



DOWN THE KAIKŌURA COAST!

Revisiting one of New Zealand's great drives

Story + Photos Allan Dick

1. Getting the Kaikōura road reopened was a huge job – but there's still a lot of work to do and stops are frequent. However, the essential character of the drive remains
2. Morning view across to Anakiwa from the DOC camp at Aussie Bay
3. Early morning visitor at Aussie Bay
4. How many survived? A family of Paradise ducks on the road into Picton

When I awoke to splendid sunshine after a sound night's sleep at the Aussie Bay DOC camp in the Marlborough Sounds, I was feeling pretty excited by the prospects of my first drive down the Kaikōura Coast since the earthquake.

My first experience of this revered stretch of our country was in late 1949 when the Dicks and Dickettes moved from Auckland to Dunedin, with Father Dick piloting a huge Wolseley limousine that had been imported for a proposed royal tour in the mid-thirties that never eventuated.

We'd crossed from Wellington (with the Wolseley as deck cargo) on the slow old, lopsided *Tamahine*. After a couple of days in Picton with my uncle and aunt we headed down the coast with my father expressing some fear and trepidation at the journey ahead, and my mother pale and silent with worry; the road was little more than a track and had a fearsome reputation.

What I remember most about that trip is the constant changing of gears as father negotiated steep hills and tight bends on a narrow gravel road that seemed to be never ending.

I have a fleeting memory of Kaikōura as a little, scattered, gritty bleak settlement devoid of any pleasures.

The highlight of the journey was the tunnels ... "Dad, toot the horn!" – TOOT, TOOT, TOOT!

In the late fifties, when I started wearing long trousers, was shaving, and owned my own car, my first two expeditions to the North Island from Brighton were via the ferries from Lyttelton – the famous overnight service, with a cup of tea at 5.00am brought into your cabin by a person in a stiff white uniform!

It wasn't until the very late sixties, several years after the introduction of the roll-on, roll-off good ship *Aramoana* on the Picton run,

that I wondered about the benefits, if any, of driving up the Kaikōura Coast to Picton rather than catching the Lyttelton ferry.

In those days I was travelling between the islands seven or eight times a year, and after that first time, I made Picton my preference. I loved the drive. By then, the road was sealed and many of the twists and turns I remembered from that childhood experience had been eliminated. By today's standards, traffic then was light and the drive was romantic and beautiful.

I have lost count of the number of times I have driven up and down the Kaikōura Coast, but I got to know it very, very well. Not even the huge increase in traffic – particularly the number of truck-and-trailer units after the Lyttelton service ended – could spoil its magnificence.

My last trip was only a month or two before the earthquake, so there was a high level of eager anticipation to see what changes had taken place and whether or not the road I loved had been spoiled and changed beyond recognition.

But before that, we had some exploring to do.

It was a gorgeous spring morning as we departed Aussie Bay and headed around Queen Charlotte Drive to Picton. We had shared the DOC camp at Aussie Bay with just one other vehicle so I was surprised to find the DOC camp at Momorangi Bay, just a few kilometres further on, almost full. That's something that I have noticed in my years of travel and camping – many people actually like the companionship of others and parking close is a preference. Not for me however.

The drive around the bays was sublime, but as we came down the hill into Shakespeare Bay we came across a family (mum, dad and seven infants) out for a morning stroll – newly hatched paradise ducks being shepherded along by their parents.

They were going to get squished!





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5. Picton harbour with a ferry waiting 6. The former Presbyterian manse in Picton where the writer spent a childhood holiday – it's now a guest house 7. Spring flowers with the Picton Memorial arch as a backdrop 8. Bristol Freighter on the ground at Ōmaka airfield. It's been there since it flew in in 1986 9. Magnificent display of crashed Hudson bomber at Ōmaka Aviation Centre 10. A long goods train rumbles its way across the old Seddon, double-decker bridge. The lower car deck has been removed

The babies were impossibly cute but there was no way they could be shooed off the roadway and into the bush at the side. The Navigator spent 15 minutes chasing them every which way and that, while I warned oncoming traffic, but they were determined to carry on picking seeds out of the nooks and crannies in the tar seal.

Eventually we had to give up and drive off knowing that their chances of survival were slim. That cast us in a shadow of gloom the rest of the way into Picton.

That trip down from Auckland in 1949 wasn't my first experience of Picton; in early 1948 I spent six weeks staying there with my uncle and aunt. He was the Presbyterian minister and lived in the manse on Auckland Street (Picton), having moved there from Picton Street, Auckland!

I have fond memories of a summer spent there, going down to watch the *Tamahine* arrive each afternoon, fishing off the wharf, and rushing to a nearby railway crossing to count the carriages on each train.

The old manse is now a colourful guest house.

In Picton we had coffee, took a stroll, caught up with the Navigator's sister who had been seconded to the Picton DOC office, then bought pies and donuts from the Dutch Bakery (Bakereij) and ate them in the park down by the wharf.



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It was perfect.

But I had another couple of jobs to do before we headed down the Kaikōura coast.

On the way to Blenheim, I noted the progress on returning the Para Wetland to pristine condition – it will be superb once all the poisoned willows rot away.

We headed directly for the Aviation Heritage Museum (think Sir Peter Jackson) out at Ōmaka airfield to see the changes since I was last there. There was a very large dog show underway in the paddocks next to the airfield, but I had aircraft on my mind.

Museum manager Jane Orphan said the new displays were very popular, "particularly the Hudson". I can understand why: this is a diorama of a Hudson bomber crashed in the jungle of Borneo. Previously, most of the displays were of First World War aircraft, all in magnificent settings, but there are now 'Warbirds' from the Second World War as well.

This place is genius and you should have it on your bucket list.

I strolled across the road to the Classic Car museum which is more about British and

Australian cars of the sixties and seventies than anything else. There's a lot of them!

On the way out of town we called briefly at the historic village at Brayshaw Park. It's free to enter and drive around, which is remarkable in an age of 'user pays'.

As you'd expect in Blenheim it was stunner of a day, and after refuelling we took a quick walk around the town. Blenheim is unusual

in that the shopping centre is, to strangers, a confusing maze of short streets – it's as though the town was designed on a two-thirds scale. Almost like being in Lilliput.

Before heading south, we checked the weather forecast – fine for the rest of the day, but a southerly change blasting through overnight or next morning.

So, off we headed.

Just before Seddon, we stopped so I could look at the

old double-decker bridge across the Awatere River, and I wondered why it was necessary to pull up the old car decking after the flash new two-lane bridge was opened.

This bridge was always a highlight. On the northern end wall there was a billboard of the PDL Mustang racing car and the tag line "Electric Blue and 185 miles per hour" – but it's all long gone!



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While I was standing in thought, a train rattled overhead – a monster. There were three locomotives at the front hauling a train that seemed to go on and on and on. I marvelled at all of that steel and tonnage being controlled by one person! Back in the ‘good’ old days there would have been a small army of NZR staff.

Instead of driving through Seddon I turned off to show the Navigator the oceans of grapevines that stretch as far as the eye can see, all the way to the ocean. Mostly these are part of the Yealand’s Winery, but not all – other vineyards are also established here.

Of course, there had to be a tasting – and a purchase.

Yealand’s is huge – with a focus on self-sufficiency and the environment. On an earlier solo visit I had met founder Peter Yealand, a former contractor and fisherman, who told me he spent months on a bulldozer contouring all of the land for the grapes.

The young woman in the tasting room suggested we might like to follow the “White Gravel Trail”, a 7.5-kilometre, 40-minute drive around the estate.

I glanced at the map not realising it was upside down and headed off in completely the wrong direction and ended up in a large paddock on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean, where peas for Talley’s were being harvested. Retracing our route I discovered my mistake and followed the correct trail.

I’m glad we did.

This place is beautiful – and it’s going to get better. The plantings of trees and shrubs have yet to fully mature and the grapevines were only beginning to bud. In a year or two, in mid-summer, this place is going to be incredible. What’s not in grapes is neatly trimmed grass giving the whole place a park-like feel.

We stopped to see some kunekune pigs with babies and a collection of tame fowls. In fact,

tame wild life is everywhere around the drive.

The trail takes you to the edge of the estate on the clifftops, where a large fenced and grassed area overlooks the Pacific with views to the North Island – and there are picnic- and stopping areas all the way. There’s an open feeling here of big skies and big spaces that you don’t always get from vineyards.

We had no fixed plans for camping that night. We thought we might get as far as the camping areas around Goose Bay or thereabouts, but that was south of Kaikōura and we wanted to spend some time in the town. We decided to box on and see what turned up.

We detoured through a side road called Redwood Pass before rejoining the main road at Dashwood. Then another short detour to look at the Lake Grassmere saltworks.

We stopped for a few moments at Kekerengu where SH1 really meets the coast. There’s a stylish café here called “The Store” – and there really was a general purpose store here for many, many years.

Thirty years or so ago, a friend of ours, Maria, who had an impact on my life, owned the place and decided to expand the business by providing afternoon teas for passing travellers. That side of the business grew and eventually took over, with the result that new owners demolished the old original store and built the stylish new premises.

Maria eventually moved to Auckland and

- 11. Cob cottage outside Blenheim has been a familiar roadside sight for many years
- 12. The tasting room at Yealand’s winery
- 13. The long and winding road at Yealand’s winery. Last years vines are bundled up and used for fencing
- 14. A mountain of salt at the Grassmere works

about 12 years ago she was diagnosed with terminal kidney failure. My tissue type was compatible and I donated one of my kidneys. At first things looked good, but then she developed serious complications and an adverse reaction to the anti-rejection drugs and slipped into a coma and died.

So we stood in the sun at Kekerengu and remembered Maria, and her telling us that when she started making afternoon teas the most popular item was bluff oysters served on a small square of buttered Molenberg bread.

Up to here, most of the quake damage had been repaired to a high standard with just some finishing-off work going on, but south of Kekerengu the impact of the earthquake began to be very apparent. There were new sections of road, almost a non-stop stream of Armco safety barrier, and in the hills on the inland side of the road you could see numerous slips – some small, some massive.

“I wonder if we will see those little islands of land where the cows were stranded?” pondered the Navigator. We didn’t!

It was after 5.00pm so the majority of tools had been downed and machinery switched off, but we got a very clear idea of the amount of work that had been done. However, apart from the long stretches of Armco and an almost total lack of ‘pull-over’ areas and access to the coast, the character of the road was largely unchanged.

But that all changed the closer we got to Kaikōura.

As we neared Ōhau Point and the seal colony, the real scale of the quake and the damage to



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the coastline became more and more obvious: the raised stretches of seabed, the massive slips in the hills and the magnificent engineering work that has gone into the recovery.

The road has been realigned, curves around bays softened and widened, while concrete and stone buttressing all give the road a different look and feel.

The old swimming pool in the bush at Ōhau

Point where baby seals played no longer exists, and the road now sweeps around what was previously a sharpish bend. Here there is a carpark with a long viewing area that’s stylish and modern. We stopped and looked over at the hundreds – if not thousands – of seals on the rocks below.

We carried on – more concrete but it’s styled to soften the visual impact, and the gabion walls



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(stones in wire baskets) are almost ‘natural’ in their appearance. It is a miracle the road is open – but there are still major ongoing works and there will be for some time to come.

In total, we made six stops at traffic-light-controlled areas where the road was either down to one way, or work was ongoing.

The biggest change for me was at a place called Blue Duck Street and Iron Gate, a particularly narrow piece of coast where the road and railways got entwined with each other and crossed a couple of times. I was interested to see how they ‘fixed’ that.

It’s now easier, wider and less complex than it was previously, and totally realigned.

The work that’s already been done from Ōhau Point to where the road turns inland away from the coast at Hapuku is breathtaking. The use of concrete and those netted stone walls is impressive and in as good taste as it’s possible. This is not the road of old, but neither is it some over-engineered, alien landscape.

Interesting to see gravel crushing plants set up in the riverbeds in a couple of places.

By now it was getting late, so we stopped for the night on the corner at Hapuku, joining 40



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or 50 other campers in a line along the ocean front. Many of them were surfers.

We had a blessed night on the coast, set a fire on the stony beach using the piles of driftwood, made another pasta meal and toasted the great New Zealand outdoors.

I wasn’t certain about the camping status of this area, but there have always been campervans here and toilets as well, so we took the chance. Now I learn the council is considering making this a no camping area,

effective this summer.

Next morning, we were up and on the road early, wanting to beat the southerly change.

In Kaikōura we stopped at a café, but a group of four beat us to the door and were so long picking this and that, but not that, nor that, just a little of this – and then debating the price – so we walked out and found somewhere else.

I was surprised at the scale of damage Kaikōura itself suffered – several well-known buildings gone.



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We drove to the end of the peninsula and back – found no seals – strolled, found a café where there weren't picky-choosy customers, and I thought about the changes I have seen in the town from that first visit in 1949.

On down the coast with a quick detour to South Bay and then through the tunnels, the famous tunnels, which apart from new concrete trim and lining are just as they always were.

Then on to visit an old family friend who lives near Goose Bay. He told of the difficulty in the first days after the earthquake and having to head south to Cheviot for groceries before the road to Kaikōura was reopened.

“Even though the road was open, negotiating the Hundalees was a nightmare,” he said.

But he voiced something we had noticed the previous day.

“We were talking about it last night,” he said. “They have spent millions and millions and made a fantastic job, but locals have noticed that there is nowhere to pull over in many places if you get a puncture, or a breakdown – it’s all Armco.”

While we were visiting him, the southerly arrived with strong winds and driving rain.

Leaving our friend we continued on, finding the road through the Hundalees was completely repaired and pretty much exactly as I remembered it prior to the damage.



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From there on it was pretty much back to the way it has always been – typical North Canterbury farming country.

It had been a great drive – the scale of the repair work is breathtaking with more to be completed. It’s already an ‘easier’ drive than it was before and it’s going to be even ‘easier’ when completed.

Apart from the miracle in getting the road reopened to a useable standard in two years, I am so relieved that the charm, beauty and character of the drive remains much the same. **RV**

20. Concrete and stone buttressing all give the road a different look and feel



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