

Day One - Auckland to Whangarei - 265 Km

“Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops, and an automobile boiled a cloud behind it.”

Clouds did indeed boil behind automobiles today, as a svelte band of adventurers began the exciting first steps of a new decade of exploration. Exploration in rally cars, under the banner of the New Zealand Classic, and as the journey through the land of the long white cloud began its first day of a three-week quest, it was more dust cloud than white cloud. Like something out of a Steinbeck novel, the caravan of cars shuffled along much as the Joad family had done, on a scorched and parched land that had not seen rain for more than forty days.

Unlike the Joad's however, this was not the beginning of a journey of an arduous nature. No this was the commencement of 7000 km of stunning roads, terrific scenery and the opportunity to experience new cultures. The cultural element began before any wheels were turned, as the competitors were treated to a display of traditional Maori displays that culminated in the fearsome Haka. If any members of our band of travellers had been struggling to shrug off the fog of an early morning, the sights and sounds of the customary war dance would certainly have blown away the cobwebs, and it was with some haste that many of our competitors departed from the starting arch, making good their escape, should the Maori warriors return to finish the job.

Or perhaps they were just keen to get underway in this, the first rally of the ERA year. Once enough propulsion had been generated to break the gravity of Auckland and its suburbs the driving could begin properly, with the first taster of exactly what our travels through New Zealand could be like. We had been promised gravel roads, and as the tarmac ended abruptly our cars were thrust headlong into shale and shingle and, consequently, the dust. With enough momentum the plume of debris expelled from the road below could be kept behind and out of harms way, at least for those first on the road. For those unlucky enough to be further back in the pack though, the dust would be waiting in ambush, hanging in the air like a translucent powder, until such time as motor car chanced upon it, at which point it would descend and engulf the machine.

By the time the cars reached the first coffee stop, all were covered in a film of filth, but it mattered not, as the roads were wonderful and shiny paintwork was exchanged for gleaming smiles. A pattern that would continue for the rest of the day across exciting new swathes of highway, that for the most part was empty of other road users. It is well worth remembering that today was just an aperitif, for as we drift further from civilisation and deeper into New Zealand's more mountainous terrain, the quality of the driving experience, and the challenge, will be set to increase exponentially. Not that today was easy mind you, there plenty of pitfalls for the unwary. According to spies on the road, one hairpin bend in particular was catching crews out. With a fast, downhill approach and a braking area that had more furrows than a recently ploughed field more than one car was seen to take a wide line after a deep entry. Fun for those spectating, less so perhaps for those doggedly trying to apply the anchors inside the car.

Awaiting all of us over the next few weeks though, is a geological playground, peppered with ancient glaciers and primeval volcanoes, traversed by roads of the greatest quality, many of which are famous for their world championship rallying history. The ancient land of the Maori people will need to be treated with respect if our procession is to make it to our terminus in Christchurch, 20 days from now. We have merely dipped our toes into the water today, but if it is even a slight indication

of what is to come, I am sure we will all be looking forward to becoming completely submerged in an automotive adventure.

For now, slumber calls, with a sleep filled with anticipation of a longer day on the road on the 'morrow and more Kiwi adventures.

Syd Stelvio.