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JULY 2023



A guy riding a vintage minibike wearing a gorilla costume, a Hawaiian shirt, a lei, and pineapple sunglasses is what the Tranz Alpine Scooter Safari is all about.

Tranz Alpine Scooter Safari

Cold Kiwi cosplay for a good cause

Story by ULI CLOESEN

Photos by the author, Cheeky Kea, and courtesy TASS

The biannual Tranz Alpine Scooter Safari is a test of endurance, with participants traveling 150 miles through near-freezing temperatures on city scooters. It crosses New Zealand's South Island, from Christchurch to Hokitika, and goes over the stunning Southern Alps. The event supports a serious cause, but the organizers and riders have a good sense of humor about it.

The TASS was created in 2009 by Jayne and Mike Rattray after their friend Blair Newton was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. Newton's mates decided to band together and create the greatest "pain in the ass" fundraiser they could devise to support his cancer journey. Newton, who passed away in 2014, loved pimping out his scooters and making his own costumes. He rode in two TASS events, dressed up as *Top Gear's* The Stig for one and Elvis in the other.

Thirty-two riders participated in the first TASS, and together they raised \$14,000 NZD for the Cancer Society. Since then, the event has snowballed, with more than 250 scooters taking part in 2022. Since the TASS began, it has raised more than \$1.4 million NZD.

A steady stream of colorfully dressed riders arrived for the 2022 Scooter Safari in near darkness at the rural Canterbury Vintage Car Club, near the airport in Christchurch. Despite the cold, a positive vibe prevailed, with riders dressed in eclectic attire. A team dressed as bumblebees joked with a team of riders in shark costumes. Some wore playful onesies – zebras, tigers, unicorns – over their riding gear. Despite it being a chilly 36 F, one brave lad wore shorts and a sweatshirt, and two guys had on short-sleeved California Highway Patrol outfits.

Scattered about were predominantly older Japanese scooters and minibikes, and some were towing sulky-type carts with toys attached to them. One scooter was fitted with handguards fashioned from plastic John Deere Hy-Gard oil containers.

Once everyone was signed in and briefed, the sun appeared and cast a glow on the motley crew. The first leg of the journey went through the Canterbury Plains, past dairy and fruit farms, to Sheffield (pop. 192), where the punters stopped for their first hot drink and some of the village's famous pie shop treats.



Left: The definition of “scooter” is left open to interpretation. Wearing a plush shark helmet and rubber fisherman’s boots, this rider is on a mobility scooter named “Greased Lightning.” **Middle:** Cookie Monster in a striped onesie hits the road while Animal loads his scooter. **Right:** Though dressed like the Pink Panther, this rider’s spirit animal is the unicorn.

More colorful characters turned up. Cookie Monster and Batman made an appearance, both with matching scooters. A white terrier in a miniature military jeep sidecar attached to a scooter wondered what all the fuss was about. One guy tried to make the trip on a mobility scooter, followed closely by a guy on a vintage minibike in a gorilla suit and a Hawaiian shirt.

After the break, the support vehicles vacated the location first, and the refreshed scootistas followed suit, traveling mostly on two-lane State Highway 73, with some single-lane bridges north of Springfield. Porters Pass (3,051 feet) soon appeared, and the steep incline presented challenges for many of the low-powered scooters.

The second stop was Lake Lyndon, which provided an uninterrupted view of snowcapped Mount Torlesse and

surrounding peaks. The route continued past Broken Hill toward Lake Pearson and several Canterbury ski areas and then alongside the Waimakariri River to Arthur’s Pass Village for lunch and fuel. The Rapid Relief Team provided the catering, churning out 500 meals outdoors in less than an hour.

Arthur’s Pass, which is situated at 2,425 feet in a national park of the same name, is one of three alpine passes connecting the South Island’s East and West coasts, and it marks the boundary between the West Coast and Canterbury regions.

After riders and machines had a reprieve, the downhill section began, including the 1,440-foot-long, 131-foot-tall Otira Viaduct toward Jacksons on the Taramakau River. Prior to the viaduct’s opening in 1999, the road between Arthur’s Pass and Otira was among the most dangerous in New Zealand due to landslides from nearby scree slopes.



Left: Team costumes are a popular choice for the Scooter Safari, like these chaps dressed as a shiver of sharks. (Or are they men eaten by sharks?) **Right:** With his light saber aloft, Darth Vader leads the charge on a Yamaha Maxam.

On their descent to the West Coast, the scooterists cruised down the Otira Viaduct, which has a 12% grade.



Left: Rodney Faulkner rode all but the last 6 miles of the TASS on his custom stand-up scooter. He's trailed by a *Star Wars* X-wing starfighter pilot. **Right:** In addition to scooters, there were plenty of Honda Trails and Super Cubs on the ride.

After a stop in Kumara, the scooterists continued along Highway 73 through undulating farmland, scrubland, and forest until they came upon the Tasman Sea on the West Coast. From there, the weary travelers rode the final 13 miles south on State Highway 6 to their destination: the Beachfront Hotel in Hokitika.

Let's meet a few members of the Scooter Safari menagerie...

Rodney Faulkner: Custom Stand-up Scooter

Faulkner only made it into this year's event by luck. Demand was so high that the entry limit of 250 scooters was reached within 20 minutes. All riders who participate are required to raise a minimum of \$250 NZD, and some raised as much as \$10,000 NZD.

Faulkner fabricated a frame, an upright fuel tank, and all the gear for his stand-up scooter with 12-inch wheels, which is built around a 2-stroke TGB 50 scooter engine

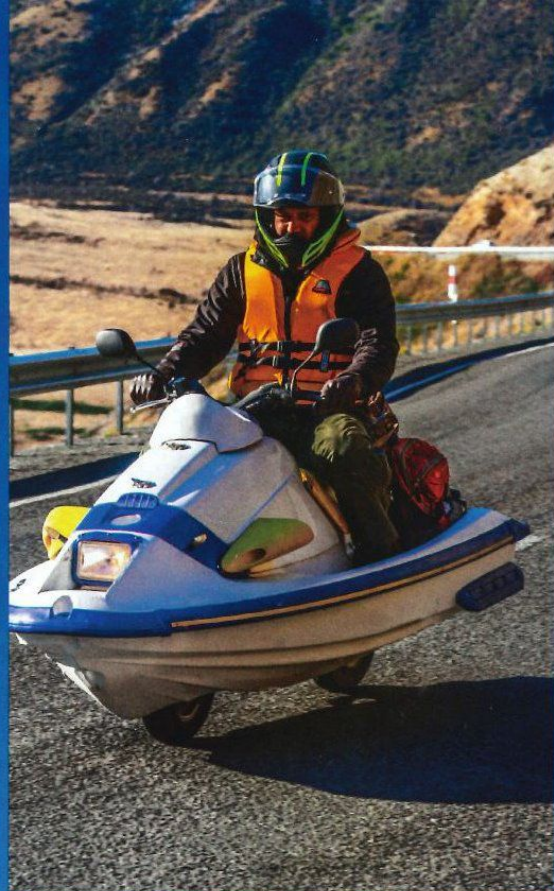
bored out to 70cc. How did his stand-up scooter, which has a 34-mph top speed, perform over the 150-mile course?

"I quite enjoyed the experience," Faulkner said. "It was a big laugh all the way. Visibility is such that you look over the top of everybody, and the stand-up probably outhandled any other scooter since you are almost in a motocross riding position."

Faulkner's fuel tank has a capacity of 1.3 gallons and a range of about 62 miles, so he used about 3.2 gallons during the Safari. Was he uncomfortable standing up for so long?

"No, because you can shift your legs backwards and forwards. The only pressure is on your feet, and you also use your knees as suspension. But you can get a bit of tingling feet due to the vibration of the engine coming through the floor."

Unfortunately, about 6 miles away from Hokitika, Faulkner's engine seized. But his support vehicle was carrying an earlier version of this scoot, which he calls the "Mk I," as a backup, so he managed to finish after all.



Karl Crossman: 'Suzuski'

Crossman's majestic jet ski on wheels was awarded Best Bike in the 2022 TASS. His custom-built conveyance came about after he saw a YouTube clip of someone riding a jet ski down the motorway. He thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, prompting him to build one for the TASS. He remarked with a laugh, "I reckon if everyone would ride a jet ski on the road, the world would be a better place."

Crossman runs a motorbike workshop on the South Island's West Coast, servicing and selling ATVs, so this build offered no engineering challenge for him. In his cheeky words, the project was a top-secret collaboration between engineers at Space X and retired South Island mechanic Spanners Watson. They grafted an old 1998 Yamaha WaveRunner with some holes in the bottom onto a 2004 Suzuki SJ125 scooter. It took about two days, and the most time-consuming part was extending all the wires for the lights.

"The result was this exquisite piece of machinery," said Crossman. "It rivals other engineering marvels such as the Chunnel, the large Hadron collider, the Springfield monorail, and the Escalator to Nowhere." He christened his creation "Suzuski," and it turned quite a few heads and made a lot of people smile along the way.

Crossman is 6 feet tall, so he had no problem getting his feet down to the ground. "It is a heavy scoot," he said, "but the weight is nice and low, and it was a nice, comfortable ride at a 44-mph pace over the alpine environment. It does

Far left: Karl Crossman pilots his custom "Suzuski" – part Yamaha WaveRunner, part Suzuki SJ125 scooter. **Below:** The TASS happens in May – late autumn in New Zealand – which makes for a chilly ride through the Southern Alps.





Left: It was a long, cold day for Nicola Garlick (in her Flintstone-mobile) and her son Jared (on his red rocket scooter), but they had fun. **Above:** This cute pup rode as co-pilot in a custom military jeep sidecar.

not ride like a jet ski; it just looks like one. At slower speeds, it takes a bit of getting used to, as you can't see where the front wheel is. You tend to corner wider than you need to."

When Crossman came over to Christchurch on Friday night for the start of the TASS, there was snow on the ground, but the weather for Saturday's run was beautiful. That is, until it got a bit wet and cold on the section down to Otira on the West Coast side.

After the event, Crossman's scooter was sold on NZ's TradeMe buy-and-sell website, advertised in a humorous fashion: "Don't bow to pier pressure to ride a traditional vehicle...the 'Suzuski' will create waves wherever you go. Canoe think of a better way to travel? Wave goodbye to your standard scooter and say hello to your new vessel." Needless to say, it found a new home.

Nicola Garlick: Flintstone-Mobile

Teacher's aide Nicola Garlick converted her 50cc Yamaha Jog scooter into a Fred Flintstone car for her third TASS attendance. The theme was inspired by her dad, who used to belong to the Lions Club in Westport and did a Flintstone conversion of an ATV with some mates for a Christmas parade some years ago.

Garlick lost both parents to cancer, and she always carries a photograph of her folks on the dashboard as a tribute to them. Despite all the colorful outfits on occasion, the Scooter Safari also has its serious side in raising money for the Cancer Society, and Garlick raised \$2,800 NZD for the cause this year.

Her two-wheeled Flintstone "car" was fabricated out of foam, fiberglass, and curtain material for the sides, reinforced with plastic cardboard and old pillows and supported by 50mm downpipe rails. Garlick used lighter materials for this year's

conversion, having learned more fabrication skills since her previous Safari, for which she converted her scoot with the use of heavier plaster of paris into a two-wheeled chicken.

She was confident her Flintstone scoot would make it up Porters Pass, and it did. Others were not so lucky and had to push their scooters uphill on this section. But wind caught Garlick's scooter on the last leg of the journey into Hokitika, so she had to reduce her speed to 15 mph to be on the safe side. Her son Jared encountered a similar fate with his 50cc Honda Today red rocket scooter, which was equipped with a nose cone up front and tassels at the back.

They both agreed that it was quite a cold ride, with a hard wind chill on the eastern side of the Alps following them. Scenery was spectacular, but a bitter cold rain chased them all the way from Arthur's Pass to Hokitika.

"Arthur's Pass is a bit of a geographical weather divide," said Nicola. "Where I stood at the top of the Viaduct lookout, you could see blue sky towards the East and black sky down towards the West Coast." The Garlicks left Christchurch at 9 a.m. and arrived in Hokitika about 5 p.m.

When I asked riders at the end of their journey if they'd do it all again in May 2024, "Hell, yes!" was the usual response.

For more information, visit ScooterSafari.org.nz.



Uli Cloesen was born in Stuttgart, Germany, home of Porsche, Mercedes-Benz, and Kreidler, the latter winning eight 50cc Grand Prix motorcycle championships, which inspired his love of two wheels. Cloesen currently lives in Christchurch, New Zealand, where he writes about motorcycles. He is the author of seven books on custom bikes and cafe racers, published by Veloce in the U.K. 