

Day Four - Auckland to Rotorua - 420 Km

This morning provided a stark reminder that people do in fact live in New Zealand, with seemingly the entire population wedged tightly on the roads of Auckland. On many of the roads we have tackled so far, we could have been forgiven for thinking that the country's population was three farmers, several bar keepers and a couple of fishermen, insert your own joke about that lot walking into a bar. The great escape from this morning's metropolis though, was a crawl to freedom that Squadron Leader Roger Bushell would sympathise with.

At least at the end of the painstaking concentration run there was an opportunity to stretch the legs and begin the day properly with a test at Hampton Downs motor racing circuit. Everyone other than car no 4 made it to the test, with Peter and Gris Gordon missing in action. The rumours were that they had taken a wrong turn and ended up in the Spring Hills Corrections Facility, just a stone throw from the motorsport park. Or it may just have been that they were seeking gentler roads to shake down their newly acquired MG Midget, the car being drafted in after the differential on their Talbot had decided New Zealand just wasn't its thing.

After playing at racing drivers the route could surely only take an upward turn, which it did with magical run across country, across a swathe of twisty asphalt and, naturally, dirt. This swiftly meandering playground of roads would be a constant for the day and after a swift injection of caffeine, enjoyed in the coastal town of Raglan, the route books carried the cars up across the tops of the cliffs overlooking the vast expanse of the Tasman Sea. It was quite simply wonderful, the unsealed roads flowing delightfully, dancing through thick, dark forest and then breaking into the daylight and providing a soul stirring view down the western coastline towards the headland at Taharoa. Whilst there was an opportunity to stop and enjoy the Bridal Veil Falls, for those with only motoring on their minds the descent from the cliffs was met with only a brief interlude at a passage control, before continuing straight into the first regularity of the day. With similar roads to those that had already been conquered, the entire section stretched out to a challenging 68 kilometres of concentration demanding, energy sapping rallying of the highest regard.

After so much driving on gravel roads, the final regularity of the day was a largely tarmac affair, with a brisk start on a stimulating hill-climb followed by a run through 'the Shire'. New Zealand will forever be associated with Tolkien's mythical Middle Earth and for the first time one felt that they could have been travelling past the very same fields that were home to Bilbo et al. With the day's competition set to finish at the site of Hobbiton itself, there could not have been a more fitting end to what was the longest days rallying so far, but also a particularly satisfying one. As Gandalf himself said, "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us", I can't think of many finer ways to fill one's time than to be rallying through this incredible country.

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