

Day Twenty - Invercargill to Dunedin - 385 Km

Endurance rallies ebb and flow, it is in their nature. Much like the road before us, the pace of the rally appears to compress and rarefy. Some days rattle on at a pace, whilst others stick and stutter, often influenced by just how successful a day one might be having. Today had a little bit of both, but regardless of the fluctuation in tempo, it was an exceedingly good day.

We began bright and early, after yesterdays false start everyone was probably keen to get out onto the road, especially with four regularities in the offing. Some of us rose extra early to go and take a look at Burt Munro's original Indian Motorcycle, the eccentric engineer and land speed record holder who hailed from Invercargill. All of us that set eyes upon the large collection of holed pistons and snapped conrods from his engine development, offerings to the God of speed, were hoping such a fate would not befall anyone on our rally.

Gorgeous sunshine lit the way as we headed east, and despite the low light of the morning burning bright into our eyes, one could still make out the beautiful colours of the rural landscape. Gravel was again a constant companion, so much so that once all of us return to our homelands and largely tarmac roads I am sure we will miss the thrill of driving on these fun inducing surfaces. Perhaps not the photographers and marshals though, they've taken the phrase 'breathing it all in' to another level over the past few weeks.

Lunch arrived briskly and was taken in sight of the South Pacific, somewhere a long way over the horizon was the Antarctic, not that any of us would have known it, such were the temperatures. Whilst the morning had cantered on, life was about to get a little bit slower as we encountered what will surely be one of the trip highlights, and if not a highlight, certainly one of the enduring memories.

River crossings have become part and parcel of our daily life in New Zealand, but as we approached the fast-flowing Clutha river this afternoon no bridge awaited us. Instead we were to make use of the Tuapeka Mouth Punt, in operation since 1896 and to look at the bizarre contraption you would have been forgiven for thinking that they were still using the original equipment.

For those that can't imagine it, it is made up of a platform attached to two pontoons, with wire rope connected to two cables that run above the river. The pace of the river then seemingly pulls the platform across and with a mixture of brute force and no small amount of skill, the punt is anchored on the other side by chains and you drive off, sometimes the operators even managed to dock on the first attempt. More often though they needed several bites of the cherry to moor up, unsurprising with the Clutha in full flow beneath the ancient wooden boards of the punt. Novel, certainly. Fun, absolutely. Efficient however, it is not. With a time-control on the other side of the river, all were informed not to worry about lateness penalties, grab a coffee and cake, served out of the back of a Morris van no less, and to enjoy the experience.

There are certainly worse ways to enjoy an afternoon, but the effect was to string out the field across a vast distance, so praise must go to the marshals waiting patiently at the controls on the afternoon's regularities, and to the sweeps bringing up the tail of the field. As I write this, final results for the day still haven't been calculated, but rumours are that there could be shift in the race for third place overall as spies in the field report seeing the so far steady Volvo PV of Mike and Lorna Harrison lying stricken on the side of the road during today's final regularity. It is of course hearsay at the minute, and if not true tantamount to heresy, but we will wait for the time keepers word on the matter.

Tomorrow, crews will enjoy a final rest day in Dunedin before the penultimate and final days of this great adventure. If they are half as good as today, we will finish with a flourish.

Syd Stelvio.