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Bus-Board Bulletin

When last we were sharing our progress, we were meandering happily and haphazardly from campsite to campsite through the top of the South Island, with the back of the bus carrying its barrels of fermenting cherries and bottle of steeping St Johns wort flowers, and the dash-board decorated with drying Konig's Kerzen.

It all comes in handy! Mani doctored a young woman at a petrol station in Murchison with St Johannes Öl for her sunburn, and our campsite-neighbour with Williams schnapps and more St Johannes Öl for a pulled muscle. We gave him the starter for making his own cider from supermarket apple juice too (just ask!), and we have since had a very happy email.

The pleasures along the way were numerous. I had forgotten, for example, how spectacular the Kaikoura Coast is. Such a long stretch of up-close sea's-edge and far-distant horizon – next stop Chile! We were staying at a campsite just south of Kaikoura township when Mani's internal clock wakened him just at the right moment to catch the sun rising over the sea. Framed by old ngaio trees, it was a sight that made me glad of digital cameras. Isn't it great to take as many photos as you want, with no thought for the development costs?

The Marlborough daisies were blooming along that coast – growing out of the slightest crack in sheer rock walls, totally exposed to the winds, and yet looking pastorally lush. At several spots along the way, a strong smell in the air would signal seals hauled up on the rocks to sunbathe. People were pulling up to grab a photograph, exclaiming in a variety of languages. We were reminded of our friend Roman who was out here – heavens, eight years ago! – and still counts the train journey along this coast as one of his scenic highlights. And yes – you do become aware of the passage of time – on both a human and geological scale, travelling like this.

On the human side, it's the signs of changing land-use. Probably half of the expensive deer-fences are now enclosing sheep, cattle and the odd vineyard. Around Wakefield, the countryside is dotted with picturesque decaying buildings – hop-drying houses, pigsties, farm cottages... The artist in me wants to paint them, the housewife wants to tidy them away, and the sociologist wonders what has happened to the families and communities. New communities are developing too, with the life-style blocks. In places, apple orchards are coming out to be replaced with grapes – but around Motueka there are many new apple plantings. And not without controversy! A major corporate apple-grower has covered acres and acres of apples with crimson hail-cloth. There are many offended eyes.

Interesting to us is to see the increased use of lucerne. Although I doubt that its drought-resistance is a feature of its use in Switzerland, it's now seen as an important feed-crop in the increasing dry areas. A guy we talked to says it costs about \$2,000 per acre to put in, but you get 5 years crop from that – and yes, the lucerne was green and mauve where all around it the grass was bleached dry and value-less.

Other changes – the signs: "Varoa Bee-mite containment area", "Broom and Gorse Containment area", "Chilean needle grass containment area", "Didymo – inspect, wash, dry". Part of me approves that we are acknowledging the pests and actively setting out to do something about them. Part mourns the need.

And of course everywhere – irrigation systems to create more land for dairying, and sheep and beef country planted out for grapes. You're hardly out of the northwards expansion of the North Canterbury Waipara grape areas before you're into the southward expansion of Marlborough's Awatea valley. "There'll be a glut" Mani mutters direly.

Then there's the geological time changes. Driving leisurely, and ambling along the walking tracks, there's plenty of time to observe the parts that were carved by glaciers – whole rock faces cut smoothly off; the parts folded by earthquakes; the huge river terraces where the rivers must once have been kilometres wide; the volcanic rocks and those laid-down by the seas – our land is so new-formed that sitting quietly and gazing around, you can often see all the forces that have sculpted it.

Even better than sitting quietly to observe, is taking a micro-lite flight. Mani has always wanted to build one and fly one. We looked at them in Hungary and thought – maybe not! But in Motueka it looked much much safer. So we flew off, each with our pilot up front, our flying suits on, and great excitement. Looking down over Motueka, Kaiteriteri, Torrent Bay you see yet another view of how nature forms and reforms the coastline (not to mention the effect of the crimson hail-cloth on the green scene!)

I once might have thought that looking at the geological timescale would put the human-scale changes in perspective.

However, given what we know now, it's easy to see the changes in land-use as part of a potentially much greater geological event. "See it while we can" or "Stay at home and reduce your carbon footprint"? How do those of us who belong to the two opposite sides of the globe reconcile these things? Well – at least the bus is an economical user of diesel, and we're planting trees to offset our aviation fuel!

Home again now – and the pukeko chicks are starting to grow their adult colours, and have almost grown into their feet. I swear they hatch with fully adult-sized feet and legs, and spend their early days trying not to fall over themselves.

Entertainment is everywhere!