







he sun's rays are creeping over the mountains, highlighting the amazing vista. In the distance are the jagged peaks of the Southern Alps, to my right is a sheer drop and ahead is a winding track that was hewn out of the rock during the 19th century gold rush.

This is Skippers Canyon, a precarious route that took prospectors 14 miles down to the gold-rich Shotover River. It's unfenced and narrow, with sheer drops and acute hairpins. No surprise it's rated as the world's seventh most dangerous road. Get stuck here and no recovery service will want to rescue you. Drop off the edge and they might never find you.

I'm on the second leg of a tour around New Zealand, this time visiting the South Island. My partner Pat and I are in an ex-military Stage 1 Series III 109-inch loaned by Dennis Brown. It has a 3.5-litre Nissan diesel truck engine; at one time the NZ army fitted it with a 4.3 diesel V6 Oldsmobile motor.

# Days one and two

Picton to Hanmer Springs **Highlight:** Molesworth Station Road

The Stage 1's deep exhaust note echoes around the bowels of the Inter Islander ferry as I drive down the exit ramp and on to the

South Island at Picton. We've sailed in through the beautiful Queen Charlotte Sound and are now heading on the short drive south to a campsite at Blenheim. This is a mainly road trip, but I'm visiting a number of off-tarmac drives that are featured in a 4WD South Island Off Road Adventures book I bought earlier.

After breaking camp next morning we set off for the longest of the book's routes – Molesworth Station Road. This gravel road runs for 126 miles along the Awatere and Acheron river valleys, from south of Blenheim to Hanmer Springs, climbing to over 1400m (4593ft) at Wards Pass.

Its name comes from the Molesworth cattle station it runs through – the largest in NZ at nearly 700 sq miles, which makes it bigger than Hertfordshire. The track is only open from NZ's Labour Day at the end of October through to Easter Monday in April, and it can be subject to closures if there's a risk of fire (check: doc.govt.nz and key in 'Acheron Road').

Initially we're in wine-producing country, including Oyster Bay's Marlborough winery. Then we start climbing and the mountains alongside the Awatare river are getting more dramatic by the mile.

The track gets narrower and the gates to open and close become more frequent as we pass through the Molesworth station. Then we're climbing to 1145m (3757ft) to the top of Wards Pass, which actually makes it on to

a Dangerous Roads website, although I have to say it doesn't look especially scary. Perhaps it might be a different story when covered in snow during the winter.

Descending from the pass, we're into the Isolated Flat, where the Acheron river flows through a vast expanse of wild country bordered by the Awatere Fault. This is seriously remote country and the Stage 1 looks and feels totally at home.

Nine miles out of Hanmer a track forks left, with a 4WD-only sign at the entrance. This is Jolie's Pass Junction, where the original road to Hanmer forks from the current route. It's seriously rough; and although I'm tempted to detour, commonsense tells me it's getting late and I should be heading for a campsite.

A couple of miles further on is another junction, where we're turning left to Hanmer over Jacks Pass, but a notable 4WD route turns right here and takes you 67miles north to SH63 at Saint Arnaud. This is the Rainbow road, which was originally built when electricity pylons were being installed in the 1950s. It runs through private land and a NZ\$25 toll is payable at the gate. It's open between between Boxing Day and Easter Monday, although access outside these dates can still be arranged if you want (see: lonestarfarms.co.nz/rainbow-access).

Dennis has recommended that we should drive the route and I'm tempted to tackle it

tomorrow, but after double-checking my map and working out distances I decide we just don't have enough time.

# **Days three and four**

Hanmer Springs to Frans Josef **Highlight:** Great Coast Road

We camp at the busy town of Hanmer Springs then drive north-west on SH7, crossing the Hanmer river on a single-track girder bridge spanning a spectacular gorge. The road continues through the wide Waiau river valley and climbs to 907m (2975ft) at the Lewis Pass.

We stop for lunch and a stroll around the former mining town of Reefton. The many traditional old buildings make you feel like you're stepping back in time – and back in 1888 this out-of-the-way place led the rest of the Southern Hemisphere. Reefton was the first town to have its own hydro-electric powe station and to install electric street lighting, earning it the name the 'Town of Light.'

We detour to visit the Cape Foulwind fur seal colony before overnighting at the Carter Beach Top 10 Holiday Park campsite. My Top 10 Holiday Park membership card gets us 10 per cent discount on an excellent seafood platter and a couple of glasses of wine at the nearby Donaldo's restaurant.

Next day we get on the Great Coast Road, driving south-west through the Paparoa National Park. This huge area of rainforest

'Blowholes in the rocks spurt out columns of seawater when a big wave comes in at high tide'

cascades down from the Paparoa mountains to the Tasman sea. This is undoubtedly one of the world's great coastal drives.

At Punakaiki we walk out to Dolomite Point to view the impressive natural phenomenon of the Pancake Rocks and Blowholes. Here 30 million-year-old layers of former seabed have been eroded by acid rain, wind and sea into mighty pancake-like stacks. Blowholes in the rocks spurt out columns of seawater when a big wave comes crashing in at high tide.

We pass through the former mining town of Ross and the Southern Alps are looming ahead. Mighty, menacing, with their heads in threatening dark clouds. We're entering glacier country, but none can be seen today.

This is going to be a stormy night, so we book into a cabin at the Franz Josef Holiday Park. Good move – a downpour during the night rattles the chalet's roof, and would have severely tested our tent's capabilities.

#### Day five

Frans Josef to Wanaka **Highlight:** Best pizza in the world

The Franz Josef glacier is briefly visible while we breakfast on the cabin's verandah before it gets hidden behind clouds again.

West Coast Wildlife Centre, where we pay a substantial entrance fee to peer in the dark at the outlines of some rare Rowi or Okarito Kiwis. There are fewer than 400 of these nocturnal flightless birds left in the wild, due to predation by stoats, dogs, and possums – plus rats eating their eggs. There are greater numbers of other Kiwi species, but the overa population is diminishing. Not good when it your national bird.

We continue along the coast, stopping for a picnic lunch at the wide Bruce Bay and take a short walk through temperate rainforest to see Roaring Billy Falls on the Haast road. After the town of Haast, with the 3033m (9951ft) Mount Aspiring looming ahead, the road veers east before turning south again to cross the Southern Alps through the heavily forested Haast Pass. Then we see the magical blue waters of Lake Wanaka. The clouds that have shrouded the peaks of the Southern Alps for so long have cleared and their tops gleam in the afternoon sunshine.

This is another beautiful area. Lake Wanaka and Lake Hawea lie in parallel glacial valleys, separated at the narrowest point by a rocky ridge called the Neck. It's a cracking drive down from here towards Wanaka, where we camp. It's a lovely sunny evening and, deciding to eat out, we go into the town – and discover the world's best takeaway pizza van. Pat and I share a venison pepperoni pizza and a goat cheese, sun-dried tomato and rocket pizza from Francesca's wood-fired pizza emporium on Brownston St, and both are truly delicious.

# Days six to eight

Wanaka to Te Anau

Highlight: Skippers Canyon

It's a relatively short drive from Wanaka to Queenstown. The scenery just keeps getting better as the SH52 climbs to 1076m (3530ft) over the Crown Range.

Then we're into bustling Queenstown and more traffic than we've seen for a long time. This busy tourist spot on the banks of the picturesque Lake Wakatipu is a bit too crowded for us and we find a campsite out of town, towards the Skippers Canyon track we plan to drive tomorrow.

We've booked onto a jet boat ride on the Shotover River, the one I mentioned at the beginning, which was NZ's most gold-rich rive during the height of the 19th century gold rush. What we don't realise is that the minibut that collects us for the jet boating actually takes us along Skippers Canyon to get to the



#### **ADVENTURE** NEW ZEALAND

boat. I'm having visions of that scene from The Italian Job where the bus hangs over the edge, as this one squeezes down the narrow track, with scary steep drops to the side.

We set out early the next day to drive the track in the Stage 1 and it's no less exhilarating coming along for a second time. At the start of the track are warning signs about the potential dangers, and telling rental car drivers that they're not insured. Dennis tells me you are literally on your own down here, and local recovery services will refuse to rescue you.

I trundle the Stage 1 along gently in low-range, and it feels surefooted in the wild, dangerous terrain. There's no other traffic apart from a newish Disco 4. Without doubt the Skippers Canyon track ticks every box in terms of what you'd want from a 4WD route: scenery, challenge and grin factor.

Our destination today is Te Anau on the banks of Brod Bay lake, another stunningly beautiful place.

To the west of Te Anau is the immense Fiordland National Park, a great swathe of green on the South Island map, comprising ice-carved fjords, lakes, valleys and mountains.

### Days nine and ten

Te Anau to Twizel

**Highlight:** Not getting stranded in the middle of nowhere

Today we're planning to drive another longdistance 4WD route, the Nevis Valley Road, which follows the Nevis river across wild country through a gorge between the Hector and Garvie mountains. It's a 36-mile drive and

boat. I'm having visions of that scene from The Italian Job where the bus hangs over the edge, scenery and 27 river crossings.

We turn right off SH6 about a mile after the Garston hotel, joining a gravel track that takes us through a gate that's locked during the winter, then climbing steeply over the southern end of the Hector mountains towards a historic ski hut. We stop to view the hut then continue to climb to 1119m (3671ft), before descending into the valley. It's a lovely day and I'm savouring the spectacular views.

Then things go wrong.

We stop at one of the many gates on the track, which Pat gets out to open. She looks towards the Stage 1, then starts waving her arms and shouts me to switch off the engine. Diesel is gushing out underneath.

I lift the bonnet to find that the rubber fuel feed pipe to the injector pump has been rubbing against a bolt head and has worn through. First I try to repair the pipe with tape, but that lasts about two minutes before its leaks again.

Then I try a more comprehensive repair with tape and a piece of plastic tube. But it also leaks.

\*\*MOUNT COOK\*\*

SOUTHERN ALPS-O

I'm looking at other options – and thinking that we might be spending the night out here in the middle of nowhere – when the

 when the cavalry arrives, in the form of three BMW bikers. We look We turn back and head for Queenstown to look for a 4x4 specialist where we can buy a piece of replacement pipe. The TomTom app on Pat's phone comes up trumps by locating Central 4x4 in Queenstown. Run by ex-pat Brit Charlie Ridgway and son Karl, this Land Rover and Toyota specialist supplies the pipe and a couple of hose clips. Problem solved.

in the back of the Land Rover and discover

Adrian, Brett and Ian – you are heroes.

that a metal pipe in Dennis's Coleman stove is

the right size to cut and splice into the broken

pipe. It does the trick and we're mobile again.









We stop overnight at the campsite north of Queenstown where we stayed before. If we hadn't broken down we would have been in Cromwell, from where we would have headed west to Naseby and then north-east across the Danseys Pass 4WD route between the Kakanui mountains and St Mary's range.

But we don't have enough time to get across to and drive Danseys Pass – which at 39 miles could take four to five hours. It's a shame because my 4WD book makes it sound like a lovely route through mountain scenery.

Instead, we head towards Cromwell, visiting the Goldfields Mining Centre for an informative guided tour and trying our hand at panning for gold (unsuccessfully), then turn north-east to Twizel. It's just a short drive away from the access road to Mount Cook, where we'll be visiting tomorrow.

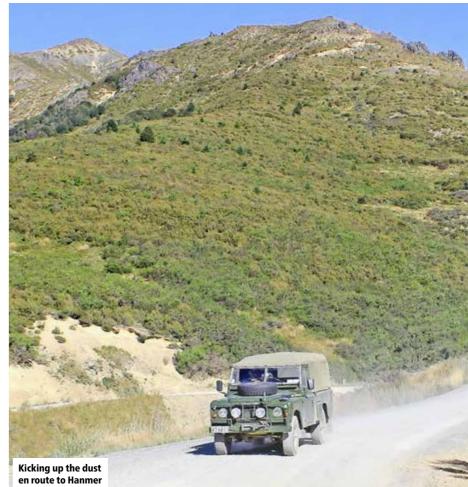
# **Days 11 and 12**

Twizel to Cheviot

**Highlight:** The Mount Cook drive

As soon as we turn on to the SH80 the snow-capped peaks of the Southern Alps loom in the distance, with Mt Sefton (3157m/10,357ft) and Mt Cook (3753/12,312ft) towering above them. To our right is the glistening water of beautiful Lake Pukaki. As we get closer, the majesty of the mountains becomes ever more apparent and the mighty light blue Mueller glacier comes into view.

I find a couple of tracks to drive, and there's a really good visitor centre, which provides a fascinating history of climbing Mt Cook – and a lot more besides. There are stories



### **NEW ZEALAND: NEED TO KNOW**

• Language: English.

• Currency: NZ dollar (NZ\$1 = 48p).

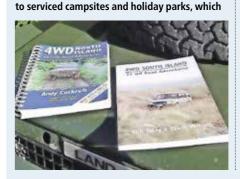
• Cost of fuel: As in the UK, tax is paid at the pump for petrol, which costs about NZ\$1.85 per litre (88p), but owners of diesel-engined vehicles have to buy a Road User Charge licence to display on the windscreen. The rate for Dennis's Stage 1 is NZ\$62 (£29.70) per 1000km, plus an admin fee. We paid 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, same as UK.

• 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),



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 loaned 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 under £8

#### **ADVENTURE** NEW ZEALAND







of the pioneering climbers – including New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to conquer Everest.

From the SH80 we turn left on SH8, passing Lake Tekapo and Burkes Pass (709m/2326ft) before the landscape levels out as we approach the coast. Our campsite is at the small town of Geraldine – I like this place, which still looks a lot like it did in the museum's historic photos of 100 years ago.

We're not ready for big city traffic just yet, so we take the SH72, aka the Inland Scenic Route, through the Canterbury region. It's a much more picturesque way of going north than on the main SH1 around bustling Christchurch.

We stop for lunch on the bleached pebbles of the Rakaia river bed, where it passes through a spectacular gorge, then camp at the Cheviot Motel and Holiday Park, just west of the SH1 South Pacific coast road.

It's a small, privately owned site where, after barbecuing the succulent Porterhouse steaks we bought from the Geraldine butcher's, we sit enjoying a cold beer while listening to the site owner's wife playing the piano. There are far worse ways of passing an evening.

In the morning there are fresh clean towels for us to use after showering, which is the first time I've ever experienced that at a campsite. What a luxury after several weeks of using the same quick-dry adventure towel.

# **Day 13**

Cheviot to Picton

**Highlight:** Dolphins in Goose Bay

Continuing north on SH1 we have the Seaward and Inland Kaikoura mountain

ranges we saw the other side of when on the Molesworth track.

As we approach Kaikoura, passing the rocky Goose Bay, there's the treat of a massive pod of Dusky dolphins performing acrobatics. Some boats arrive in the bay and we discover that tourists can get in the water and swim with the dolphins.

We're just past the Molesworth track junction en route to the campsite at Blenheim ready to catch the North Island ferry tomorrow at Picton, when the steering starts to feel lumpy and then pulls noticeably to the left. The nearside front tyre has lost some of its tread and punctured.

As I explained in the previous instalment of my NZ story in the last issue, I can't find a replacement BF Goodrich All-Terrain on the South Island, but manage to locate one for when I get back to the North.

But the tyre failure hasn't spoiled what is a truly memorable adventure – one of our best ever. The only disappointment is that we didn't allow enough time and had to miss out some parts of the country. But then it does give us an excuse to return.

New Zealand is a beautiful place to visit. The North and South Islands both have mountains, temperate rainforests, beautiful coastlines, sandy beaches, rocky coves and deep blue seas. But they are different – and that extends to the weather. The eastern side of South Island is often warmer than North Island, due to the location of the Southern Alps. Prevailing weather comes from the west and by the time it reaches the east, it's stripped of its moisture and heated as it heads across the Canterbury Plains. On North Island, the mountain ranges are on the eastern side, meaning the majority

of its landmass is more moist and cooler. The eastern areas are certainly drier and warmer,

South Island is less densely populated but has more tourism, with Queenstown and Te Anau being very busy. But you're soon away from the crowds, and places like the stunningly beautiful Coromandel Peninsula on North Island are almost deserted.

Also, as I found from the ever-useful North and South Island 4WD books, there are plenty of rough-country routes for us to get even further away from it all – and the Skippers Canyon track was very special.

So too was our transport. Okay, so the Stage 1 did have the puncture (which could happen to any vehicle, of course) and the fuel pipe hiccup, but it's done exceptionally well for a 33-year-old Series Land Rover, taking us nearly 4000 miles. We're truly grateful to Dennis for his generosity in loaning us the vehicle – it's been a great trip. **LRO** 

#### YOU CAN DO IT TOO

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

If you don't have camping equipment, you can book into hotels or motels, but campsite cabins or chalets are cheaper: they're 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.