

Day Five - Rotorua to Gisborne - 333 Km

Since the birth of the automobile I have had the pleasure of driving some of the planet's greatest thoroughfares, Col de Turini, Großglockner, Transfăgărășan, Stelvio Pass (naturally) as well as countless others racking up the miles over the years. Thankfully, there are still some surprises left out there, still roads to make me sit up and take notice and this afternoon I experienced just such a revelation.

There may have been other roads today, indeed I'm sure there were regularities contested across the morning but after this afternoon's epiphany I cannot remember them. If you wish to know more about other elements of today, it is perhaps best to ask the photographers who will at least have photographic evidence to jog our memories, although I wouldn't be overly surprised to find that they too can only speak about the road that was tackled post lunch.

That particular road is the Motu Road, a 67km driving paradise that stretches from the coast of Matakai inland to Motu. 48 km are purely gravel, mostly single track and stretching through an ever-changing scenery of sub-tropical rainforest, farmland and pine forest. All, whilst traversing an ever-twisting ribbon, there are the odd straight bits, but the edges of the road don't remain perpendicular for long.

The entire journey feels like it goes on for an eternity, not because it is dull or monotonous, but with an ever-changing backdrop it is as if one is being transported through the different sets and scenes of a film. On minute you are climbing steeply through a corridor of lush vegetation, the next negotiating the narrow ridge of the forest canopy at nearly 800 metres above sea level and then all of a sudden one has descended to the valley floor, snaking a route out along the belly of the canyon with the bubbling Motu river for company.

For those not of a nervous disposition the views out across the forest and plains from the highest reaches of the road were as breath-taking as the driving itself, but with such a technical test laid out before all of us to maintain the regularity pace the opportunities to take it all in were fleeting at best.

The drive though was the greatest reward, the Motu was of course the very favourite road of late WRC world champion Colin McRae and it is easy to understand why. The prospect of factory prepared WRC machines tearing along this particular stage later in the year is a salivating one and also slightly incomprehensible, the bravery and skill needed must be magnificent.

For the mere mortals though the two regularities that split this road in two will have provided the experience of a lifetime I am sure, for those that have missed out at home the stories of everyone's endeavours today will surely conjure up a fearsome envy, but that will hopefully turn to inspiration and spur some on to come out and experience it first-hand.

But what of the rest of the rally now? With some 18 days still to go is it possible that we have peaked too soon? I do not believe that this will be the case, the Motu will live long in my memory as a highlight of my rallying career but it does not render other amazing experiences obsolete. New Zealand still has plenty to offer up I am sure, and I will look forward to regaling more of our travelling bands exploits over the coming weeks.

Syd Stelvio.