

ABOVE AND BEYOND IN PARADISE

The go-anywhere abilities of the Land Rover Discovery and Range Rover Sport are put to the test and reveal a side of New Zealand few ever get to encounter.

by SONJA PIONTEK PHOTOS by SONJA PIONTEK AND JAGUAR LAND ROVER





KIA ORA AND WELCOME TO PARADISE. We are in the South Island of New Zealand for an experience of a lifetime – the Land Rover Above & Beyond Tour. Over the course of the next five days, a fleet of 25 brand new Land Rover Discoveries and Range Rover Sports across some of the finest off-road terrain New Zealand has to offer. We will encounter a local Maori tribe, take a helicopter to the top of ‘Leaning Rock’, pet the famous Merino sheep, cross roaring rivers, enjoy a homecooked meal on a remote high country farm, have a drink with the owner of the legendary Vulcan Hotel and stay in some rather unique places - from an

acclaimed golf resort with stunning alpine views, the historic gold mining town of St. Bathans where one of us will be put behind bars for the night to glamping under the radiating milky way on a private beach at Lake Tekapo.

The tour starts at Terrace Downs Resort in the little town of Windwhistle, a mere hour’s drive from Christchurch international airport. Our villa features stunning views over the resort and the snow-capped peaks of the Southern Alps in the back. Lined up in front of the clubhouse is the fleet of 25 brand new Land Rover Discoveries and Range Rovers Sports. They look immaculate, capable, confident. Ready to be revved up. But also a little too clean for my liking – but rest assured that will change very soon.

With us on this tour are around 50 people from across Asia Pacific who have won the national rounds of the regional Land Rover Above & Beyond Tour and have thus qualified to represent their country at the Finals in New Zealand. There’s Bok Seng and Chloe from Singapore, Bill from Indonesia, the Koo’s from Malaysia, YK from Hong Kong, Amey from India, Lana and Cam from up in Auckland, Mandy from Australia, Yi Hong and Yu Wen from Taiwan and many, many more. We are a rather heterogeneous group – be in in terms of nationality, background, gender or age. Yet everyone seems to get on very well right from the start.

While the sun is setting over the glowing Southern Alps, the event is officially opened with a private Maori P whiri, the traditional welcome ceremony performed by the local Iwi (tribe). We exchange a so-called Hongi by pressing our noses against the tattooed nose of the Maori chief. We see the impressive Haka – which was originally developed as a war dance to scare off the enemies. Today however, the Haka is so much more. It is a welcome gesture as well as a deep insight into a beautifully spiritual culture. Towards the end of the P whiri, the Maori warriors invite us to join in. What our group lacked in linguistic accuracy, we more than made up for it in fun!

The real business of off-roading begins on Day Two. An almost measurable buzz of excitement and anticipation fills the air and we are ready to put the cars to the test, to get into some serious off-roading and an equally serious commitment to having fun. We set off in small groups of five – a certified Land Rover instructor to every four cars.

Our first ‘playground’ is Lake Heron Station, an iconic sheep farm in the so-called High Country that spans over an incredible 20,000 hectares – a quarter of the size of Singapore – owned by no more than a single farmer and his lovely wife. Philipp and Anne Todhunter have granted us exclusive access to their land, and



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this is how we take our first steps off the beaten track. We cross fast flowing rivers (what a thrill!), crawl over a field of rocky boulders, learn how to use the HDC (Hill Decent Control) on an otherwise intimidatingly steep downhill section, drive deep into the beautiful land on narrow gravel tracks and learn step by step how to properly handle a car off-road and how to use the myriad features these modern cars are equipped with. Last time I drove a Discovery was about ten years ago and I must say the car has evolved quite a bit. It feels so effortless now to handle the various off-road situations and I am impressed by the variety of off-road modes we can choose from, be it rock crawl, HDC, gravel or mud, just to name a few.

For lunch we are invited to the private homestead for a hearty homecooked meal. Seeing how these humble land owners live is a beautiful experience in itself. The food is certainly nothing short of a real treat. Before we head on, Philipp gives us an insight into sheep farming, the many challenges, the breeds and what it takes to live and farm in such a remote piece of land. It startles me how he doesn't speak about 'sheep to a hectare' but rather about 'hectare to a sheep'... that gives us another idea of how large their farm really is.

The first night was spent in a five-star resort but second will be under five million stars! Isolation Bay is a beautiful laid-back luxury accommodation with a stunning private

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beach on the shore of Lake Tekapo. We however, will not be staying indoors for the night. Isolation Bay lies in the middle of the acclaimed Aoraki McKenzie Dark Sky Reserve - famous for its low light pollution, the amazingly clear starry nights and the magnificent nocturnal views. We will therefore set up camp! For one night out of four, we are going to be really adventurous and sleep under the stars. Land Rover being Land Rover the camp is luckily quite comfortable, and we have rather cuddly sleeping bags and soft mattresses we are lying on. Most in the group have never camped before or spent a night outdoors...so this is quite something – especially in a place as beautiful as this. The next morning one of the older guests – a lovely gentleman from Malaysia – shares with a big smile on his face how proud he is about being so adventurous at his old age. He loved the night out in his tent and thought it was a pretty valuable and ‘rather cool’ experience. Who would have thought?

From Isolation Bay we take another dirty, but beautiful road south. Set on privately-owned land, Blackforest Station and Te Akatawara Station are proper off-roading gems that even most New Zealanders would have never been to and we spend hours of unparalleled fun climbing high up into the mountains of this stunning piece of land. The views over Lake Benmore and the barren mountain ranges of the south are truly magnificent, the off-roading absolutely prime, the Discoveries and Range Rover Sports both amazingly easy to handle even in challenging situations and the overall experience nothing but a blast. We are in a Range Rover Sport today and I can totally relate to Bock Seng’s comment from last night: “For me, definitely the Range Rover, it’s such a nice luxury SUV. It feels so comfortable, especially when going over bumpy tracks.” I couldn’t agree more! That day, thousands pictures are taken, friendships are formed and the newfound passion for off-roading spreads like a bushfire amongst our happy group.

Lunch is a picnic on the shore of Benmore Dam – the largest earth-filled water retaining structure in NZ and a lovely spot with majestic willow trees under which the dusty Land Rovers look in in their element. Once the last muffin is eaten, we depart on the final leg for the day – the climb across Omarama Saddle and the crossing of quite a few

rivers on the way. We are ‘pros’ by now so none of this is a challenge any more, rather a whole lot of fun as we know how to use the many settings of these unbelievably clever cars to best get us through any situation we might face.

After another unforgettable day off the beaten track it is time for a ‘yes-we-did-it’ cold beer. And there’s no better place to do it than the historic gold mining settlement of St. Bathans by the beautiful Blue Lake. In the 1860, St. Bathans was one of the biggest gold mining centres in NZ and the largest sluicing mine in the world. An impressive 80 tons of gold were excavated in this little town. Apart from the lack of the gold mining activities... nothing much seems to have changed. Being in St. Bathans is like travelling back in time. While we admire the old Vulcan Hotel, Jude, the lovely owner shares all the insights about this distinctive little town. But while we are having a great time, Jude’s husband is in hospital. Yet, the elderly lady welcomes our group with open arms – this is Southern hospitality at its very best – thank you Jude! As we are the largest group that has so far stayed in St. Bathans, we have basically taken over the whole town. So rather than ‘deluxe room’ like in any given hotel, tonight it is ‘Constable Cottage’, ‘The Old Hospital’, the allegedly haunted room in the ‘Vulcan Hotel’ or the ‘Prison Cell’, yes you have read right, the ‘Prison Cell’. Bok Seng and Chloe from Singapore have been chosen for this experience and take great pride in being prisoners for the night.

The next morning, we say good bye to Jude, wish her husband a speedy recovery and jump back in our cars. Today is going to be the toughest off-roading so far – the steep climb up to Leaning Rock. We undoubtedly have full confidence in the cars, and to a certain degree in our newly acquired



Above: Good company, food and song make for an expedition that stays in the heart and mind forever



dirt driving skills. And it gives us great confidence to know that we have a highly experienced international emergency doctor on the tour – something that we value a lot given how remote some of the places we’ve travelled through are. Step by step and corner by corner our qualified instructors lead us up to the top. The inclines are steep, the corners tight, the surface rocky and the heartrate high, but machine and driver have become an inseparable pair, so we all succeed.

Up on the top, another highlight awaits us – lunch (which by that time we really need) as well as helicopter flips! What a treat to be seeing this stunning country from up in the air! We still rev about the helicopter flight as we get back into our cars to attack the steep decline down to Northburn Farm. Hill Descent Control is our best friend on the way down and we all make it to the valley without a scratch. What’s also extremely nice to use is the front and side view camera our Range Rover is equipped with – it makes it so much easier to go over hard to see sections or through tight passages.

Modern technology – you are such wonderful thing! Compared to many of the more basic off-road models I’ve tried out over the years this feels like a real treat.

The last few kilometres are on the road, along the mighty Kawarau River to the acclaimed Millbrook Resort. Located in a beautiful valley outside city of Queenstown this leading international golf resort is a wonderful choice for our last night and a beautiful setting for the farewell dinner of the Land Rover Above & Beyond Tour NZ. Sleeping in the mega comfortable beds of our suite rooms feels really nice after four long and thrilling days off-road.

The next day it is time to say good-bye to our newfound friends, our lovely cars as well as to bucket list country number one. Highlight after highlight seemed to have been the motto of this amazing off-road tour. Unforgettable experiences, extraordinary memories, million-dollar shots and new friendships is what we will take home. And one thing is for sure - we will be back! ✘

This unique tour was developed by SONNENKIND Pte Ltd Singapore, an acclaimed agency specialising in the creation of unforgettable experiences for HNW and luxury brands like Land Rover, Leica Camera or e.g. Cycle & Carriage. SONNENKIND regularly takes clients to the most amazing countries in the world, be in Mongolia, New Zealand, Namibia or deep into the German Alps and have run some pretty mouth-watering drive experiences internationally. SONNENKIND are the official partner for global Leica Akademie photography tours and have recently been nominated official GOLD Specialist by Tourism New Zealand.

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