

Places to Ride:

NEW ZEALAND

words and photos by Shannon Mominee



VULCAN LANE IN AUCKLAND CENTRAL CITY

When I had previously thought of New Zealand, I pictured adventurers jumping off of cliffs or out of airplanes, hang gliding, cave exploring, surfing, and kiwi birds. I knew fine-quality wool is a main export, and that the British gained sovereignty of the country in 1840. That wasn't long before the indigenous Maori people realized what they had given away, attacked the British settlements, and tried for years to regain what was lost.

Traveling there, I learned that New Zealand does offer all the heart-pounding excitement one can handle, but it is also much more than an adrenalin junky's playground. Its location in the southern hemisphere means the seasons are opposite of what they are in the U.S., so the best time to visit is December-February, prime summer time. Typically, the weather is mild; most places receive 2000 hours of sunshine per year, even more around the Bay of Plenty. Mountainous geography and western winds cause some weather fluctuations.

Being fairly isolated in the Pacific Ring of Fire at 1400 miles southeast of Australia, the closest landmass, New Zealand is not the easiest place to get to. Air New Zealand (airnewzealand.com) offers international flights from North America, Australia, the southwest Pacific, Asia, and the United Kingdom. A flight from Los Angeles costs upwards of \$1000, but the reward is worth the travel, and the U.S. dollar's exchange rate is favorable, so you get



TIM HUNTER RIDING A FEATURE AT WOODHILL BIKE PARK

VIEW FROM THE 42 TRAVERSE

more for your cash once there.

In late October, just as their spring rain was ending, I made the journey via Air New Zealand from L.A. in economy class. I was grateful for the private monitor and headphones, abundance of movies, two hot meals and free alcohol. Most of the 12-hour flight went by in a dream state, but the flight attendants were friendly and a pair of in-flight concierges answered my questions about travel and customs. New Zealand has strict bans on foreign dirt, so be sure to clean your bike and shoes before flying. I didn't, and thus my shoes needed to be dunked in a cleansing solution.

The North and South Islands, along with several smaller ones, make up New Zealand, which is about equal to Colorado in area with a population of 4.2 million people. After crossing the International Dateline and adding 17 hours of time to my east coast watch, I landed on the North Island city of Auckland—the most populated area of the two islands, containing roughly 1.5 million people.

Stepping into a steady drizzle at 7:30 a.m., I made my way to the rental vehicle and sat nervously behind the right-hand side steering wheel. My jetlagged mind visualized driving on the left side of the road and wrecking the Toyota Highlander, but I made it safely to Auckland's city center and checked into The Quadrant Hotel (see sidebar). Once there, I gathered my itinerary left in my room by Tourism New Zealand, and assembled the Niner Air 9 Carbon bike that made the journey with me. (See review on page 38.)

With the remainder of the day to enjoy, I wandered around and found myself amazed by the cleanliness of the city. Auckland's street layout and architecture reminded me of Europe but with a modern element in the mix. Outdoor cafés, pubs with sidewalk seating, pedestrian-only streets, boutique shops, antique bookstores, huge twisted trees, flower gardens, and coastal blue sky filled me with awe, as the intermittent rain came.

WOODHILL BIKE PARK

First on my list of places to ride was Woodhill Bike Park, located 30 minutes by car north of Auckland. The Bike Park contains 80.7 miles of purpose-built singletrack loaded with more than 250 man-made features, ranging from simple kickers to elevated skinnies with 10ft. drops. Sixty-seven trails are spread throughout the forest that constitutes the park. Each trail is named, numbered and clearly marked on the large trail maps posted at major intersections.

On a somewhat rainy Wednesday afternoon, I met with staff member Tim Hunter. He gave me a map and park overview, then I rode off. I saw less than 10 other riders through the thick trees and fern foliage. (I hear the weekends can get pretty busy, though). The sand-based soil, with a top layer of pine needles, absorbs rain quickly and actually becomes tacky, instead of muddy, keeping the park rideable during wet weather. Beware: the wood features do get slick in the rain and the soil will chew up a drivetrain, but there's a bike wash station at the parking lot and a forest service road in close proximity to the trails in case of an accident.

The trail system and its features are well thought-out, super-flowy, and constructed so most of the climbing is gradual, but still demanding. The beauty of the Bike Park is that it can be as challenging as desired, yet beginner friendly. There's an abundance of trails for the cross country rider and enough features to satisfy the thrill-seeking huckster. Signs posted before obstacles rate their difficulty with "X", 1X (easy) to 6X (hardest). Bypass markers indicate alternative routes and a skill-building area helps riders develop their technique.

Under the thick canopy, I stopped frequently to listen to the wind bringing an incredible calm through the trees. It was pretty surreal. I heard no overhead air traffic and saw only a handful of bird species, but no forest creatures. There aren't many native animals on the islands and no snakes. Without predators many birds evolved flightless, but with Maori overhunting and the Europeans' introduction of rats, stoats, and other pests, the bird population was decimated. The Kiwi bird and other species are now protected, and one quarter of the land is reserved wilderness.

An incredible amount of effort and upkeep goes into Woodhill Bike Park. Obstacles are inspected, documented and maintained on a bi-monthly basis, and during posted business hours at least one first-aid trained Bike Park staff member is on duty. For this, Woodhill charges \$7(NZ) for an adult day pass—all money benefits the Park.

For those traveling from afar, there are 50 rental bikes, an on-site mechanic, pro shop, and a café. Weekly, six-month and yearly passes are available. Those looking for big jumps and huge air will find their pleasure at the Monster Airfield dirt jump park located across from the pro shop. Check the Bike Park's website for staffed business hours, or use the honesty box and pay as you ride.

ROTORUA

Rotorua is about a three-hour drive southeast of Auckland and one of the most active geothermal locations in the country. It was also the home of the 2010 Single Speed World Championships (see "Readings" in this issue, page 14). I was excited to take part in the SSWC festivities, but decided to take a detour to follow the coast along the Bay of Plenty to Rotorua. It wasn't the most direct route and added an extra two hours, but I wanted to see the beaches and the scenic diversion was well worth it. The clouds also parted and sunshine replaced the rain for the remainder of my trip.

Checking into the Regent of Rotorua (see sidebar), I was in the heart of this small city and within walking distance to pubs, restaurants, and Lake Rotorua. Thermal spas are abundant, and a mild sulfur smell claims the city. The Whakarewarewa (Whaka) Forest has over 60 miles of purpose-built trails; the trailhead at the Waipa mountain bike park, where the SSWC took place, was a 15-minute bike ride away. There are no less than five quality bike shops in Rotorua—Kiwi Bikes and Bike Vegas were the two most people mentioned.

The day after the SSWC, I hooked up with Nick Chater from Multi-Day Adventures to ride other portions of the Whaka. The climb to the multiple trailheads is a gravel grinder, but Southstar Shuttle Service operates two buses with bike trailers on weekends and holidays. Pickup is at the intersection of Pipeline and Hill Road in the forest near the pump track. Get a map of the trail network or stop by any shop for directions. A single shuttle trip can be purchased for \$10(NZ) or in bulk for less.

The trails in the Whaka are absolutely amazing and some of the best I've ridden anywhere. Under a heavy canopy of redwoods, the soil is more dirt-like, less sandy, with few exposed roots and even fewer rocks. The variety of terrain on the trails is hinted at in their names—"Curves" is full of banked turns, and carving from one into the next was so much fun. "Split Enz," named after the New Zealand band of the '70s and '80s, is a speedy run full of twists and turns. "Little Red Riding Huck" has one roller after another to launch and many drop-offs. "The National Downhill Course" is self-explanatory and looked challenging.

Coming around a corner, I was struck by the sudden void of trees. I learned that some areas of the forest are grown specifically for commercial use, and the redwood was imported from Canada because it thrives in the pumice-based soil, maturing five to seven years quicker than in Canada. All the riders I talked to understand and accept that the trees will be cut. This understanding has led to a respectful relationship between the logging companies, mountain bikers, and other user groups. When the trees are cut, the trails are not bulldozed and destroyed. Rather, saplings are planted around the trails to preserve the

PLACES TO STAY

THE QUADRANT HOTEL

The Quadrant is a modern-style high rise with a hip atmosphere. It's located in downtown Auckland, just blocks from Auckland University and across the street from Albert Park, a green space with amazing trees and gardens. A vibrant urban center with the High Street Fashion District, cafés, pubs, restaurants, beautiful architecture, and narrow European-style streets are all close for the exploring. Auckland Harbor is a short walk away and city bus service is curbside.

The balcony view of the sea, city and surrounding volcanic hills left me standing in awe. Take advantage of the equipped kitchen to save a little money, or enjoy a meal and drinks at the in-house Quad Bar and Restaurant. www.thequadrant.com

REGENT OF ROTORUA

The Regent of Rotorua is an upscale hotel centrally located in the heart of Rotorua's lakefront and urban center. Pubs, restaurants, cafés, and shops are within walking distance, as well as tour companies for the surrounding area and Mokoia Island.

The Regent offers excellent meals, a cocktail and espresso bar, private courtyard with a heated swimming pool, indoor thermal mineral pool, mini-gym, and spa treatment area. Clean rooms and suites with comfortable, down-covered beds, wireless Internet, and other modern amenities are standard. The friendly staff truly made me feel welcome. www.regentrotorua.co.nz

REGENT FLASHPACKERS

If you're on a budget or would rather be in a more communal atmosphere, Regent Flashpackers offers safe and clean hostel accommodations and is located right next door to the Regent. It's owned by the same friendly people.

Accommodations include private and shared rooms, and women-only rooms. All beds have quality linens at no extra charge. Private thermal pools, social bar, leather couches, Internet, stainless-steel kitchen, and an outdoor garden with a BBQ area puts Flashpackers on the short list for places to stay. Both the Regent of Rotorua and Flashpackers have laundry facilities, bike storage, on-site parking and knowledgeable staff. www.regentflashpackers.co.nz

OWHANGO HOTEL

Experience a night far from the beaten path at the Owhango Hotel. It's located near the village of Owhango near the Tongariro and Whanganui National Park. The 42 Traverse ends at the hotel's backdoor. This family-owned hotel is part restaurant, hotel, tavern, and mini-mart. Its food is a favorite among the locals, while its simplicity, inexpensive meals and beer, and humorous atmosphere were welcoming. Rooms include a toilet, shower and bed, communal living area, covered deck, and picnic area. But do yourself a favor and try the steak and fries. Bikes are welcome. www.owhangohotel.co.nz

WAITOMO CAVES HOLIDAY PARK

Waitomo Caves Holiday Park has accommodations to suit every budget: non-powered tent sites, powered campervan sites, kitchen-equipped motel units for families or groups, and stand-alone cabins with 2-6 beds. I stayed in a two-bed cabin that was incredibly clean, naturally lit, and had a covered deck overlooking a pasture. Equipped bathroom and mini-kitchen are standard.

The main building houses a communal kitchen, covered BBQ area, showers, toilets, and Internet kiosk. Swimming pool, hot tub, playground, and laundry facilities are also on-site. The restaurants, pubs, shops, tour operators, and information center are all a short walking distance away. www.waitomopark.co.nz



OWHANGA FALLS NEAR WAIKINO

system for future use.

I could have spent days riding in the Whaka Forest, and if you make it to New Zealand, I'd put the entire area on the must-ride list. The trails are fantastic, well-mapped and rated for difficulty using color codes. Some trails are beginner-friendly and follow a stream surrounded by ferns. Others will have you squeezing the brakes while a smile takes over your face. All the trails are beautiful in their own way and visually spectacular.

42 TRAVERSE

The 42 Traverse is located south of Lake Taupo, New Zealand's largest lake, in the Tongariro National Park. This is pretty much the center of the North Island. I made my way there early in the morning, stopping for a jet boat ride at Huka Falls in the Waikato River, then continuing to Taupo Bungy where I jumped from the 154ft.-high platform into the river, after elevating my heart rate on the Cliff Hanger Swing. No caffeine for me that day. If you've never taken the plunge, Taupo Bungy is the place to do it. The ravine, canyon walls, and turquoise water below are stimulating to the eyes. Then you get to jump and fall through all of it.

The 42 Traverse, named after State Forest Road 42, is 28.5 miles of packed gravel, dirt doubletrack, and ATV trails through native bush and forest. Veins of singletrack split off the main artery. The area is remote with no easy way out. Venturing off the main trail should only be considered if you have a good map or are riding with a knowledgeable local.

I was fortunate to have local Kate Lacy as my guide, along with her well-worn map, but stayed on the main line nonetheless, stopping to take in the panoramic views of the surrounding volcanic mountains, native forest, waterfall, and black ferns that grow up to 65 feet tall. The trails are not marked, but the 42 Traverse is worn in enough to be able to follow it without much problem. 1,870 feet of descending made for some speedy gravity sections that usually ended up at a stream crossing with steep

climbs on the opposite side.

The best way to ride the Traverse is to shuttle to Kapoors Road off of State Highway 47 and ride its entire length. The ride takes about 3.5 hours and ends with a road climb that goes through a small neighborhood leading to the Owhango Hotel (see sidebar), coincidentally where I stayed.

This one-story hotel, pub and restaurant is in the heart of dairy farmland and offers a look at the real New Zealand, far from the beaten path. The mugs of beer are cold and inexpensive, and the steak so fresh it made me feel guilty looking at the cattle across the parking lot. The rooms are basic and it's a good place to stay for the night. The local dairy farmers congregate at the pub after work and they make for a humorous evening, but by 9 p.m. the place is quiet. They begin work at 5 a.m.

THE LAST DAY

With one day remaining, I headed northwest to Waitomo for a caving adventure with the Black Water Rafting Company (see sidebar). After two hours underground, a few more spent in the pub with a group of British folks, and a night of sleep, I woke early to hike the Ruakuri Reserve Bushwalk. The loop through picturesque fern foliage, limestone outcrops, caves, tunnels, and points overlooking water rushing in and out of caves was a fitting departure. The air smelled so clean and the trails were lined with silver fern, New Zealand's national symbol. In traditional times, the Maori also used the silver side of the fern to mark their way home, because it glows under moonlight.

Traveling to New Zealand and experiencing the North Island was an absolutely amazing adventure, one that seems dreamlike as I look back on the experience. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend traveling there to the best of my friends, and hope one day soon to follow the silver fern back to the islands myself for more adventuring and to visit those that befriended me and gave me life-changing experiences. ☺

ROTORUA OFF THE BIKE

There's more to do in New Zealand than just pedal on world-class trails. Tourism New Zealand's website, www.newzealand.com, makes finding anything and everything easy. It contains information on tour companies specializing in adventure, along with their operating location, cultural sites to see, and less strenuous activities and forest walks. I browsed their site and clicked on what interested me to build a basic list. With that information, Tourism NZ filled in some blanks, gave recommendations through email and phone conversations, and created a custom itinerary for me, including:

Wai Ora Experiences does cultural history tours on Mokoia Island in Lake Rotorua, the sacred island of the Te Arawa confederacy of Maori tribes. The island and lake both formed from a volcanic explosion, and the island is a wildlife sanctuary full of native birds, flora and fauna. Guided tours and educational programs have replaced Maori settlements, but walking around the island, one gains a sense of what life was like for the early inhabitants. www.mokoiaisland.co.nz

Hells Gate and Wai Ora Spa is Rotorua's most active thermal park, and for over 700 years, has been a source of wellness to the Maori people. 150 years ago, Europeans followed suit and sought the medicinal sulfur pools and mineral-enriched mud. Hells Gate gives everyone the opportunity to indulge in natural spa therapies, mineral pools, traditional Maori Mirimiri massage, and mud baths. I've never felt mud so smooth—it's definitely not the kind of mud we ride through. www.hellsgate.co.nz

Te Puia, New Zealand's Maori Arts and Crafts Institute, is located just outside Rotorua in the Te Whakarewarewa Thermal Valley. There, traditional woodcarving and weaving techniques are taught in their respective schools, and the Kiwi house offers a glimpse of the endangered bird. The grounds contain the Pohutu Geyser, which erupts 100 feet into the air, and boiling pools of mud. Traditional cultural performances are held throughout the day, and in the evening, a generous indigenous meal, prepared over hot stones or poached in geothermal pools, is served to guests. You will learn Maori customs and won't leave hungry. www.tepuia.com

Multi-Day Adventures specializes in delivering the best that New Zealand has to offer. Experience a scenic helicopter ride before mountain biking down Mt. Tarawera, go white-water rafting over waterfalls on the Kaituna River, or enjoy kayaking, hiking, and rock climbing in beautiful locations across the islands. Their pre-designed itineraries are fully guided or can be customized, and last anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Nick and Kimi Chater and Tak Mutu are good people that have pride and respect for the outdoors. I had one of the best days with them and an unforgettable journey. Most gear and equipment is included. www.multidayadventures.co.nz

Raftabout—If you are looking to spend a day on the water, Raftabout does grade 5 waterfall rafting and grade 4 river runs on the Rangitaiki River. Go big and experience the Wairoa River as the Ruahihi Power Station releases its water, 26 days of the year. Try "sledding" and head down the rapids holding on to a purpose-built board, while maneuvering it with the flippers on your feet. It's all great fun. www.raftabout.co.nz

Taupo Bungy offers the ultimate experience of bungy jumping from a 154ft.-high platform over the Waikato River. It's a complete adrenalin rush, especially at the end when you're dunked in the river. If you'd rather not jump but still experience the rush, the canyon swing is your ride. Sit in a full-body harness, dangle over the river, and feel gravity's power as the safety line is detached. A few seconds of freefall are followed with swinging between the canyon walls. I did both back-to-back and was buzzed all day.

www.taupobungy.co.nz

Kayaking Kiwi offers guided kayak tours across Lake Taupo to the Maori rock carvings. The entire lake is a caldera surrounded by volcanic mountains; Mt. Ngauruhoe, which played the part of Mt. Doom in The Lord of the Rings, looms 7516 feet high in the background. The lake is absolutely beautiful, a beachside snack is provided, and there is something amazing about kayaking around volcanoes as planes overhead fill the sky with parachutes. Be prepared to row—the tour lasts a few hours, but is worth the effort. www.rapids.co.nz

The Legendary Black Water Rafting Company opened my eyes to the world beneath Waitomo in the Ruakuri Cave. They provided the wetsuit, boots, helmet, abseiling devices, and tube. I followed the guides and a group of Brits and abseiled (rappelled) through a three-foot hole in the earth that opened into a cave system. What followed was a zip-line through the darkness, leaping from a cliff into water, hiking in a subterranean river, climbing up waterfalls, and drinking hot chocolate to stay warm. Beyond water and a few tight spaces, the cave is full of glowworms—matchstick-size larva with glowing butts that line the walls and ceiling like stars in the night. Absolutely amazing and worth doing.

www.waitomo.com/black-water-rafting.aspx



RAFTING THE KAITUNA RIVER