



Shangri La

And stinking mud ponds

Barbara Jones continues her world travels with husband Mark.

“Where? New Zealand! For how long?”
I took a deep breath.
Never one to forego the many creature comforts of life, I greeted the proposal of a week-long tour of New Zealand’s north island with mixed feelings: dread mixed with panic.
After all, wouldn’t it be hours on end in cold, rainy conditions, staring at the back of the rider’s helmet with

no one to talk to except myself?
But this proposal came from my rider, Mark Jones, the only man I’d ever loved and have been married to for nearly 30 years. The bottom line, as with the marriage, was that I wouldn’t have missed a minute of this incredible journey.

Local knowledge
New Zealand’s north island is by any measure a paradise, obviously designed by a creator who rode a bike. Strange thoughts occur to pillions without intercom. Things like, ‘What if God rode a bike, what would it be? And if he did, would Jesus have ridden pillion?’
Our bike was a BMW F650GS, BMW’s confusingly named 800cc twin, fully fitted with panniers and top box, capable of carrying everything we needed between stays.
Now, just landing in an unfamiliar country and renting a bike to explore with is fraught with perils, much like walking into an unfamiliar pub with no idea where the loos are. The way to travel is to get some inside information, and ours came from the team at Paradise Motorcycle Tours. These guys must have the best job in the world – checking out the very best routes and accommodation in NZ, to custom fit each rider’s personal preferences.



Food for thought
Auckland time is two hours ahead of Australia, and we staggered off the plane after a 3:30am wake up in Cairns – to meet international check-in times – to collapse into our first hotel with views of Manukau Harbor.
We’d spent days culling our riding gear and clothes to fit airline and pannier limitations, and we were soon re-packed and ready to go, with the GPS pre-programmed by Paradise for the next day.
Auckland’s Manukau Harbor has a newly re-developed marina area of shops,

restaurants, and more restaurants. That was all good from a foodie point of view, but pricey. Some of the best food could be had at the decidedly down-market Food Alley, offering a taste of Asian, Indonesian, Turkish and Japanese takeaways or eat-ins. There were plenty of bright lights and it was noisy, but it was extremely friendly and there was really big bang-for-buck food. Food Alley defines “grubby” at a glance, but don’t dismiss it. Cruise it and sneak it back to your luxury hotel room with the widescreen TV for an intimate night.

Dotting the eyes
We set out after a full brekkie at the hotel. Even though we don’t usually indulge, the breakfasts are essential to get through the morning rides. We were expecting to be on and off the bike repeatedly for camera stops for the first few hours and the roads were challenging, but at least they’re perfectly maintained.
Hey, wait a minute! All I could see was

SHANGRI LA



the back of my beloved's helmet. It said, 'DOT'. It also said it weighed 1666gm.

After some practice I could actually look to the sides for incredible views without disrupting the aerodynamics. Even as we left Auckland in the only drizzle we encountered on the whole trip, the closed-in city views expanded to amazing panoramas of vast farmlands – mainly sheep, cattle and grass-cropping. Every hilltop offered a horizon-wide vista to take the breath away.

The GPS sent us somewhere we weren't expecting, a little artist colony called Raglan. If you love artist colonies, or are into a bit of surfing with bodyboards, make absolutely sure you have Raglan on your itinerary. It was full of great little restaurants and arty-type shops. There were lots of upmarket B&Bs in the area as well, offering good value for tired riders. The spa bath and luxurious terry robes at our choice, Redwood Lodge, met my undeniably high standards for creature comforts.

Moving up

The second day's ride was a long one, riding around the many volcanoes that make up the island.

There are many guided tours of caves with phosphorescent 'glow worms' – actually insect larvae. They're pretty cool, but they take a lot of time that could be better spent riding the roads to the Mangapohue Natural Bridge near Waitomo. This is an amazing structure, fitted out with excellent boardwalks and no crowds. It also comes free, instead of the fairly high cost of the more-frequented sites.

Riding around the south of Lake Taupo, we finally caught up with the cold on the central plateau. The increase in altitude made us glad we'd put the thermal liners in our riding gear.

The realisation that what you're looking at is actually an extinct volcanic crater, of what is purportedly the largest volcano on Earth, makes everything else look small in comparison.

Pardon us

The next day from Taupo to Rotorua was so remarkable that superlatives don't do it justice. The geothermic activity is right there in front and on the nose, and the high water table throws up innumerable geysers, resulting in steaming vents throughout the countryside.

There are many guided tours through the



area, but none better than Orakeo iKorako, a masterpiece of ecotourism. Called The Hidden Valley, it's only accessible by boat, and gives an hour-long stroll around some of the smelliest scenery imaginable. Yep, those blooming mud holes are giving off hydrogen-sulphide gases – much to the delight of young boys who thrill at any fart jokes they can manage.

Pooling resources

The next few days allowed some time to look around Rotorua, catch up with the laundry and take an excursion out to the east coast and The Bay Of Plenty, sticking to the back roads for more rollercoaster riding.

We finished the northerly ride at Whitianga after an unexpected stop at Hobbiton – yeah, the site of the Tolkien Lord Of The Rings movies. We'd read those books 30-odd years ago. It's cute, if you're into it.

There's a free beer at the end of the tour for the effort.

The town itself is tiny and decidedly tourist-oriented, with a jaw-dropping marina full of yachts with price tags like a lifetime's earnings. It's a superb coastline, and a short trip to the Cathedral Cove and Hot Beaches



is highly recommended. Don't forget to wear easy walking gear, and don't stand too close to the hot pools people have dug. You'll only annoy them and burn your feet.

And now for the true Shangri La – just follow the magic path from the Oceans Resort into the world of the Lost Spring.

Four years in the making, the Lost Spring taps into the geothermal activity to heat a series of pools of varying depths and temperature. Lined by luxuriant plantings draped over the swimming-length ponds, fitted out with swim-through caves and grottos, the mineral waters are amazingly clear. And as a plus, you can order your chardonnay to be brought to you at the pool. For a kid brought up in the icy climate of Maine, USA, this was heaven.

Paradise For sure

The final day started out with more winding roads and jaw-dropping scenery, then it was back on the freeway to Auckland.

I've run out of superlatives for this tour, and are forever in debt to the Paradise folks for making this the trip of a lifetime.



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