

Day Nine - Whakapapa to Palmerston North - 310 Km

“In the event of a Volcanic Eruption sirens will sound from the village. Keep calm and assemble in the hotel lobby for further instructions.”

These were the instructions for what to do in the event that one of the Volcanoes surrounding the Chateau Tongariro happened to sneeze during our stay there yesterday evening. Thankfully, we all awoke without any interruption from the village siren and even opened our eyes to sunshine, after the previous evening had been accompanied by a deluge of rain and fog.

The skies were ominous as we left though, and Mount Ngauruhoe was only semi-visible in the distance, towering over the hotel. The active stratovolcano is better known to the world as Mount Doom, used as such in Peter Jackson's adaptation of the Lord of the Rings, no rings of power were cast into its smouldering cone overnight, nor, thankfully, any wedding rings as despite being over a week into the rally husband and wife driver/navigator pairings appear to remain jovial!

It is right to mention that there has been a little bit of car swapping happening, keys have been pulled from pots and Peter and Louise Morton have switched Stuttgart steel for the Bavarian Motor Works, and are now driving in a trick looking BMW 2002Ti. The dust from the early days, and Motu Road in particular, seemed to have done for the 912 for now, but its not really about what you drive, enjoyment is king and we all hope that they are relishing their first ever rally.

Overall today was slightly shorter as we approach the coast, and there was some payback for having enjoyed so many deserted roads this past week with a few sections of state highway to get us on our way towards the south of the north and into Wellington in time for the ferry in a couple of days. Even so, the three regularities today were all of a decent length and provided breath-taking views across vast hilltop farmland and distant peaks.

Despite us still being in New Zealand's summer, one could have been forgiven for thinking that we had entered autumn today. The mercury dipped into the teens for the first time this rally, the wind blew and the rain faded in and out for much of the day. The trees too, perhaps suffering from the overly hot summer, were faded and golden in places and many leaves had already been dropped, leaving the verges a mixture of orange and brown.

We were then surmised again, as the weather turned about for the final regularity of the afternoon and as we tackled 22 kilometres of largely ridge roads in the hills south of Kimbolton. The sun beamed down upon us, and the lit the landscape in a beautiful golden hue. The sheep hills stretched out and the view took the eye further, over to the cloud covered Ruahine Ranges in the east.

It was a fabulous way to finish off the day and no doubt served to reinforce the fact that we have probably all fallen a little bit in love with New Zealand's north island over the past nine days. Tomorrow is half day as we head to Wellington, and our final bits of competition before the cars are loaded onto the ferry to travel to the South Island, until then though I am sure all involved will be extracting as much enjoyment as possible from the no doubt fabulous roads.