

S.L.A.M. DUNK

Riding New Zealand's Southern Lakes and Mountains

By John Nick

We spend much of our lives plugged into a workday grind. Five or more days a week of early starts and late finishes can leach the fun out of people. These are the grey worried faces we see day to day, those caught on the treadmill of life.

But looking around now I can hardly call my eight trail riding companions worried. Nor are their faces grey, In fact they are positively glowing, from the exertion of another stiff climb and the crisp autumn alpine air. Far from dull eyed, ours are lit up with the sheer buzz of the experience and no doubt the healthy dose of adrenalin that's also contributing to make our hearts thump along.

From our vantage point high in the margins of New Zealand's Southern Alps, on Walter Peak Station, we can look back towards Queenstown, the jump-off point this morning for our three day ride. Though it's barely 11.00 am our start already seems an age away. We rode out from our hotel kitted up in trail riding gear and mounted on knobby-shod enduro bikes, to the astonishment of the resort's early morning shoppers and strollers. It was only a few hundred metres to the small beach just outside town where we rode our bikes directly onto the chartered barge for the early morning crossing of Lake Wakatipu. Beyond the lake we were bound for private high country station tracks and mountain trails only accessible by water.

There was something particularly satisfying in leaving the small crowd of tourists who gathered to watch our lively boarding as we skidded the bikes around to face back towards the barge's front loading ramp. They seemed so helplessly tied to the travel conveyor belt, while we are so obviously starting a highly unconventional adventure.

Southern Lakes and Mountains was the title that Chris and I had coined in the early emails sent around our group of trail riding mates. The 2011 S.L.A.M. ride, as it soon became abbreviated to, quickly gained the numbers needed to make it a viable proposition for Robbie Cricket of High Country Trail to put together the logistics required. High Country Trail are solidly backed by Yamaha New Zealand, whose head marketing man Peter Payne believes these rides are so good he's often seen on them.

Access to this stunning wilderness doesn't come about by accident. The S.L.A.M. ride was essentially Robbie's interpretation of our wish list, both Chris and I having enjoyed riding in the area previously. Now it was up to High Country Trail to make all the logistical challenges fit together: guiding, private access, barge transport, accommodation, meals and remote fuel backup. What we the customers would see, was a trouble-free, seamless stream of trail riding, food and good times together.

The S.L.A.M. was to be a fairly short, last ride of the season, just three days fitted into our busy autumn schedules. The idea was to pick out some of the best riding in a loop, starting and finishing in Queenstown and encompassing Walter and Cecil Peaks, the Remarkables, Garvie Mountains and Old Man Range. Intermediate overnight stops would be in Waikaia and Alexandra.

CROSSING TO THE OTHER SIDE

Millions of tourists have gazed across Lake Wakatipu, and many cross by the vintage steamer Earnslaw for a morning tea or meal at the old homestead, but only a very few have had the privilege of riding a dirt bike into the mountains beyond the lake. This is just what we did that first morning, a giant loop around Walter and Cecil Peaks finishing at Halfway Bay, another lake-locked station, where we would again catch the barge back across to Wakatipu's western shore. But this was to be no ordinary ride. Leaving the lake behind I pointed my Yamaha WR 250F at a rocky station track following a stream through beech forest, relaxing as much as possible to get used to riding South Island rocks again. Clearing the tree line we started a gut-busting zig-zag climb,

bursting out into open tussock country on a high saddle where we re-grouped, caught our breath and captured the moment on our cameras, or as some did, sent skyte photos by phone to piss off no-show mates. To our rear was the lake with wide views back to Queenstown, while ahead the trail dropped invitingly into the hidden valley of the Lochy River.

The Lochy Valley is one of those magical hidden gems you may only ride once in a lifetime. Surrounded by mountains on all sides, the trail that draws you down into the valley is the only sign that you haven't slipped back in a 1000 year time warp. Once in the valley floor the Lochy River alternately tumbled fresh and pure over car sized boulders, meandered over quiet tussock-covered river flats, or cascaded through hobbit-like beech forest. The track snaked and twisted along the banks, all the while crossing busy side torrents over rough rocky fords. It's simply superb trail riding, up with the very best I've sampled anywhere on this blue planet.

The crossing of the Lochy River went without mishap and we were soon boarding the barge again, tucking into our generous lunch packs while we re-crossed the lake. Munching on a roll gave me time to reflect: already we had crossed a major lake, ridden some challenging rocky climbs into the mountains, seen Queenstown in the distance, discovered a hidden valley, forded a hundred streams and one mighty river. Yahoo, only day one, only lunchtime and there was so much more to come.

PICTURES TELL THE STORY

It would take a whole issue of this magazine to tell you all about the rest of our adventure so I'll have to let the photos tell the remainder of the story, though I will just mention a few highlights to help fill in the picture:

- a guide who took a shortcut through a braided river and ended up over his bollocks with a cylinder full of water,
- the zig-zag climb from Kingston up the Remarkable Mountains, more than remarkable, and with countless 180 degree turns, just the track for stretching throttle cables,
- the downhill on Glenary Station - steeper than steep, there was no way you could see to the bottom without jumping off. Well, maybe it just looked that steep, because we all got down safely,
- Glenary Station, one of the largest properties in this green land, you could ride there forever I reckon,
- kilometre after kilometre of teeth-jarring single-track tussock trails across Argyle Station - like head banging, best in enjoyed in retrospect,
- Waikaia Bush, home of the best sliding gravel roads you can imagine, what a hoot, and yes, more stretching of throttle cables
- boggy and foggy trails across the almost 2000 metre high Old Man Range. When it wasn't boggy it was foggy, and often it was both,
- the meal at Waikaia pub, fabulous night. In fact every on every night were treated like kings - breakfast, lunch and dinner, top shelf all the way.

GOOD TIMES GOOD MATES

Like many groups of riders we came from incredibly diverse backgrounds – wage earners, tradesmen, a medical specialist, businessmen, farmers and even an international sporting personality, people who might not ordinarily rub shoulders for days on end. However the shared spirit of trail riding has few barriers, proving that the only thing that can add to a world-class trail ride, is a great bunch of mates to share it all with.