



OPERATION: ENDLESS SUMMER

Sick and tired of the long, cold British winter, Roo Fowler takes extreme measures and jets to the other side of the world in pursuit of a month's worth of high-adrenaline kiwi kicks

Words and photos: Roo Fowler

Flicking idly through the TV channels one day, I stumbled upon the warm, grainy images of Bruce Brown's legendary surfing documentary *The Endless Summer*.

The film follows a couple of surfers on a trip around the world as they seek to escape winter. A seed was planted in my mind, and perhaps watered by the rain hammering down outside. Whatever, the decision was made: I had to do something similar one day.

For whatever reason, it's taken me a while to get round to it. It seems like such a big deal, flying around the globe — the sheer distance, the unknowns, even the time differences create barriers, mental and physical. Last year was different, though. Christmas passed by and we rolled into the New Year through the usual bouts of snow and rain.

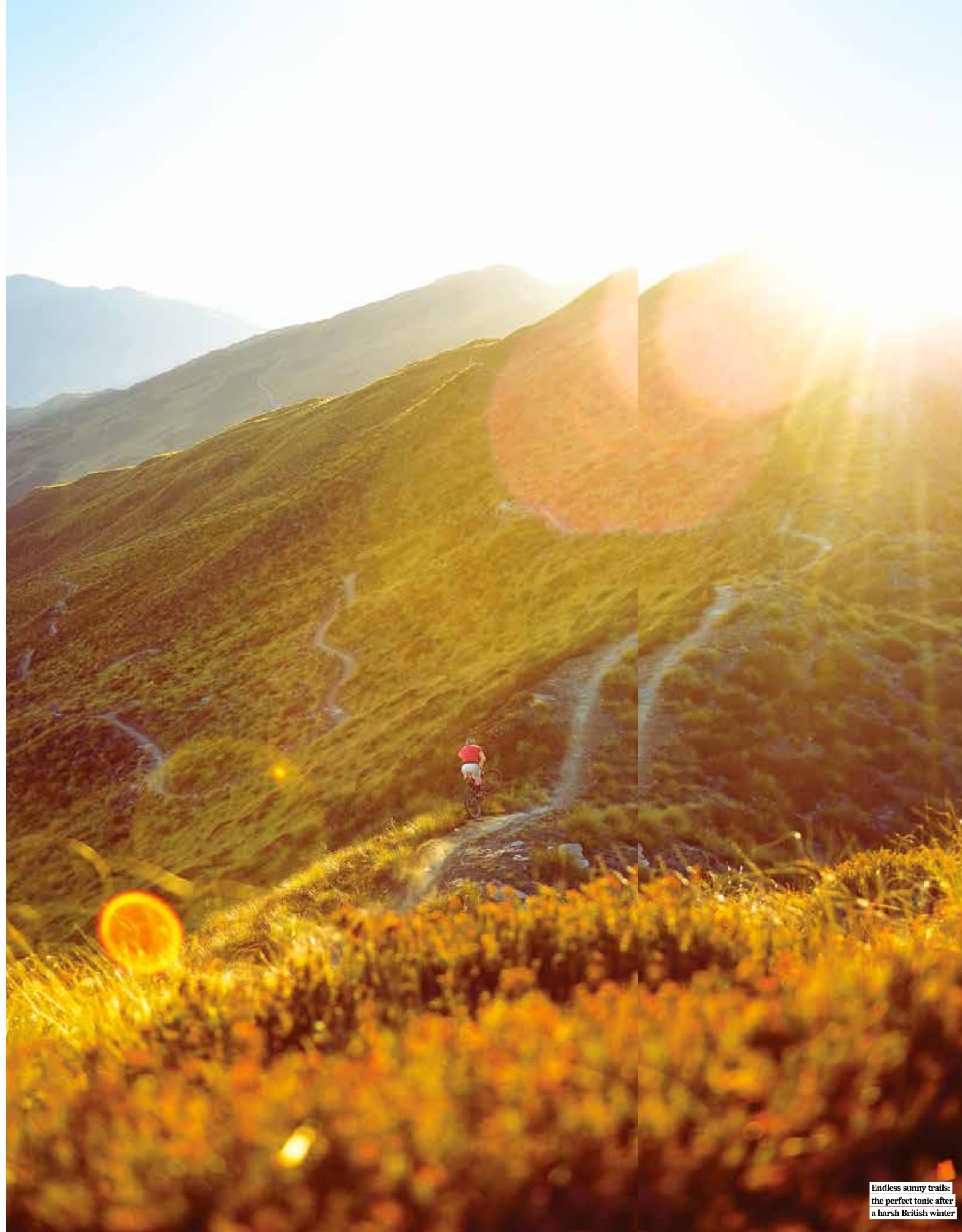
It felt like spring would never come, and so I found myself hunting around for flights. I took the plunge and hit 'confirm'. My booking details said that in four weeks' time I'd be leaving for Christchurch, and returning from Auckland a month after that. The paperwork might say I was going to New Zealand, but I saw it as 'Destination Summer'.

I drove up to Heathrow on a particularly dark, drizzly February afternoon. The motorway dot matrix signs read 'Heavy snow forecast', but for once, instead of a warning, it served as encouragement, a push in the right direction: I was doing the right thing.

Twenty-four hours of flying plus a coach ride later, I'm in Queenstown. It's 25°C, paddleboarders are cruising around turquoise Lake Wakatipu and the Skyline gondola is lapping the hill. As smoke from a BBQ drifts by, I realise quite how much I've missed the ambient energy of a summer evening.

New Zealand has a reputation as a paradise for outdoor pursuits, with good reason. There's great mountain biking all over both islands, running straight out of the towns and making good use of the surprisingly vast and steep terrain.

Whether you're looking for big mountain adventures or well-sculpted woodland trails, it feels like New Zealand and mountain biking are made for each other. Sometimes a whole area of riding would take me by surprise, other times a single trail, so here are a few nuggets — what you can expect if you make it out there.



QUEENSTOWN: FAMOUS FOR A REASON

The North Islanders laughed at me for spending so much time in Queenstown — it's the spot where all travelling riders seem to head, oblivious to the quantity and quality available elsewhere. It's true, some of the best riding I did in New Zealand was in the quieter, less-ridden spots such as the cheeky trails in Wellington, a tiny spot near Hamilton, and the fast but tight trails of Cragieburn.

The thing is, it's hard to beat Queenstown; you can fly to within a few miles of the trails, the town is vibrant, and a lot of the riding is within pedalling distance. The Skyline gondola opens up downhill trails that are definitely best enjoyed with a full-on DH bike, although a few are good fun on a more trail-orientated set-up. Most of the tracks are steep and rooty, with various rock drops and rolls, and around five minutes in length. For your first run, Hammy's Track is a good bet,

carving its way down the hill with a relatively gentle gradient.

For the best of Queenstown's riding, head up to Coronet Peak for massive scenery and a big ride that takes in Coronet Enduro, Rude Rock, Skippers Canyon and Zoot Track. If you've seen the Stevie Smith/Gee Atherton section in *Follow Me*, you'll recognise these trails, and Killaflaw's 'Set Me On Fire' will be pumping through your head.

A 20-minute lakeside pedal from town brings you to the old gold-mining trail Goldigger for a 15-minute climb and eight-minute roller-coaster descent — then you pop over the road to enter the seven-mile scenic reserve, a packed peninsula of singletrack, berms and jumps where the trail names do the talking... from Satan's Corridor to Grin and Holler, ending on the beach of Lake Wakatipu for a quick dip to cool down. ➔



Struggling to see the wood for the trails



Tracing ridge lines all day long



Red sky at night: yet another delight



Between a rock and a gnarly place

Endless sunny trails: the perfect tonic after a harsh British winter

CHRISTCHURCH: DH CITY

Christchurch was an unknown. I'd heard it had some good stuff but knew little more than that. The guys at Chain Reaction Cycles on Riccarton Road helpfully pointed me in the right direction, and after a quick drive through a city still seriously scarred from the earthquake two years ago, I parked in a residential street and pulled the bike out, still questioning what was ahead.

Some ominous clouds had moved in but it stayed dry as I found a sign for Rapaki Track and set off into Mount Vernon Park. A minute later, I had to stop and check I hadn't slipped through a portal — I was getting blasted by a strong wind. A rough, stony track disappeared off into rolling hills reminiscent of the Peak District. Turning around, there was the city of Christchurch. The contrast between the two views was startling.

Half an hour later, I'd reached a purpose-built mountain bike trail heading towards Victoria Park, where around 20 downhill trails drop towards the city. I was short on time and picked the first trail I came across, Lava Flow. It's slow, technical, but steep in places, with some genuinely



An mtb wilderness on the edge of a city

tricky sections that require careful line choice and confidence before rolling in.

My rear shock got a workout skidding down old volcanic rock, and it was a good four minutes before I reached the end. I was stunned; it could have been a national DH track, but it's just one of many, and it finishes literally as it heads into Christchurch.

There can't be many places in the world that have riding of this quality and quantity located so close to a major city. ➔





WELLINGTON: WEIRD WORLD

It's said that any hill you can see from central Wellington has mountain bike trails on it. And that was easy to believe as I was shown around a few local spots, kicking off with Makara Peak.

Rolling in from a finger post that informed me Coed-y-Brenin was a mere 18,700km away, we hit the open, bench-cut trails dodging exposed rock and negotiating some tight but flowing hairpins on a loose surface. As we picked up speed, we railed turns above suburban roofs and dived into tunnels of gorse and reeds.

We sampled just one of the 15 or so options before checking out some slightly more hidden

and cheeky trails that had us grinning from one obstacle to the next with the aroma of hot discs and dirt. It's a bizarre environment — it feels like bone-dry rainforest and yet still pops straight out onto city streets.

Another day, and one last nugget of Wellington's riding awaited. We did an early morning lap of Wainuiomata Trail Project, which offers a different kind of riding altogether. Deep in dense woodland and rainforest are tight, twisting, undulating trails that keep you as focused on the ups as on the downs. By the end, you're utterly disorientated but hungry for more. ➔



Just 12,000 miles from a Welsh downpour



Wellington's trails demand full focus



The trails begin just minutes from the city

RAINBOW MOUNTAIN: FAST AND FURIOUS

I met up with Jeff from Southstar Adventures at a combined service station/honey shop. We headed five minutes north to park at the dormant volcano named Rainbow Mountain, so called because of the various hues of its rock. The local Maori legend is that there is an eruption every time the trees have fully grown since last being destroyed. They looked large and healthy but there was no sign of lava — though it was baking hot as we started the spin up. If you're keen and have the gearing, it's possible to pedal all the way up the singletrack climb to arrive 40 minutes later at the innocuous start of the Te Ranga trail, which Jeff had a hand in building.

With no idea what was ahead, I dropped in on narrow bench-cut singletrack that undulated and flowed through the woods and over rocks before breaking out in the open, past a huge boulder and back into trees. The odd pedal stroke kept the speed up over the crests. As we worked our way lower, the track steepened in places; tight turns inches deep in dust exploded like a smokescreen from the rear wheel.

After a few minutes, it darkened. We entered a rainforest, where the trees were larger, older, and less dense. The trail widened, we picked up speed, and suddenly it was all arms and legs as we struggled to squash the lips and keep the bike on the ground for the approaching corner. Out in front, Jeff hit a bermed chicane in textbook fashion, railing the left-hander and bouncing into the right with such speed that his tyre rolled off the rim and barked out in protest. This ducking and diving over berms, lips, rollers and around the cartoonish-sized ferns continued for longer than I'd dared hope. Eventually the trail started to peter out. We crossed a fire road and picked up a tiny singletrack beside a stream; around the corner a waterfall appeared, with a convenient plunge pool. It looked icy but Jeff said I'd be surprised. I was. My skin stung from the heat — it was a hot spring. Of course, this is New Zealand. You don't just get amazing trails, you get amazing trails in incredible places. As I left, I passed a fire danger sign with the arrow hovering somewhere between severe and extreme.



Here, it pays to ride faster than lava flows



Supersized thrills in the rainforest



Te Ranga Trail boasts dazzling variety



Can't face leaving? Pretend to be a stick



Beyond Queenstown's bike park is some incredible natural riding



The riding is just as good as the views



Remote trails at Craigieburn: fast and tight

AND THE REST...

A month's riding is too much to fit into one article, and I'm missing out so much. There was a night sleeping out under the stars and full moon, rising for an epic morning descent from rocks and ruts to a dusty ridge line, tailing my mate Toby around berms and over 20ft tables, hauling hiking bag and roll-mat, straight into town for breakfast. I did one ride at a locals' spot unknown to most, even the natives, which packed countless threads of traffic-free loam and roots into a hidden paradise. The downhill track in the same place had us roosting dust clouds so thick it took five minutes for them to disperse.

And then there were the cheeky trails in Queenstown that look like nothing serious but turn into super-steep technical trials sections challenging even the best local riders. An hour's drive and you're out in the Wanaka maze known as 'Sticky Forest', hitting trail bike jump lines and singletrack that turns double for impromptu dual races. Getting bored? There's the purpose-built trail at Deans Bank just over the river. And we're only just getting to Rotorua's Whakarewarewa Forest, the hub of mountain biking on North Island, a vast woodland with a complex trail network from gentle XC routes to downhill runs.

Most of these are man-made tracks, but there are also numerous hiking trails open to mountain biking across the country, from the classic Moonlight track to the 71km Queen Charlotte. Many of these are ripe for hike-a-bike and multi-day bivvy missions. There are whole areas I never got to explore, like the city of Nelson, also said to have some incredible riding.

Mountain biking is a popular sport in NZ and it seems to be on the rise. New trails are

appearing everywhere, and thanks to an open mind in the Department Of Conservation (DOC), many of them are official, with an accompanying trail map. Unlike in the UK, many of the best riding spots here are clustered around cities and towns, making them easy to access and to maintain. New Zealand is a long way away but without a doubt it's worth it. Logistical (or financial!) difficulties involved in trying to organise a trip like this are swiftly forgotten after you get here and begin to sample the riding experiences on offer.

For me, suddenly — so suddenly, way too soon — my time in New Zealand was up. I found myself back in the UK on the M25, early Monday morning in March, heavy snow falling. It was the first precipitation I'd seen in a month.

THANKS

A big thank you to Tobias Pantling, Caleb Smith, Rod Barnsley and Jeff Carter for their help. [mbr](#)



Unforgettable: you won't regret an NZ epic

KIWI FACTS

GETTING THERE

■ Check baggage policy if flying with a bike (watch out if it's across mixed carriers!). If exploring both islands, flying into Queenstown and out of Auckland or vice versa may work well. Alternatively, fly into Christchurch or Wellington.

GETTING AROUND

■ There are good bus routes and many are happy to take bikes. Car hire is reasonable and campervan hire is worth a look. Don't be fooled by distances — motorways are virtually non-existent, so cross-country driving can take longer than you predict. Crossing between South and North Islands takes three hours on the ferry.

EXTRAS

■ The Skyline gondola in Queenstown offers uplifts throughout the summer. It's £40 for a day pass, £100 for three days and £280 for a half season ([skyline.co.nz](#)).

■ Southstar Adventures offers shuttles in Rotorua from about £5 for one uplift, to £100 for 60 ([southstaradventures.com](#)).

■ Vertigo Bikes offers bike hire and tours around Queenstown with its uplift trailer ([vertigobikes.co.nz](#)), as do Queenstown bike taxis ([queenstownbiketaxis.co.nz](#)).

■ Other bike shops: R+R Sport ([rrsport.co.nz](#)) and Outside Sports ([outsidesports.co.nz](#)), with stores in Queenstown.

ACCOMMODATION

■ In Queenstown itself, Pinewood Lodge ([pinewood.co.nz](#)) is a good place to look, with rates from £15 a night in a mixed dorm to £62 for a two-person en suite, and options for family units as well. It's a few minutes from the town centre, right next to the Skyline gondola and offers bike hire and storage.

■ Motels are reasonably priced and a godsend for long jaunts.

WHAT BIKE?

■ A 140-160mm trail bike with dropper post is ideal. You don't want to be on too big a bike, as you'll want to be out pedalling all day enjoying everything you can!

WHERE THE TRAILS ARE

