

New Zealand – South Island

For many of us ticking off an overseas motorcycle tour is usually on our motorcycling wishlist. For some that includes riding New Zealand's South Island. New Zealand consists of two main islands and many smaller offshore islands. The South Island is about 20% larger than the North Island at 151,000sq km as opposed to the North Island's 114,000sq km. Despite having a larger land mass, the South Island's population is only about one-third (1.1 million) of its northern counterpart meaning from a motorcycling point of view, the southern roads are relatively uncluttered.



The South Island has two main *length of the island* arterial highways: State Highway 6 (SH 6) and State Highway 1 (SH 1 - which also goes the length of the North Island). SH 6 generally follows the western side of the Southern Alps mountain chain and SH 1 follows the Pacific Ocean coastline.

Whereas the North Island has the volcanic activity and the beaches, the South Island can proudly boast the majestic mountain ranges and dense virgin forests. Due to having a ready source of river shingle from the mountain streams, the South Island boasts infinitely superior roads to the North Island. All highways and 'main roads' are bitumen, though for the most part nearly all are only single carriageway. The South Island is roughly 900km in length, approx. 250km in width and boasts over 5,000km of coastline, ranking it as the world's twelfth largest island.

For most overseas folk considering motorcycling the South Island the starting point is usually the gateway city of Christchurch (pop 350,000) where the motorcycle rental firms are based. The other viable tour starting point option is the settlement of Picton which is the terminal town for the inter-island vehicle ferries from Wellington – it is a three hour sailing journey across Cook Strait between the North and South Islands.

If riders are comfortable riding around 350-400km per day then there are many superb roads to ride during a week's touring; one could comfortably circumnavigate the South Island.

Must-stay overnight stops include the South Island tourist capital of Queenstown, a night at either of the Glacier townships Franz Josef or Fox Glacier, whale watch town Kaikoura and the alpine resort settlement of Hanmer Springs. For sheer kiwi hospitality an overnight stop at a Westland country pub is a must, with two well known motorcycle watering holes being the Mahinapua Tavern south of Hokitika, and the ‘Formerly the Blackball Hilton’ at Blackball near Greymouth.

A few ‘must ride’ highways include the 250km SH 73 Trans Alpine Highway which traverses the Southern Alps, and also the 260km SH 94 (also known as the Milford Sound Road) which sees motorcyclists start with rural sheep country in Gore, the lakes of the Te Anau area, and finishing with magnificent beech forests and steep mountain ranges. Another route on the local kiwi riders conscience is SH 60 which takes riders from Nelson to Farewell Spit which includes the 23km Takaka Hill which is awash with tight corners and switch-backs, some aptly named with corner names like ‘Devils Elbow’ and ‘Eureka Corner’. Farewell Spit (an18km long sand spit) is so named as Captain Cook departed here on one of his voyages.



New Zealand’s speed limit is 100km/h, though with the South Island’s roads being less congested, this can create a false sense of security for motorcyclists as it is not difficult to ‘overcook a corner’ and find yourself in a ditch or the wrong side of the centreline. Being caught exceeding 140kmh may see a rider face an instant 28 day loss of licence.

During the summer months, NZ is awash with campervans – particularly the South Island – often travelling slowly and driven by inexperienced van drivers which can cause a queue of impatient drivers behind them.

The South Island experiences a far greater variance in temperature so it’s not uncommon to be riding in summer at 25 to 30 Celsius during the day and then for the overnight temperature to drop to 5 Celsius. Further, during the summer months it does not become nightfall until around 9pm so long riding days are not a problem, or the barbecue can be cranked up for many an hour.

Another feature of South Island roads is the road-rail bridges of the Westland province where trains and vehicles share single-lane bridges.

Motorcycle memorabilia can be found at Methven and Invercargill, and is well worth the stop. In fact, at Invercargill a very good collection of old motorcycles is located in a long serving, large family hardware store in the main street.

When you finish your day's riding you may want to relax with a beer at a pub and this will cost you around NZ\$6 for a pint of local bitter. Petrol is currently around the NZ\$2.10 mark (June '13) and a good three course meal at reasonable restaurant will set you back around NZ\$50, and certainly plenty more if you wish to dine at the higher end of the market. A motel of reasonable standard will set you back around NZ\$150 per night, though if you tent and use a camping ground this will only be about NZ\$25 per night for your ground plot and use of communal facilities.



Holiday parks on a shared room basis can work out a very cost effective at around NZ\$40 per night per person. One thing is for certain though is that it won't take long for fellow kiwi motorcycle enthusiasts to come over and introduce themselves and have a chat on how your tour is going.

New Zealand's South Island represents the pinnacle of motorcycle touring: big enough to have varying terrain and awe inspiring scenery each day and small enough that you can comfortably travel and tour the bulk of the island within a week. Come see for yourself why New Zealand is motorcycling nirvana.

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