



CLASSIC TOUR NEW ZEALAND

PART 2 John Pearson uses an unusual diesel converted Stage I to visit South Island's epic scenery and its best 4WD routes – including the world's seventh most dangerous road

PHOTOS: PAT SUMMERS



Molesworth Station Road wends its scenic way for 126 miles



'40s suspension footbridge was restored in 2013



Pancake Rocks have been storm-tossed for 30 million years

The 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 Awatere 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 67 miles 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 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 Waiua 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 power 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 overnighing at the Carters 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 Donald'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.

Our first visit this morning is to Franz Josef's 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 overall population is diminishing. Not good when it's 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 river during the height of the 19th century gold rush. What we don't realise is that the minibus that collects us for the jet boating actually takes us along Skippers Canyon to get to the



Great Coast Road is well-named – what a drive!



Mueller glacier is jaw-droppingly epic



A South Island must-do for any 4x4 traveller



Passing bikers help get stricken Stage 1 mobile again

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.