



Bonfire put on by a local farmer at the campsite – end of day one of the 'Big Coast' [Rob Greenaway]

THE BIG EASY, ON KNOBBLY TYRES

New Zealand's 'Big Coast' Cycle Event

Mountain bikes are the toys of the nineties. With wide wheels and shiny paintwork, they are the equivalent of the Range Rover — designed for off-road use, but seldom taken further than the local shopping centre. Considering the rate at which mountain bikes sell in New Zealand — about nine out of every ten bikes sold in the past year — the hills should be alive with the sound of muddy derailleurs. In reality, a large proportion of mountain bike owners share a reluctance to take their new machines into the rough terrain for which they were designed.

Consultants — a small Wellington-based tourism, parks and recreation planning firm, which has also organised such events as the Raid Gauloises in New Zealand in 1989 and in Borneo in 1994.

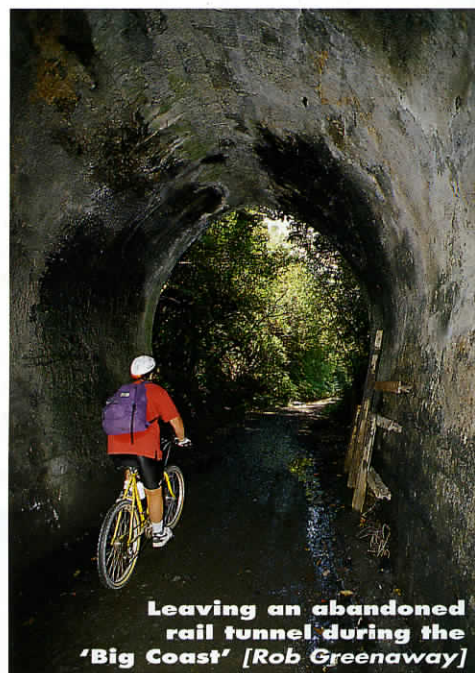
The concept of The Big Coast was supported in its initial years by the Hillary Commission, a quasi-government agency responsible for promoting sport, fitness and leisure. So far it's worked, if the growth of the event is any indication.

a local band for the evening's entertainment. As the music plays, the young riders steal most of the cardboard rubbish bins and use them as sleds on a nearby hill.

Since all rider's personal camping gear is carried by a truck, and Lions Clubs provide all the meals as a fund-raising exercise, there is no work to be done. As a result, the event has become a true family affair. In 1992, most riders were between 15 and 25 years. This year there were as many teenagers as people in their forties. This is not your typical mountain biking event — it's as much about socialising as it is about riding. At least two participants met on one event and later married (one of them was me).



Heading towards Pencarrow Head and into a headwind – day two of the 'Big Coast' [Rob Greenaway]



Leaving an abandoned rail tunnel during the 'Big Coast' [Rob Greenaway]

However, in Wellington — self-proclaimed mountain bike capital of New Zealand — one event has shown that more and more average mountain bikers are willing to get their toys muddy. It's called The Big Coast and has grown from 300 riders in 1992 to over 1,000 at this year's event, which means it's probably the largest non-competitive mountain bike event in Australasia.

The Big Coast was originally designed as a cunning plan to get thousands of New Zealand mountain bike owners off the roads and into the hills, courtesy of an overnight cross-country cycling excursion. Rather than being just an event, it was to be an example of what ordinary folk could do. The concept of the fully supported ride was dreamt up by outdoors person Dave Bamford of Tourism Resource

The route is simple, although it sounds like hard work. Loosely described as a circumnavigation of the Rimutaka Ranges, the event is in reality a 100 km cruise, punctuated by cups of tea, cake, scones and good conversation. Enid Blyton never had it as good. When the route isn't going downhill, it's on the flat, and most of it is completely off-road. The few hell-riders who can't miss an event which offers cups of tea, are satisfied by the option of adventurous routes that take on some of the hardest riding in the region.

The two-day event is cut in half by the installation of a tent city on private farmland, by a piece of reflective water called Lake Pounui. Each year the local farmer throws a pile of tree stumps and brushwood together, lights it with a bucket of diesel, and illuminates

Participants tend to be non-traditional outdoors people. Most are pure urban types bleached white by fluorescent lights. Every year many participants purchase their first \$700 mountain bike during the week preceding the event, and then have the pleasure of cruising beside riders on machines worth over \$10,000. Volunteer bike mechanics expend as much energy shaking their heads in either awe or shock at the state of many people's cycles as they do on peddling their own.

The Big Coast is one of the best indications that mountain biking is becoming a mainstream activity. Just as snowboarding is becoming less a street culture phenomenon and being taken up by ordinary skiers, off-road cycling is moving from fringe culture to mainstream. And like The Big Coast, mountain biking is not going to go away.

Rob Greenaway