

Day Thirteen - Hanmer Springs to Nelson - 334 Km

On the big Waiau River, that cuts a swathe through the rock on its way down to the Foveaux Strait from Lake Te Anau, the banks rise steeply up and the trees grow thick on the mountains that tower over it along much of its 80 km length. New Zealand's State Highway 7, the Lewis Pass Rd, also follows a similar course, trading sides of the valley with the fast-flowing waterway, sometimes port, sometimes starboard. At this time of year, the river is home to migrating Salmon, the mature Chinooks heading upstream to spawn and, ultimately, die. Alongside them today ran another migratory species, the competitors of the New Zealand Classic, an altogether shorter journey but one with a much happier ending. But today, our paths intertwined and a river ran through it.

Indeed, water courses seemed to be a constant companion on the journey back north to this evenings halt at Nelson. Whether it was the Waiau, Rahu, Maruia, Tutaki or optimistically named Hope. Hope would be what some of our travellers would be pinning their arrival at the final MTC on later in the day, but in the cool sun of the morning they didn't know it yet.

Another beautiful day saw the cars off from Hanmer Springs, and any early birds would have been treated to a delightful dawn that saw the sky glow pink as the darkness perished under the strength of the sun. It was a good omen for a tremendous day ahead, if tough at times. It wasn't so much the competitive elements that provided the challenge early on either, regularities one and two were relatively gentle affairs, but the road that ran between them was less kind.

Road is grand word, goat track may be closer to the truth, not that it was impassable mind you, with a modicum of care and attention to the road ahead even the lowest slung vehicles made it through. It was a technical driving challenge, that was for certain and it was probably a good call to have it as a link section rather than a regularity, so the classics could negotiate it at their own pace without the threat of the time keepers clock. Waterfalls and streams infiltrated the route every now and then, providing the first fords of the event, those of any stature at least. Most plotted a course through them carefully, but there is always one who takes to the high-board and cannonball into any piece of water. I'm not going to name names, but reports in the field suggest a certain Targa may have been today's watersplash hooligans.

After lunch we flirted with more waterways and lakes of the Tasman region, as the route took us through the Four Rivers Plain and onto the third and final regularity of the day. One and two may have been gentle, but three provided the sting in the tail that accompanies so many journeys end. The road got rougher, the Healey of Julia Kirkham and Edmund Charlesworth again providing the most wince-worthy soundtrack as they skittered and bounced along on the sump guard of their ride, and the fords got tougher.

Whilst they weren't the deepest river crossings ever, the entries to them were tricky, with large potholes and drop-offs on approach, erosion taking its toll since last years route reconnaissance. It was fun though, as Stephen Owens announced in broadest Yorkshire at the finish, "That were a reet good day, although I've realised that I've bought the wrong car". As well as the jubilation at another day complete tales of woe were also swapped as crews arrived, car 31 had bust a suspension strut, 14 had shredded a tyre and bent a wheel rim and the Woofs Triumph TR4 had jettisoned its clutch fluid after a particularly turbulent entry into one of Regularity Three's fords. Others too needed new tyres fitting after the event and sensed a late arrival into the hotel this evening (where does one find four tyres for a Vintage Bentley in Nelson?!)

Late nights are probably the last thing many will want this evening, as rest is needed to tackle tomorrow, one of the longest days on the route, with 470 odd kilometres being ticked off as the rally heads south again to Hokitika. It will doubtless be another incredible day of travel in this magnificent country and no doubt, a river will run through it.

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