



gold of a different shine

A long delayed homecoming to New Zealand  
reveals hidden treasure and friendly natives

by Mike Ferrentino • Photography by David Reddick



**I GREW UP IN A GHOST-FILLED FORMER GOLD MINING TOWN** called Waihi. People had gone to dairy farming a long time ago, when the gold ran out. This was down at the bottom of the world, in New Zealand. My memory is etched deep with these things: Rain, sometimes 100 inches of the stuff in a year. Green, everywhere, lush and fragrant from field to hedge of gorse to thick stand of dark native bush. Steep, the whole country creased and wrinkled, sitting atop the conjunction of two colliding tectonic plates, dotted with volcanoes and geysers and stinky gray superheated mud holes. Quiet as a tomb every weekend, not a peep from the countryside save for the bleating sheep, and the seasonal grunt of rugby or crack of cricket bat on ball to break the blanketing peace.

Mountain bikes were not around. But off-road riding was part and parcel of growing up, including the daily grind up the demeaning gravel hill we lived on, 700x23 tires scrabbling in futility as I tried to clean the whole climb. It never crossed my mind

back then that people somewhere might be evolving bikes into more tractable use and doing shit like this for fun. I left in 1984, one year out of high school, and spent 18 years one-dimensionalizing myself into some sort of personified bike riding petroglyph. A one-dimensional expression. In that time, while I chased tire tracks through dusty mountains, the ties to the people and the land that raised me fell slack. The bottom of the world was a long way away, and yearly promises to my dad about homecomings were routinely reneged upon as I bounced around the deserts and mountains of the American West. With each aborted homecoming, I fell further away from my past.

Eighteen years is a long time. Almost half my life. Aside from sporadic visits to the north from my dad, there was nothing left here to remind me of the child I was. My sense of home had become blurry and vague. It was time to come back and see what the past tasted like.



From a canopy of ferns that can grow up to 70-feet tall in Tokoroa...

## NORTH

After all this time, returning with fat tire bikes, like-minded friends and no specific agenda, I was unsure what to expect. Point it south and cross the fingers. Photographer David Reddick, his blushing fiancée, Michele, and I pitched up on a sunny Saturday morning on the wet sidewalk outside Auckland International Airport last April, just in time to watch a crystalline sunrise part the clouds and splinter the still glistening countryside with silver light. Even surrounded by concrete, the air smelled fresh and lush and full of potential. We picked up a motor home, stuffed it to the gills with toys and food, and headed south toward the middle of the North Island. Near Te Awamutu, we met up with Jeff Carter, who runs an outfit called Southstar Adventures, and rides far faster uphill than anyone on a clapped-out Rocky Mountain RM7 with a Rohloff 14 speed rear hub has a right to do.

The next day we were railing through a tangled maze of man-carved trails in a forest just east of Tokoroa. We rode singletrack built with bikes in mind—swoopy and twisty, bermed and jumped, buffed out singletrack, all carpeted in moss and mulch and pine needles. Air thick with the smell of ferns, crisp and moist, tuis calling their multi-octave scales and fantails flitting around us snatching at invisible insects. I'd forgotten how the bush

smells in New Zealand. A clean but full earthy smell. It smells like life and growth and mulch and wet and is so beautiful and home-sick-strong that it should be bottled and sold as an aphrodisiac. I remember coming here on a geography class field trip in high school. It smelled the same, but there was no singletrack then.

We played there all morning and then took an hour drive to Rotorua. Tourism central. Hordes of Japanese laden down with cameras and wood carvings nattering between hot spring thermal resorts and gift shops, Rotorua is off-handedly referred to locally as "Vegas." This haven of geysers and mud pools is, and always has been, New Zealand's meeting point between tourism and Maoritanga. In spite of appearing to be a whored out low scale Disneyland at first glance, the place handles the crowds and the cultural nadir with casual aplomb. Not that we really had time to notice or care, sucked immediately as we were into the ferny lush of the local forest, onto more trails built by mountain bikers, with mountain bikers in mind. Trails in verdant shade that dip and weave and roll. Trails that snake through the trees in a way that makes hard riders hoot with joy yet at the same time could coax a huge grin to the face of a 70-year-old grandma on her first bike ride ever. Candy Land. A lucky utopia. Sure, gawk at the geysers, wrinkle nose at the stinking mud holes,



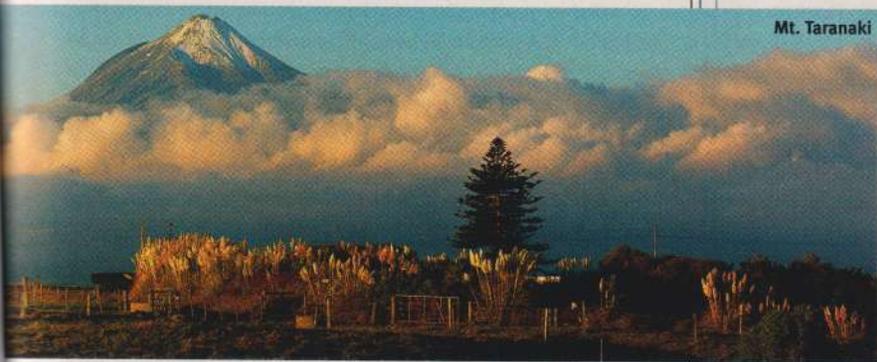


...to wooded singletrack in Nelson, the hallmark of New Zealand's trails is diversity. Rider: Seamus Ryan.

soak in the springs, buy greenstone trinkets, but get down on your knees and kiss the mulchy earth of these trails because they are the true hidden treasure here.

Our numbers grew—joined by wool merchant and clothing maker Gary Sullivan, smooth riding hammer and photographer Graeme Murray, and an assorted motley band of their friends—and over the next four days we hopscothed around the central North Island. Drive an hour, get out and rip some trail. Drive another hour, repeat, often in terrain that is so different from its neighbor

where the green of ferns clinging to the sides of denuded hills contrast sharply with the funeral breath of the land. Fireroad climbs, savage and steep and straight up the side of an active volcano topping out in a jagged, treeless landscape of red rocks and sulphur yellow gashes in the mountainside. Overgrown logging trails amidst dense stands of gigantic rimu and beech trees, towering over trails which in turn are being devoured anew by a hungry and clamorous forest of trees and vines and broad-leaved plants all fighting each other upward toward the light. Fat swaths of green



Mt. Taranaki



Mt. Tarawera

we might as well have changed countries, or in some cases, planets. Tight singletrack ribbons of black, mulchy soil hidden in filtered green cool half-light, where the temperature drops 10 degrees as you plunge from the sunlit outside through that first green curtain. Blasted landscapes of steaming vents and sticky gray clay

pastureland so vibrant that the word "green" is not enough. Extradimensional. The usual three-dimensions bolstered with the standout of "green," and the million smells of a different world.

Finally, after a week of jousting through an ever-changing landscape, Jeff's worn out and well-thrashed bike gave up in the



middle of a 42-kilometer ride south of Turangi. We fabricated a sling out of inner tubes and towed him 20 odd kilometers to the van. Adding insult to the injury of a few days prior, when he and his close to 40-pound freeride bike had dropped me on a climb up the side of a 3,000-foot volcano, he proceeded to do the same going down a hill at the end of this ride, passing me with his feet on the handlebars, cranks dangling uselessly below the frame where the bottom bracket had shorn right off. At the end of a day stretched long, we tipped ales and parted ways—Jeff home to his wife and daughter, Graeme and Gary back to Rotorua, and ourselves south toward my brother's house in Nelson. After the kind of warm farewells that only feel cliché when described with the usual words, we hit the road with Dave behind the wheel, sniffing for the coast and the potential of surf like a barn-sick horse.

## SOUTH

My brother Pat lives in Nelson, at the northern tip of the South Island. When dad uprooted the family and moved us from California to New Zealand, I was five years old. Pat was in the Navy aboard the USS Hornet. He never moved down while I was growing up there. It wasn't until the late '80s when he finally pulled the plug on the faster paced, debt-heavy, American way of life. Former sailor and disgruntled ex-postal worker, he now lives in Nelson, teaching photography, living quietly. Aside from two very brief visits back north on his part, it had been a dozen years since we'd spent any time together. And, aside from another of those high school field trips, I had never been in the South Island.

The South Island is the larger of the two main islands that comprise New Zealand. The bulk of the 3.5-million-strong human population live on the North Island. The bulk of the roughly 45-million-





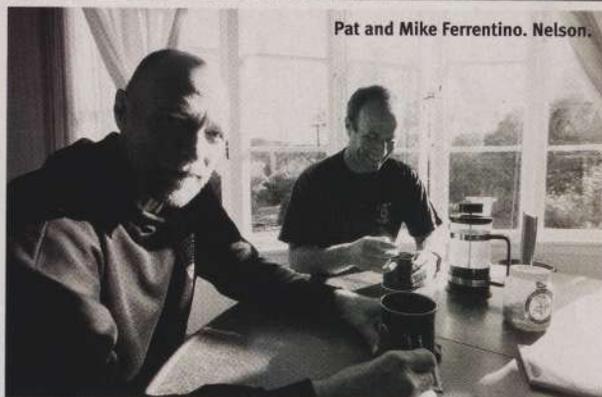
There are more than 220 native tree species in New Zealand and at a point they become a blur. Turangi. Rider: Gary Sullivan.

strong sheep population, as well as the tallest mountains, the fattest rivers, massive glaciers and an extensive network of fjords, can all be found on the South Island. It's as if the South Island has a spectacularity complex. Everything seems to happen on a larger, more dramatic, more dangerous scale than on the North Island. More than most of the world, for that matter. Nelson, sitting in a temperate banana belt of orchards and warm weather, is this hip but laid back gateway to a huge and imposing scale of nature. We arrived to find my brother sick as a dog with some sort of flu, and our own window of time rapidly collapsing. Three days, that's all we had.

Three days couldn't even begin to scratch the surface of the riding around Nelson, which in turn barely registers as a knot on the greater tapestry of South Island riding. It was as if the sensual riot of the North Island got kidnapped, and here in the South Island, ratcheted up to the outright majestic. I didn't even know where to begin. I headed out of town our first day there and started climbing an old railroad grade turned into trail. Three hours and over



Jeff Carter. Turangi.



Pat and Mike Ferrentino. Nelson.

3,000 vertical feet later, I had popped out from dense subtropical rain forest onto a sparsely vegetated rocky saddle. The trail angled away, across the slope in front of me and disappeared into a horizon of mountains stacked one after another. The next day, arriving at the same saddle from a different direction in the company of Andy Thompson, owner of Bridge Street Cycles, I asked how far the trail went. He laughed, and flatly said, "It's not as much a matter of how far the trail goes. More a case of how far you can go....," before going on to point out peaks in the distance that were jutting up from the long crown of the Southern Alps, describing alpine singletrack dicing across constantly moving scree slopes, trails diving through lush, dense rain forest, descents measured in hours, not minutes, and a diverse network of trails that exceeded the abilities of most people to truly grasp. "You could spend a lifetime down here," he finally said, pointing again at the jagged horizon, "and not ever come close to riding it all."

I moved away from New Zealand a couple years before I got

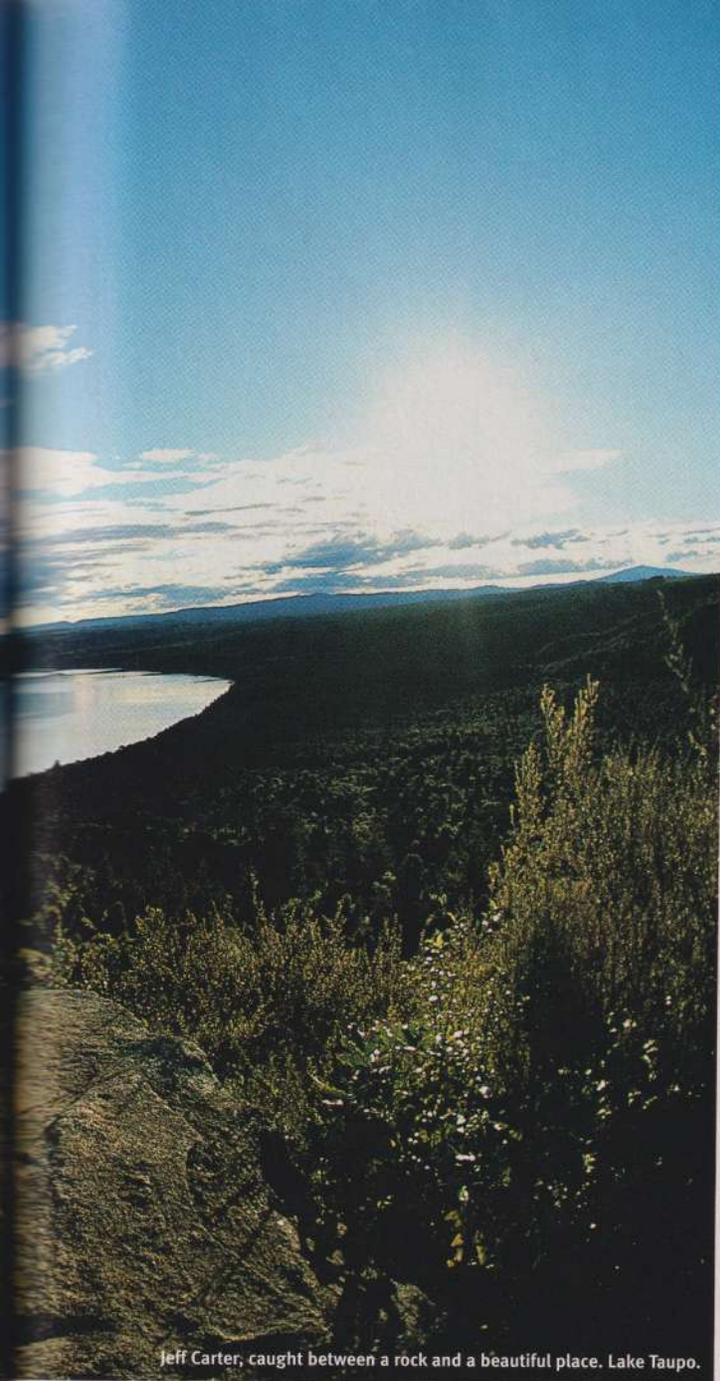


into mountain bikes, and long before my mind's eye developed a taste for far horizons. If I had timed things a little differently, I might still be down there, probably living in Nelson, tapping into gigantic trails in the middle of nowhere, following dotted lines on topo maps from a southern hemisphere perspective rather than the one I currently have. But life just has a habit of happening, wherever you might be, and I finally arrived down there after spending nearly half my life rooting around the globe for something just like this, a taste of something huge. There was an almost perfect irony that I would find it a few hundred miles south of where I was raised, right in my brother's adopted backyard. "We've been here all along," the mountains and trails seemed to mock. "Where were you?"

## HOME —

Returning northward to Waihi, pilgrimage to the town I grew up in, another irony was driven home. My dad still lives at the top of an arcane and cruel gravel hill, albeit a different one than that which defined my childhood, but it was as if the rest of the landscape had shrunk. The dairy lands, the local peaks, even the distance from town to beach, had all decreased in scale from what I remembered. After spending almost half my life away from here, searching for constantly bigger and broader views, I had returned with a changed perspective and it felt almost as if I could see right over the tops of the local hills without even standing on tiptoe.

My hometown had become small. Even the misery of the hill I grew up on barely registered as a slope anymore. I remember how



Jeff Carter, caught between a rock and a beautiful place. Lake Taupo.

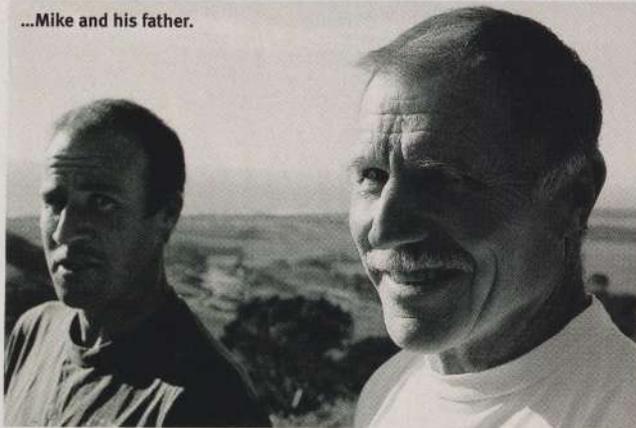
some of my friends were chafing as teenagers to escape, how they had felt the confining smallness of a rural town in a small country at the bottom of the world. I hadn't felt it at the time. It took 18 years somewhere else, reinforced by a glimpse of the awe-inspiring magnitude of nature a mere few hundred miles away from where I spent my childhood, to open my eyes all the way.

It is often said that "you can never go home." Meaning that your memories are best kept that way, that trying to retrace a past will inevitably result in some sort of disillusionment. That may be. I returned home to a place barely different from what I had left long ago, only to discover that I had changed. It still felt like home, though, inasmuch as my nomadic nature will allow. The air still smells like home. The kicked-back nature of everybody we met, the



Roots run deep...

...Mike and his father.



barefoot school kids, the pervasive bleating of millions of sheep—they all feel right in my gut. There's still a freakishly demeaning driveway up to my dad's house, and a view when I get there. Only now there's also a patch of spare floor in Nelson with my name on it, and a powerful gravity drawing me back down there, soon. Might have to spend a few years, though. Mere days won't cut it next time. There's too much, far too much, to explore. **B**

Getting to New Zealand is the worst and most expensive hurdle. It's at the bottom of the world, and the seasons are reversed. Expect a 15-hour or longer flight, and expect to pay at least a grand for it, regardless of carrier. Air New Zealand and Qantas both fly direct out of Los Angeles. The best season is between February and the end of April, and after that, the weather turns to shit. Any earlier, and the whole country is out on vacation. Airfare prices start dropping around mid-March. The good news is that once down there, the U.S. dollar will make you feel like a millionaire. The exchange rate at press time has the New Zealand dollar worth about 55 U.S. cents. When we went last year, it was down around 42 cents.

Aside from bringing a bike, it would pay to bring some *good* waterproof clothing. And, since wet is more common than dry, bring some tires with real knobs.

**Local talent:** We hooked up with Jeff from Southstar Adventures ([www.southstaradventures.com](http://www.southstaradventures.com)) for our central North Island wanderings. Even if you don't take one of his tours, he's a good source of info, and he runs a pretty neat mountain bike/rock climbing/adventure park in the middle of North Island.

There's a company down there called Macpac. They make expedition-quality foul weather gear, sleeping bags, packs and tents. I picked up one of their bike-specific packs, the Ultramarathon, and honestly believe it to be about the best damn long ride pack on earth (\$126). Not cheap, but really, really good. Check them out at [www.macpac.co.nz](http://www.macpac.co.nz).

N-Zone make stylish and functional riding duds. Super comfy, machine washable wool jerseys, hip T-shirts, well-fitting, tough pants and shorts. And, they're really good folk who possess a wealth of knowledge in regard to riding in and around Rotorua ([www.n-zone.co.nz](http://www.n-zone.co.nz)).

Spoke Magazine can be found at most bike shops down there or through the Kiwi-centric web site [www.vorb.org.nz](http://www.vorb.org.nz) (which is a bit freeride-y but pretty darn thorough). It's homegrown and heartfelt, and the kind of magazine I'd like to see more often.