In late fall, Hannah sent out an email from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, with thoughts of traveling down under. At the time, I was gallivanting around in the Bay area, Tom was off photographing the legendary cyclocross races in Belgium, Heather was continuing her massage studies in Thailand, and Brian was being his mountain-man self, innovating with his split snowboard biz. Meanwhile, Hannah was doing her thing — skiing like only Hannah Hardaway does, scheming up a next adventure and its likely participants.

Back in winter wonderland Missoula, Montana, it was early February, and Tom and I were riding on trainers and reveling in the launch of our article “Chasing Summer” in the February 2011 issue of Adventure Cyclist. By the end of the month, Tom, Hannah, and I had purchased tickets to meet in Auckland for a four-week ride on the northern tip of New Zealand’s North Island. Shortly thereafter, Heather and Brian were on board.

The Riders

Tom Robertson is a rock. He has raced, toured, ridden, and worked in Adventure Cycling’s Routes and Mapping Department for the better part of his days. Technically proficient and a logistical master, Tom is also one of the most sensitive, caring, and patient people I know. He is tuned into everything from route details to morale. A tough rider, modest and easygoing, Tom can roll with anything. With a bike in one hand, he almost always has a camera in the other. Tom reserved our bikes and gear in Auckland and mapped out a rough itinerary.

Hannah Hardaway’s vibrant personality and perpetual enthusiasm have a history of starting a party. An Olympic skier (Salt Lake City 2002), she is an athletic machine. Boisterous, adventurous, and seemingly inexhaustible, Hannah will charm the pants off you and then kick your butt at any sport. Driven and self-disciplined, she is also a loyal friend who beams love with her infectious laughter. Hannah knew a couple who had biked in the region and scored their notes.

Upon meeting Heather Geoghegan, I felt as if I’d known her for years. She has a refreshing quality about her that is straightforward and honest. She seems
to live by her intuition and is super go-with-the-flow. A professional musician and acupuncturist, Heather tends to matters of wellness and brought herbs and massage therapy along for the trip — keeping us all healthy and soothing our tender aches. Brian Pattee and Hannah are cousins. Clearly cut from the same cloth, Brian also embodies superhuman strength and capability. A well-seasoned snowboarder and backcountry woodman, he moves with simplicity and makes everything look easy. A Gary Snyderish sort of character, he is an adventurer both inwardly and outwardly. A gentle presence, Brian has a steady and agreeable temperament — unhurried by circumstance. And me? I like to think that I’m always up for an adventure.

My last minute decision to bring a Joseph Campbell Companion was perfect. Reading excerpts (which I have quoted here) throughout the trip offered pure gems of insight.

Arrival

Tom and I left from Portland, Oregon, Hannah and Brian from Sydney, Australia, and Heather from Bangkok, Thailand. We all convened in Auckland on April 16. It did not feel like much of a big deal as we arrived on the other side of the world in what (according to the clock) appeared to be the future. After exploring and getting our bearings, we quickly turned Freeman’s Lodge in Ponsonby into home. Auckland offered a warm welcome with 70-degree temperatures, some fine coffee shops, and open green space, and top-notch gear rentals. Navigating on foot was easy and offered the usual city experience. As I tune into the rhythm of a long ride and realize the minuteness and magnitudes of physical and mental decisions, I find cycling meditative. Riding with others, such moments become interspersed with group dynamics — there are spaces between spinning wheels where we eat, sleep, and so on — and I found myself deliberately reflected in these moments — relationships and ideas pertaining to the individual versus the collective.

From train to Wellsford

The edge of the Auckland suburbs felt like a formal beginning to our ride. It was refreshing to shed the urban energy and to breathe the cool autumn air of the countryside. The climbs of the first day were a novelty as we naturally fell into line and rode in a single file. The scenery was straight out of a fairy tale surrounded with endless rolling hills and speckled hermitages. At the 25 kilometer mark, we learned we were going to have to ride the scenic hills of the Coromandel Peninsula. It appeared as a possible place to make camp.

We spotted a pull-off with horses and cattle and white-knuckling on the declines, all the while gazing over fields and groves that seemed to go on forever. Upon our arrival in Wellsford, we found ourselves at a junction, both geographically and as a team — one of several as our group would eventually splinter from five to one. As we posted up outside the public library, snugging some warm clothes and kicking over our belongings, we decided that Wellsford would inevitably be home for the night. With no clear prospects of camp spots, we were again graced by random goodness.

Alison magically appeared. Curious

We awoke covered in fresh dew and beams of morning splendor. The North Island of New Zealand is chock-full of winding roads through lush green hills. From train to Wellsford — one of several as our group would eventually reduce from five to one. As we

Early morning splendor. The North Island of New Zealand is shock-full of winding roads through lush green hills.
From Wellsford to Kerikeri

Early on April 20, the five of us headed back down Alison’s dirt road, and as our tires hit the pavement, we split. Hannah, Brian, and Heather went west from Wellsford toward Dargaville, while Tom and I traveled east towards Whangarei. We were pulled in those directions for various reasons, but there was something unsettling in parting ways. We would meet up again — love and kindness is contagious.

The coming climbs. The group has a few laughs while looking over elevation profiles.

We noticed this pass-it-on spirit again and again — love and kindness is contagious and truly seems to spread so that people can give it away. We spent several heartwarming, rejuvenating nights with Alison and her family throughout the trip.

The spirit of the land was powerful and stood at the ocean’s edge and listened, in awe of the stars multiplying above me. In my skin, and the taste of saltwater on my lips. Tom and I rejuvenated in our own ways and regained energy. After a good 70 kilometers, we rolled into Uretiti Beach campground near Ruakaka, bundled up for sunset, picnicked the tent, cooked dinner, dozed off, gazed at the stars, and climbed over the sand dunes to the sea. I stood at the ocean’s edge and listened, in awe of the stars multiplying above me. In this moment, I sensed that I would at some point go off on my own during this trip. The spirit of the land was powerful and spoke to me in a solitary way. And that’s how it goes sometimes. It takes a minute to just show up and to let go.

The next morning the sun was beaming more than on any morning yet. While the tent hung drying in the trees, I carried myself out to sea for a swim — soft sand grassed my edges, cool clear water washing my skin, and the taste of saltwater on my lips. Tom and I rejuvenated in our own ways and rejoiced for a long day of intense riding on the highway and worked hills going toward Kerikeri in time for Easter. From Whangarei to Kuakatau to Russell, my legs grew stronger as did my confidence. I knew I was lucky to be riding with Tom.

Meanwhile, Hannah and Brian were machining their zip-tied, broken-gear get-ups while Heather was gladly hitching rides from the locals on the unruly hills of the west side. Surely none of us would be short of stories of the kind people that came our ways, and seagulls danced for the crowd. This chapter of the ride. There was a lovely scene in the ferry town of Russell as children giggled while carving sand angels on the beach and seagulls danced for the crowd. This magic goes on and on, as everything seemed somewhat extreme and fantastical in New Zealand, reminding me that life is beautiful.

“Live from your own center.”

Kerikeri to Auckland

Bay of Islands to Kerikeri was one of my favorite sections of riding — quiet roads,
The spirit of the land was powerful and spoke to me in a solitary way. And that’s how it goes sometimes.

Chas, the Round-the-Bend Café with legendary fish and chips; the posh Burgundy Rose Motel in Whangarei; rowdy rounds of ping pong at the guesthouse near Waipu; historic Towai Hotel with owners Sam and Rose Motel — all curled up in bed after a hot-tub party and bucket of ice cream, with Brian reading Krishnamurti, Tom listening to music, Heather typing, Hannah uploading photos, and me writing. We had become a family. And for some reason, the specialness of these simple sort of moments always shines brighter in hindsight — there were so many of them.

“Your real duty is to go away from the crowd and delved into a whole new sort of experience. In short, I stilled the voice in my head and went with my body and delved into a whole new sort of adventure.”

Reading this Joseph Campbell excerpt confirmed my intuitive decision to depart from the group. I wonder if I would have done anything differently had I known this was to be my last day of riding. And so it goes. It was a bit of a heartbreak to relinquish the bike. But ultimately, I embraced both courage and fear to go my own way and willingness to change gears midstream.

Once back in Auckland, we came to another major juncture. Brian flew home, and I hitched a ride to a meditation center. The five of us shared a final meal and celebrated the exotic unfoldings of our journey. With happy bellies and warm hearts, we each seemed to shine a little brighter upon our departure.


“Your real duty is to go away from the community to find your Nzos.”


Ann Robertson is currently in Nepal further expanding her horizons. Tom Robertson is expanding his portfolio and currently photographing many Missoula events and athletes. More of his images can be seen at tomrobertson.com.