

## South Island mountain biking adventure – February – March 2018

Over the past five weeks I have shared a grand adventure, cycling off road through the South Island of NZ. My traveling mate was Heather from Hamilton in the North Island. Our initial connection happened some thirteen years ago when we both accepted volunteer assignments in Lao PDR – Heather in Vientiane, and me 500 km south at Savannakhet. Over those two beautiful years we shared some unique cycling adventures on the back roads and tracks of that wonderful country!

More recently when I was working in remote Australia I became aware of the increasing number of mountain bike tracks that were being created throughout NZ, and determined to check some out. In February 2017 I set off alone from Wellington and cycled up what is called 'Tour Aotearoa' bike packing route<sup>1</sup> to Hamilton to spend some time with Heather, and then looping south west down to New Plymouth.

I loved that trip, and was comfortable with my aloneness, so it was with enthusiasm, but some trepidation, I agreed to join Heather for a similar off road route down the South Island. Heather made a few stipulations about rest days and relaxed riding which seemed OK to me; (and besides we were independently kitted out with cooker and tent, so could have had time out if we needed it). As it turned out the enrichment of a good companion enhanced the trip exponentially!



Heather with purple streaks in her whitish hair, and bright stylish clothing balanced my less imaginative presentation. And between us we drew out many stories from fellow travellers and local people – stories of adventures; friendships; local politics:

- One cycling German couple looking super cool in matching logo'd shirts and bikes, were challenging themselves to the extreme riding rough tracks on their heavily-laden narrow tyred road bikes.

- An old farmer drove some 100 km each month to take an old friend with dementia out of the rest-home, for a meal of fish and chips.
- Haast township feels pretty frustrated because their rates are helping maintain the fantastic West Coast Wilderness cycling trail some 250 km north of them, while that same council has not supported their own local initiative in building a cycle trail. And so many more stories!

Another thing that happened with increasing frequency as the trip continued (perhaps as we became more haggard??) were the accolades to our adventures. More than daily, people (Kiwis and visitors) would approach us to take our photo, express their admiration (often describing us as 'an inspiration'), one guy even wanted to do a video interview (but we avoided that one!) and perhaps ask us a 'personal question' (code for 'how old are you'!).

We also both had the habit of creating stories about diverse people we saw but with whom we didn't necessarily interact. For example at the foot of the Haast Pass there were a couple of super flash touring bikes with well-worn panniers parked near a waterfall walking path. We decided the owners would be a couple of super-fit young Europeans who would pass us on the 500 metre climb ahead. Well we slogged up the climb; ate our lunch; and strolled on up to a lookout; and only after that did we encounter the pair. He was a mature-aged cyclist from Adelaide and his older sister, who was not particularly a cyclist but had agreed to accompany him on this trip because his wife (with whom the trip had been planned) had died suddenly and he had not been coping well. They had already ridden over 1000 challenging kilometres and experienced days of heavy rain and road flooding. Now

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<sup>1</sup> Tour Aotearoa is actually a bike packing route from Cape Reinga (tip of the Nth Is) to Bluff (bottom of Sth Is). The initiators (Jonathon Kennett and his brothers) have prepared a wonderful guide with some 60% off roads; and in Feb 2016 and 2018 have actually held brevets (no winners or prizes) where about 600 riders participate carrying spot trackers so that the whole world can watch their progress. Talking to friends who have done this gruelling 3000 km ride, the trackers plus en route rivalry soon have everybody pushing their limits! Most riders aim to do the ride in 30 days (ie 100 km/day average) although the speedsters do it in 15 days!

(apart from the fact that she was loquacious - I heard her and his life stories and medical histories in the first five minutes!!) I would consider her to be inspirational in her support for her brother!!

For an in-depth description of our trip you might like to go to Heather's wonderful blog 'goldcardgal.com' . But in the meantime I will summarise:

Norm dropped us in Nelson on Wed 7 April and we headed off down the Great Taste trail and back roads to the West Coast. We both loved the bush and vistas of the 130 km West Coast Wilderness trail, and then it was on to the main tourist road (with Chinese New Year travellers) down to Haast and up over the pass towards Wanaka. The west coast traffic was steady but slow. It was impressive to see the slips and huge boulders which had been cleared from the road following recent heavy rains.

We found the 50 km into Lake Hawea township pretty gruelling with rain, headwinds, significant undulations, narrow shoulder, and heavy traffic doing 100 km plus! From there it was on to cycle trails down the Hawea River and up to Wanaka on the Clutha trail. Continuing icy rain and cyclone warnings meant that Heather's sister in law, Carol, rescued us (wet and cold) and took us home to a log fire in Cromwell (75 km away). Next morning after admiring the fresh snow on the surrounding ranges, we enjoyed riding the delightful Braeburn track into vineyards and a historical gold sluicing area.



On good advice we took a shuttle through the narrow and busy Kawerau gorge road to Queenstown, then the SS Earnslaw carried us across Lake Wakatipu to Walter Peak Station and the Round the Mountain trail. The trail is delightful but the route has been blocked down one valley because trout-fishing guides with their overseas clients feel it would spoil their solitude??!! (An interesting legal debate on values which is still continuing!) While plugging up over a range in this area we were overtaken by one of the leading cyclists from the Tour Aotearoa. His derailleur had broken, leaving him with only one gear! He expected to finish the 3000 km ride on his 15<sup>th</sup> day!

Later on this trail we had an amazing ride through farm lands as 100 kph tailwinds had us clocking up speeds of 35 kph on the gravel (I actually had to brake!) and Heather did 40 kph on the sealed road without pedalling! Where the trail was at an angle to the

wind we were obliged to dismount as the bikes were impossible to control! When we stopped in a Mossburn café for Heather's morning fix<sup>2</sup> we met a group of cyclists about to head up our route who listened to our exhilarated report with some scepticism! Wondering how they had fared we were amused to encounter them the next morning – they had cycled 5 km only managing speeds of 8kph before deciding to quit and turned tail for the nearest accommodation!

A long-time friend drove her camper bus 100 km up from Invercargill to share a couple of nights with us, and then (after taking us through the aviation heritage centre) dropped us at Lawrence to commence our ride up the Clutha River. Initially it was the 73 km Clutha Gold trail and then onto Roxburgh Gorge trail which included a 30 minute boat ride to avoid a part of the gorge which has not yet been tracked. This track ended in Alexandra where we joined the Otago Rail trail for a cruisy 63 km day to Otarehua to relax and explore a strawbale house which a woman had built there.



Our next couple of days were quite special as we headed west to visit the small mining town of St Bathans (used as the set for the movie 'Light between the Oceans'); and climbed (and pushed) some 800 metres over a rough 4wd track of the Dunstan Range which wound through small, tussock valleys, and eventually back to Lake Cromwell and the home of Heather's brother, Les, for a second time.

<sup>2</sup> Heather had the useful habit of seeking a quality coffee each morning, so it gave me a grand excuse to indulge in some sort of sweet concoction and a cup of hot chocolate. Invariably we had covered a few kilometres by that stage and were ready for a boost!

Refreshed we cycled up the main road to Wanaka to enjoy the hospitality of another couple, complements of Heather's contacts. Colin and Pam Kane were a fund of local stories from their many years running sheep and deer on their nearby property Grandview. They also treated us to an afternoon on their boat – taking us to explore Mou Wahu (Pigeon Island) which has an island within a lake within an island within a lake within an island in the Pacific Ocean??!!



Our next adventure we both approached with some trepidation! It was an annual 47 km Motatapu ride over a mountain range between Wanaka and Arrowtown. We would be sharing the event with 2000 other cyclists as well as marathon runners. It



involved 1250 metres of climbing and a steep rough descent. I was confident that we could do the ride but anxious about the crowded cycling, and especially the fact that some would be riding e-bikes<sup>3</sup>. I was concerned that inexperienced riders would pass me on the uphill but behave unpredictably on the downhill. This did not prove to be the case because a) I don't think any inexperienced riders were doing the Motatapu; b) I never did pass an e-bike on the downhill! The winners did the ride in just over 2 hours. We took five hours and there were still lots of people behind us. Eight cyclists were helicoptered out with

injuries and one guy died (? heart attack). I loved the camaraderie and, since it was a 4wd track, there was always room to pass or be passed.

After that we were seriously heading north. Our own poor planning resulted in us climbing the 970 m Lindis Pass (main route to Christchurch) on the day after the Motatapu ride and the Wanaka show - endless stream of fast moving traffic on a steep road with a narrow shoulder! Not our cleverest move! But it did hook us up with the Alps to Ocean trail at Omarama – and a delightful finale to our trip! (It is a trail I would be interested to do from Mt Cook to the sea next time.) Norm met us in Oamaru and after a night with our friends<sup>4</sup> in Christchurch to hear about their experiences of just completing the Tour Aotearoa in 26 days, we were off home.



Over five wonderful weeks we covered 2,000 km which included 12 cycling trails. We consumed 34 coffee/hot chocolates (there were a couple of days there were no cafes available!) and climbed more than 8 kilometres in total!! Motatapu and the ride over the Dunstan range were probably highlights for me, but all our interactions with fellow travellers and locals, and our own casual and comfortable conversations made it a very special experience.

*Sari - March 2018*

<sup>3</sup> I am having a bit of a love/hate relationship with e-bikes at present. I think it is a great way to get people out and about who would not otherwise be comfortable to be there. But I do get discouraged when I am slogging up a hill and someone cruises blissfully past me!! On the Motatapu they have a good plan – all e-bikers had a sign on their backs. I think it should be mandatory for all e-bikes!! It could be a little number plate!?

<sup>4</sup> Norm and I have shared many tramping adventures with Jac and Les, and they joined Heather and I in Lao PDR for one of our best cycling trips – 200 km down the Ho Chi Minh trails of eastern Lao on the Vietnamese border to the Cambodian border.