

A RIDE TO THE TOP OF NEW ZEALAND

ADVENTURE
NORTHERN EXPOSURE



WORDS: John Nicholson PICS: Michael Britton



The long whaleback ridge of sandstone jutted into the mouth of Northland's Hokianga Harbour, so white it strained my eyes, but not enough to fully distract from the massive view. I turned the full 360 degrees, three times. No camera lens could ever capture this feeling.

While I did so, I recalled a far north Queensland trail tour operator once telling me that, in some seasons, 30 per cent of trail riders slogging their way to the top of Australia's northernmost point, Cape York, were Kiwis.

Like him, I was stunned. Only Aussies outnumbered us Kiwis. The regular suspects – Brits, Americans, assorted Euros, and Japanese combined – often didn't match the Kiwi total.

It is said Kiwis are great travellers but I suspect that while many of us have seen Sydney, the Gold Coast or London, far fewer have ventured to the extent of our own islands. Now before me lay an arc of sand dunes, bright blue water, green hills, pines and distant bush clad ranges – and I could not think of anything I had seen overseas to top this.

The message was obvious: don't leave New Zealand until you have been on Mike Britton's Yamaha Northern Exposure Trail Ride.

And of course we had got to this place the best way there is – on two wheels and much of it off-road. No easy blast down the highway either: a little ribbon of winding tar seal to get out of town and some slidey gravel deep into the back country, but in the main, our knobbies had clawed dirt.

What trails we had ridden! Slippery clay bush tracks across the Maungataniwha Ranges through a private coastal kauri forest, down a long roller-coaster descent to an uninhabited bay, a blast down a deserted beach, some flowing pine forest trails, even a couple of gnarly chest-heaving climbs, one up shelving coastal rock, the other

TOP: A Maori carving guards the northern entrance of the Hokianga. The four hours of trail riding made getting there all the better for us.

MIDDLE: Countless rocky bottom streams confirm the Far North's volcanic origin, while the Britton sweep crew maintain faultless precision.

BOTTOM: Deserted beaches featured each day of the Yamaha Northern Exposure Trail Ride. John Nick cuddles up with his trusty Yamaha WR 250 F.





through power-sapping sand dunes.

And all this excitement only got us to lunchtime, on just one day of our four days. You can always rely on Mike Britton to over-deliver but what astounded me was the sheer variety of the trail riding Northland offered.

The Yamaha Northern Exposure Trip to the Top goes as far north as you practically can in this country, Cape Reinga: and let me boast here, it's a far more lofty and surf crashing affair than Cape York.

MIXED BUNCH

On each of the four days our group of 20 customers, a guide for the day and two to three sweep riders, headed into the wilds of the top-end for around 180 to 220 km of completely new adventures, each day as different and unique as the next.

As always there was a range of bikes – several each of KTM EXCs and Yamaha WRs, a brace of Suzuki DR-Zs plus a lone Kawasaki and Husaberg. Our bikes were required to be road legal, quiet and well prepared – 900 km in four days is more than many trail riders manage in a season.

WR250F

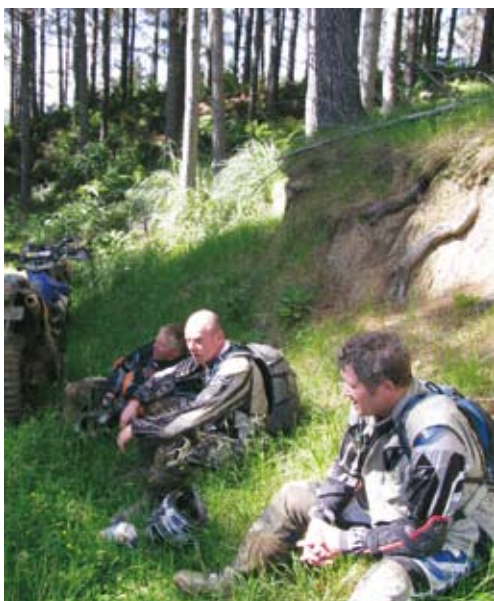
I was riding a Yamaha WR250 F, a

very handy combination of fine handling and just too much, but not dangerously so, power. This is a sane combination which feels even more right as the days go on and cumulative wear and tear inevitably dampens the effectiveness of all but the best big-bore riders.

We were a varied bunch too, ranging in skill level from second season beginners to over-seasoned veterans. All top blokes to spend a few days riding with, including (as well as the usual tradesman and farmer suspects), a top kiwi international sportsman (pinch some valuable insider anecdotes), a skilled motorcycle mechanic (diagnose and help with faults) and the ultimate security blanket, our own real live trail riding doctor (value obvious).

Of course in the usual modest way of blokes it takes a few days to work out what everyone does and the doctor spent two days executing spectacular get-offs before we sussed him. Impressively setting my mate's dislocated thumb deep in Aupouri Forest blew his cover and after that the nearest rider would rush towards him at the vaguest sign of instability.

TOP: No ride is worth doing without a few challenges. This rocky off-camber coastal track (top) looked worse than it was. **MIDDLE:** Taking some big breaths at the top of a climb on one of the pine forest sections. **BELOW:** Rolling down to yet another private piece of coastline.



TAIPA BASE

Base for the ride was Taipa Bay, as lovely a location as anywhere on earth. Here we were accommodated in a line of comfortable holiday homes overlooking the sea and served delicious cooked breakfasts and dinners on the big deck of our base house.

As the sun rose each day over the bay the group would gather on the big deck, tucking into bacon and eggs, or fresh fish if the catering crew had good luck fishing and waiting for Mike's daily pre-ride briefing, which would begin the next set of adventures.

Hours later as the sun dipped over the Maungataniwha, here we were again, scoffing a mighty dinner and over a few drinks recounting the sights, thrills and spills of the day.

Experience heaven for four days and you know you will be back. **KR**

ABOVE: Can trail riding get any better, sun, sand, surf and who can resist another wheelie? **BELOW:** Another high point and guide Mike Britton points out salient features.

