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Motorcycling in New Zealand: Beauty Is All Around. So Is Gravel.

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By Roy Furchgott

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Devoted motorcyclists the world over come to New Zealand to experience the greatest biking roads on the planet. Only a few experience it the way I did, face first.

I can't say I wasn't warned. "New Zealand is not the place to learn motorcycling," said Go Tour NZ guide Ian Fitzwater. But hey, I knew how to ride. I had ridden a bit in my teens and 20s and had come back to it in my late 40s. I figured I could take it easy, and if the terrain was tricky, I would keep my ego in check and slow down.

Despite Ian's admonition, I could think of no better place to become reintroduced to motorcycling than New Zealand's South Island. With only about a million inhabitants spread over an island roughly two-thirds the size of Britain, it had long swaths of roads between towns with little traffic to worry about.

And the roads -- the roads! -- are miles of nonstop twists surrounded by scenic beauty that beggars the imagination.

On top of that, the country is motorcycle-friendly. Drivers there are aware of motorbikes and courteous to them. That led me to believe I could manage the risk, a theory I clung to right up to the moment I crashed.

But New Zealand turned out to be something more than an astonishing collection of roads and scenery. It also was a vast collection of experiences to be had, enough out of the ordinary to verge on exotic but made comfortable by the friendly English-speaking Kiwis. I was left with a packet of experiences that I will be sorting through for a long time to come.

If I thought I was seasoned enough to dismiss Ian's warning, at least I had enough sense to sign up for a tour. My first time in New Zealand, I didn't want to worry about where to stay and eat while having to remember to drive on the left side of the road.

I chose Go Tour NZ, which didn't rigidly require us to follow the guides like ducklings after a mama duck. Each morning we were given a map and shown a choice of routes. Our guides, brothers Ian and John Fitzwater, would describe the attractions along each road: a stop at a hot springs resort, a bungee-jumping bridge or a steam-engine ride. "Dinner is at 6:30," Ian would remind us. "If you are going to be late, call. We call the police to look for you at 6."

The guides traveled by van, which went ahead with our belongings so we could ride unencumbered by luggage. The van had a bike trailer in case anyone tired out and wanted to pack it in and get a lift to the hotel.

I had signed on for the "Fun and Funky Tour," not as cheap as the budget tour nor as ritzy as the luxe tour, but it was two weeks of visiting Ian and John's favorite stops, from a plush hotel in an adrenalized ski town to a run-down lodge that served a fish-bait omelet.

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We started in Nelson, known primarily for its arts community, which means it is chockablock with galleries, coffee shops and cafes such as Lambretta's, where you can tuck into gourmet sandwiches surrounded by the scooters that hang from the walls.

The most temperate city on the South Island, Nelson has a calm bay that protects white-sand beaches. But that can instill a false sense of security. The volcanic island has a mountainous ridge down the middle, with 18 peaks topping 10,000 feet. The ridge contributes to the unpredictable weather. You can start the day beachside in light riding gear and be in snow by midafternoon. "New Zealand has four seasons," goes the saying, "and you can experience them all in one day."

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