

An IMPine Adven

Gary Henderson, Lower Hutt, New Zealand



My Mk1 Imp, named *Leaping Lena* by her original owner, had first made a skiing trip to Turoa on... 11th September 2001! As we drove to Mt Ruapehu on that brilliant morning, we had no inkling that the world was about to change. Four-and-a-half hours' drive up, about five hours on the Turoa slopes, followed by a further four-and-a-half hours driving home ensured a sound sleep that night. To awake with our clock-radio talking what seemed to be wild fiction as the South Tower came down...

A later ski-trip in 2005 was less remarkable, except for a leaking radiator. But this year I decided



11th September 2001: *Leaping Lena* with Mt Ruapehu. On the other side of the world even more dramatic events were taking place...

Photo: Gary Henderson

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that *Leaping Lena's* looming 50th birthday warranted a return to the snow, so on Friday 10th October I set off early for a cruisy run with time for photo stops. The first was at Bulls, 99 miles from home, a small junction town just across the Rangitikei River. It's infested with signage making puns on the name, inspired (if that's the right word!) by the cartoonist AS Paterson's book, *The Bull-Pen*. (Love-a-Bull, Adore-a-Bull, Consider-a-Bull, Terri-Bull, etc).

Some distance northwards from Bulls, we passed through Hunterville, the 'Huntaway [sheepdog of the noisiest kind!] Capital of the World', then dropped down to pass the Makohine Viaduct, built in 1902 and still a dramatic feature of the North Island Main Trunk railway (NIMT). It was claimed to be the highest rail-bridge in the Empire when it was built in 1902.

Onwards following the big Rangitikei River, passing the picturesque Rangatira Golf Course to Mangaweka for a photo under the DC-3 café there – doesn't a DC-3 look big when parked in a town!

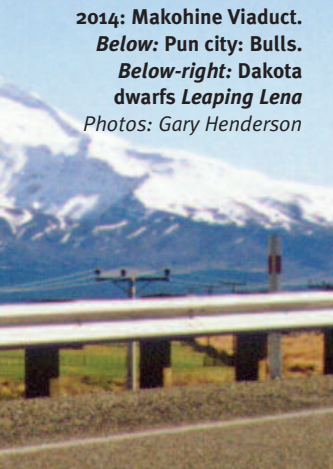
On through the Mangaweka hills to Taihape, where trains used to stop to be taken over by a fresh locomotive or two for the even-tougher country to come. The cry "Taihape, Taihape, ten

2014: Makohine Viaduct.

Below: Pun city: Bulls.

**Below-right: Dakota
dwarfs Leaping Lena**

Photos: Gary Henderson



minutes for refreshments!” was once credited as the basis of the All Blacks’ scrummaging prowess! (Say it “tie-happy” and the locals will know where you mean.)

After Taihape SH1 crosses the Hautapu River then climbs steeply 300 metres up the ‘Big Dippers’ which offer a good running-start but peg an Imp back to about 40 mph in 3rd at the top. Onward following the Hautapu River past the Hihitahi Bluffs towards its headwaters and the tiny town Waiouru, known for its Army camp, the National Memorial Army Museum, its semi-desert surroundings and appalling climate! Army folk call it ‘Waiberia’; it long seemed a strange training-ground for our troops off to Malaysia, Vietnam, Timor L’Este, etc but of course Afghanistan would have seemed like home to them.

We now left SH1 to head west on SH49 for Ohakune, the ski-town serving the south side of Mt Ruapehu and centre of the major carrot-growing district. A stop at the Tangiwai Memorial was a must – this was the site of the Christmas-eve disaster in 1953, when a packed train reached the bridge at speed, just after a lahar had come down the Whangaehu River, taking a bridge pier. The bridge collapsed when locomotive KA949 came onto it under heavy braking; it and six carriages drove into the wave of volcanic mud, with the loss of 151 passengers and crew.

My destination for the night was the Aorangi Ski Club lodge – I’m a member of this club

Leaping Lena pays her respects at the Tangiwai Memorial. The red disc is the boiler plate of the ill-fated KA949

Photo: Gary Henderson

National Memorial Army Museum

Photo: Gary Henderson





which is the only one to have a lodge on or serving each of the three ski-fields on Mt Ruapehu. I usually ski at Tukino on the NE side, accessed via the Desert Road section of SH1. *Leaping Lena* is unlikely to ever go there; her garage-mate is a Mitsubishi L300 4WD van with almost 9" ground clearance (but still has a few dents underneath!), wearing 235/75x15 tyres and sometimes chains on all four! The oldest skifield (Whakapapa) on the NW side is accessed via SH49, 4 and 47 and the Bruce Road – *Leaping Lena* might be asked to take that trip sometime...

Malcolm would love our Ohakune lodge – from upstairs you have a bird's-eye view of the NIMT from a little over 100 metres away.

This particular weekend was arranged for a group which had taken instruction at Tukino in 'Harb' skiing technique (i.e. proper use of carving skis). Our instructor Jim (aged 85! I guess this qualifies him as a guru) joined us to see how we could go on a much larger field. The Turoa field has southern exposure and extends up to the 2,325-metre contour on Mt

Ruapehu so holds its snow later than even the South Island fields – usually into early November. Operating ski-fields on a live volcano has its moments – it blew in 1995 and 1996, practically wiping out skiing for a couple of years. The ash is both acidic and extremely abrasive; all machinery at

Tukino required overhaul and all lodges needed re-roofing within the next five years.

As I had all my own ski gear with me – carving-skis are nice and short so fit inside an Imp – I drove directly to tackle the Ohakune Mountain Road to Turoa. This is one of the most-scenic roads in NZ, rising from 600 metres ASL at the Ohakune Junction where it passes under the North Island Main Trunk railway, through a succession of dense forest types to reach the bare volcanic moonscape (summer) or snow (winter and spring) at 1,600 metres ASL, in only 17 km. *Leaping Lena* doesn't understand this metric nonsense of course, so climbs by a bit over 3,100 feet



Veteran skier Ian Baine (left) with Gary
Photo supplied by Gary Henderson

in about 10¹/₂ miles! This road is a highly recommended short side-trip on any NZ tour.

Because *Leaping Lena* is much smaller than the other vehicles of our group, I was directed to a different car-park. It also took me a while to ticket-up whereas the others had season passes valid for Turoa (I have a season pass but only for Tukino). As a result, it was not until after lunch that I finally re-connected with the group. I hadn't taken a photo on the Mountain Road in the morning due to traffic, but on the way down I chose a spot where it was safe to stop, if a little steep:

Because of having been separated on Saturday, on Sunday I hitched a ride with instructor Jim in his camper. I skied with Jim through the morning (couldn't catch him though!), then the group

gathered to go 'out west' to the beautiful lift-accessible off-piste area known as 'Solitude'. Local knowledge was needed to find a safe way back! On a clear day, the (hopefully) extinct volcano Mt Taranaki/Egmont is clearly visible, poking through near-permanent cloud some 75 miles away.



The weather continued to hold, so when the rest of the group went home I stayed another two days, meeting up with a former fellow-student David Edmonds and an older family friend Ian Baine. Ian is nearly 83 and I still can't quite catch him either!

There was one more fine day forecast, but my legs (and funds!) were now totally used up so on Wednesday *Leaping Lena* pointed homewards, this time with only essential stops. In just under four hours I was home, *Leaping Lena* having used no water, less than a pint of oil and less than nine gallons of petrol since leaving there five days previously.
