

**I**N THE CLOSE-KNIT WORLD that is the niche publishing empire of **TRAIL ZONE** Global Headquarters Incorporated, there occasionally comes a time when one has to pull rank. You see, when you're The Boss, you can do that. So despite originally giving ORE web master Lance 'Russ' Turnley the plum assignment of jetting across the Tasman Sea to the South Island of New Zealand to ride and report on the 2011 Lakes and Mountains Yamaha NZ Safari, when my schedule opened up and I could make the journey, it was all-over-red-rover for poor old Russ and his shiny new passport.

"Sorry, Russ, but I'm clear for the NZ Safari trip, so I'm going – I'll send you a postcard ... of a sheep!" I announced, much to Lance's chagrin.

Just like he did when he copped a fourth flat tyre in three hours on the road back to Hillston in a ride we did years ago, Russ took it all on the chin ... although the sound of a rusted old XTZ750 muffler being flung across the ORE Garage was a sign of his frustration. After all, it's not every day of the year you get an invite to one of the best trail/adventure rides on the calendar anywhere in the world pulled out from underneath you. Maybe next year, Russ?!

### TOP-SHELF TRAILS ON A PLATE

Having ridden two Yamaha NZ Safaris in 2008 and '09, I knew the 2011 Lakes and Mountains event would deliver more of the same spectacular mountain riding that the centre of the South Island of NZ is renowned for. If you're looking for an absolute smorgasboard of top-shelf trails with eye-watering views from atop remote high country stations, you won't find anywhere in the world with more of it



**MAIN:** Yamaha Motor NZ boss Peter Payne is the driving force behind Yamaha's sponsorship of the NZ Safari event. With trails like this atop Burkes Pass, it's no surprise the Yamaha honchos keep coming back for more! **1.** For a wandering Aussie journo such as myself, the whole route-sheet business can take a little getting used to ... **2.** Keith Larkin from W. White's Wholesale is another sponsor of the NZ Safari and as you can tell by the badges on his DR650's tank, he does get around! **3.** Pillion riders are welcome on the Yamaha NZ Safari and where these guys and girls go is simply amazing, with the majority successfully scaling Mount Nessing on the final day. Woo hoo!

packed into each square kilometre than the Mackenzie and Otago regions of NZ's South Island. While Otago is further south near Queenstown, this year's Safari kicked off from the tiny hamlet of Twizel, in the northern reaches of Mackenzie country, which is flanked at the very north by beautiful Lake Tekapo and renowned Mount Cook in the nearby snow-capped alps. A huge natural basin, Mackenzie country is surrounded by mountains, so no matter which way event boss Mike Britton from Britton Motorcycle Adventures and his trusty route-sheets were set to take us, you needed to be packing a spirit for high altitudes.

My arrival at the event's parc ferme on the evening before the Safari was set to fire into life was greeted by a hive of activity as riders prepared their route-sheets, prepped their bikes and then mosied on over to the bar – of course!

As the major sponsor of the NZ Safari, Yamaha Motor NZ boss Peter Payne was soon on hand and steered me in the direction of my mount for the three-day session of two-wheeled mountaineering: a shiny new Yamaha WR250R Supertrail. A fast

application of **TRAIL ZONE** stickers and a cut-and-shut of day one's route-sheet followed by rolling it into the bar-mounted holder and the black WR-R and I were good to go – too easy!

### **FOLLOW THAT ROUTE-SHEET!**

Come the morning of day one, and it was clear this year's field of 85 or so riders, pillions (yes, some mad folks ride it two-up!) and associated media and sponsor types were keen to get into it. Seeing the first starters getting away early from the window of my room, I hooked in and hit the road, too.

Leaving Twizel we charged south toward Omarama (which was the base for the 2008 Safari) with a detour to a local sightseeing point dubbed the Clay Cliff Walls: which featured clay cliff walls – go figure! We then turned north up and over Benmore Dam, then passed a locked gate to follow a hydro electric access track all the way around Lake Benmore, before reaching the first optional Trail split of the day. At the previous night's rider's briefing, Mike Britton had claimed the first



# **100% Pure NZ**

**We've said it before and we'll say it again: for a country so small, New Zealand is blessed with some of the very best trail and adventure riding terrain in the world. The annual Yamaha NZ Safari in the South Island is living proof!**

Story & Photography: Clubby

**MAIN:** Day two kicked off from Lake Tekapo with a climb high above Burkes Pass, where gale force winds blew gates off their hinges, knocked bikes off their stands and made riding in a straight line near impossible. 1. Taking time out to view the famed Clay Cliff Walls near Omarama. 2. Haldon is a tiny dot on the map at the northern reaches of Lake Benmore. The local school house hosts just six students and was a fabulous lunch stop for the troops on day one. 3. The Yamaha NZ Safari welcomes bikes and riders of all shapes and sizes, from Africa Twins to TT-Rs to TT600 Belgardas.



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**BEST OF BRITTON!** The Yamaha NZ Safari is organised by Mike Britton and Angela Bruce from Britton Motorcycle Adventures and is just one event on their packed annual calendar that includes trail and adventure rides throughout New Zealand, as well as tours to Asia and Mongolia! For more information on some amazing rides in exotic parts of the world, check out the [www.adventurerides.co.nz](http://www.adventurerides.co.nz) web site.



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two kilometres from the split up to the first gate in the Trail section was the worst of it, so I confidently steered my mighty midget WR250R into the thick of it to see what the fuss was about. Before long the gate emerged and figuring that was that, I romped along the ensuing razorback trail across the mountain top – until section after section of filthy, ugly, jagged ‘scree’ rocks started kicking my butt and taking my name! The rotten gnarly rock piles wouldn’t have been out of place in a world trials championship event. With that I made a note-to-self: Don’t believe a word that comes out of Mike Britton’s mouth when it comes to trail conditions!

Eventually the Trail section started dropping back down into the valley, via a fabulously named section of track through Staircase Gully, and we hit Black Forest Station, back on the edge of Lake Benmore. There another optional Trail section was on the agenda (no scree here, thankfully!) and then it was on to the lunch stop at Haldon school house.

## NO DRIVE-THRU MACCAS OUT HERE

The lunch stops on the NZ Safari have become a part of folklore, being catered for by local community groups at tiny hamlets and towns the event passes through. Now, when it comes to tiny, the Haldon school house takes the cake, as the school has just six students from surrounding stations, and they and their families all turned out to put on a slap-up feed for us hungry riders. Thanks kids!

With bellies full it was time to maintain our trek north toward our first overnight destination at Lake Tekapo and all was going swimmingly until we reached route instruction #65, which indicated we should look for a grass-track veering to the left at precisely 2.3km from the last reset. Only problem was, 2.3km co-incided with

a rock farm with barely a blade of grass in it, and certainly no grass-track veering to the left. Hmmm, what to do? Well, most of us rode around in circles for a while, contemplated our navels, agreed that there was no grass-track and kept pressing on – and voila! After a few anxious moments, the grass-track veering to the left mysteriously appeared a few kilometres later.

“That was the day’s deliberate mistake – designed to keep you all on your toes!” Mike Britton joked at the evening’s briefing, after we had all eventually arrived at the plush Pepper’s Bluewater Resort at Lake Tekapo, with 260km passing beneath our wheels on day one. Yeah, Mike, sure ...

## As we made the day’s first climb into the mountains, the wind became a raging gale

### BLOW ME AWAY

In the early hours of the morning of day two, the wind really started blowing and it was clear Mother Nature wasn’t about to repeat the picture-perfect weather conditions of day one – in fact, she had a fair old gale in the works. Heading east out of Lake Tekapo the strong winds were obvious, but as soon as we made the day’s first climb to the top of the mountains above Burkes Pass, it was a raging force-niner! With no protection atop the razorback trail, bikes and riders were getting blown in every direction and it was all you could do to stay on the trail and not disappear over the edge. At one gate, the damn thing was nearly blown off its hinges as I opened it, smacking into my bike, knocking it over and bending the

**MAIN: What goes up, must come down! Here Yamaha Motor Australia/NZ Director Steven Cotterell works his way down from high atop another mountain range. Nice views, huh?! 1. At each overnight stop the evening ritual of beers and route-sheets begins. 2. With up to 400km per day on the agenda through remote country areas, mid-section top-ups for the smaller-tanked bikes were a must. 3. TRAIL ZONE's trusty steed for the NZ Safari was this shiny new Yamaha WR250R Supertrail fitted with Michelin AC10 tyres, Acerbis brushguards, a route-sheet holder and one turn up on the rear shock preload. The mighty munchkin did the ride with ease!**



**▶ WHAT'S IT COST?** The 2011 Lakes & Mountains Yamaha NZ Safari cost NZ\$1,195 to enter, with the fee including four nights quality accommodation, three buffet dinners and lunches, four breakfasts, luggage transport, land access fees, sweep riders, back-up and route-sheet information. Hire bikes can be arranged for Aussie riders, so if you're keen for a trans-Tasman tour, check out [www.adventurerides.co.nz](http://www.adventurerides.co.nz)

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front brake lever like a pretzel. Thankfully the lever didn't bust and I still had a front stopper for the ride down off the mountain – could have been fun otherwise ...

Dropping down and through Burkes Pass gave us some respite from the wind, and from there we snuck north along the eastern edge of the mountains that border the lush green coastal plains of the Canterbury district. A run along a remote station track through Orari Gorge was an absolute pearler, before stopping for fuel and lunch at quaint Mount Somers. After another mighty feed of fresh lamb (what else?!), pork, salads and cakes at the local community hall, we set off north-west into the mountains once more, punching into a horror head-wind up a deep and rugged valley through Lake Heron Nature Reserve, before hitting the upper reaches of the mighty Rakaia River.

The Rakaia River valley was an impressive sight, bordered by mountains reaching for the sky on either side and numerous channels cut through the stony river bed as the aqua blue water flowed east toward the coast. In full flow the river must be something to behold – which it had been just a few weeks earlier when unseasonal summer rains had flooded the valley.

After picking our way over numerous sections of ugly black scree rock where mountain run-off crossed the 4WD track we were following, we eventually reached a shingle (that's what the Kiwis call gravel) dirt road that followed the river for ages on the way to the second overnight stop at Methven, where the WR250R's odometer ticked over 600km come the two-thirds point of the event.

## IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, IT'S WHO

If there's one thing that really grabs your attention on rides like the Yamaha NZ

Safari, it's the sensational access to remote stations and farms the organisers have secured. And secured is the word – because it's private property that is otherwise not open to the public.

Over dinner at Methven I quizzed Mike Britton's right-hand-man on this ride, Jevon McSkimming, about how hard it is to gain land access, and he readily admitted a key factor was having local contacts, requesting their permission to access their land, earning their trust and then doing the right thing by them.

As a case in point, Jevon is a local in the Mackenzie and Canterbury regions and went to boarding school with many of the blokes who have now grown up and

## The river was bordered by mountains on either side, all reaching for the sky

run the family stations in the region. That kind of relationship is priceless.

I then asked Jevon just how many stations we would pass through on a typical day of the NZ Safari. He said it could be dozens on some days, or precious few on others. It all depends on where precisely?

"Some stations can get pretty big," Jevon explained. "Like on the first day, the entire afternoon's ride from the school house at Haldon to nearly all the way up to Lake Tekapo was on one station. It's 230,000 acres. They have single paddocks in there that are 48,000 acres."

Imagine growing up there and the old man barks out: "Now son, get out there and plough the back paddock!?" You'd be out there for weeks!

**MAIN:** Eye-watering views await over every mountain crest or each new valley the ride turns into. The afternoon of day two wound out with a fast run down this shingle road beside the mighty Rakaia River to Methven. It might look rather dry now, but three weeks earlier it had been pumping hard following unseasonal summer rains in the mountains upstream. 1. These gnarly, sharp-edged rocks are called scree and are the size of bowling balls – but they don't have a smooth curved surface on them! Time to put your trials riding skills to good use. 2. The access the NZ Safari organisers gain never ceases to amaze us. This footbridge provided a vital link for entry into the stunning Orari Gorge track on days two and three. 3. Mount Nessing on the final afternoon saw all-hands-on-deck to get many bikes and riders to the top. Here Aussie enduro legend Geoff Ballard ponders words of advice from Yamaha NZ's Phil Winter (left) and Yamaha's Dunedin (NZ) dealer Rick Jamieson as he steels himself to get Rick's Super Tenere to the top ... and he did!



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## WET BEHIND THE EARS

Just to give us the full gamut of weather conditions, the third and final day dawned with grey skies and drizzle. So it was on with the wet weather gear as myself and fellow Aussie journo Tommy TBAM snuck out before the pack in an effort to get ahead for film and photo stops. But it wasn't to be: before long the first riders came charging through before we even reached the dirt as the route-sheets steered us on a return journey through Orari Gorge and back to Burkes Pass.

By mid-morning the weather had lifted and the day's first climb up the mountains south of Burkes Pass revealed awesome views of cloud-filled valleys in all directions. And we were higher than the clouds!

After dropping down into Albury for lunch courtesy of the local school ladies, we all took a deep breath for the afternoon's much talked about climb over Mount Nessing, which Mike Britton described as: "A shingle track up and over the mountain. It will be fine, so long as the first bikes don't cut it up too much ..."

Ha! After stopping near the bottom of the climb to help NZ Safari founder John Nicholson re-fit the carby on a female rider's WR250F that had been knocked off the back of the cylinder by a rock in a tumble, the climb up the mountain resembled a war zone. Bikes and riders were strewn everywhere on the switchback riddled ascent that was littered with jagged scree rocks the size of grapefruit. This was no shingle track, Mr Britton – you fibber!

After picking my way through the carnage on one section, I walked back down and helped ride a few bikes up for weary riders, much to their delight. I then carried on up two more switchbacks, where I found Aussie enduro legend Geoff Ballard and three pushers helping him get Dunedin Yamaha dealer Rick Jamieson's XT1200Z Super Tenere up one especially gnarly pinch. With plenty of heave-ho, Ballard managed to tractor the big blue beast through the worst of it, in

a scenario that was being mirrored back down the hill as the sweeps helped get everyone (including a few pillions!) to the top ... eventually!

## NOW THAT'S JUST SUPER

Dropping down the backside of Mount Nessing, Yamaha NZ service department boss Phil Winter caught up with me at a gate and offered me the keys to the new Super Tenere he was riding. Woo hoo! We swapped saddles at the river crossing at the bottom of the hill and I was off, the big 1200 chewing up the next long section of shingle road at a great rate of knots, although the next trail section through a station soon saw the grin on my face replaced by a look of determined

## Bikes and riders were strewn all over the switchback-riddled rocky climb

concentration. Here, on rocky single-track and virgin grass green-lane, the XTZ had to be treated with respect and obstacles tackled with a steely resolve. I didn't want one mistake on my part to throw 260kg of Super Tenere down the trail!

Happily, the XTZ and I emerged out of the hills unscarred and the last long section of shingle road to Lake Tekapo blazed past in a blur. After a final refuel, I was set for the 60km road ride south around Lake Pukaki back to Twizel and the conclusion of the ride. At 400km-plus, the final day had been a big one.

Kicking back in the bar that night, it was hard to wipe the smile from my dial – which was a common theme amongst my fellow riders. Everyone was rapt after three days of riding through spectacular lakes and mountain country they will never forget. If you can ever be part of the Yamaha NZ Safari, just go for it! **TZ**