

BUSHRANGER BIKES NEW ZEALAND VOLCANIC MADNESS BACK COUNTRY TOUR - 23 FEB to 5 MAR 2007

DIARY NOTES OF TERRY HEYDON (To the best of my recollections).

Statistics:

Weight 23 Feb. 67.4kg. (Feb 2006 – 66.9kg).

Weight 6 Mar. 67.5kg. (Mar 2006 - 65.4kg.)

Total kilometres ridden/pushed. - 250.2km (2006 = 260km).

Digital Photos. 428. (2006 = 627)



Highlights:

1. Walking the Tongariro Crossing in Tongariro National Park, even though the weather was extreme. To experience the cold, wet and windy weather; the steep climbs; the crater walks; the scoria descent to the Emerald Lakes and the final descent through alpine vegetation, past the Ketetahi Hot Springs, then into the dense scrub before emerging from native forest to a car park. All of this in limited visibility for most of the walk. What would it be like on a fine day?
2. The fast single tracks of MTB Park at Taupo and the Redwoods at Rotorua.
3. The 16k loop in the primitive forest of Whirinaki Forest Mountain Bike Park.

Ride Expectations:

Every ride had its own speciality and uniqueness to live up to and this was achieved and it is now very difficult to pick a favourite; although the fast single tracks were great.

Disappointments:

It was unfortunate that wet weather prevented riding the 42 Traverse. Another ride that was full of promise. However, we were fairly well blessed by "Mother Nature" providing numerous fine days to achieve the rides as outlined in the tour itinerary.

Participants:

Jon Newrick (Tour Leader and Guide as well as Director of Punishment)
Dale Garvey (Tour Assistant, Medic, Mechanic, Food Connoisseur)
Ken Potter
Di Carrol
Karen Underwood
Madonna Faux
Simon Faux
Terry Heydon

8 MTB riders and 14 wheels. Madonna and Simon showed everybody their expertise and strength riding a tandem MTB through a wide range of MTB track. An impressive display of strength, communication and co-ordination.



Noel and Annette joined us in New Zealand and assisted Jon with the navigation of the tour and also with the relocation of the vehicle for some of the ride legs as well as providing sustenance for the riders. Bacon & Egg pie, salads for the BBQ etc.

Quotes:

Noel. The wind's always blowing from the south!

23 Feb 2007. Friday. Travel for this trip was with Air New Zealand departing Brisbane International at 8.05am for a scheduled landing in Wellington at 2.30pm. At least the travel time for this trip was in daylight hours. Beryl drove me to the airport, arriving at 5.30am and I commenced the check in while Beryl parked the car. (Bike bag was 18.7kg and luggage bag was 11kg). Just made the 30kg limit. Dale and Karen were just ahead in the queue and Simon and Madonna arrived soon after. Allocated a window seat, over a wing. After a coffee and saying goodbyes, we proceeded through immigration and security without any problems. Where's my fleecy? I'd left it on the security conveyor belt. A quick recovery. Jon, Ken and Di preceded us to Wellington on the 21st. Jon to arrange the final tour details on the ground and Ken and Di having a couple of days settling in before the tour commenced.

It was a comfortable flight across the Tasman with no problems at immigration or clearance of the bikes with quarantine. Although we did spend a little extra time waiting at the "over size" baggage collection point for our bike bags, until Karen noticed the bike bags on the opposite side of the area next to the customer service area. Was this Kiwi logic?

Met by Jon, Ken and Di and loaded our luggage into the van and trailer for travel to our accommodation at the "83 By the Sea" Motor Lodge at Petone, on the northern edge of Wellington Harbour.

A quick check in to the rooms then unpack and assemble the bikes. Jon had planned a ride for the remainder of the afternoon. All the bikes arrived without damage but my bike did get a "pinch flat" somewhere between Brisbane Airport and Wellington Airport. (My tyres were semi deflated in the bag and the rear tyre was dead flat when taken out of the bag and

immediately deflated when I pumped up both tyres for the ride). Not the start I wanted, but a quick tube change and it was time to hit the trail.

The ride was into Belmont Regional Park close to Petone and on the Korokoro Gorge trail. A very narrow track, that followed a flowing stream up a bush clad valley with some steep edge drops as we rode up a gradual incline, with a strong, cool tail wind to assist. In some places it made my pulse quicken. Don't Look Down. A ride to sharpen the senses, especially after the early morning start, air travel and a 3 hour daylight saving time extension to lengthen the day. There was a wide variety of terrain and scenery as we ascended the track, past the Korokoro Dam and to finally emerge at the top at Belmont. We then followed a long, winding, downhill bitumen road back to Petone. I think I may have walked some of the track if we had to return the same way, although downhill, it was into the teeth of a strong wind.



The weather for our first afternoon was cloudy, cool and windy. Our evening meal for the first night was at the “Flax” café.

13.1km, 1hr 08m, Av 11.5kph, Max 57.4kph.

(Max was on the bitumen downhill somewhere. I was too busy watching the road with the tandem right behind).

24 Feb 2007. Saturday. A continental breakfast in the room and the days ride started from the “83 By the Sea” Motor Lodge”. We packed our baggage in the van as we returned to Petone after the days ride from Featherston and travelled on to Raumati.

The weather was fine and clear with a north easterly blowing. Our luck, a head wind! The track followed the harbour foreshore then crossed over to the eastern bank of the Hutt River at Moera. The track then meandered along the riverbank past Woburn, Hutt Central, (no time to check out the Saturday morning markets), Avalon, and Manor Park until reaching Harcourt Park, where we had a small snack break. Noel met and joined the group along this track. Whilst we were here we also observed teams of people playing “frisbee golf” through this parkland. The ride was broken along the way by having to negotiate “barriers” where we

had to dismount and weave between the posts. The track is great with a range of hard, compacted gravel surfaces, coarse stone, bitumen and concrete. Sometimes close to the riverbank, or on top of the levee bank. Wide enough to allow up and down flow for cyclists, with a long gradual incline, as we were riding to the start of the Rimutaka Rail Trail and still pushing into the head wind.

From Harcourt Park we followed the footpath and road to Birchville where the Hutt River meets the Akatarawa River and the track signage became a blur. A check of the map and we crossed the road at the river junction and continued to follow the Hutt River along its east bank.



A short stage of track along the top of the levee bank of mown grass, onto winding single track through some dense stands of beech trees and emerging on the edge of State Highway 2, then a long 5k climb that incorporated the Rimutaka Hill and still into the head wind. A down hill ride from the top then branching off to the right, into the Pakuratahi Forest and the start of the Rimutaka Rail Trail.

At long last, out of the head wind and the long, steady climb of the gentle gradient to the Summit began. The track surface was very firm and stable, great scenery of the surrounding hills covered in pine trees and pampas grass in bloom, blowing their plumes along side of the track. I negotiated the Pakuratahi Tunnel successfully, without having to walk, as it was only 91m long on a slight radius curve. At the Summit it was packs off and time out for a “snack” break, before pressing onwards and negotiating the next section of rail trail between the Summit and Cross Creek, known as the Rimutaka Incline.

This ride was designed to enable the group to ride to Featherston and catch the 5.35pm train back to Petone.

Over the previous hour I had noticed Jon glancing at his watch, then calculating our travel times. At the Summit our dead line for Featherston was achievable, provided there was not too much time lost on the downhill ride.

Firstly, there was the long, straight 576m of the Summit Tunnel to negotiate. I walked the full distance this time and still experienced the unnerving feeling of vertigo. Some kids passed me in the tunnel and they rode their bikes all the way through. Heroes and told their Dad so. They displayed no trepidation of their feat.

Now it's all down hill to Cross Creek. A quick stop at the lookout that was our furthestest point of last years ride and to observe the downhill track to the Siberia Tunnel of 120m, with a slight radius curve and Siberia Gorge beyond.

This downhill track is still wide but a lot rougher than the incline but so fast and brain rattling there was a constant need to be on the brakes and picking the line to negotiate the trail whilst trying to observe the terrain flashing past. Safely through the Siberia Tunnel and on exiting there was a difficult gorge to traverse. This is known as Horseshoe Gully, Siberia. I managed to ride to the bottom and across the rough creek but the steep embankment on the other side pulled me up very quickly.

Prices Tunnel of 98m had to be negotiated and this one had a slight curve and the "light at the end" only came into being after entering some 30/40 metres. I could feel the wet surface under the tyres and the unsteady feeling of riding in a darkened environment over took the senses until exiting the tunnel, still upright and still mobile.

Over the top of the Siberia Gorge the trail continued at a very steep descent and depending on ones confidence, let it rip or ride the brakes. This was still a wide, rough trail, but brain rattling, thigh burning and eyeball bouncing for a fast run all the way to Cross Creek.



A halt was called just short of Cross Creek for the group to regather. Here the view extended further down the trail with Lake Wairarapa in the distance. Di and Karen each had a fall of sorts after Siberia, but no injuries or damage to bodies or bikes. (Di was quick to show off her scars to Beryl at Brisbane Airport).

The significance of Cross Creek:

At the foot of the Rimutaka Incline, Cross Creek existed to service the six Fell locomotives, and marshal trains in preparation for ascending the three miles (5km) of Fell-worked 1 in 15 gradient to Summit. An extensive locomotive depot was provided, including a wheel-drop pit within the main four-road shed. Major repairs were undertaken on the Fell locomotives, Petone and later Hutt Workshops providing major overhauls and boiler repairs. Ash pits, coal bins, 'skinny' rectangular water vats and three-way turnout leading to the engine shed were hallmarks of the depot, with two or more 'H' class Fell locos being serviced. Trains heading north from Cross Creek were hauled by conventional steam locomotives, typically tender types, turned and serviced at the depot.

Time was still pressing against us to reach Featherston so there was no time to observe the relics and look at the rail history of Cross Creek. From Cross Creek to the "Car Park" the track deteriorated into a single track through some very technical, interesting and along side some terrifying steep edge drops through dense forest and emerged beside farming property before exiting at the "Car Park".

From the "Car Park" there was another couple of k's of gravel road before we reached the back country bitumen road and the long, open stretches to Featherston 10k away. Out in the open again and still into the headwind.

After the "Car Park" the group split into three packs of riders as the day was now long and the earlier physical efforts were beginning to show and the train was waiting for nobody. I was in the middle, riding with Karen and it was quite disconcerting to see the first group ahead in the distance and not being able to bridge the distance over the long straight stretch of bitumen and it must have felt the same for the group behind us.

We all arrived at Featherston by 5.10pm, exhilarated with our days ride and physical achievements, but not without Jon having Plan B put into action. The headwind really reduced the speed and there were earlier doubts if we would all catch the train.

Plan B was activated with Dale riding back to meet Jon and collecting the train tickets that had been pre-purchased; then riding back to the group at the station to catch the train. If the train arrived before Dale arrived, the earlier arrivals were to pay for their tickets. This group would go by train back to Petone, collect the van and trailer and drive back to Featherston to collect the riders that missed the train. Thankfully, everybody arrived in time.



The train arrived at 5.35pm. Jon had pre-booked the train and arranged for the caboose to be attached to enable the bikes to be loaded. All aboard.

Back at Petone Railway Station we rode to the motel, loaded the bikes and drove to Raumati on the Kapiti Coast for our overnight accommodation at the Raumati Sands Resort. Evening meal at the "Flamin Poms".

69km, 5h 15m, Av 13.27kph, Max 40.4kph.

25 Feb 2007. Sunday. A 7.30am start on a fine, sunny and brisk morning with no wind and a ride around the rolling dune tracks of Queen Elizabeth Park, between Raumati and Paekakariki before breakfast. This area is open parkland with a Coastal Track and an Inland Track. Both tracks provide access for walkers, MTB'rs but horse riders are restricted to the Inland Track. The tracks are heavily grassed along the edges, with numerous tight turns, steep inclines with the mandatory steep declines and sandy drifts at the bottom of some of the descents. A really great area to play without being too technical or difficult. This was a great morning's ride with pleasant scenery and highlighted by the rising sun on the surrounding hills of the Tararua Range and Kapiti Island from Whareroa Beach.

Back to the Resort where we checked out and loaded the van before heading for a cooked breakfast at Café Art, Raumati, at approx 10am. Following breakfast Noel Fisher re-joined the group and he then led us along one of his "backyard" tracks to Waikanae. (Noel and Annette live locally, so know the area intimately).



This ride from Raumati to Waikanae was approx 15k's following the Waikanae River for the latter part until the track reached the State Highway where Jon was waiting with the van. This ride provided great tracks without any challenges. Comfortable, smooth, only one hill and a variety of river bank scenery. Noel has a great back yard!

Load the bikes on the trailer at lunchtime and it's on the road to National Park Village, our next overnight stop. Followed State Highway 1 north through the major towns of Levin, Foxton, Bulls and turned left to Highway 49 at Waiouru then right at Ohakune to Highway 4 and National Park Village. We stopped at Taihape (home of the Big Gum Boot) for coffee and a snack at the Brown Sugar Cafe. The scenery to Bulls was fairly plain with wide, open farmland. But, after Bulls the highway turned to the inland and gradually climbed toward the

central highlands and the scenery became more varied with rolling and rugged hills and the presence of sheep took over from the dairy industry of the plains. The van was refuelled at Ohakune (home of the Big Carrot) after passing the large military base and museum at Waiouru before arriving at the Tongariro Crossing Lodge. An old, large establishment with very comfortable facilities catering for groups especially during the winter season.

Karen had two falls from the bike and both were in the Queen Elizabeth Park area. The first, falling to her right off the bike whilst stationary, with the second, onto soft sand when a sand drift proved too deep to negotiate.

Our evening meal was at Eivins Bar and Bistro that has Mt Ngauruhoe as a backdrop but cloud descended and heavy rain fell until dark and ruined this view.

Noel and Annette also joined us here as they had followed in their own car from Waikanae and were to assist Jon over some sections of the next rides. Annette had also cooked a snack for the group and handed over a bacon and egg quiche at the end of our ride at Waikanae. Dale approved of this generous offering.

31.4km, 2h 18m, Av 13.6kph, Max 36.3kph.

26 Feb 2007. Monday. Breakfast in the Lodge but it was raining and the cloud was hanging very low with next to no visibility. So the first ride of the day, on fast downhill bitumen from "The Top of the Bruce" on Mt Ruapehu was cancelled. We did drive up to the top to try and envisage and sense the environment through the misty cloud and rain. Back down off Mt Ruapehu we headed to Turangi and booked into our overnight stop at the Turangi Leisure Lodge, a time-share resort. Another comfortable accommodation location with all the facilities for an extended stay.

Over the mountain range on the approach to Turangi, Jon stopped at a lookout so that we could admire the spectacular views over Lake Taupo. As we prepared to drive from this location, the vehicle would not start. Problem? A flat battery! Solution! Unhitch the trailer and the fellows pushed the van around the car park for a clutch start and then reattached the trailer. Not one of the girls took a photo of this embarrassing moment. Jon was able to purchase a new battery in Turangi and there were no further problems.

After lunch it was time to travel back up the road to the Kaimamawa Forest off Desert Road and the start of the Tree Trunk Gorge Trail and to the Pillars of Hercules, by following the Tongariro River back to Turangi. This ride had the lot.

Initially, a fast bitumen road downhill to the bridge and the impressive view below of Tree Trunk Gorge and the roaring river snaking its way through crevices in the rock formations. Then the trail began on the eastern bank. Ranging from technical single track, some hard climbs, steep rocky descents, soft and quiet birch leaf covered trail, compacted earth, grassy track, etc.

The noise of the river below was always audible as it rushed along its rocky bed and rapids. Occasional glimpses of the river far below could be seen through the densely populated trees.

There was one instance where we had to cross a stream which was considered too wide to ride through without getting ones feet wet or the possibility of falling off as the bottom of the stream was covered with slippery river rocks. So the solution was found to cross at a suitable spot by negotiating the stream on large, dry rocks and a fallen tree trunk, passing the bikes hand to hand to the other side.



The track continued through deep, damp native forest before emerging at a car park near the Pillars of Hercules. The Pillars offered a view from a newly constructed swing bridge where the river below is forced through a geographical crack in the rock banks.

From the car park the track heads uphill and emerges on to a bitumen road, again to another bridge over the river and views to a hydro power area. We continued, uphill on the bitumen for a short distance then branched off to the right onto another gravelly track that linked up to a "spillway canal" that we followed for a short distance until it met with the State Highway.

Now it was time for some more fast fun, riding on the bitumen, with a tail wind, until we reached the Red Hut Pool sign and branched off the highway to cross the river to its right bank, over a swing bridge and the start of the Tongariro River Trail.

Once again, a single track that starts almost immediately with a bike carry up the "spiral staircase" but develops into a track of varying surface levels and degrees of difficulty through a never ending change in the wooded environment but most suitable for all levels of MTB rider. The track is still predominately high above the river below and the noise of the river running over rapids can be constantly heard, together with glimpses through wooded breaks, of trout fishermen wading in the river as Mt Pihanga loomed high over our left shoulders providing a foreboding backdrop.

The track finally emerged on the outskirts of Turangi Township and it was only a short ride to our accommodation. A "self help" barbeque tea tonight and thanks to Annette and the chefs (Noel and Simon) for providing nutrition to our famished bodies. Not so kindly was the township in providing the necessary hydration supplies. The ride finished at approx 7pm and Jon went to purchase wine/beer etc and found the liquor barn was closed, the supermarket was about to close and the supermarket grouch wouldn't let him in. Jon had to pay top \$ for "takeaways" at the main bar. A mutiny was averted!

Despite the damp start at National Park Village, the day finished fine and warm but cooled considerably as the sun set and the wind increased.

What happened on this ride? Crossing the river, carrying the bikes while balancing on boulders and logs and getting the bodies across. (Twice). Anyone for dancing lessons? There was one very sudden drop off with a small creek at the bottom and an immediate left turn, uphill. All of these decisions to interpret in a second. I made it down the drop off and through the creek but the sharp left turn pulled me to a halt. How far back off the seat can one go without a nose dive?

36.4km, 2h 28m, Av 14.7kph, Max 57.4kph.

27 Feb 2007. Tuesday. A fine cool morning to start the day that remained fine and became hot. There was no need for thermal layering. After breakfast and packing the van it was off down the road to Taupo before getting into the saddle again. We followed the lakes shoreline all the way to the outskirts of Taupo with the morning sun highlighting the lake and mountains. (Lake Taupo appeared to be on its best behaviour as this was also the venue for the Ironman in a couple of days). A quick stop at the lookout on the south side of town to admire the views over the lake and back to Turangi with the view of Mt Pihanga, Mt Tongariro, Mt Ngauruhoe and snow peaks of Mt Ruapehu in the southern background. A short drive to Wharewaka Point (Worry Wokka) where we unloaded and assembled the bikes before riding around the shoreline of the lake to Taupo town centre.

Simon headed directly to the Avanti bike shop to purchase some wheel spokes as he had broken one on an earlier ride. The others had a quick walk around the block and it was time to ride again and follow the Waikato River to Aratiatia Dam where we hoped to see one of the daily scheduled releases of water into the river below. We rode out of town passing by the Taupo Bungy (nobody was interested) to Spa Park. Here a thermal stream flows into the river and some people were taking advantage of the clear, warm water. The track branched uphill and followed the eastern bank of the Waikato, along Rotary Ride, a recently developed track by Bike Taupo. This track was not overly wide, but very dry and dusty and consisted of a lot of switch backs as it climbed up the white coloured clay riverbank and through narrow cuttings that overlooked the river far below. Some sections were also designated one way as the track was cut into the cliff face.

The track finally emerged from the bush just above the Huka Falls so us “smelly” MTB’rs mingled with the tourists and walked over the observation bridge and admired the mass of water that was pouring under our feet into the river below. Back to the track and uphill again to the top of the riverbank and continued along a well defined track. One section was through a pine forest with the trees so close it was eerily dark and the track super soft and quiet from the bed of pine needles. No place to be on a dark night without lights. The track re-emerged near the river and Dale and I stopped for a few moments at a vantage spot, high on the river bank and observed a Jet Boat leave its jetty and do a 360 in the river far below. A mass of white foam formed in the clear blue waters.



The track finally emerged at Aratiatia Dam but we were too late to see the 12pm release of water. After a light snack it was time to load the vehicle and proceed further north. The day was not over yet.

Just north of the Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland we turned right off the highway and headed for the Whirinaki Forest Park to ride a recently constructed, purpose built MTB trail loop of 16k's. There was also an option within the loop to make an 8km ride. Jon, Karen, Di with Simon and Madonna on their tandem, rode the 8k loop, whilst Noel, Dale, Ken and I chose to ride the 16k loop. Straight into the forest and it was like stepping into some prehistoric region. Where are the dinosaurs? There were large tree ferns with face slapping fronds growing tall beneath the forest canopy, so visibility was always on the dim side and added to the thrill of the ride. The initial section was a climbing single track which was slow, twisty and rolling. It then followed with a downhill, twisting, winding trail and so the theme continued.

The two rides of the day were totally diverse in the nature of the terrain. The first starting around the edges of Lake Taupo, to single track, negotiating the river banks through open vegetation, the eerie dead forest and some hard climbs with switch backs and steep edge drops with spectacular views over the river. The second ride was through primitive, dense forest with huge tree ferns under a dense forest canopy. The tree ferns had overgrown the track and there was a constant need to watch out for fronds as well as negotiating the twisty/gnarly corners that were peppered with soft muddy holes. It also featured some very hard climbs that offered some very fast twisting and flowing downhill track, complete with water bars and chicanes. There was a "nervous" moment in the early part of the ride whereby there is the "tree trunk" ride that provides a short cut on the track. (A large tree had fallen over a deep gully and the track builders have cut a horizontal slab off the tree to form a flat surface for the hardy, of some 500mm width and this surface has been covered with "chicken wire" to provide a stable surface). This "tree trunk" path also appears very suddenly after a downhill section that requires a sharp right hand turn on to the trunk or then taking a quick left hand turn and following the gully embankment around to the other side. I didn't have enough time to baulk, so it was straight across the trunk and I wasn't going back to do it again to have my photo taken. Both groups enjoyed this particular ride and it's a pity it is so far out of town, but the distance is probably what makes it an unspoilt forest and track. Both groups emerged from the forest around the same time, so it just goes to show what was available from this circuit track and the skills and strength to push a little harder. The day remained fine and hot after a great day of hard riding. Loaded the van once again and we headed back to the highway and to our Rotorua accommodation at the Tuscany Villas Motor Inn. The ever present sulphur smell for the next two nights. A new motel offering excellent accommodation and a large in-room spa if one felt inclined. The evening meal was at the noisy Fat Dog Café & Bar, together with listening to the ramblings of a local tourist operator to her new overseas visitors. A pleasant meal was enjoyed.

38.7km, 3h 05m, Av 12.1kph, Max 38.8kph.

28 Feb 2007. Wednesday. Awake to a fine, cool and cloudy morning that remained the same for the day. After breakfast in the room it was time to travel to the south east outskirts of Rotorua to the Whakarewarewa Forest and the Redwood trees.

The location of the first proper designated MTB Park in New Zealand that still lays claim to being the best. There are dozens of tracks with various distance and difficulty levels available. They are all well marked and signposted. All of the tracks I rode were within the old pine forest and redwood trees, with low growing tree ferns in abundance. The tracks were dry and fast with continuous curves and berms have been constructed to add to the thrill of the ride. Of course, there were the mandatory steep hill climbs, but not of any length or duration.

Just before we rode into the forest, I noticed my bike computer was missing and everybody generously gave their time to search the immediate area but to no avail. Halfway through a ride, Jon called Dale on the radio and said, "Tell Terry I have found his computer". I yelled a grateful thank you and Jon and his group heard me, they were just around the corner adjusting the tandem. As I was preparing to ride into the forest, Jon asked for assistance to secure the vehicle keys in his backpack. The computer was in my gloved hand and it fell into his backpack with the keys and he found it when he stopped to retrieve his tool kit to perform some bike adjustments. Mystery solved.



Some of the trails I rode were: Cross Creek, Nursery Road, Haro, Diamond Back, Avenir, Repco, Exit Trail, Exit Jumps and Tahī. We completed these rides around lunchtime, so a light snack at a nearby bakery, load the bikes on to the vehicle and a look around town, taking in the thermal area, Maori Church and the foreshore of Lake Rotorua. There were then a couple of hours for time out and a walk around town before meeting at the Pig and Whistle for our evening meal.

21km, 1hr 55m, Av 11.6kph, Max 27kph.

1 Mar 2007. Thursday. There was rain overnight so the morning was bleak and damp but not raining. After breakfast in the room it was the usual routine of pack the van and drive on to the next destination of the tour. We had reached the most northern part of the tour and we now returned south, towards Taupo.

The initial intention was to be at the Aratiatia Rapids Scenic Reserve to witness the release of water from the dam, as we were too late previously. As we still had time before getting to the dam, Jon diverted to the geothermal location at Wairakei where we saw an endless sight of stainless steel pipe, of all dimensions that carried thermal steam as part of the process in the geothermal power production. It was also unbelievable to see boiling water pouring down the hillside in stone culverts.

A short drive back down the road to the Aratiatia Rapids Scenic Reserve to witness the 10am release of water from the dam. Following the warning sirens, the two flood gates were raised in the dam wall and it was awesome to see the fast rise of water into the river pool below the dam wall and the force of the water itself through the narrow crevice into the river further below.

The drive from Rotorua to Wairake was also presented in a different light due to the low cloud and misty, cool weather and to see the thermal steam venting from the ground and vaporising in the cool atmosphere at various places along the way.

The weather was still showery but was trying to clear so Jon drove us to the small town of Kinlock, where we had morning tea. Kinlock is located on the northerly banks of Lake Taupo, facing a large bay. Taupo township is not visible from here due to the large cliffs that make this location a very picturesque, tranquil and secluded location. Observing the construction and development that was occurring it appeared that progress was catching up to this area.

From Kinlock, it was a short drive back to Huka Falls to view the Waikato River rushing through the cutting and into the river below. Karen, Di and Jon had by passed this viewing a few days earlier. As the weather had cleared, it was time to ride again. We were close by to the Craters of the Moon MTB Park so Dale and I rode our bikes some 2k's uphill on a new track that was complete with switchbacks and views of the river below as we climbed higher. We met the others at the Helicopter Ride Park where we spit into two groups to ride in the MTB Park that was on the opposite side of the highway.

There were two ways to get to the other side of the busy highway. One: Cross directly over the highway to the other side, a distance of some 50m. Two: Ride the bikes through a tunnel and track that was purpose built under the highway, a distance of some 500m. The track involved a narrow, downhill single track with switchbacks to the bottom, through the tunnel that bought back the "vertigo" feeling of the rail tunnels of the Rimutaka Trail, then climb out of the gully, up a narrow, crumbly single track with switchbacks to the top that came out on to the other side of the highway. I was the only one to take this option.

The MTB Park is much on the same scale and level as the Redwoods of Rotorua, with its many tracks constructed to suit all levels of skills and well signposted with the degree of experience required. The tracks we rode were basically single track through pine forest with numerous twists, turns, berms, ups and downs, slippery with exposed gnarly tree roots and short tree stumps to keep the mind alert.

Also within this park there was an abundance of long grass hanging over the track that hid a lot of the blackberry vine that continually snapped at the ankles. I found this area very good and considered it to be marginally harder than the Redwoods of Rotorua, but we didn't have enough time to try all of the tracks. Some of the tracks Dale, Ken and I rode were Goods Inwards, (near the highway entrance), Bumble Bee, Ferret and Fast Eddie. We did part of Fast Eddie twice and some of this track was marked and being prepared for the MTB championships on Sunday, 10th March.

My initial reaction to this park was quite daunting as the first track, Goods Inwards, was a steep, narrow single track over soft crumbly soil and I wasn't keen to ride too far on this sort of crumbly track. However, at the top of the incline the MTB trails proper could be selected and were nowhere near as hard.

Back to the van and load the bikes once again and head into Taupo. Simon had broken another spoke in MTB Park and negotiated with the Avanti bike shop to repair and realign his rear wheel whilst we had a look around and took time out for a break. Back in the van again and a drive to Acacia Bay to buy fish and chips for tea, then drive further to Wharewaka Point (Worry Wokka) to eat and skim a few stones on the edge of the lake, as it is now very calm and tranquil, complete with sand fleas.



We finished the day by travelling further to Turangi and occupied the same rooms at the Turangi Leisure Lodge.

We organised our bags and clothing as the next day was an early start from Turangi to do the Tongariro Crossing Walk and hoping for a fine day.

13.9km, 1hr, 14m, Av 11.3kph, Max 50.7kph.

2 Mar 2007. Friday. Walk the Tongariro Crossing. Up at 5am and a breakfast of sorts in the room and on the road at 6am to National Park Village to the Tongariro Crossing Lodge, our overnight accommodation on the drive up from Raumatī and it's still pitch black. This was to drop off the bike trailer and our baggage. Steve, (the proprietor) then drove us in the van to the start of the crossing walk at the Mangatepopo Valley road end, off the main road.

As dawn broke the weather was miserable. Cloudy, windy and a light mist kept the temperature cool. Jon asks, "has everybody got wet weather coats, gloves, thermal layers, etc, etc." The days rations were provided by Jon the night before at Turangi and it was a matter of helping oneself to what was available remembering that it had to be carried and in consideration of the physical exertion that was going to occur during the walk. We had been warned!

As the weather was inclement, Madonna and Annette decided not to participate in the walk and as we reached the hut shelter at the start point, light rain began to fall. I think, "Are we really going to proceed in this weather"? Yes we are!

Everybody unpacked their packs and donned their respective wet weather clothing. I had wet weather japa trousers, waterproof cycling jacket, waterproof ski gloves and a japa southwester cap. Under this outer layer I wore shorts, two thermal upper layers and a long sleeve cycling jersey, thick woollen socks and joggers. I also carried 3l of water, spare socks and another windproof jacket, a small first aid kit plus the rations.



We started the walk at approx 7.50am and pressed forward up the Mangatepopo Valley track towards Soda Springs. It was difficult to see any scenery, bare as it may be, due to the low swirling cloud and misty rain.

This part of the track is well defined, with some sections having raised boardwalk paths. There were numerous walkers of all shapes, sizes, ages and nationalities as well as all manner of apparel. From the seasoned bush walkers in appropriate clothing to the casual day trippers, clad in shorts, jackets and sandals. All heading in the same direction. Onwards and upwards, carefully watching ones footsteps.

The “wall” was mentioned a few times by Jon and Noel but couldn’t be seen, but the incline was beginning to be felt. A brief stop at Soda Springs for the group to reassemble, then we continued towards the invisible “wall” and the climb up to Mangatepopo Saddle. An endless, upward climb over an unprepared track and having to climb like a mountain goat to pick a path among the rocks. The “tail” wind was relentless and cold and spiked with light rain as we followed the trail poles up the slope until the saddle was reached.

Another break for the group to reassemble and we tried to seek shelter on the windward side of some large boulders, but the wind whipped around all of the corners and a rest from our exertion made the body cold and it was best to keep moving at a steady pace to keep warm. The ground seemed to level out and the track was fairly smooth for a while, but still on the incline and the wind still fairly howling. This was actually the South Crater and the poles ahead designating the track ranged from a visibility of one to four. Mainly one. Then another steep, rough climb was encountered up a narrow ridge to the left, with the wind threatening to blow one off the ridgeline before reaching an unseen top of the track that was still shrouded in cloud and misty rain. If the weather were fine, the Red Crater at 1886m would have been visible.

Over the top of this apparent ridge the descent started. (My spectacles at this time were continually misty on the outside from the weather and foggy on the inside from the body heat venting from the neckline of my jacket and the thick gloves made them difficult to wipe clear).

The initial downward descent followed a zigzag, narrow ridge line (as we noticed later, when the sun broke through the cloud) of scoria. A loose, soft and treacherous surface. A long descent that could be best described as skating downhill on marbles, so it was a matter of digging the heels in hoping not to go base over apex, as there was nothing to latch on to, to stop a long slide. The wind was still howling and mist surrounded our vision.



As we neared the end of the scoria slope the weather began to lift and briefly opened to expose sunlight patches in the surrounding environment. Yells of look; Left, Back, or Right to expose glimpses of barren rocky slopes and sulphur coloured earth, then the cloud would close in around us again.

Also in this same area we took refuge in the lee of some large boulders for the group to regather and to boil the billy for a cup of soup, (best soup Di had ever tasted and even bought a packet home) tea or coffee to warm the inner body.

During this interlude the weather cleared on several occasions and revealed we were close to the Emerald Lakes. So we were able to take in the scenery offered on each occasion. Especially awesome was the view back up the narrow zigzag ridge of the scoria slope and the walkers appearing as small moving coloured dots against the dark background of the track.

Pressing on, the track led across another crater type surface towards a 'wall' that appeared intermittently through the cloud. At the top of this climb a faint outline appeared far below the ridge and to the right. This was the Blue Lake, but the weather remained closed and prevented any further scenes of its magnitude. (This was Central Crater).

The weather was still foul and the descent continued by gradually weaving its way around the contours of the mountain towards the Ketetahi Hut and close to the hot springs. Along the descent it was possible to see the walkers above and below us, yet they were several minutes away. After passing the hut, we were well below the ridgeline and the wind abated with only the odd shower to dampen the track. The vegetation also gradually passed from alpine terrain back to low stunted scrub that merged into dense native forest where we arrived at the exit car park at approx 3.15pm. About 7.5 hours for 17km, a great achievement considering the conditions we endured.

The track from the hut is well maintained but there are numerous step-downs that over the long distance are hard on the knees and legs. There is evidence of major upgrades being performed to create improved walkways that will reduce the environmental damage to the surrounding countryside and reduce personal injuries.

Annette and Madonna were waiting at the car park for our return and drove us back to National Park Village and our overnight accommodation. Everybody is tired and somewhat cold from the day's excursion but we enjoyed this experience. Karen developed a sore knee from just past the hut, but made it all the way to the car park.

The next day most people were suffering some degree of leg soreness. My glutes were initially sore and tight but after stretching I suffered no further soreness. Dale, Jon and I stayed at "The Park", a backpacker type establishment for the next two nights. Dale was seen to warm the inner man with a hearty swig of Baileys. Our evening

meal was at “The Station”, a very nice restaurant at the railway station. A commendable meal and dining location.

To experience an awesome event not encountered on a regular basis and despite the bad weather, I found this walk extremely inspiring. There was hardly any anticipation of what was ahead of us along the track until it appeared some 4 or 5 metres in front or to the side. What was beyond this visionary limit, only a fine day would reveal. How many guide posts could we see to lead the way? 1, 2, 3? In fine conditions, how long would it take to complete the walk? No doubt there would be mind-blowing scenery and photographic opportunities. But would the steepness of the “wall” to ascend and the narrow ridges to negotiate add another mental dimension that couldn’t be sensed in cloudy conditions?

3 Mar 2007. Saturday. Awake to a fine, cool day and no wind. Mt Ngauruhoe was totally visible early in the morning before a cloud descended and covered its top. My body was feeling great after yesterday's walk and ready for the day's ride. Met the group for breakfast at the Tongariro Crossing Lodge.

The 42 Traverse was cancelled due to the wet conditions on this track and there was a chance that some of the “legs” may not have been up to another hard day of riding. Karen was also recovering and much improved from a sore knee and blisters for her effort on the walk.

As the day was fine and the scheduled ride cancelled it was decided to go back to “The Top of the Bruce” and see what was missed the other day. It was also a chance to have a close distance look at the “wall” of yesterday's walk.

Mt Ruapehu was still covered in low cloud so the chair lift option to the top was voted a “No Go”, besides it was \$20.00 a ticket to see the inside of a cloud. We had done enough of that the previous day.

The bitumen road to the top had dried so Di, Ken and I rode the bikes down the steep road, complete with its hairpin turns, from “The Top of the Bruce” to the information centre at Whakapapa Village. Coffee and a short break, then another short ride downhill from the Village to the “Mounds”. (Low volcanic features formed from the debris of avalanches during Mt Ruapehu's periods of volcanic activity thousands of years ago). Loaded the bikes and returned to the National Park Village. Karen and Dale's bikes were then unloaded.



Dale remained here to assist Karen in the cleaning and packing of her bike as she was departing on Sunday by train for Auckland. She had extended her time away to visit family and friends.

The two sections of downhill bitumen road was a blast on the knobbly tyres and my 11.6km ride was all over in 16minutes.

We collected our "cut lunches" from the accommodation and then drove back towards Turangi for another short ride over part of the Tongariro River track from Red Hut Pool via the spiral staircase to Turangi Township.

Noel accompanied us on the ride again; with Annette assisting Jon to relocate the van and trailer to Turangi. We had lunch in a park on the edge of town then drove back to National Park Village for the last time.

The evening meal was back up the mountain to Whakapapa Village and the Pihanga Café & T-Bar restaurant located in the pleasant surroundings of the Bayview Chateau. The evening was cool and clear and the full moon was observed rising from behind Mt Ngauruhoe and casting a brilliant glow on it's conical slopes with the Bayview Chateau in the foreground. (Reminiscent of the full moon rising and the glow over Mt Gower and Mount Lidgbird on Lord Howe Island).

6.7km, 8m 46s, Av 45.9kph, Max 56.3kph. Top of The Bruce to Whakapapa Village.

4.9km, 7m 02s, Av 42.9kph, Max 52.8kph. Whakapapa Village to the Mounds.

5.8km, 28m 52s, Av 12.1kph, Max 35.9kph. Red Hut to Turangi.

4 Mar 2007. Sunday. Today was a travel day from National Park Village to Wellington. The morning was cool and cloudy but developed into a fine, warm day for the full trip. We farewelled Karen at National Park Village as she was catching the "Overlander" at approx 1pm and we headed back down the highway to Wellington, our last overnight stop of the tour.

A short stop at Hunterville for fuel and a coffee. Yuk coffee. Back on the road we saw Karen's train just past Hunterville, then on to Noel's house at Paraparaumu to collect the bike bags and the tandem box. (Also the walking poles that were stored in the box. A good idea at the time). Then on to Wellington, staying at the Halswell Lodge, opposite the Cambridge, our accommodation location in Wellington of last year.

The travel scenery today was quite spectacular, especially from National Park Village to Ohakune and being able to look to our left and see sun drenched Mt Ruapehu with the snow still clinging in the numerous crater crevices as we travelled along viewing from different angles. From Ohakune to Hunterville the scenery is ruggedly beautiful with the backdrop of the Ruahine Forest Park and the escarpments of the Rangitikei River in the foreground with sheep grazing country. From Hunterville to Bulls the terrain is still spectacular but flattens out into dairy and sheep grazing with some minor agricultural crops of carrots, corn and potato being evident.

From Bulls the scenery changes again to flat, open grazing land and follows the Tararua Range all of the way to the Kapiti Coast.

Arrived at our accommodation in Central Wellington, unpack the vehicle and then headed out for the last ride. Initially, from our accommodation to Island Bay, but that would have involved riding on the road with the Sunday traffic. So, back in the van and a drive out to

Island Bay for a “long wait” for lunch at the Bach Café before riding to Red Rock, where we hoped to be able to view a seal colony. None were seen here today. Red Rock is probably the furthest, south easterly part of North Island and overlooks Cook Strait.

This ride was along the coastline on unsealed hard gravel and compacted river rock surfaces of vehicular wheel tracks that were quite loose and difficult to ride if one deviated from the wheel tracks. Another range of track surfaces to experience and quite easy to ride provided momentum was maintained.



We returned to Wellington and commenced to strip and clean the bikes and pack them into the bike bags for the return trip home. Considering the dirt and terrain we had ridden over, they were in a reasonable condition and didn't require too much heavy scrubbing.

Our final evening meal was at Strawberry Fare, down the end of the street from Halswell Lodge. The menu was more suited for its wide array of sweets than mains.

Jon and I ventured down town for a quiet ale after the evening meal and encountered Pete Creagh outside the Cambridge, then on our way back met Pete, Mark Prickett and Nic Both. They were digging into pizza and beer. Nic (from Australia) was the 2nd place getter in the Karapoti Classic that had been completed the previous day, with Pete and Mark having management involvement in the Classic.

A very pleasant evening.

8.4km, 47m 36s, Av 10.6kph, Max 24.3kph.

5 Mar 2007. Monday. The last day of the tour. A fine, cloudy, windy and mild morning to start the last day. Breakfast was over the road at the Cambridge before loading the van and trailer with our baggage and bikes.

Di, Ken and I had a leisurely stroll around the CBD and finished with a brief visit to the Te Papa Museum before meeting Jon and Dale, who had taken Simon and Madonna for a vehicular sightseeing tour of Wellington. A lunch stop at Seatoun and the renowned “Chocolate Fish”, before driving to the Wellington International Airport for our departure that completed a memorable tour.

Farewells to Jon and Dale who had two days break before the arrival of another group who were to ride a similar tour to the one we had completed. Checked in without any problems

and departed Wellington 25 minutes late, but arrived back in Brisbane fairly well on time after a comfortable trip. The mandatory cleanliness checks of the bike through quarantine and back to the real world.

Thanks to my fellow MTB travellers for their companionship over the past 10 days, both on and off the track. Also to Jon and Dale for the execution of their well organised tour, experience and tolerance to make this a most memorable tour.

Is it on again next year?

