

## **Battling Gales, Wind and Hills in the East Cape by Holly Wade**

I allow myself fifteen seconds to cry. There's a horse watching. A few minutes before, it witnessed me trying to drag my heavily-laden bicycle through a gate I couldn't manage to pull wide enough open because of the waist high grass around it. Then a car pulled up beside me and, too tired to lie, I admitted to the driver that I'm trying to free-camp in the paddock. I'm instructed to head further down the driveway to ask for permission from his friend who owns the land and then, left alone, just me and the horse, that's when I start to cry.

I've cycled 469.2km around the East Cape circuit, and I'm 66.3km and one day away from Opotiki, which I left four nights before. I've followed the coast through Te Kaha, Te Araroa, Tolaga Bay and, that morning, through Gisborne. I've been loosely following a guide written 14 years ago that promised me shops that are now closed and, the one night I pay for camping, a tent site half the price it is now. I've also got a gradient profile which for this day is a steadily growing wedge of black: it's the hill I've been fighting all day, and I've scribbled some furious expletives above it. I finish my cry, resolutely decide to not feel sorry for myself any more and, abandoning the free-camping plan, cycle painfully slowly up the last bit of hill to the start of Waioka Gorge.

From Gisborne, the lumpy bright green hills on my right have been growing. They looked velvety smooth in the morning, interspersed with clumps of dark green trees, but over the course of the day the trees have become scarce. The hills have grown scraggy and steep, with ridges of exposed rock and paths hewn by grazing sheep. A stream sneaks into view when the road rounds a hill, and I look for it again when I reach the top of Trafford's Hill, but it's barely visible a hundred metres below, thrown into shadow as the sun drops behind the hills towering beside it. It's getting late, just past 6 o'clock when, finally over the hill, I plunge down into the valley, freewheeling gleefully and laughing hysterically before I glide into the DoC campsite half an hour later.

It's just after New Years, but the roads are quiet, logging trucks still on holiday. I only come across one other cyclist when I camp in the holiday park in Te Araroa. There, over half a bag of rice, we talked about cycling out to the lighthouse the next morning to catch the sunrise. It's the easternmost point in the world, the first place to see the sun. He was reluctant, because he liked to lie in. I was also reluctant because, thanks to my gradient preview, I knew what lay ahead of us: three sharp climbs. I tried to show it to him, but he didn't want to see. It'd put him off, he said, he'd rather discover the hills as he went along.

He made a good point: the gradient previews torture me. That afternoon I'd lain on the grass at Hick's Bay, intimidated by what it told me was a 2.7km uphill lying ahead. I'd spent so long glumly studying the preview that a local girl riding bareback, who I'd passed fifteen minutes before, caught me up again. It was only the prospect of a hot shower that finally got me over the hill to this campsite at Te Araroa.

After dinner, my new cycling friend retreated to his tent with a jar of Nutella, and I was sucked back to poring over the gradient preview. The road to the lighthouse winds along the coast for 20km, and is badly maintained with long stretches of gravel. It'd be an early start, with sunrise in January at half-past six, and I was intimidated by the thought of an additional, difficult, 40km before Day 3's destination, Tokomaru Bay. But, I suddenly realised, the beauty of travelling alone and by bike is the freedom to take it day by day, and to go only as far as I felt like going. From the next morning onwards, I decided, I would ignore the directives of my guide, and make it up as I went along. I set my alarm for 4.15am.

The next morning, though, was a disaster. Setting off alone, I found my guide had fooled me again: it was 6km before the road to the lighthouse even began. I'd left everything but my camera at Te Araroa but, even unloaded, I struggled on the gravel. I was a city cyclist, spoiled by smooth tarmac, and my only useful instinct was to give the same wide berth to the half-asleep livestock standing in the road that I would to a parked car.

Rounding a corner, still a few kilometres from the lighthouse, I was dismayed to find the sun had already begun to rise, and was climbing steadily towards the ominously grey clouds just above the horizon. I watched the sun for the few minutes it remained visible, and then it began to rain. During the hour-long ride back to the campsite to retrieve my belongings, my shoes steadily filled with water. Along the way, I lost control on the gravel rounding a corner, and as I lay in a ditch I was passed by a car. I saw it again at the campsite. The driver came over to talk to me: if he'd known I wanted to go to the lighthouse, he said, he would have given me a lift.

I met up with the cyclist from Te Araroa and we follow the road inland. In the late afternoon we pass a logging forest, this one with a negotiable gate, and he continues on without me while I stop to camp for the night. After my early start, all I wanted in this last hour of cycling was a change of scenery. Fields of corn are both monotonous and impossible to camp in; I'd already discovered that grazing cows are invariably terrified of my bicycle, and I had no desire to scare them further and sleep beside them.

This was my first time camping in a forest and the noise was unexpected. I hadn't noticed the wind all day, but the tops of the trees were more exposed than the road I'd been following. They flexed alarmingly, dozens of metres above my head, crashing into each other and groaning. From inside the nylon walls of my hammock, it sounded disconcertingly close; but after 110km of cycling, I lay awake worrying for only a few minutes before succumbing to the best night's sleep of my life.

The next day the wind had strengthened. When the hills either side of me disappeared for a kilometre, I was picked up and hurled along a straight section of road. I stood up on my pedals and sailed. It's sheer delight to have the wind on your side: because of the shape of a bicycle, of the 360 degrees around you, only 160 are in your favour. But then I hit the coast, changed direction, and battled with gusty side winds that threaten to blow me off the road.

At Pouawa, hundreds of tents lined the bays for kilometres. It was another world, after my night in the forest. Most of the tents looked incredibly sophisticated, and although it was barely 4 o'clock people were gathered in sociable groups, barbecuing and drinking. Glistening water lapped at rocks where people gathered shellfish, and the ocean was flat and dotted with swimmers. I felt that I had hours and hours in me yet, but it seemed like too good an opportunity to miss. As I set up my hammock, the grandmother of the family next door invited me for a glass of wine, and while we sat and chatted, their generosity extended to dinner and a hot shower. Later, when the winds tore my pegs out of the ground for the fifth time, they kindly offered a mattress and shelter in their four-room tent. It was a hospitable end to a day that also included being made French toast and coffee by a father and daughter in a campervan in Tokomaru Bay.

Cyclo-touring has made me instantly fascinating. While I've never encountered trouble as a lone woman, the assumption that I'm more vulnerable has brought me more hospitality from strangers than any other cyclists I've met, most of whom have been male and travelling in pairs. And there have been other benefits too: over the French toast and games of draughts, Julian told his daughter that she too could cycle the world as I told them I plan to do. Being seen as an example to aspire to has stuck with me, and it's why I'll take crying in a forest over driving in a car, and why cycling will be central to all the travel I have ahead of me.

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