

CLASSIC TOUR NEW ZEALAND

PART 1 John Pearson uses an ex-military Series III Stage 1 to visit New Zealand's breathtaking scenery, fabulous coastal areas, best off-road routes – and Tolkien's Middle Earth

PHOTOS: PAT SUMMERS



First night with new tent, by the coast



Heading inland on the Maungaroa track



Several single-track bridges along the way

We're climbing a track through dense, temperate rainforest, with impenetrable walls of greenery on both sides. The fronds of giant tree ferns cascade majestically over our Land Rover and the sounds of the forest echo all around us – tuneful songs of exotic birds and the all-pervading electric-current crackle of innumerable cicadas.

My partner Pat and I are on an off-road route heading inland from the coast on the east of New Zealand's North Island. I never imagined that NZ would have such a richness of greenery as this, but as I've already discovered it's a stunningly beautiful, hugely varied place.

I'm driving a rare – possibly unique – Stage 1 Series III Land Rover on a journey around the country's North and South Islands. It's a lovely 1983 ex-NZ military 109 kindly loaned by Kiwi Land Rover enthusiast Dennis Brown.

Under its bonnet is not the Rover V8 petrol engine that you'd expect, but a 3.5-litre

Creeking-out in NZ

New Zealand names all of its rivers and creeks. Here are some of our favourites: Stinky Creek, Cowhide Creek, Kiwi Jack's Creek, Gunboat Creek, Fiery Creek, Sheepskin Creek, Dead Horse Creek and So Big Creek. My number one was Kerosene Creek near Dennis's home at Rotorua – it's the first time I've ever been swimming in water the temperature of a warm bath.

turbocharged TD35 four-cylinder Nissan diesel truck engine. However, when Dennis bought it back in 1999 it had a 4.3-litre V6 diesel Oldsmobile motor and was adapted for possible peacekeeping operations with NATO forces in Bosnia during the mid-1990s.

In 2002 Dennis replaced the Oldsmobile with a more dependable normally aspirated four-cylinder Nissan FD35 engine to use on an adventure in Australia, and subsequently swapped that for the current turbo unit, for its greater performance and hill climbing ability.

For more about the vehicle, see the separate page at the end of this story.

Days one and two

Rotorua to Tatapouri (near Gisborne)

Highlight: Camping by the coast

The Nissan motor is growling rhythmically as I set out from Dennis and partner Jen Cole's Rotorua base, heading south-east towards Lake Waikareiti in the Te Urewera National Park. I am quickly becoming accustomed to the Stage 1's characteristics, including its lack of power steering.

We leave surfaced roads behind and drive a series of gravel tracks that have become muddy and slippery due to heavy rain. Fortunately the rain stops by the time we pull over to stay for the night at a campsite near the lake, but as a precaution we erect the tough canvas awning that Dennis has had made for the rear of the vehicle.

This is a proper outdoor adventure truck and Dennis has kitted out the rear as a

sleeping and storage area. There are a number of plywood lockers, which also provide a flat platform for him and Jen to sleep on, cushioned by self-inflating mattresses.

Unfortunately I'm just a bit too big to get comfortable in this arrangement and, to ensure that I get some good nights' sleep on what is a lengthy adventure, I decide I need to buy a tent and a couple of airbeds. Sleeping soundly is crucial when covering big miles.

Next morning we continue towards the coast, initially through forests and then open, rolling green hillsides. The track is lined by luxuriant tree ferns, ToiToi (a native pampas grass) and New Zealand flax with its green-sword-shaped leaves.

Dennis has provided a proposed route for our trip, and once we reach Wairoa we follow this in an anticlockwise direction along the coast road. There's not a cloud in the sky as we stop for lunch by a beach on the Mahia peninsula. It's a beautiful, deserted spot, with deep blue sea and silver sands.

At Gisborne we go shopping for a tent plus a couple of airbeds and an electric pump. Gisborne is New Zealand's most easterly city. It's where British explorer Captain James Cook first landed in October 1769 in his ship Endeavour while mapping the coastline. He named it Poverty Bay after deciding it had nothing to offer, which with the benefit of hindsight seems a bit unfair.

Our plan is to reach picturesque Tokomaru Bay further north from Gisborne, but time is against us and we stop at a pleasant campsite by the beach at Tatapouri. This part of New Zealand is close to the International Date Line

and, as the campsite manager Chris Berge proudly claimed: 'You get the first sunrise anywhere in the world here.'

Days three and four

Tatapouri to Opotiki

Highlight: The Maungaroa Access Road

Heading along State Highway 35 (SH35), we stop at Tolaga Bay to stroll along its 660m historic wharf. The Land Rover is regularly attracting attention from people who owned or drove them in the past and here I meet a man who, like Dennis, drove from the UK to NZ by Land Rover some 45 years ago. It's wonderful to listen to his tales of adventuring through countries that are sadly inaccessible to travellers these days.

It's March, which means it's now autumn in NZ and the roads and beaches around this part of the coast are almost deserted, despite temperatures in the mid-20s. We stop for lunch at Tokomaru Bay and have the whole beach to ourselves.

One of the attractions of New Zealand is that although it's slightly larger than Great Britain,

'I'm enjoying driving the ex-military Stage 1. It's an old soldier – tough and very capable'

the population is just 4.6 million compared to the 65 million crammed into our country. Around 75% of the population lives in the North Island, but apart from the major cities such as the capital, Wellington, and Auckland it's just not heavily populated. No wonder most people seem happy and unstressed. Drivers are more pleasant to one another, while people working in shops and restaurants are genuinely friendly and pleased to help. It's also a clean and tidy place, unlike our own litter-strewn homeland.

From Tokomaru Bay we continue north, before taking a track to the East Cape – the easternmost point on NZ's main islands. It's bleak here, with rocky shores; and the few trees that have bothered to grow are at acute angles thanks to strong coastal winds.

A track cut into the cliffs takes you around the Cape, with views over East Island, before heading inland to where it ends at a footpath to the East Cape lighthouse.

We camp at the inexpensive Te Araroa Motor Park before continuing the journey – now heading west around the coast.

I'm enjoying driving the ex-military Stage 1. It's an old soldier – tough and very capable. I think my muscles are building up nicely from the daily workouts with the heavy steering, lifting the bonnet with the spare wheel on it and raising and lowering the tailgate that has two jerry cans attached.

We're looping around towards what Captain Cook named The Bay of Plenty, because the area was rich with plantations, and we're heading to the first route from the 4WD North Island book by Andy Cockcroft that Dennis has lent me. Although this is primarily a road

trip around the two main islands on tarmac and gravel roads, I'm also seeking out some of New Zealand's best 4x4 routes.

Just before reaching Te Kaha we turn on to route number 45 in the book, the Maungaroa Access Road – the track I mentioned at the start of this story, which twists and turns through dense vegetation for 7.5 miles before reaching the Kereu river.

The book suggests returning to the coast along the river bed. There's only a trickle of water running down it, but after making a short recce I decide it's a bit too rough and is probably best tackled with at least two vehicles. Although the Stage 1 has a hydraulic winch, the river bed looks devoid of suitable anchor points and I'm not keen on getting stranded miles from any help.

We camp at the holiday park in the small town of Opotiki. My Lonely Planet guide is a bit sniffy about eating out in Opotiki, saying it's 'not exactly the gourmet capital of the Bay [of Plenty]'. However, the former Masonic Hotel on the main street has been converted into an Indian restaurant and Irish bar and I enjoy a really tasty seafood curry with a cool pint of Guinness.

Days five to seven

Opotiki to Raglan

Highlight: Hobbiton

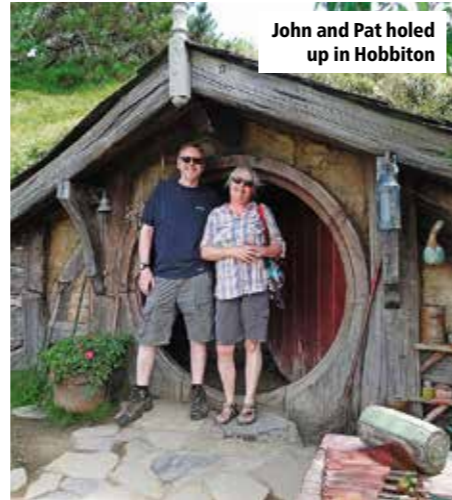
A lady called Gill who's camping opposite us at Opotiki says she used to drive Stage 1s when serving as a corporal in the NZ army. She sits in the driver's seat and regales us with tales of her off-road training and various drives. **✪**



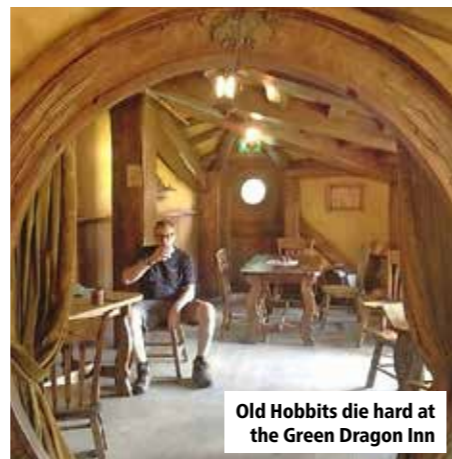
Autumn (ie, March...) in NZ means deserted beaches



Beachcombing in a Series is allowed in some places



John and Pat holed up in Hobbiton



Old Hobbits die hard at the Green Dragon Inn

it looked like England's Thames Estuary. Then we continue south towards Matamata, where we're going to take a detour into Middle Earth, the mythical world of JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. We're visiting the Hobbiton movie set.

We join a coachload of Chinese tourists and are whisked into the set, on an undulating 1250-acre sheep and beef station outside the town. In 1998 Kiwi Director Peter Jackson decided this was the best of the locations his researchers had found and work started on building 39 Hobbit holes out of timber and polystyrene, along with the mill, bridge and Green Dragon Inn ready for filming the *Lord of the Rings* the following year.

It was rebuilt out of more permanent materials for the *Hobbit* trilogy in 2009, and has been maintained ever since as a thriving tourist attraction. Avid book reader Pat has been a Tolkien fan for many years and thoroughly enjoyed the visit.

Days eight to 10

Raglan to Mokau

Highlight: Kawhia harbour

We're still only a week into our marathon drive, but already I'm conscious that we're not covering as much distance each day as I'd anticipated we would.

So a decision has to be made about what to cut out of the adventure. The drive north past Auckland up to the tip of Cape Reinga is something I'm keen to do, not least because of the off-road route on the famous Ninety

Mile Beach on the west of the peninsula. But it's a seriously long way up there, and to do it would jeopardise some of our planned itinerary on the South Island. Something has to give, so we cut out the northern loop and head across to Raglan on the west coast. Raglan is a popular surfing resort, but there's heavy overnight rain, which continues through the morning. At least our new tent proves to be waterproof.

We take the opportunity to get some washing done in the local launderette before visiting the nearby 55m (180ft) Bridal Veil falls.

Our planned route is along a 28-mile gravel road to Kawhia on the coast, but the rain is torrential now and the forecast tells us it will continue all night. It's miserable to set up a tent and camp in heavy rain, so we divert to Hamilton and book into a motel.

Hamilton has a highly rated botanical garden, so we plan to visit there the next day – but the weather is still horrible, so we go to the town's Waikato museum on the banks of the river instead. Here there are some excellent exhibits, including Te Winika, a massive, exquisitely carved 200 year-old Māori waka taua (war canoe). There's also a temporary exhibition about soldiers from the Waikato region who, 100 years ago, were fighting with the Allies in World War I. I visited the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey last year, a place where many of those brave New Zealand and Australian soldiers fought, died and are buried. It's fascinating – and very poignant – to see the background history and photographs of those young men who went there, so very far from home.

The weather finally improves as we head for the quiet coastal town of Kawhia. Its harbour is sheltered from the Tasman sea by sand dunes and it's hard to believe that the tranquil waters here are just around the corner from the raging surf of Raglan.

Kawhia has its own hot water beach, the Te Puia springs. There's also a local museum, which contains a number of interesting exhibits, including one of the 11-metre-long historic racing whale-boats that locals compete in here every January 1.

Kawhia is a significant place in the history of NZ's indigenous Māori population. Tainui, one of the large ocean-going canoes that brought their Polynesian ancestors to New Zealand around 750 years ago, landed at Kawhia and was buried in sand by the harbour.

Our next stop after Kawhia is at Waikawau, where we turn west off the gravel coast road on to a narrow track that takes us to a 100-metre (328ft) tunnel through cliffs to the beach. Here, back in 1911, three workmen cut the tunnel with pickaxes and shovels so that local stockmen could drive their cattle along the beach to grazing land rather than taking them over the precarious clifftops. It's narrow but tall, to enable the stockmen to get through while mounted on horses. Interestingly, the beach has black sand, due to its iron ore content. This is mined and made into steel at a plant west of Auckland.

Next we drive through the scenic Manganui gorge. Initially there's dense vegetation, then rolling Hobbit country, then an area that could be in Austria or Switzerland, with alpine-like mountains and pine trees.

NEW ZEALAND: NEED TO KNOW

- **Language:** English.
- **Currency:** NZ dollar (NZ\$1 = 48p).
- **Cost of fuel:** As in the UK, tax is paid at the pump for petrol (approximately NZ\$1.85/litre (88p), but owners of diesel-engined vehicles have to buy a Road User Charge licence to display on the windscreen. The rate for Dennis's Stage 1 is NZ\$62 (£29.70) per 1000km, plus an admin fee. We paid between NZ\$0.87 and NZ\$1.12 per litre for diesel (42p to 54p).
- **Time difference to UK?** 12 hours ahead.
- **Drive on the left.**
- **Which maps?** Hema North Island, Hema South Island (1:1,000,000), £10.99, stanfords.co.uk.
- **Camping:** Sleeping under canvas is really popular in NZ, with hundreds of campsites around both islands. These range from Freedom camping in some areas (mostly with your own toilet), Department of Conservation sites (some with, some without toilets and showers – not usually managed, so you pay in an honesty box), to Serviced campsites and holiday parks, which

have full facilities. We bought a NZ\$49 (£23.47) Top 10 Holiday Parks membership card, which gives a discount on site fees plus a 10% saving on Inter Islander ferries, as well as various local savings, including restaurants – top10.co.nz, camping.org.nz. Dennis lent me a Hema North Island Motorhome and Camping Atlas, which lists all kinds of sites. It's not currently available, but Hema's NZ Touring Atlas lists campsites (£24.99 stanfords.co.uk).

- **Food:** Fish and seafood are a must, as is New Zealand lamb. New Zealanders love their fish and chips; the fish can be hoki, gurnard or even shark rather than the typical UK cod or haddock. Worth a try is the traditional Māori Hāngi – meat, fish and vegetables are cooked underground using naturally heated rocks.
- **Drink:** Popular lagers like Tui are widely available; I developed a liking for Monteith's malty Black Beer, and discovered some excellent locally brewed craft beers. We enjoyed NZ's white wine varieties such as sauvignon blanc and pinot gris, buying local where possible.
- **Rights of way:** New Zealand has nearly 35,000 miles of unsurfaced roads, so it's proper Land Rover country. Generally, a sign or locked gate indicates where you can't go. A number of beaches can be driven legally – usually indicated by a sign. For the best 4x4 routes I used 4WD North Island by Andy Cockcroft and 4WD South Island by Ken Sibly and Mark Wilson. Both are available on Amazon, but only secondhand copies of the latter. I found one in a bookshop in Hamilton for NZ\$16.50 (£7.90).

Our journey continues, now on SH2, to Waitotahi beach. Here there's another of the 4WD North Island book's routes – a beach drive, so we detour along the sand.

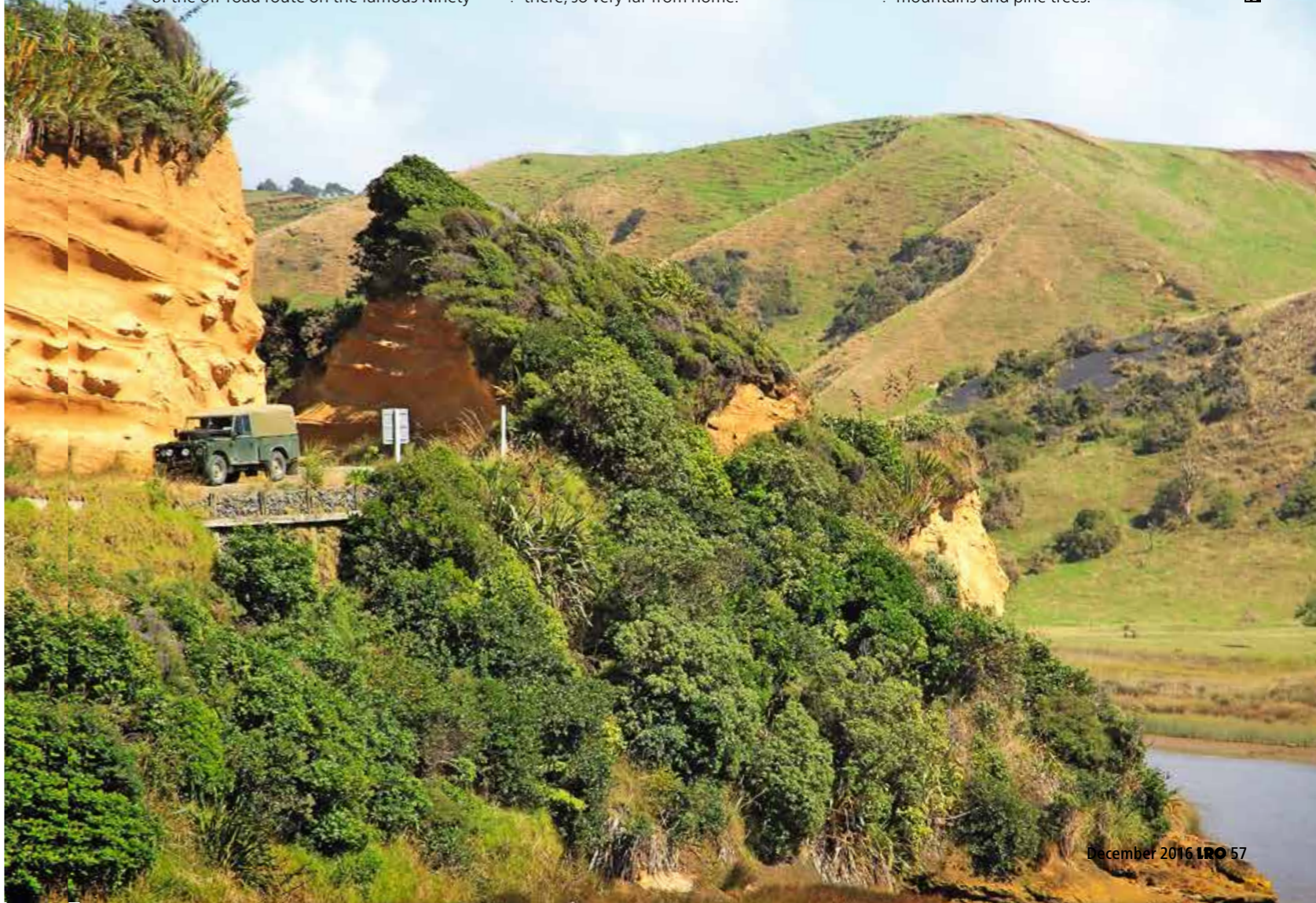
After this we're heading north on to the immensely beautiful Coromandel peninsula, with its endless beaches. Whangamata beach is reputed to be one of the best for surfing, and it's so popular the campsite is crammed with campervans. So we continue to Opoutere. Here there's a lovely campsite, with just a short walk through pine-covered dunes to a picturesque, almost deserted beach.

Next day we continue north from the campsite on gravel tracks, but there's a locked gate so we have to backtrack to the SH25 before detouring to the famous Hot Water Beach. The tide's in, so we can't enjoy what this beach is renowned for – digging a hole and making your own natural spa pool with the thermal waters that are bubbling away just below the sand. If you want to experience this, the tide times are listed on various websites or chalked on boards at the resort.

We head further north to Cooks Beach, where James Cook visited in 1769, stopping here to view the planet Mercury travelling across the face of the sun. This only happens 13 or 14 times a century – and most recently occurred in May this year.

From here we rejoin the SH25, going north towards Whitianga before taking a gravel road west across the peninsula. Like the Maungaroa Access Road, this track meanders through dense green rainforest before dropping down into the town of Coromandel.

We overnight by the Firth of Thames, the name that Cook gave it because he thought





Somewhere on the Forgotten World Highway. Can't remember where



Probably past saving, then...



Sandcastle hunting on Himatangi beach

We stop over at the Whitebait Inn campsite in Mokau. Unusually for NZ, the shower block is shabby and in need of a refurb.

Days 11 to 14

Mokau to Wellington

Highlight: Himatangi Beach drive

We've got a choice of three routes coming up. We could continue down the coast and then go to the east or west of Mount Egmont; both routes are equally picturesque, according to Dennis. But we're tempted by the very name of the Forgotten World Highway, an alternative route that takes a roller-coaster ride south-west across picturesque country from Taumarunui to Stratford. We join it near Tahora after driving across gravel roads from Kotare, and stopping to walk a kilometre across farmland to view the spectacular Damper Falls. The 74m (242ft) waterfall gushes out from a natural chute that has eroded into the cliff over time.

Almost immediately after joining the FWH we're into the 180m (590ft) single-track Moki tunnel, also known as the Hobbitt Hole. This is another one that was hand-cut into the hillside by men with pickaxes.

After passing through the self-proclaimed Republic of Whangamomona – a small town that declared independence after residents objected to it being moved from the Taranaki to the Manawatu-Wanganui region – we drive through a deep gorge with dense, impenetrable forest. No wonder it's called the Forgotten World Highway; there could be dinosaurs roaming around down there.

Soon the 2518m (8261ft) Mount Egmont looms into sight. Or at least the lower slopes do; the volcanic cone is hidden by clouds that are so black and foreboding it could be the Dark Lord's Middle Earth, according to Pat.

Stratford signals the end of the FWH. The town is named after Shakespeare's birthplace, and all the streets have Shakespeare character names. Built in 1919, Stratford's central King's Theatre is historic for being the first cinema in the southern hemisphere to show 'talkies' – movies with sound – in April 1927.

We make good time heading south on SH3, stopping to buy some more gas for the cooker at Wanganui Hunting and Fishing – which has a surprise inside. The owners have used the front and rear sections of an old Series III Land Rover as sales props in the store.

We turn west off the SH3 towards Himatangi Beach, where we book into its excellent

Holiday Park. This independent site owned by enthusiastic young couple Reuben and Alice Ebrey is clean, well equipped and a shining example of how a good campsite should be. What makes this location better still is the adjacent beach. As you approach, a large sign tells you the beach is officially a road – and it goes on for miles. It's magical to drive along; we weave between large piles of bleached white driftwood, then park to sit in the sun or swim in the turquoise sea.

YOU CAN DO IT TOO

Land Rovers aren't widely available for hire in New Zealand, but newzealand4wdhire.co.nz list Discovery 2 and D3 on their website.

If you don't have camping equipment, you can book into hotels or motels, but campsite cabins or chalets are cheaper: they are usually equipped with a cooker and are available with or without en-suite toilet and bathroom, priced accordingly. My suggestion, however, is to buy a cheap tent, airbed and basic cooking/eating kit for the duration. Many campsites have barbecues and kitchens with kettles and pans to use.

The Stage 1 proves to be surefooted on the sand, delivering lots of grip as it trundles along at low revs. It's Pat's birthday while we're at Himatangi and, as the sun dips to an amazing sunset, we celebrate with a cold beer and fish and chips from the beach-side takeaway.

Taking Dennis's advice, we advance-book an Inter Islander ferry from Wellington to Picton on the South Island for tomorrow, then stay overnight at a campsite in Paekakariki on the edge of the Queen Elizabeth Country Park.

Days 27 to 31

Wellington to Rotorua

Highlight: World's longest name.

I'll be writing about the second stage of our adventure on the South Island in the next issue, so to keep this North Island adventure self-contained I'll continue from when we drive off the ferry back from the South Island.

I had planned to head towards the east coast, but a tyre blow-out during our penultimate day on the South Island forces a route change. Unable to find a replacement BF Goodrich AT in any of the Blenheim (South Island) tyre dealers, I phone Beurepairs in Paraparaumu on the North Island and they order one for me. We stay overnight at the Paekakariki campsite again, from where we have a short drive to get the new tyre fitted.

It's pouring with rain as we then cut across country to the east via Levin and Palmerston North. Then we get on to the SH2 as far as Dannevirke, where we divert

into the hills – and visit the place with the world's longest name. Located between Wimbledon and Porangahau, the 85-character *Taumata-whakatangi-hangakoauauotamatea-turipukakapikimaunga-horonukupokaiwhenua-shiroroa* tells the story of a Māori chief who lost his brother in battle and was so grief-stricken he stayed at the site for several days playing a lament on a flute.

We camp at Hastings, and I decide to get the Stage 1's engine oil and filter changed before handing it back to Dennis, and there's a branch of oilchangers.co.nz in nearby Napier. No need to book; I just turn up and they do the work. I also get them to check the other levels and grease all of the nipples.

We look around Napier, with its art deco buildings, then drive a few miles north to visit some of Pat's relatives whom she's never met. Her aunt came out in 1948, and her aunt's children live near here. We're staying a couple of nights with her cousin Lesley and husband Chris, who are total petrolheads. Lesley competes in drag racing and Chris runs a team that competes for speed records at the Bonneville Salt Flats speedfest in the US.

We head back to Rotorua, where we started out a month ago. It's been a great adventure and both of us have fallen in love with New Zealand – the people, the magnificent scenery, the beaches and the wonderful places to drive in a 4x4.



NEXT ISSUE
John tells the story of his adventure around the spectacular South Island, including breaking down in the middle of nowhere, driving the world's seventh most dangerous road and finding the best pizza in the world.



What more scenic way to test a Series III's stamina?