

Riding along West Bank Road was a bit unnerving. This minor shingle back road near Springs Junction runs parallel to the Maruia River and by standing up on my WR250R's foot pegs, I could look over the adjacent stop bank to see that the river had breached its banks, becoming a torrent rushing through paddocks, and was about two metres above the road.

YEP, IT WAS WET

Up ahead I noticed that the road was flooded for a couple of hundred metres with muddy water to an unknown depth. Very slowly, keeping to the crown of the road, I quietly and safely trickled through, finding that the deepest point was above the Yamaha's front wheel. Riders of BMW boxer twins needed to be extra cautious as their bike's air intake is just above the cylinders, so their passage was fraught with the risk of a bow wave being drawn into the engine. Two riders didn't make it...

The unseasonable weather had already caused logistical difficulties for Safari organisers Mike and Angela Britton and last minute route changes to accommodate this disruption to the three-day annual Yamaha Safari meant that riders were several times taken to the limit of where they felt comfortable. At times, the difficulty went even further.

RALLYING TO THE CAUSE

In typical Safari fashion, of course, riders rallied to the cause and by working in teams the bigger bikes were man-handled through the trickiest sections. The social side of adventure riding can't be overstated and the bonding of riders working together to overcome seemingly impassable

terrain must be looked on as a positive attribute of this style of event.

The Safari, which this year started and finished in the scenic lakeside town of St Arnaud and had overnight stops in Reefton and Greymouth, was fully subscribed with many of the entrants being regulars at Britton Adventures' events.

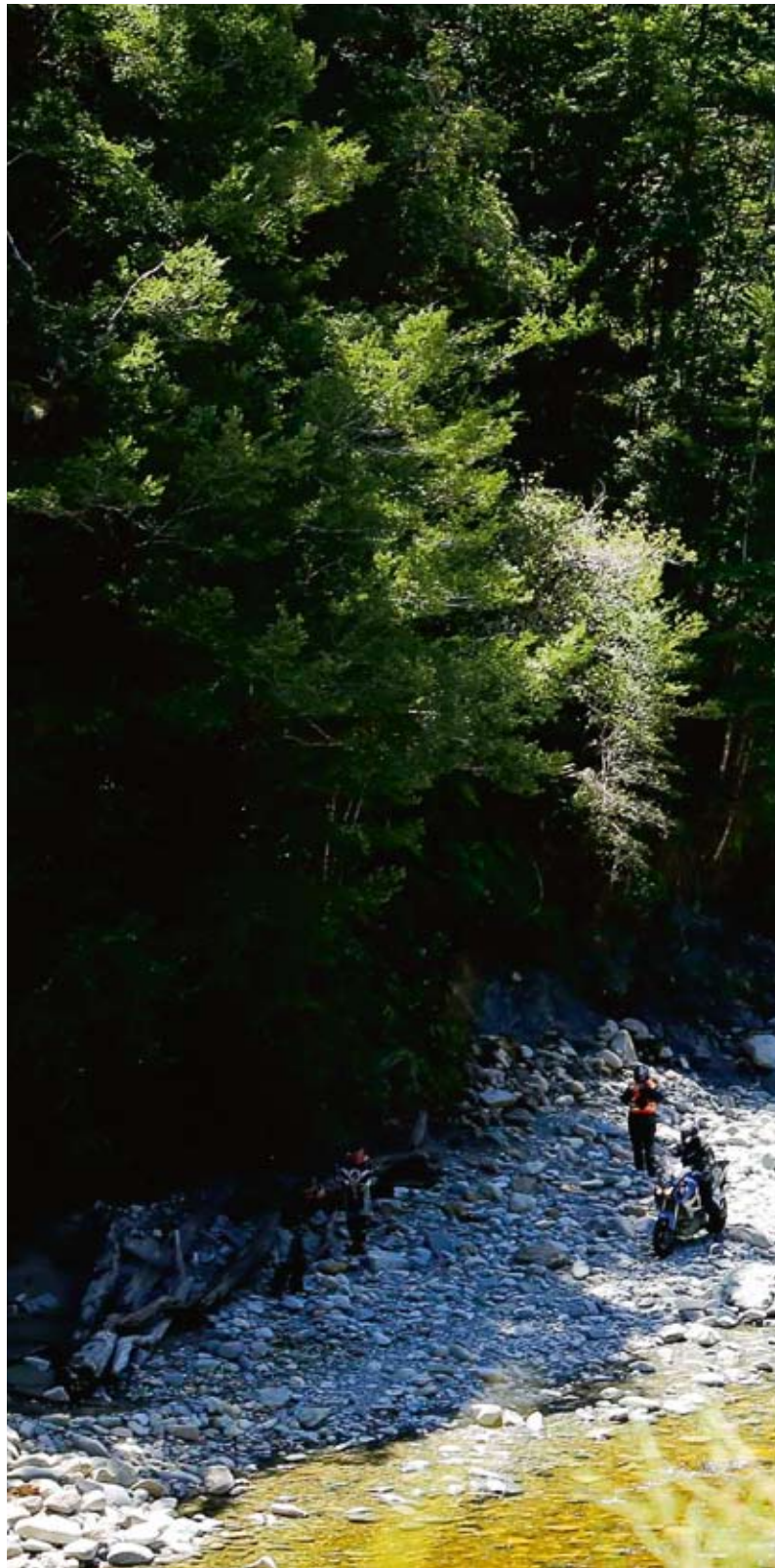
Quite a few rode with pillions and I think the gutsiest ride came from Maurits and Jackie Roos, whose F 800 GS could be heard powering at high revs through every section, trail or not, and never putting a wheel wrong.

WET START

In contrast to the summery evening when riders gathered, the Safari's first day was rainy. Ironically, a planned section in Golden Downs forest had to be bypassed due to high fire risk, so a transport through meandering back roads replaced it, and brought riders to the Porika Track, a rocky and in places steep pylon maintenance track to Lake Rotoroa. Brown water cascaded down the ruts, as bikes skittered their way down those same ruts to level ground.

Soon afterwards, a farm track crossed a stream three times. With the water rapidly rising, the first crossing needed care, the second was decidedly dodgy, and the third bordered on dangerous, so walking through slipping the clutch was the only safe way to avoid a dunking. Some riders didn't walk... At lunch in Murchison, word filtered through that the Maruia Saddle road was closed, but further enquiry determined that it was open for motorcycles, and the gritty surface actually had more grip in the rain than in the dry. A sealed transport in clearing skies

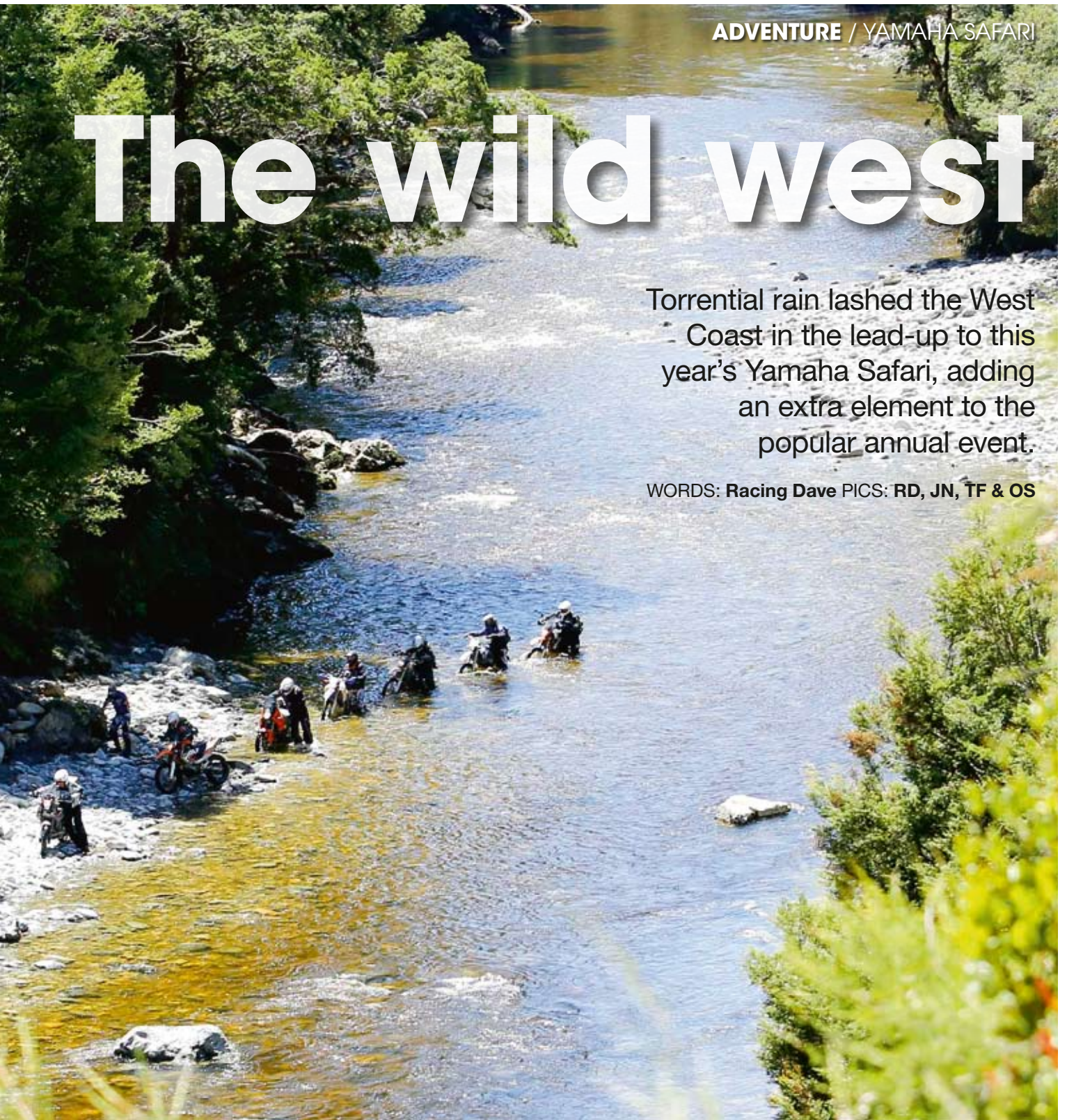
Clockwise from right. Riders carefully negotiate the Mackley River on the Denniston Track. The Bridge over the Buller River at the Brunner mine disaster memorial. On the road again and time for a quick photo stop in the gorge on Nobles Creek



The wild west

Torrential rain lashed the West Coast in the lead-up to this year's Yamaha Safari, adding an extra element to the popular annual event.

WORDS: Racing Dave PICS: RD, JN, TF & OS



Yamaha WR250R

Five years after its introduction, this tough little trail bike continues as a popular choice for commuting and adventure riding.

Apart from higher Renthal handlebars (better standing comfort) and Michelin AC10 tyres (better traction), the bike I rode was standard, and, as I expected, had no trouble covering all the sections with ease.

The forks and rear shock worked well in the predominantly rocky terrain on the West Coast, and there is just enough power to climb any steepness of hill, although riders must not be afraid to use all the revs when faced with a full throttle blast to maintain

momentum. The seat is OK, but no more than that, on longer transports, the lights work well, and the service intervals are astonishingly long.

I can't help wishing for lighter weight and more power, but Yamaha have clearly and emphatically ticked the reliability box on the spec sheet. I know of many high mileage WR250Rs, but I've never heard of one wearing out. Consumables such as tyres, brake pads, and chains and sprockets are not stressed by a 250, making low maintenance another of its virtues. It's economical, too, and I averaged 25 km/litre, giving a maximum range of about 175 km.



Clockwise from top right. Stunning view (on a clear day!) over the Denniston Plateau, lunch at the Ngahere Hotel, a trio of riders regretting taking the steep and muddy trail option at the Reefton Saddle, and finally, the flooded West Bank Road.

brought us to the earlier mentioned West Bank Road, and thus to our day's end in Reefton.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL...

Day 2 began in light rain, but the track to the abandoned gold mine at Big River is all-weather. It was here that Michael Dobson tipped his unique KTM 990 over in a river crossing. Due to injury, his left leg doesn't hinge at the knee, so he rides with highway pegs, a right-foot gear change, and a left thumb rear brake. Where there's a will... When the 990 failed to restart, he used a satellite phone to call a local helicopter that scooped it up in a net and flew both rider and bike to civilization.

A trail option included a serious downhill, which was made treacherous by the wet clay, but with some considerable team effort all those who ventured here were able to get to an excellent lunch in the sunshine at the Ngahere Hotel.

Riders who had the time (I went twice!) were taken to the eighth wonder of the world, riding down Nobles Creek through a hand-cut gorge and then through two tunnels in near pitch-black darkness.

THE DENNISTON INCLINE

Day 3 began with a long transport from Greymouth, via coalmines and memorials of miner's deaths, to another outstanding lunch in Inangahua, before taking the challenge of the pylon track from the Buller Gorge to historic Denniston, site of the ninth wonder of the world, the Denniston Incline, and now restored for viewing. The Mackley River crossing proved to be another obstacle requiring teamwork, but everyone eventually made it to the plateau.

Time was fleeting, as were our petrol reserves, so some returned to the reverse run over the Porika Track via Westport, before arriving tired yet satisfied to the final dinner in St Arnaud.

The 2013 Yamaha West Coast Safari was, as always, well organised and had the expected high standard of meals and accommodation. Apart from some unavoidable glitches caused by extreme weather, Mike and Angela gave the riders some superb adventure riding over interesting and varied terrain.

The 2014 Yamaha Safari will be in the Far North, starting and finishing in the Bay of Islands.

Returning the favour

By Angela Bruce

With help from past clients Britton Adventures sponsored two of their Vietnam tour crew (Hai, their lead rider and Long, their mechanic) on a trip to New Zealand to join in on the Yamaha West Coast Safari.

Day One of the Yamaha West Coast Safari and the rain came down, increasing in volume as we sat at breakfast.

I looked across to where Hai and Long were sitting and felt sorry for them that their first day riding in New Zealand would be in such unpleasant weather. Fortunately we had purchased some waterproof over-trousers for them both and found raincoats and jackets to fit.

OH DEAR!

After all the bikes had departed I set off in the truck heading for Murchison. By the time I arrived at the lunch venue some riders were already there with stories of slippery tracks and drowned bikes in the swollen rivers.

"One of your Vietnamese mates put his bike down in the river," a rider informed me. "The bike went totally under, Mike was de-watering it when we left. It was the mechanic guy (Long)"

Riders trickled (literally) into lunch



Hai (left) watches on as Long assists Dave Greenslade and others ferry a bike across one of the many rivers they crossed (top) and below, I-to-r Hai, Mike and Angela's son Mikaere, and Long.

with more stories of flooded bikes and rising rivers. Further reports on Hai and Long came in, including a description of Hai slipping over while helping to push Long's flooded bike through the river. Apparently Hai went completely under and started floating off downriver until Long hauled him out. With that information I went and got the bag of dry merino thermals I had put in the truck.

BACK AT LAST

Finally, after another couple of hours wait Hai, Long, Mikaere and Mike arrived, all dripping wet but laughing and chatting animatedly. After a quick lunch they were off

again over the Maruia Saddle, which was closed to cars due to past rain damage but no trouble for bikes. The rest of the day went fairly smoothly for them and they arrived in Reefton where they commented on what a beautiful little town it is.

"Looks like town from western movie," observed Hai. "Really beautiful."

The absence of people on the main street was completely foreign to a couple of lads from Hanoi.

EARLY START

Day 2 began and Hai set off early with Mikaere to ensure riders didn't take a wrong turning and end up in a very deep part of one of the rivers. First they had to ride down the river-bed of Nobles' Creek and through a couple of tunnels that had been man-made during the early mining days on the Coast.

"I loved the tunnels and riding in the small river," said Hai. "Sometimes I scared when the track very steep, but it make me stronger rider and more experienced."

Long brought up the rear with Mike again and was in for a relentless day.

When one rider decided to have his bike choppered out of the bush after draining the battery when it went under in a river, Long was there helping to load

the bike despite it being a totally new experience for him. His mechanical skills and logical thinking were useful on a number of occasions.

EVERY DAY WE WET!

I saw them again at lunch where they hungrily wolfed down some roast meat and veges, despite it not being part of their usual diet. Despite thunderstorms being forecast for Day 3 of the Safari, it turned out to be magnificent weather. However, that didn't prevent Hai and Long from getting wet for a third day running.

"Every day we wet," said Hai.

"Even Day 3 it's fine but we help so many people across big river (Mackley) we very wet again."

With the river higher than expected and the day stretching out longer than anticipated, Mike made the call to send Hai and Long back to our overnight destination, St Arnaud, via the Lower Buller Gorge with some of the clients. But far from a big stretch on the tarseal being a letdown for the lads it proved to be another highlight.

"I never ride faster than 100 kilometres before," said Hai, eyes wide. "Maximum in Vietnam 80 kilometre, maybe 90 for very short distance. Going fast on the road I love it. Mostly I love everything about Safari and Long love it too." ■

