

ADVENTURE

NEW ZEALAND 4WD TRIP



Off Road Heaven

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY VIC WIDMAN

Widman visits 'the land of the long white cloud' for a 4WD trip that he will never forget.

Climbing the incredibly steep 4WD track on Delrachney Station.

We drove along the very edge of Mavora Lakes deep in the South Island.

In the mid 1990's while traversing Australia's great inland deserts I thought to myself, I wonder what it's like to live in a country where there are no flat bits and no deserts. Imagine a place with loads of mountains and low range 4WDing? The place that immediately sprang to mind was our closest neighbour, 'the land of the long white cloud', just three hours across the ditch, yep! New Zealand.

I often thought how wonderful it would be to clamber over the snow-capped mountains of the South Island in a fourbie. Where the roads seemed to climb straight up to heaven, like that famous Led Zeppelin song, *Stairway to Heaven*. I wanted to go and experience what I figured would be some of the best 4WD terrain on earth. Sadly the opportunity never eventuated until last Easter.

A chance email from Steve Beston of NZ 4X4 Treks made all the cards fall into place. Steve, in his email proclaimed he was the NZ equivalent of Vic Widman, he reckons he even looks a bit like me, I'll let you be the judge on that, poor Steve. Steve's reasoning behind this was that like me, he conducted 4WD tag-along tours. He wanted to do a deal, get me over to the long white cloud to go 4WDing and at the same time bring some of my customers, so he could make some money. A shrewd business man perhaps.

Steve did not know that I had always harboured a desire to explore his wild southern isle and was pretty chuffed when I said OK, give me an itinerary and a 4WD and a price and I'll



Getting There

The weather conditions are so harsh in the South Island of New Zealand that the 4WD tag-along tours can only be conducted between January and April, the rest of the time the tracks are metres under snow. Just fly yourself to Christchurch and collect your rental 4WD from Overlander Hire (great name). You can join Great Divide Tours on one of its amazing seven day New Zealand 4WD tours led by local tour guide Steve Beston check out www.4wd.net.au



Staying There

On the tour all of your accommodation is provided in a variety of great New Zealand motels, hotels and caravan park cabins.



4WD action New Zealand style.

bring some customers with me. That's how it started and this is how it went.

It was simple really, just get yourself to Christchurch, bring a bag of clothes, mainly woollies as it was going to be cold with possible snow and the rest is arranged by NZ 4X4 Treks. So, on Good Friday I lobbed into the Airport Motel at Christchurch and for a change my wife, Julie, joined me. Her view was that I wasn't going on an overseas junket without her and the prospect of seven nights in accommodation rather than in a swag and someone else doing the cooking was right up her ally.

Easter Saturday and a convoy of typical NZ 4WDs arrived at our motel. Yes, they were all at least 10 years old, in fact my special Toyota (a model not sold in Australia) was nudging 18 years old, I immediately had doubts about the reliability of these rigs (I was to be proven totally wrong as all eight hired vehicles performed faultlessly). They were all autos to ensure anyone who hires them can drive and all were diesels which was good not only for the excellent

Crossing the Manuherika River.



economy they offered but diesel was only \$1.20 per litre where as petrol was a whopping \$1.90.

The tag-along tour was due to start on Easter Sunday out of Lake Tepako which was about five hours drive south in the middle of the Island, so after some food shopping (we had to provide our own lunches and brekkies) and filling of the chilly bin which was provided, we were off through the quiet countryside that typifies the sleepy South Island. We met Steve on the shores of the beautiful blue Lake Tepako with a cool breeze whisking around our ears, Steve gave us the usual briefing on the day's activities and us Aussies were soon alarmed to hear that these sheep musterers didn't usually stop for a morning tea break. I stepped in here and put a halt to proceedings, if we weren't stopping for morning tea, we

BELOW:
The Pylon track crossing the Fiodland Mountains.



Road Conditions

Expect everything from mud, snow, rocks, rivers, and the steepest of steep tracks.

weren't moving from the Church of the Good Sheperd (on the shores of Lake Tepako). Julie cringed in the corner and Steve's mouth moved up and down without actually saying anything. I think for a moment he doubted his decision to expand his services to us Aussies. Anyway, we got on with it, Steve was introduced to 10am morning tea breaks in the bush and we were happy, all I had to do now was purchase a thermos for my hot water.

Day one saw a gentle easing into the 4WD world in NZ, the best part of travelling with NZ 4X4 Treks is Steve has done a lot of leg work with local farmers (yes all sheep farmers) to gain access to tracks that the general public wouldn't have a hope of ever seeing. As a result whilst on the 4WD trails we didn't see another soul, which was just as well given that most tracks were barely one vehicle wide and literally hung off the side of mountains.

It was unusual seeing completely different country to what we have in Oz land, apart from the steep mountains and blue water (the beautiful colour is created by the suspended silt from the glacier activity) the total absence of trees on their mountains made seeing the view, well, easy! Mind you, with a near kilometre drop straight out of the driver's window it would have been good to have had the view blocked by some solid trees at times.

Nothing really prepared us for our second day of adventure. We once again had access along a river valley to a private sheep station but at the end of the river flat we came abruptly up against an almost sheer sided mountain that literally was the Stairway to Heaven. We could see a narrow track



Too much speed almost spelt disaster on this river crossing.

scratched into its side zig-zagging up that terrible ascent and Steve, with his pearly white smile under his greying beard, pointed skyward and said over the UHF, lock it in low and hang on! The bastard was enjoying seeing our Aussie tans fade from our faces!

What a road, I actually wrote about it recently in my *Overlander* column ranking it as one of the best ever 4WD tracks I have had the pleasure to drive. At 1500m it levelled off

“ On top of these mountains it is a bit like passing into another world. ”

BELOW:
The drive up to
Omarama Saddle.



Contact numbers

Great Divide Tours 02 9913 1395 www.4wd.net.au
4X4 Treks Ltd www.4x4treks.co.nz
Overland 4WD Hire www.overland.co.nz

and the views all around were stunning. Sorry but words don't really do this place justice. I hope the photos do. After several hours of clinging to the side of a mountain both up and down us Aussies conceded defeat and when offered to go back the way we came or out via the valley floor, we chickened out and took the valley. Top stuff!

Could it get any better? You bet, on the way to Queenstown you pass the town of Cromwell which again sits in a delightful valley full of grapes and citrus trees of all varieties, but more importantly it is flanked by the Pisa Range. A towering bare mountain which in winter is metres deep in snow. Once again we found ourselves wandering through some blokes backyard (with his permission thanks to Steve) and then engaging low range we went straight up, this time to 1800m! On top of these mountains it is a bit like passing into another world. Strange rock outcrops are scattered bizarrely around the nude mountains which drop away to reveal distant views of more mountains, lakes and in our case glorious clear blue sky.

Lunch was beside what the locals call a tarn (a small mountain lake) that was as pristine as any wilderness lake in Tassie except we were privileged to drive to it and camp next to it and enjoy our lunch. Up amongst the clouds on this incredible mountain it was easy to see why NZ is chosen for so many breathtaking film sequences. It really did feel like we were driving through a totally alien landscape. This was proving to be one of the best 4WD trips my colleagues had experienced, great tracks, lots of low range work, the need for careful wheel placement and all the time gobsmacking scenery. We dropped into the multi million dollar Cardrona ice testing facility, before staying overnight in the equally inspiring Cardrona Hotel.



Note

Vic Widman paid for his own participation on this tour to judge if it was worthy of inclusion in his own schedule of 4WD tours, it obviously passed the test. See www.4wd.net.au for the next scheduled trip to New Zealand.



ABOVE: The group of Aussies and Kiwis that were with Vic on this amazing 4WD trip.

If you have ever visited Queenstown and stood on the lookout at the top of the gondola in that picturesque town you will see the huge Remarkable Range stretching away to the south along the edge Lake Wakatipu (if not, just google Queenstown web cams and you'll see the Remarkables immediately). Well, our trek today took us to the very top of that Remarkable Range. Deeply gouged 4WD trails, low range first climbs and tracks all to ourselves were the order of the day. Lunch was beside the Nevis River in a valley perched high in the mountain range preceded one of the most exhilarating 4WD journeys I have ever undertaken.

Entering Lorne Peak Station we were rewarded with a chance meeting of true New Zealand shepherd's herding 5000 sheep across a mountain top. We reached Tenants Peak at 1600m it had a splash of fresh snow from the previous night and now our view was straight back up Lake Wakatipu from Kingston to Queenstown, we had travelled

BELOW: The view down to the beautiful Lake Benmore.



The Church of the Good Shepherd on the banks of Lake Tekapo.

the full length of the Remarkable Range via 4WD tracks. This was 4WD heaven.

Moving to the Southland for the last two days of our off road journey we found quite a contrast in terrain as we literally drove around the shores of the beautiful Mavora Lakes where the perfect reflections equalled anything I had seen on the flooded Eyre Creek last year. Lunching beside a deep lake that borders Manapouri south of Milford Sound was like being in a different world and we had to pinch ourselves to realise that this was just a few hours flight from bustling Sydney. The final off road adventure of our seven-day trip saw us following a huge power line maintenance track that literally clung to the side of one of the most rugged mountains deep in Fiordland. Wheels scabbled for traction up the near vertical climb and all around the land dropped vertically away for hundreds of metres, if you don't like heights don't come out on this trek.

After 15 years of dreaming of a 4WD adventure in New Zealand I've now accomplished that task. Was it good? No. It was fantastic. Everyone should experience the off-road driving found on the South Island, the scenery is out of this world, the 4WD action is incredible and the Kiwis are so friendly and welcoming. 📷

BFGoodrich
TAKE CONTROL

**DESTINATION
OF THE YEAR
2011**