room heaters. The rain and dark clouds dashed any thoughts of doing a helicopter flight and landing on Franz Josef glacier, and also dashed any inclination to walk the path of the retreating glacier.

Franz Josef to Queenstown was another of the longer days, and full rain gear was in order. Roads were still wet as we set off but the rain held off for the challenging ride to Fox Glacier, and the straighter roads through forests to Bruce Bay. After stopping for coffee at a roadside van, the rain started as soon as we headed off and continued to "motorcycle heaven" Haast.

The Frontier Hotel had an inviting open fireplace so lunch took a bit longer than usual, and a local introduced himself and bragged how he rode his Harley-Davidson to Wanaka 3 days a week for work. With his choice of bike, his tattoos and piercings, and his 1970's Cadillac parked outside, he was obviously into heavy metal.

We had another break at Makarora, joined by a group of wet but happy thrill-seekers returning from a jet boat ride, before the rain eased approaching Lake Hawea.



Lake Hawea photo-bombed by raindrops

More roadworks delayed our approach to Queenstown, and by this time Tom-Tom was showing as little resistance to water penetration as my rainsuit, and offered no help finding our motel, arriving around 4:30pm and repeating the dry-out procedure.



Queenstown and The Remarkables from Bob's Peak lookout

This was another planned rest day, giving the opportunity to catch the Queenstown Gondola to Bob's Peak with its impressive views towards the city, The Remarkables mountain range, Lake Wakatipu, and surrounding countryside. A dusting of snow had fallen on the mountains overnight, and even the low clouds couldn't detract from the magnificent sights.



snow-capped mountains photo-bombed by a tree, at Glenorchy



hugging the shoreline of Lake Wakatipu

With cool but clearing weather we had an enjoyable afternoon ride to Glenorchy, hugging the shoreline of Lake Wakatipu each way, then walked into town for dinner.

Queenstown to Te Anau is a 2 hour ride so we detoured via Arrowtown and wandered around this popular historic gold mining centre, including a 1 hour visit to the town museum. The route then went past The Remarkables, still with the dusting of snow, and another great ride along a different section of Lake Wakatipu shoreline. Google had highlighted a viewpoint to the Devil's Staircase but Tom-Tom pleaded ignorance and I still haven't seen it.



another day and another shoreline road beside Lake Wakatipu

The country became flatter with straighter roads, many fields with even more sheep and cattle, and a herd of deer. Te Anau is the gateway to Fiordland National Park, New Zealand's largest, and featured in The Lord of the Rings franchise. If you believe local tourist brochures, there doesn't appear to be anywhere in New Zealand that doesn't feature in The Lord of the Rings! You'll also be led to believe the land of the long white dark cloud always has clear blue skies!

We arrived approx 3:45pm, walked around town, and later had trouble finding a venue for dinner. As with most of New Zealand, there was a severe shortage of hospitality staff.

The Moose Tavern had a 1 hour wait, the Italian restaurant was closed, as was the pizza shop, and we settled for Chinese, incurring an almost 1 hour wait while the husband and wife owners took orders and served the large group of diners. They were probably also doing the cooking. On the way back we booked Moose Tavern for the following night.

From Te Anau, the itinerary had us riding to Milford Sound for a pre-booked cruise, but we chickened out and caught a bus. A good decision. The bus was dry and warm, Paul the driver gave a running commentary on the way there, the 2 hour cruise was spectacular despite the rain, clouds and fog, and we saw plenty of waterfalls cascading down the mountains, plus fur seals and dolphins. Unfortunately, as with most of this trip, my photos don't do it justice.



misty, cloudy, beautiful Milford Sound

Tom-Tom was having a hissy fit while I tried to program next day's ride to Invercargill, insisting State Hwy 65 was an unsealed road. We checked at the Visitor's Centre before leaving Te Anau and were assured the road was sealed. "Southern Scenic Route" was a pleasant ride, probably as much because of the dry conditions as the road and scenery, and the surface looked like it had been sealed for many years.

Approaching Invercargill the countryside became even flatter with crop fields as well as sheep and cattle. We checked in to our motel then had a ride to Bluff, the southernmost town and one of the oldest European settlements in New Zealand, stopping at the Marine Lookout, Bluff Lookout and the Maritime Museum before returning around 5:30pm.

Invercargill was another rest day, allowing time to see Burt Munro's "World's Fastest Indian" in E. Hayes hardware store, over 300 bikes in Classic Motorcycle Mecca, and Bill Richardson's Transport World collection of trucks, cars, tractors and other motoring memorabilia. We also had our first experience with a New Zealand courtesy bus, picked up and returned to our motel after dinner at the Savvy Chef restaurant. Where was this on the rainy nights?



Burt Munro's "World's Fastest Indian"



new model Brough Superior in Classic Motorcycle Mecca

The planned route to Dunedin was to follow the “Southern Scenic Route”, avoiding an unsealed road closer to the southern coastline. The motel owner told us that road was now sealed and recommended a café at Niagara, so we changed our plans accordingly. The new route was a pleasant ride, the road surface also looked like it had been sealed for many years, but the turn-off to Slope Point, the most southerly point in New Zealand, was unsealed so we continued on.

The touted café at Niagara was closed, but fortunately the unexpected Whispering Frog Resort café was open 20km down the road, and extensive roadworks before Balclutha had us riding an unsealed surface possibly longer and rougher than the shunned 4km road to Slope Point.



Larnach Castle

Impending rain had us donning the rain suits during a lunch stop in Balclutha, and the heavens opened approx. 50km from Dunedin. It eased sufficiently to do a tour of Larnach Castle, but the sprinkles continued to our motel in Dunedin. The nearest dinner venue was another Irish pub, so I had the usual Guinness Pie washed down with a couple of Ireland’s finest.

David and I walked to the Octagon next morning, a geometrical arrangement of streets in the centre of the city surrounded by imposing buildings including St Paul’s Cathedral, the Council Chambers, Dunedin Art Gallery and The City Library, and other buildings less so.

Rain pants were on for the ride out, and Tom-Tom was in another foul mood due to detours around some main street roadworks. The roads dried shortly after, and we stopped at Moeraki Boulders to check out this tourist attraction and have a coffee in the conveniently located café.



Robert Burns reciting on Poet's Walk near St Paul's Cathedral, Dunedin



Moeraki Boulders near Hampden

David's fuel light had come on shortly after Palmerston so we stopped at the next servo and begrudgingly paid NZ\$2.95/litre for 95 octane. We had seen over NZ\$3.00/litre at other servos but typically paid around NZ\$2.65/litre, or AUD\$2.50

Sprinkles turned to rain before the planned lunch stop at Kurow, so the Flying Pig café at Duntroon provided both lunch and an opportunity to fit rain jackets. Unsure of fuel prices at Aoraki (Mt Cook) we refueled at Twizel, saw the first of many snow-capped mountains, enjoyed a break in the rain at Lake Pukaki viewpoint, and enjoyed even more the sight of blue skies over Mt Cook in the distance. Unfortunately the clouds re-gathered for the ride into Aoraki Village. In desperation I did take a photo of Mt Cook from a large painting in the hotel, partly to have a photo, but mainly so I'd recognize it if there was a small break in the clouds.

We did see several glimpses next morning, and hung around for a while hoping the clouds would clear. No chance. Reluctantly we set off but I kept an eye on the mirrors hoping for a change of fortune. This came before the same Lake Pukaki viewpoint so we happily pulled in to join the many tourists taking in the view (and many photos).



Aoraki (Mt Cook) putting on a show at last

Lake Tekapo provided a pleasant ride around the shoreline and a coffee break, Drift Inn at Rangitata was lunch, then less interesting riding on State Hwy 1 towards Christchurch.

Tom-Tom again wanted me to take every exit approaching the city but I knew our motel was near the city centre so I followed the road signs until Tom-Tom co-operated, not easy with water droplets and shadows inside the screen, and condensation blocking out the street name display. I still think there were more deviations than necessary to reach the motel.

David and I did a ride around the outer suburbs of Lyttleton and Sumner Beach before handing the bikes back next morning, following road signs while Tom-Tom threw an absolute tantrum. If Tom-Tom had co-operated and taken us to Governor's Bay as I wanted, we would have done just over 5,000km total. As it was we did 4,984km. With no hesitation, Te Waipounamu happily refunded Tom-Tom's fee.



Hagglunds at Christchurch International Antarctic Centre

After lunch we caught a taxi to the International Antarctic Centre, experiencing an Antarctic storm in a special room with wind gusts up to 42kph and "feels like" temperature of -18°C, strapped ourselves into a Haggglunds all-terrain vehicle for a ride over several steep inclines, a side incline, a bumpy timber track and a water hazard, before getting all warm and cuddly with a penguin feeding display and a pat of some huskies.

Next day involved a visit to Canterbury Museum, the Quake Museum detailing the 2010 and more devastating 2011 earthquakes, a walk around Christchurch Cathedral, still fenced off while massive strengthening and reconstruction work progressed, and a visit to the trendy New Regent Street café precinct before dinner at Christchurch Casino's Monza Bar.

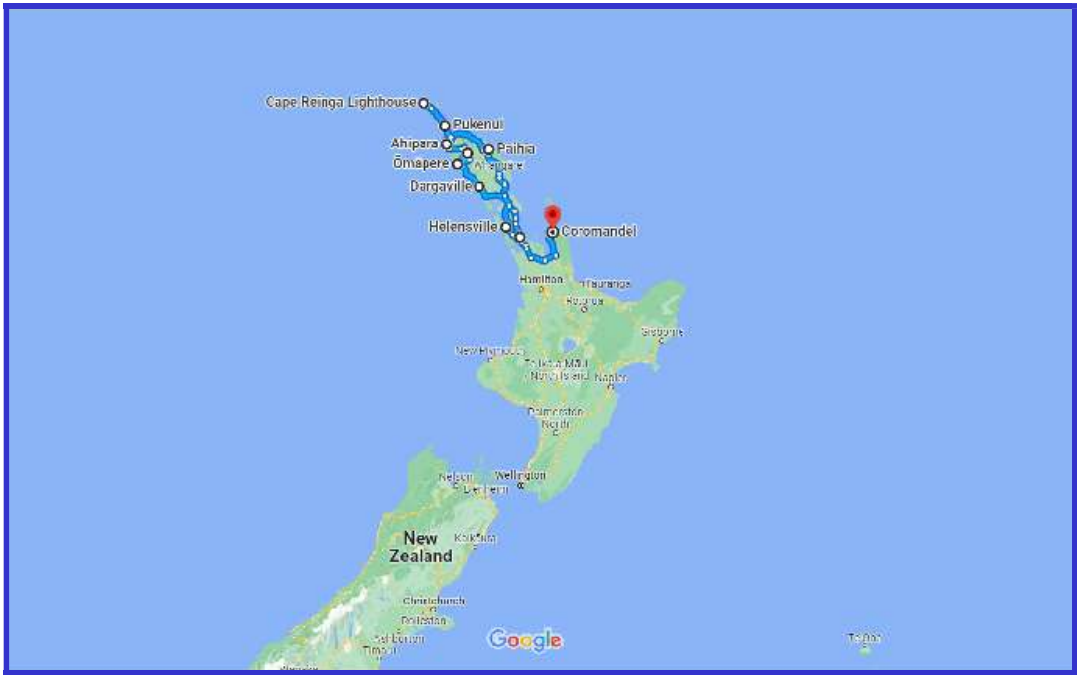
Final day involved a ride on the Christchurch Tram, hopping on and off at various locations on the shortish route before retrieving our bags from the motel and heading to the airport.



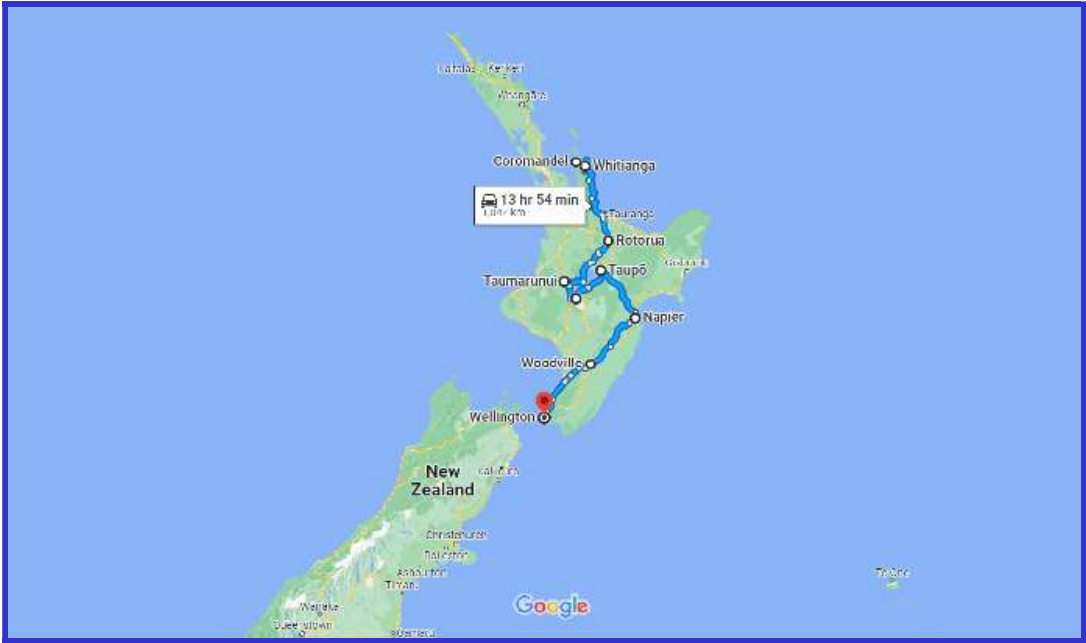
Christchurch Cathedral reconstruction works

Despite the disappointing weather, this was another interesting and enjoyable trip, but it could have been so much better if we had a fair share of reasonable weather. This was the only bike trip I can recall where I never removed the jacket liner or used summer gloves. But some things are out of our control, and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend New Zealand as a travel destination, bike or otherwise. Just do it in fine weather.

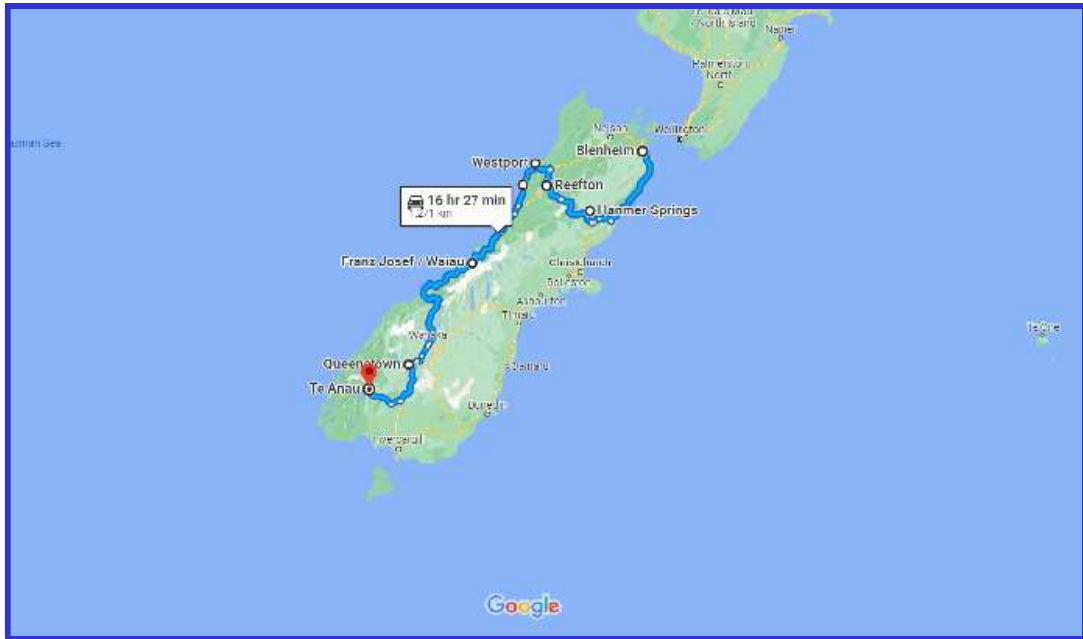
Geoff Roberts



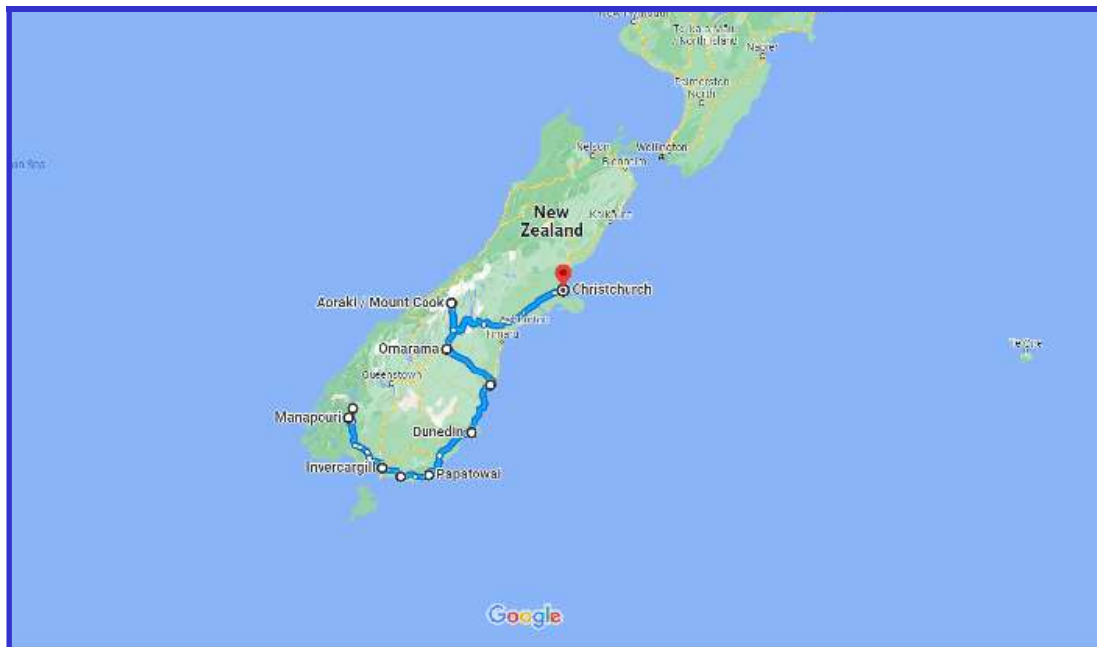
Week 1: Auckland, Paihia, Pukenui, Dargaville, Coromandel



Week 2: Coromandel, Rotorua, Taupo, Napier, Wellington



Week 3: Blenheim, Hanmer Springs, Franz Josef, Queenstown, Te Anau



Week 4: Te Anau, Invercargill, Dunedin, Aoraki/Mt Cook, Christchurch