



## Travel Stories by Amaru & Suzanne



### A Forgotten Highway led us to the Caves

by Amaru & Suzanne, January 27th 2007

'So tell me again why you chose to drive down this road?', says Mike from the back of the car.

We are driving along the "Forgotten World Highway", a road that not many people know about, not even the locals. It's a road that runs for 150km between the towns of Taumarunui and Stratford in the Taranaki region. The "highway" (not really a highway, only one lane in each direction) is listed as a Heritage Trail and we just thought it might be something different to try out.

The main purpose with this trip is to eventually make it to Waitomo where we are going to try out some Black Water Rafting (more about this later in the blog) but since we needed to fill out the rest of the time we decided that a drive along a road called the "Forgotten World Highway" could be a fun thing to try out. For this trip we have even recruited a third member to our travelling party, Mike, one of my colleagues from Vodafone. He's only been in the country for 2 months as well and not seen anything yet, so when asked if he wanted to tag along he was keen on joining us.



The Forgotten World Highway  
Let's go!



Good thing we just  
filled up our tank

To get down to the start of the "Forgotten World Highway" (from now on I will only refer to it as "FWH") we had to drive for quite a bit - this first part of the trip was just transporting us to the start, so we didn't make any stops before that.

Once we reached Taumarunui we had a quick meal, made sure we filled up the tank (there are no gas stations on the "FWH") and then started the trip.

It's a beautiful drive, we drove up and down through hills where the views are stunning, passed a few small farms here and there (we even saw a Lavender farm), drove through a 12km unsealed road and even got to drive through a one lane tunnel.... very exciting!

Halfway through the "FWT" we reached Whangamomona, a small village that became an independent Republic in 1988 after disagreements with the local councils. Every two years in January the village celebrates Republic Day and its population swells from approx 50 to over 5000 people, loads of people come via cars and trains from other places to help celebrate "the other nation".

We had heard about the republic day and knew that it would take place in January, we just didn't know during which day. And just a day before we left Auckland we managed to find out that the celebration would take place on the very day in which we were driving through. Talk about good timing!

There were lots of people celebrating and taking part in some of the events, you could try out and learn how to use a whip, there were sheep shearing competitions and some auctions taking place. We made our way to the local hotel where we tried to sample the "National Ale", but unfortunately they were all out and we had to do with a normal beer.....well, it could be worse, they could have been completely out =)



**The scenery along the Forgotten Highway is stunning**



**Lavender fields**  
Colourful and beautiful

After participating in the celebrations and even getting ourselves a local "passport" it was now time to hit the road again if we wanted to reach New Plymouth while we still had daylight.

We drove towards Mt Taranaki, a dormant volcano which resembles Japan's Mt Fuji (resembles it so much in fact that the movie "The Last Samurai" was filmed with this mountain as a stand in for Mt Fuji). We were hoping that we would be able to get a good view of the mountain but like Mt Fuji always is, its top was covered in clouds.

Eventually we made our way into New Plymouth, found our accommodation for the night and then hit the town. We had a nice meal at a local Irish Pub where we were able to also have some nice drinks with our food.

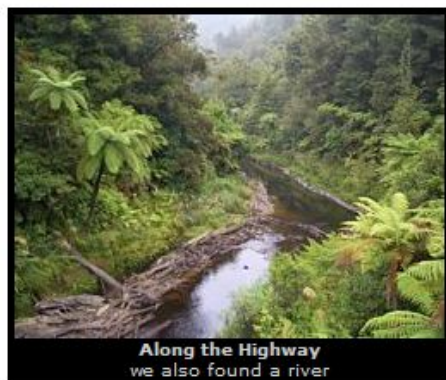
After dinner we were all very tired but going back and going to bed at 8pm seemed a bit early so we walked along the main street of the city for a while, looking for a place where we might be able to sneak in and have another drink (saturday night and we weren't dressed to get in anywhere). Eventually we just walked past the cinema and ended up watching a movie.

The next morning we got up pretty early and since the day was fairly sunny we decided to try and see the mountain. It would be such a shame to come all this way and not see it...

We drove back to Egmont Village and there turned off towards North Egmont. We could see most of the mountain but its top was still covered in clouds. As we got closer and closer to the mountain we could see that the clouds were disappearing and all of a sudden, the mountain was in clear view in front of us. And it was an awesome sight to behold!



**Gateway to heaven?**  
...or just to the hills



**Along the Highway**  
we also found a river

We reached the visitor centre of the mountain, read about all its different walks and just stood there watching the impressive mountain. While we were there the clouds came over the mountain again and once more, the mountain was gone.

Well, happy with what we managed to experience we headed back to New Plymouth, had breakfast and hit the road once more. Along the way we passed Black Beach with its black sand, very different from the other beaches we've seen around the world.

Not long after that we arrived at Waitomo, an area famous for its caves and the Glow Worms that live in them. This is where we were going to experience Black Water Rafting, also known as cave tubing. From what we knew, this is unique to New Zealand. You use an inflated rubber inner tube (you know the one from a car or truck) to keep you afloat and then it takes you down the river in the cave. We were very excited to try this out!

We were given our wetsuits, helmets and boots and then lined up to get a group photo taken. We were then driven to the cave. Before we entered the cave we each had to test run the tubes - jump off a ledge down the river to make sure we would be able to do it once we reached the waterfalls in the cave. Suz went first, attached the tube to her bum and then jumped backwards. As she landed in the water she exclaimed: "This is so warm and nice". I went after and the guide whispered to me to say that I had been scalded by the water. I then jumped and.....it was really, really cold!! The water can't have been much warmer than 12-14C. But of course I couldn't say that so I said: "The water is lovely, what do we need the wetsuits for!".



"Hobbit Hole"  
A very tight squeeze

The time had now arrived for us to enter the actual cave. We sat at the entrance of the cave for a little while just letting our eyes adjust to the dark. On entering the cave we had to do a bit of walking, jumping backwards into the darkness and also float through the caves. At one point the guides told us to switch off the lights and when we did we could see the Glow Worms. And it was an amazing sight....hundreds upon hundreds of small shining lights everywhere, it was almost as if we were looking at the stars.



Through the tunnel  
Almost there...

Later in the cave we floated in the darkness and just watched the Glow Worms, it was nice to just float along, do nothing and be able to see what we saw.

Eventually the ride had to end and we were taken back to our start location where we could have hot showers, hot soups and a nice bagel (can't just get a normal toast, it has to be in the form of a tube!). The whole experience took us 3 hours and we had such an amazing time, the caves are great, the Glow Worms are amazing and the guides were so much fun (we specially enjoyed their own conspiracy theory about the reason for the Glow Worms, let's just say it involved Uranium mines =)).

Well, after that we made it back to Auckland after an amazing weekend, the Forgotten World Highway was beautiful, Mount Taranaki's impressive and the Waitomo Caves was one of the best things we've ever done, there are some longer cave tours to do, there is for example one that takes around 7-8 hours and involves absailing among other things, maybe we just have to do one of those next time we hit the area =)

....back in Auckland a few days later Kate arrived on her way toward the south island and we decided to go out and go somewhere where we hadn't been yet. So we ended up at the Minus 5 Bar....it's just what it sounds like so you have to dress up. It's really fun though, everything is made out of ice, the walls, sofas, bar and of course the glasses. You are only allowed to sit in there for 30min so we had our drink, nibbled (well, ate is more like it) at the glasses and when we were cold enough we left.

Very cool....literally!



Not sure what that is...  
Not very pretty though



Whangamomona  
A Republic in New Zealand!?



**The Border Guard**  
.... a toilet



**The Main street of Whangamomona is packed with people**



**Sheep shearing**  
They had competitions...



**We arrived during Republic Day**  
Which only happens every 2 years



**Some Republic Souvenirs?**  
We ended up getting a nice local passport



**Guess the weight!**  
Well, we can tell we're in a country town



**Having a drink and celebrating Republic Day along the Forgotten Highway**



**Welcome back to New Zealand....**  
Funny!



**Well, that's the end of**  
The Forgotten Highway



**Mount Taranaki**  
Somewhere behind the clouds



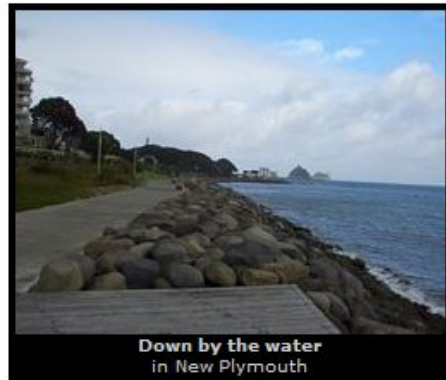
**The clouds are disappearing**  
We might get to see the mountain



**There it is....**  
A great sight



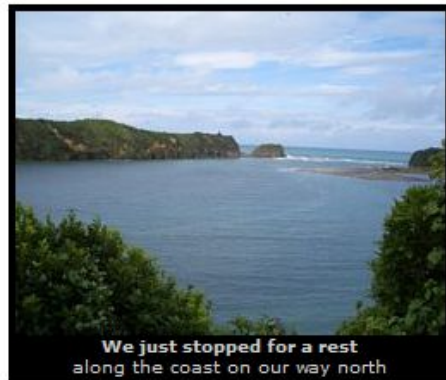
**We managed to see the mountain for 5min**  
Now the clouds are coming back



**Down by the water**  
in New Plymouth



**Ehhh....a windwand**  
What a great Phallic symbol!



**We just stopped for a rest**  
along the coast on our way north



**Black beach**  
Nothing but black sand....



**It does look quite nice though**  
Doesn't it?



**In Waitomo**  
Let's go Black Water Rafting!



**Our Group**  
All dressed up and ready to go



**Well....**  
Just playing around a bit =)



**"Make sure your bums don't fall through"**  
Bend over and sit on your tubes



**"Make a right, left, forward, backward"**  
Just learning how to navigate....



**And we are stretching**  
Don't want to pull anything...





**All geared up**  
for a cold experience



**Everything is made out of ice**  
Walls, sofas and glasses



**Warming up after the cold**  
in Lenin Bar



**Belgian beers**  
...at a bar with a Russian name

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