

NEW ZEALAND

To say New Zealand has some good roads is like saying tabasco has a bit of a tang to it. This place is Cadwell Park, Laguna Seca and most of Scotland rolled into one. It's also basking in summer right now. Happily, this irresistible blend of well-maintained highways, scant traffic and plentiful contours is well served for those planning the ultimate motorcycle holiday.

The rental outfit we used, VFR New Zealand, has several advantages. First off, its Christchurch home is in the South Island which, as the local biker adage has it, is home to 80 per cent of the roads and 20 per cent of the traffic compared with the North Island. The company also offers up Honda's finest sports tourer and uses the local Honda dealer as its base, so you know the bikes have been decently maintained.

The South Island is a tad bigger than England, but is home to just one million people against our 51 million. A bit of space to play then. I escaped the flatland around Christchurch and spent two weeks travelling 2404 miles in a figure of eight; heading over the Southern Alps to the western rainforested strip wedged between the sea and mountains, cutting through a valley gorge to the lush wine-growing north, then enduring a day of Canterbury Plain in the east (including Telegraph Road and its 12-mile straight) before dodging back into the Alps. Then it was through the adrenaline capital of Queenstown, down to the fjords of the South and back up via the west coast and across.

The roads are top quality. The grippy surface is mostly well-maintained, there's an excellent sign system that ranks bends for tightness and the verges are cleared to

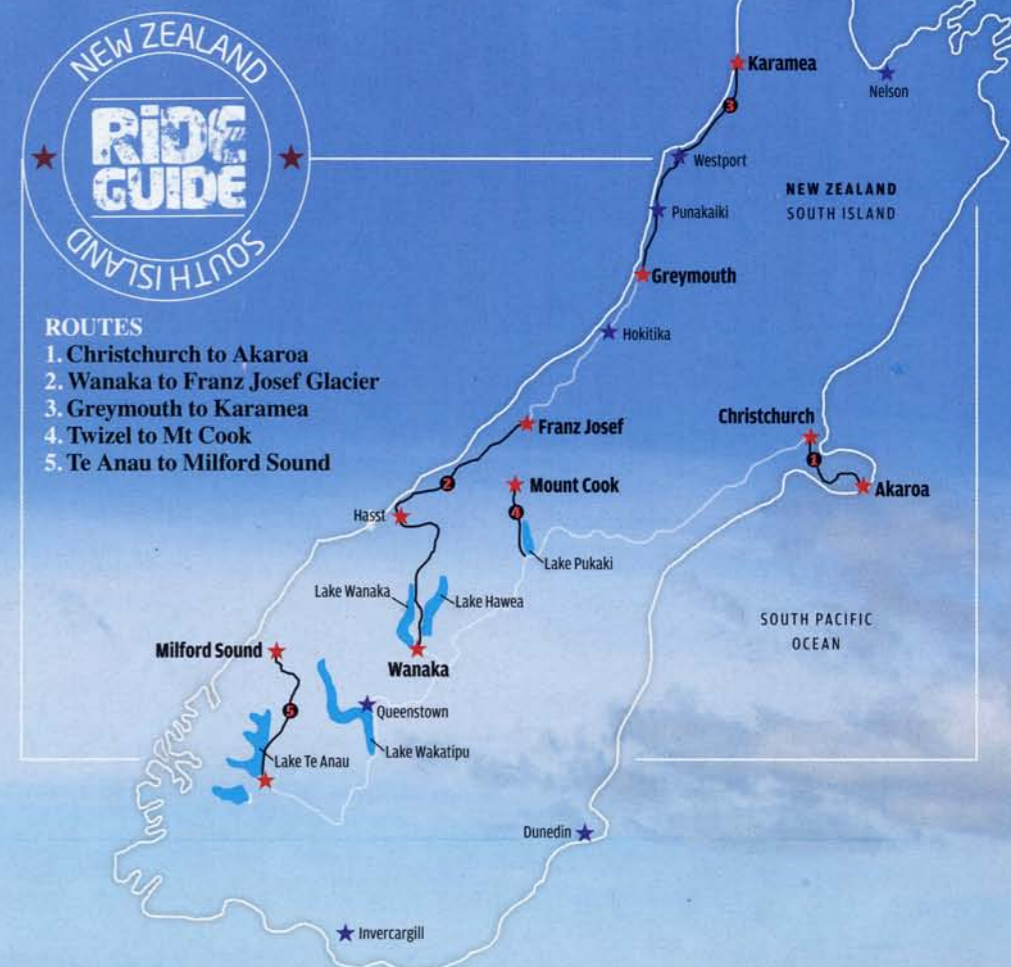
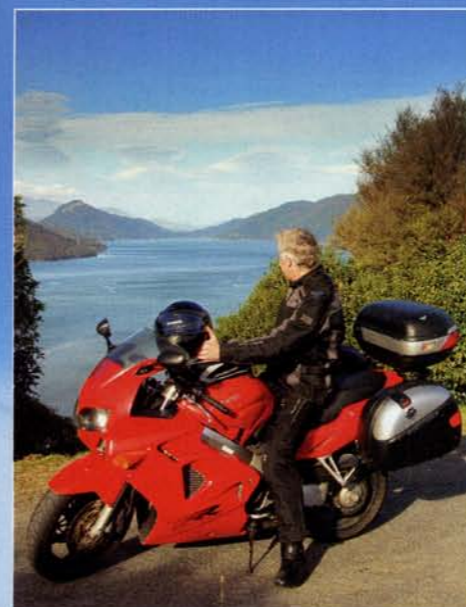
improve sightlines. A higher force takes care of the topography.

There are only two clouds on this awe-inspiring horizon. One is actual clouds – this place gets wet, especially the west coast. But it rarely sets in like it does in the UK. I was lucky and had only three part-rainy days – another VFR customer I met had just two hours of rain in 10 days.

The other is the police. There aren't many but they can radar-fix while driving towards you, fining above 62mph (100km/h) and confiscating the bike past 87mph (140km/h). Only pathetic pleading got my 91mph clocking reduced to a \$400 fine.

If you can look outside right now and honestly report that you're staring at the perfect combination of weather and roads, then we're sorry for disturbing you. Otherwise read, weep and then save like you've never saved before. ☑

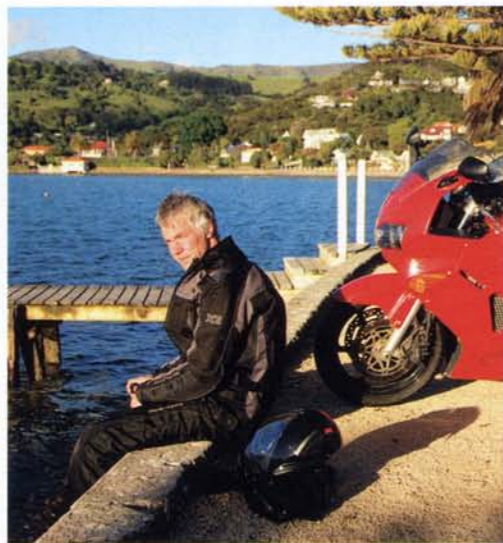
Need a break from work? Try the road between Christchurch and Akaroa



NEW ZEALAND

A once-in-a-lifetime trip with awesome roads in spectacular scenery

Words Nick Gibbs Pictures Paul Gibson



1: Christchurch to Akaroa, 51 miles

This explosive ride into an old volcano makes a brilliant day trip from Christchurch. So flat and featureless is the farmland around the Southern capital that Captain Cook thought this mountainous peninsula was an island.

The anticipation starts building through suburbia as the ex-volcano looms larger. The first thrill is delivered by the long, exposed straights and bends running along the marshland past Motukarara, before the 75 spears left along the loch-like Lake Forsyth. A run through Cooptown's tree avenue is the last relaxation for a while. Exactly how long is indicated by a yellow

diamond twisties-ahead sign: 13km of them. Unlike the forest climb to Karamea, this road over the rim of the volcano offers more visibility into the sharp bends, giving increased confidence to nail those apexes.

The view down into the breached and sea-filled volcano is dreadfully distracting on the limit – it helped I was having to conserve fuel. The place to refill is the

‘The road over the rim of the volcano offers more visibility into the sharp bends’

★ View from the roads above
★ Akaroa. Leaving Cooptown towards 13km of twisties.
★ Sitting on the harbour wall in the town of Akaroa.
★ Looking over Akaroa towards Christchurch

garage at Duchavelle at the head of Akaroa harbour. Ask nicely and proprietor Max Blacktopp (his real name – I kid you not) will show you the ratty but impossibly cool 1964 Triumph Trophy Special he still enters into speedway events.

After a night spent in Akaroa (try Alice's La Belle Villa B&B for that mum-away-from-home experience), head back via the Summit road to experience the thrill of mountain-top corners that seemingly disappear into the sky.

This is how crazy New Zealand's weather is: it was eight degrees on the Summit road, 12 in Akaroa and yet the sun was so strong it was melting the Tarmac. How do you dress for that in the morning?

2: Wanaka to Franz Josef Glacier, 178 miles

This half-day snapshot of New Zealand's finest geography is also the only way out of the Queenstown/Wanaka adventure playground if you're heading to the west coast. Bigger the bungee jump, this adrenaline hit is far more prolonged.

The scenery comes thick and fast with the aquamarine Lake Hawea to the right of the bucking Route six, riding high through dry scrub above the shore. Mountains to the right, then duck through a gully, another lake and mountains on the left. The road here is etched into the sharply dropping hillside and the shortness of the straights means I have to snatch the

throttle to dispatch the camper vans.

No problem further up through the high-velocity Cameron Flat, the six running alongside the sparkling Makaroa River before climbing through beech rainforest and over into the Haast Valley. I'm gingerly crossing the awesome Gates of Haast, a one-lane bridge spanning the furious, boulder-filled river beneath, before trying

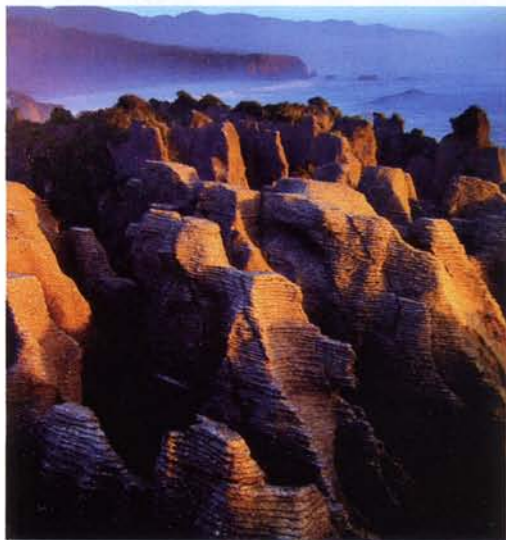
‘Scenery comes thick and fast, riding high through dry scrub above Lake Hawea’

★ Scenic road between Lake Wanaka and Lake Hawea. The amazing boulder-filled river.
★ Franz Josef Glacier.
★ Nick enjoying the view over Lake Hawea

and failing to wring the neck of the road beyond. The scenery is all too much.

Better later on when the valley floor flattens toward the coast. Throttle-pinning straights now let you steal glances at the forested walls either side. Stop to wipe the sand flies off and order blue cod and chips at Haast's Fantail Café before enduring the Roaring Forties wind blast of the coastal straight that follows, then stop again for dolphins, penguins and seals around the shore to Moeraki. Then it's hammer down through civilised pastures and over vast rubble-strewn river beds to Fox Glacier.

I was knackered at this point, so after 10 miles of tiptoeing, the rickety collection of tourist hostels and bars of Franz Josef Glacier looked wonderful. ■



3: Greymouth to Karamea, 123 miles

Just 32,000 people are scattered along the 400-odd miles of coastline on the west side. Human contact is so prized out here, even car drivers wave at you.

From Greymouth, home of the annual bike races, Route Six is a benign travelator for the first 30 miles or so, letting you take in the surf-pounded beach to the left and rainforested mountains to the right.

After a break to watch the geyser-like high-tide blowholes at Punakaiki, the fun really starts. Through the forest and scrub of the Paparoa National Park to Westport, the six never rests, climbing over bluffs, before corkscrewing down and over river

bridges and rising back up again. Corners are a mix of high-speed sweepers tackled with the merest whisper of counter-steer or unsighted Laguna Seca twisters ending in the dreaded OLB (One Land Bridge). On a dry day, this traffic-less highway is just about the finest biking road in the world.

Prepare for the second half with whitebait sandwiches or gammon steaks **‘On dry days this traffic-less highway is possibly the finest bike road in the world’**

★ Taramakau River bridge near Hokitika. ★ Punakaiki blowholes (locals call pancake rocks). ★ Superb but tiring roads. ★ Watch out for the penguins

at bustling Gibby’s café in Westport, then make like the local Harley riders and relax. The only bends on the first chunk of the 60-mile dead end to Karamea are chicanes over an ungated rail track. This is where NZ hippies go to seed, their old camper buses succumbing to rampant foliage outside wind-blashed bungalows.

A few miles past the coal mine turning at Stockton (take it to see those vast mining trucks in action), the Karamea Highway wakes up and embarks on a tight climb through forested hills, pausing only to take a breath in totally unexpected Swiss-style pastures. Concentration here brings great rewards. We recommend taking it in the form of a Monteiths beer at the Last Resort motel in laid-back Karamea.

4: Twizel to Mt Cook, 64 miles return

Apparently an American client of VFR New Zealand rides this 64-mile there-and-back thrill-run to Mount Cook twice, the first time to check for police. A tad cautious. The ‘town’ at the end is little more than a visitor centre for New Zealand’s highest mountain and (happily) a petrol station. The mountain bit is misleading. Route 80 is no switchback rollercoaster. Instead it follows the valley in a series of long, throttle-pinning straights linked by wide-arc corners that just beg to be taken at similar speeds. If you arrived from the east, it’s reward for all the licence-preserving self-control exhibited on the

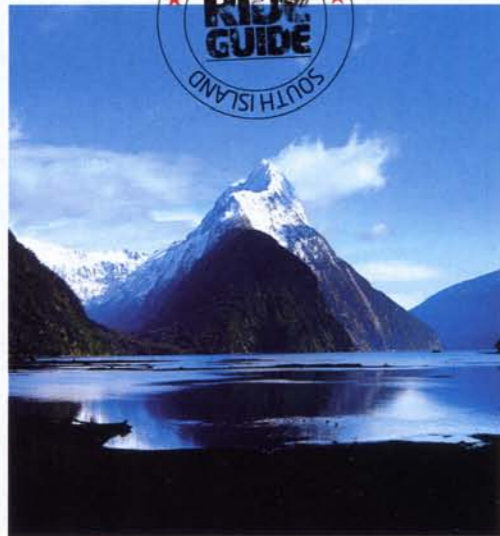
Canterbury Plain’s endless, bendless roads. Once you’re out of the pines lining the impossibly blue Lake Pukaki, the 80 then glides round the feet of the mountain range, before dropping onto the wide, glacially scoured valley floor. No sane biker would miss this opportunity to stop and take one of the best road-gloat photographs on the planet, looking down a 1km straight, to

‘It feels as good as it looks, the abrasive and fast-drying Tarmac offering fabulous grip’

★ Lake Pukaki, it really is that blue! ★ Beautiful road to Mount Cook. ★ Mount Sefton which can be seen once you go in the valley. ★ A seemingly never-ending road to Mount Cook



a long, loping left-hander, followed by another straight, then a lengthy right-hander, and so on right to the base of the snow-topped Mount Cook. It feels as good as it looks, the abrasive and fast-drying Tarmac (Tarseal in Kiwi) offering fabulous grip. Just don’t hang around the visitor centre too long before heading back – the camper vans you overtook on the way there will start trickling in and the evil stares can be quite withering. 📷



5: Te Anau to Milford Sound, 150 miles return

A magical but frankly scary ride through the south-west's Fiordland National Park. If you are lucky enough to visit on one of the 165 days a year it doesn't rain, the 75-mile dead-end-to-die-for to Milford Sound winds through the undulating tea-tree scrub above the blue of Lake Te Anau. Expertly laid cambers and those wide, vision-friendly verges raise the speed; speed that's enhanced a little later by beech-forest tunnels and then goaded higher by unfettered 1km straights across valley flats.

As the road climbs past the Mirror Lakes, the valley and the well-watered

rainforest close in to tighten the bends, while sudden one-lane bridges and frustrated coach drivers lie in wait to catch out those gawping at the snowmelt-slick cliffs high above. It's about survival now as the pea-gravel the Kiwis use to de-ice mountain roads collects in drifts on the tight, rising bends. And then comes the traffic light. Waiting for green at the 'While waiting for the traffic lights, you're set upon by Alpine parrots called Kea'

Riding out of Te Anau away from Lake Te Anau. Deserted road between Te Anau and Milford. Mitre Peak at Milford Sound. A Kea AKA the munching devil

1200m, one-lane Homer tunnel you're set upon by canny Alpine parrots called Kea. Let them on your bike and they'll have pecked through the seat cover before you've lifted the camera. Doh! The utterly black tunnel slopes alarmingly and spits you out onto a steep and gravely left-hander, before you wind down a moss-draped, wooded valley and into Milford Sound, a socking great glacial fjord that's home to cruise boats. The highlight of the area is the imposing Mitre Peak – rising to 1692 metres. This iconic mountain is the most photographed peak in the country because of its distinctive shape. Once you've finished here you have to double back and do it all again. You did brim the VFR in Te Anau, didn't you?

The kit recommended for heat and rain



Need to know: Kit & Bike

THE KIT

Getting the kit right in New Zealand is harder than just about anywhere. It might rain all day, or that million-watt sunshine might emerge to pound you. After two weeks of this, we knew exactly what we thought of our equipment:

1 The jacket: Frank Thomas XTi Xtreme Sport Jacket £150
www.frank-thomas.co.uk

Very good. Remove the two inner layers, open up the flaps and the lightweight outer shell was unobtrusive in the sun, either riding or just walking about. Fully waterproof and it was warm and dry without getting sweaty.

2 The boots: Dainese Fulcrum £150
www.dainese.com

Simply excellent. Comfortable from the get-go, never got wet inside and always warm.

3 The trousers: Frank Thomas XT £90
www.frank-thomas.co.uk

Good spec with armoured knees, vents and removeable inner layer, but sweaty in reality, even with the vents open. Annoying lower zips always getting trapped.

4 The helmet: Schuberth C3 £430
www.oxprod.com

Lightweight flip-front newcomer ideal for taking SLR pictures without de-helmeting. Not that much lighter than my Shoei Multitec, but quieter and it extends further down the neck for more warmth. Loved the flip-down Judge Dredd sun visor.

5 The gloves: Frank Thomas XTi £60
www.frank-thomas.co.uk

Excellent wind protection with lots of finger feel, but the waterproof membrane couldn't cope with prolonged rain. Fleece inserts not supposed to come out, but they did in the damp and wouldn't go back in.

6 The summer gloves: Triumph Raptor Vented £25
www.triumph.co.uk

A couple of years old now, but getting better as the mesh gets less scratchy with age.

7 The tankbag: Bagster Minea £74
www.bagsster.com

VFR NZ bikes come with Bagster tank covers, hence the choice. Map pocket is in the perfect position, the little pocket was handy for bug-clearing wet wipes, and it expanded to 21 litres for useful carry-on luggage. Shame it isn't waterproof without its cumbersome cover.

THE BIKE

The bike: A choice of pre-2002 Honda VFR800s, newer VTEC VFRs or Pan Europeans.

The price: £700 per week for the newer VTEC VFRs, or £500 for the older, higher-mileage 800s. Price drops to £350pw for the third week.

The small print: No mileage limit, Givi side panniers and top box included in the price, £1500 insurance excess.

The flight: Singapore and Emirates fly to Christchurch. Budget for around £1000 per person.

The weather: January to March is summer, meaning warmth and more camper vans. Quieter in spring (October-December), but changeable temperatures can bring snow.

Contact: www.vfrnewzealand.com or call Robin Hughes in the UK on 07779 656253

BIKE STATS

Miles covered: 2404 **Fuel used:** 55.4 gallons

Fuel cost: £178 **Average economy:** 42.8mpg

Worst: 35.9mpg (west coast, wet, engine too cold)

Best: 48.4mpg (Picton, eking out a tank after 6pm)

Best tank range: 179 miles

Food/accommodation: £414 for 10 days

I've done it
Chris Lidgate, 49,
software engineer



"It's been stunning. The road conditions have been excellent; smoother and better maintained than in the UK. I've been lucky with the weather – two hours' rain in 10 days! But I hadn't appreciated just how tiring a twisty road can be.

"I have a new VFR at home, so I went with the pre-VTEC bike. It's true you don't get the stutter, but the steering's a bit slower and the handling's not quite as sharp. As for the organisation it's been great. New Zealand is definitely not oversold."

Stay here
The Nook, Pohara,
near Takaka



It doesn't get more biker friendly than this lush-gardened bungalow hostel in the north. The owner Des understands the exhilaration you'll be feeling coming off the 365-bend Takaka Hill road.

The doubles and twins are clean and comfortable, or there's a self-contained cottage, or even better, an achingly cool house-truck at the back.

It's self-catering, so dine at the superb Sans Souci closer to the beach.

130mph past the police station

Kiwis are nuts about bikes. But they don't just own them, they race speedway, join Harley clubs, organise dirt-bike ride-outs - anything to get them in the saddle. I got to see this craving first-hand at the Greymouth street races.

Greymouth is a relaxed west-coast town with a hint of the western and a chilled outlook. Until they shut off the main streets with some old tyres and wobbly mesh and turn it into a racetrack every spring. I couldn't believe it. Every 20 minutes or

so, a grid of around 35 bikes would come rushing up to a right-angle junction on Main Street, squeeze through and then hare off past the police station at 130mph or more. And I only saw one bloke fall off.

Categories include supermotos, classics, superbikes and, my favourite, Formula Greymouth. After clocking a 1977 Moto Guzzi, a Ducati Monster and a Suzuki SV650 on the grid, I asked an official what the entry restrictions were: "It must burn petrol and not leak oil." Brilliant



We like the sound of Formula Greymouth