Touring Middle Earth

A New Zealand Motorcycle Adventure

by Steve Larsen

LAST YEAR, DAVE SEARLE wrote in an "Open Road" column, "...every day you put off a riding vacation, you can be absolutely sure you are getting older." Maybe it's because I recently passed 50 years old, but damn, that hit home. Consequently, my wife and I got plane tickets to New Zealand and I signed on for a 14-day tour of New Zealand's South Island.

Boarding the plane to spend two weeks with GoTourNZ on their "Luxury Tour," I thought, "Will the Kiwi claims of having the best motorcycle roads in the world really be true? Will it be worth it to spend this much money and travel this far to ride? Will I find Hobbits, and will they be riding motorcycles? And if I fail to find Hobbits, will the scenery look at all like the wonderful landscapes in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy?

The bottom line is this: If Mother Theresa had been a motorcyclist, when she died she would have gone to the South Island of New Zealand. This island country the size of Colorado has majestic, snow-capped mountains, scrub-dotted savannahs, endless sandy beaches, breathtaking waterfalls, towering fiords, volcanoes, turquoise lakes, thermal pools, tumultuous river rapids and enormous glaciers.

Now, upon this pristine and fascinating landscape, insert twisty roads containing every type of corner you can possibly imagine. Pave the roads with a lava-based material that provides almost unbelievable adhesion. Add in a population density so low it is possible to ride for hours and see only a half-dozen other motorists, and few cars mean very few highway patrol officers. If that's not motorcycle heaven, I'm not sure what is. And that's only the half of it.

When you first find New Zealand on the map, it appears to be on the other side of the world—because it is. However, from a travel standpoint, the trip is no more difficult than a trip to Europe from the US, and in some ways it is easier.

We left Los Angeles on a Monday night at 9:10, had dinner on the plane, fell asleep, woke to breakfast and landed in Auckland at 7:10 the following morning, refreshed and ready for a day of exploring. "Following morning" is a slight misnomer because there is a 24-hour time change due to crossing the international dateline. Instead of arriving Tuesday morning, we arrived Wednesday morning, but it *felt* like Tuesday. Got that?

Air New Zealand and Quantas offer the most flights, but American and United fly there, too. ANZ and Quantas are partnered with many US carriers, so this might be a good time to use those airline miles you've been saving. A quick poll of our group found people paying a low round-trip fare of just $499 all the way up to $1925. So shop around and watch for specials.

Once you've decided to see NZ by motorcycle, your next choice is whether you want to rent a bike and head out on your own, or take a guided tour. While we chose a guided tour, NZ's well-marked roads, courteous English-speaking people and numerous bike rental places would likely help to make a self-guided tour a good experience. In the guided tour category, there are two main types: The international, large group tour (e.g. those by Edelweiss) or the locally-based, small group tour (e.g. GoTourNZ).

The cost of a guided tour is more expensive than just "renting a bike," although perhaps not as much as it may first appear. Once you factor in buying food, planning, reserving and paying for lodging and extras, the "premium" paid for the guided package is quite reasonable. Several benefits turned out to be excellent values on our guided tour, not the least of which were having a chase van to carry luggage and a guide to arrange and pay for all lodging and restaurant bills. Having someone else focus on those details, as well as worrying about the health of the bikes, made it easy for us to focus on the quality of the experience. You can compare a guided tour like this to an ocean cruise; everything was covered except alcohol and souvenirs. And with a guide, you've got backup insurance should something unplanned happen. In our case, we awoke at Mt. Cook with a flat tire on one of the bikes. Because the van pulled a trailer, it took just five minutes to get the bike on the trailer and we were off. With his connections, John Fitzwater found a repair shop along our way open on Saturday (few are), and by noon everyone was back riding. Without a local guide, we'd have been stuck at Mt. Cook until Monday, losing three full days of riding.

Whether you book a "Standard" or "Deluxe" guided tour from GoTourNZ, you get a completely personalized, printed tour itinerary. Ours was 103 pages long and included detailed information about each day, every stop, things to do and see enroute, directions and information on various route options, driving distances, and cross references to the excellent "Compact New Zea-

land Traveler's Atlas." This small map book fit perfectly in a tankbag. The itinerary included photos of sights to see along the way, and we studied it carefully each morning before heading out.

Another undocumented benefit of the guided tour was being accompanied by a well-known guide. John Fitzwater is not only well-liked, he does a lot of business with those in the local tourist industry. So, in addition to his knowledge of the best deals, it meant clout in restaurants and lodgings. The extra efforts made on our behalf to ensure things were just perfect for us were readily apparent. Future business was at stake. John and Ian have studied every area and know the best B&Bs, restaurants and wineries. They know which boat tours or bungee jumping experiences are best, or which flight to take over Milford Sound.

GoTourNZ offers a tantalizing selection of late models from Aprilia, BMW, Harley, Honda, Triumph and Suzuki. I puzzled over how to choose a bike to ride in New Zealand when I had never been there and landed on the most logical answer: Ask the experts.

Although I was tempted to go with the familiar and ride what I have at home, John and Ian convinced me to try a brand-new, 2004 Triumph Tiger 955i. The Tiger falls into the category of "sporty adventure" bike, similar to the Suzuki V-Strom and BMW GS. It was flame-colored and painted with tiger stripes.

Although rides over a couple of hours long proved a bit uncomfortable for my passenger, it was the perfect bike for me on this trip. Because I am "inseam-challenged," I appreciated the bike shop for lowering the bike a couple of inches for me and also putting the seat at its lowest setting. They outfitted the bike with custom-created stainless steel crash bars and headlight protectors from Thunderbike PowerMotorsports. These added significant protection for the bike in the event it went down and also made it way cool to look at. I got lots of thumbs-up from pedestrians. Riding partner Philip chose a Honda Pan-European (ST1300 in the US) and Steve B boarded a BMW R1150RT. The NZ roads allow some aggressive riding, so unless you plan on leisurely sightseeing only, a sportier bike will pay you big dividends in the twisties. Of course, keep in mind we did spend 4-5 hours a day on the bike, so a comfortable ride was important.

I found the The Triumph Tiger was ideal for New Zealand's twisty roads. The adventure touring aspect of the bike helped on a couple of occasions, specifically on an optional ride into Skipper's Canyon down a mining road that would have been hell for the Honda. The optional ride was on Coronet Peak Road. It left Queenstown and took us deep into Skippers' Canyon. The road is all gravel and closed to rental cars. It was tortuous in places and heart-stopping for people with a fear of heights. Twelve kilometers into the gorge, I found the area where Peter Jackson had filmed the Ford of Bruinen in flood stage, one of the most dramatic scenes from *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Near the end of this road in the most prolific of the local goldfields (where each square foot of the river bed was said to hold an ounce of gold), is a fabulous old bridge that gives you chills when you cross it.

This was the first tour on which my wife, Maggie, accompanied me. Although we have ridden together frequently in the past, spending long hours behind me on a narrow motorcycle seat has lost some of its allure for her over the years. Unfortunately, the Triumph's small seat was uncomfortable for her for more than a couple of hours at a time. This was offset by the fact that the van carrying our luggage from place to place turned out to be extremely comfortable for passengers. More importantly, van driver, tour guide, and GoTourNZ co-owner John Fitzwater is a highly-educated geologist with an encyclopedic knowledge of his home turf. Both avid readers, Maggie and John's conversations kept them entertained while ogling the awesome scenery. To my surprise, Maggie had a great time without always being on the back of the motorcycle.

On the practical side, I need to mention all driving is on the left side of the road. I found the adjustment comes pretty quick as everyone else drives on the left side, too. This is a valuable visual reminder! Each rental bike boasted a large yellow arrow pointing left with the words "keep left" between the speedometer and tachometer.

Further complications came from traffic circles (called rotaries or roundabouts elsewhere). If your only experience with them is from the Boston area, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the civility and smooth traffic flow at these intersections. These you enter and bear left and go around clockwise, yielding to traffic on the right. We don't have many traffic circles in California, but having seen how smoothly traffic flowed in New Zealand, I'm beginning to believe they are a good thing. After a couple of days, keeping to the left seemed normal, and I only had to remind myself to look right before crossing intersections (which matters while walking, too). In rural areas, nearly all bridges are one-lane, and sometimes long, so these needed to be approached carefully.

New Zealand paves its roads with a mixture of a volcanic substance and regular asphalt resulting in a road surface with unbelievable grip and bite. "The downside is we only get 5–6,000 kilometers (3,000 to 3,500 miles) per rear tire," said John Fitzwater. "These roads just tear them up." The combination of the road surface and the Triumph's excellent handling made me feel as if I were on a high performance Ducati sportbike in the corners. While doing my best to spread wear liberally around all sides of the Triumph's rear tire, I never once felt even close to the limit on adhesion. In addition, New Zealand's civil engineers really seemed to know what they were doing. Decreasing radius turns are rare, and camber is fairly aggressive.

New Zealand's automobile drivers, when we saw them, helped make riding there a pleasure. Although there weren't that many vehicles on the road, the drivers were relatively careful about signaling their intentions. They seemed to actually see motorcycles and reacted by moving aside to let us pass as we approached. Trucks flicked their turn signals and pulled to the side when they saw it was clear and safe to pass. We saw highway patrol types only rarely. We were never stopped, although our guide provided advance warning as to which portions of our route were most likely to be patrolled. We slowed down appropriately in those sections. One morning over breakfast we observed a laser equipped officer outside our B&B pinging cars with his laser gun. He would then motion them to "slow down" with his arms as they passed. Beats a ticket.

One can't talk about New Zealand without discussing climate and weather. First off, the seasons are the opposite of here. Being in the southern hemisphere, they experience spring in November. (That's when we went; grass was vibrantly green, redbuds and dogwoods bloomed prolifically, and many yards looked like traditional English cottage gardens.) December, January, February and March are the very best riding months in New Zealand as they are the warm and dry, middle of summer months. April and May bring autumn, with trees changing colors, shorter days and cooler temperatures. In addition, these small islands, with their numerous mountain ranges, have a great variety of micro climates that change frequently and are notoriously unpredictable. Each morning, television weather forecasters confidently predicted the weather and, as best as I could tell, their forecasts bore little or no resemblance to what actually occurred during the day. In short, bring raingear; you may need it once a week or so, especially in the spring.

During the three weeks I spent in New Zealand, I never saw a single Hobbit, much less one riding a motorcycle. Much more apparent, however, were many of the sites seen in Peter Jackson's "travelogue trilogy about New Zealand," called the *The Lord of the Rings* saga. Alan Lee, conceptual artist and set decorator on this movie project,

stated that New Zealand more than matched his hopes as a setting for *The Lord Of the Rings*. "...from lush farmland, woods and rivers to dramatic gorges, endless plains and soaring mountains uninterrupted by roads and pylons. It's a young land, primeval in places, still flexing in the aftermath of its creation. I can imagine Britain in a much earlier age, with higher peaks and the clearer light that illuminates Tolkien's pages, might have had a similar quality."

Mr. Lee could not have been more correct on the landscape. It's hard to comprehend this landscape until you see it; the incredible variety in such a compressed area is amazing. And it was fun to go by places we recognized from the movie. For instance, on the first day of the ride after passing the Ngarua Caves, we drove by the stand of trees where Aragorn led the Hobbits into the wilds after leaving Bree. We saw Mt. Aspiring near Wanaka, which was used in the opening sequence of *The Two Towers* to represent the high peaks around Moria. The drive from Queenstown to Glenorchy is fabulous on its own merits with incredible stunning views of mountains and Lake Wakatipu, but this 45-minute ride also reveals the areas used to portray Ithilien.

When booking this trip and trying to decide on the "Deluxe" or "Standard" package, I ended up going with the "Deluxe" version. Normally I see myself as more of a "Standard" or perhaps even "Budget" purchaser, but this time my wife was coming. I wanted to be sure she'd have a great time and, frankly, I became convinced to upgrade based on what I read on GoTourNZ's website and what I'd heard from past tour members. I believe it made a big difference in our experience. This truly ended up being the vacation of a lifetime versus a motorcycle tour. While impossible to capture what all that means in this one article, there are important differences.

Eight bikes is the maximum for any of the Fitzwater tours. For this trip, we had only three, resulting in a very close-knit, personal tour. We stayed at small, high-quality "boutique" lodges and bed & breakfasts. Our stay commenced at the incredible Grampian Villa in Nelson, where we had a warm, lushly decorated, oversized room, an awesome bed, and one of the most beautiful antique wood floors I'd ever seen. Imagine my surprise when I opened my computer and discovered wireless Internet access right from the table in our room.

Many inns had significant historic attributes and one could easily imagine staying several days in each of them. For example, after a 40-km ride on the only unsealed road of the whole trip, we arrived at the Tokarahi Homestead built from locally quarried limestone by Alexander McMaster in 1878. Proprietors Mike and Lyn Gray spent three years restoring and transforming the building into a five-star B&B. Mike and Lyn dressed in period costumes and entertained us with stories of the life and times of that era. Mike's stories of the "swaggers," hobo-like characters who traveled the countryside avoiding work, were hilarious.

Restaurants were equally extraordinary. One could expect the lamb dishes to be fabulous (and they were) because sheep are raised more than any other livestock, but fellow traveler Steve Barkoff described his steak one night as the best he'd ever tasted. Deer are raised on farms in New Zealand, so venison is a frequent option and it was delicious. However, red meat dishes were regularly overshadowed by the most outstanding seafood. The green lipped mussels were out of this world, the flounder—delicate and buttery, and seafood chowder was a gourmet treat. Due to the connections the Fitzwaters have (Ian's wife, Robyn, was a professional in the restaurant and catering business for ten years), dinners for the group often took place in private dining rooms and wines were always superb. We ordered anything on the menu that looked appealing and there were very few disappointments.

In addition to food and sleep, other interruptions to the ride included visits to places like WOW (the World of Wearable Art) in Nelson (www.wearableart.co.nz/). Not everyone's cup of tea, it was positively mind-expanding to me. Clothing and fabric are not usually something I care about, but I was intrigued. I never thought along those lines before. WOW does a show once a year in September. After viewing the highlights from this show, I could imagine a trip to NZ just for this.

Besides museums and shopping, we explored natural caves, tidal blow holes, and exotic rock formations. Our guide arranged a tour of the Ngarua Caves on top of Takaka Hill, the Marble Mountain. The extraordinary and humorous "caveman" gave a tour none of us will soon forget.

NZ also has some of the most stunning glaciers (Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers) in the world, easy walks of 20 and 40 minutes take you almost to the edge. You can take a helicopter tour which will land on the glacier and allow you to walk on its top. A visit to a bird sanctuary only barely prepared us to meet the native parrot, the Kea. This destructive bird loves anything squishy or soft, and so attacks the rubber around car windows and motorcycle seats. And the Homer Tunnel is a trip. It is a complete black hole, swallowing all light. Driving through it is an amazing experience one will never forget. Not to slight Queenstown, the birthplace of bungee jumping and zorbing, this city is the adrenaline capital of the world and requires an article in itself.

The link between all of these incredible experiences, of course, was days of riding winding roads that clung to mountainsides and followed twisting rivers of exquisite clarity. I felt in constant danger of scenic overload. Often the temptation to stop the bike and simply stare at the awesome isolated beauty and tranquility of nature was irresistible. I had to remember to breathe.

After 14 days of motorcycling on tour in New Zealand, I cannot say with certainty that it had the best motorcycle roads in the world, but then only because I have not yet been everywhere in the world. Yet, it is without a doubt the best place I've ridden. Worth the price? As Dave Searle says, "An extended tour reaches deep into your fiber, transforming mental mush into clarity." Although expensive, for me it was worth it. What began as a motorcycle tour with my wife tagging along, in the end became one of the best vacation experiences of our lives.