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Autor: [s.n.]
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Myrtha the Swiss Grossi Cycling Around the World

4,500kms cycling around NZ notched up on a tiny, plucky 75 year old Swiss woman's belt



Myrtha with Belinda

It was a pleasant enough day in mid September as I drove along Desert Road on my way to spend some time with family in Greytown. However, as is frequently the case in Central plateau, a strong cold Westerly was blowing. It was then that I spotted a woman slowly pushing her heavily-laden bike up one of the steady inclines and she looked very tired. That was how I met Myrtha. I became one of her New Zealand "angels" who helped her along the way; she became one of my "God-sends" who later spent Christmas week with us, baked Guetzli, gardened, sewed together and helped me brush up on my Schwyzerdeutsch. It was like having a female version of my Dad, Engelbert Fluhler, back with me.

Myrtha comes from the small village of Stettfurt in Thurgau. She and her husband owned a business for 25 years installing heating, plumbing, kitchens, bathrooms, solar power etc. She did the bookwork as well as working in the local post office. He later built her a cattery which she ran for 22 years. Together they had a son and daughter and 4 grandchildren in later years. Sadly, in 2003, very shortly after his retirement, her husband developed a brain tumor and within 3 months, he passed away. Myrtha continued running the 24/7 cattery, 12 months of the year with little holiday time.



St Patrick's Church, Burkes Pass, South Canterbury

Then in 2008, she took up cycling, at the age of 65. She had a bike specially fitted for her and began biking around Switzerland between March and July when she closed the cattery. She enjoyed it so much that in the summer of 2009 she did her first foray into a different country: from Switzerland through France, over the Pyrenees to Spain, around Spain and then a flight back to Switzerland. Her first 5000km!

So began the 12 week annual cycle trips, averaging about 100km a day. In 2010 she headed to Scandinavia via Germany, going to the top of Denmark into Sweden, Finland to Nordkapp in Norway then back to Helsinki for a flight back to Switzerland. 5000km. 2011 saw her walk the 850km Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in 6 weeks then back on her bike in 2012 covering 8000km in 14 weeks: France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark to the highest town in Norway (Hammerfest), along the Russian border to Helsinki, through Sweden, Germany and back home. She assured me there were lots of flat areas so she could average 100km a day.

2013 was "Grossi" time when she took her 3 grandsons, aged 9, 11 and 14 for the 250km cycle around Bodensee then in 2015 she repeated it with her 11 year old granddaughter. 2014 was the year of Alaska and Canada and during this 4500km cycle she had a close encounter with a bear and once slept in a toilet block for safety. 2016 saw her cycle through Scotland and up to the tip of Shetland Island with a friend and all that via Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway and flying across to Scotland.

In 2017 she worked all year to save for the biggest 3 year adventure to date, with New Zealand as the starting point. Over the next 3 years she plans to circumcycle Australia (12,000km in 7 months) then from 2020, the 25,000km from the Southern tip of South America through the Americas, USA and up to Vancouver. She says she's not sure if it will all be possible but she hopes so.

Myrtha keeps a diary and every 5 months or so she writes an article for her local newspaper. Here is some of the account of her time in New Zealand in her own words (translated from German).



Mt Ruapehu

I started on the 15th September 2018 with my fully laden bike from Manukau along the East Coast. Through Thames, Coromandel, Tauranga, Taupo, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch, Timaru, across to the West Coast. I had to go over 3 Passes: Burkes, Lindis and Haast. This cost me quite some strength and endurance. The Lindis Pass was special with its big wide flat areas after the steep pass. The weather played its part and so I experienced a dream-like day because the snowy mountains were reflected in the crystal clear mountain lakes. Over and over again I had to stop to take photos..... From Haast over to the Westcoast took lots of energy. Although very beautiful, it was also very hilly, really humid and changeable. Then heading North to Franz Josef Glacier, Greymouth, Westport, Murchison, Nelson, where I had an accident with a truck. This truck with its 2 trailers brushed against me and pushed me into a rock face. Result – 8 stitches in my left forearm. Fortunately I could be treated at A & E so that 3 days later I could get back on my bike. In Picton I went back over to the North Island by ferry. Wellington, Wanganui, New Plymouth, Tauranga and shortly before Christmas, Hamilton....

Unfortunately the roads for long-distance cycling in New Zealand leave much to be desired. Many are in poor condition so that you can't really get up much speed. You need a lot of strength in your knees and then you really feel it in the evenings. The narrow verges go into ditches or rock walls which makes the slightest move sideways impossible. Finally, the beautiful distant country which resembles Switzerland so much in places isn't quite so ideal for cycling; the exceptions being the many mountain bike tracks. However, for long-distant road bikers it isn't so suitable unless you are only doing day trips and without a backpack. It's an attractive country for young, sporty people because there is a wealth of sporting opportunities like hang-gliding, walking on glaciers, hiking in the mountains, caving, surf schools etc.

New Zealanders are a quiet, helpful and friendly lot. There is no rush, everything goes calmly. I even do the same.... New Zealand has more sheep than people. It's amazing that everywhere where I cycle, I'm greeted by cows, sheep and horses and shortly afterwards farewelled with a loud "maa" or "moo." ...The flora is also impressive; almost tropical. Many plants, which we can buy in pots in Switzerland grow wild on the side of the road. There are areas with huge palms and special pine trees and very many types of bushes which I have never seen.



Rusty Nail, Tahihape

I meet about 2 cyclists like myself each week. Many stop a moment to exchange thoughts and we ask each other about cheap, clean, comfortable accommodation after we've swapped information about where you're from. We're called the bush-telephone."

At the time of writing this, Myrtha has dropped by Hamilton to collect a few things posted our way. She has completed her cycle to Cape Reinga going up the East Coast and returning via the West and across to Tauranga again. I ask her a few final questions before she leaves for her last couple of weeks resting in Tauranga before heading to Australia.

Belinda: What advice would you give someone contemplating long distance biking?

Myrtha: Take your own bike; have appropriate gear for all seasons in whichever country you are cycling and have courage and confidence in yourself.

Belinda: What two or three things were you most pleased to have included amongst your gear?

Myrtha: a bicycle tool kit and spare tyres (5) so that you can fix your bike anywhere and at any time; a tent in case you can't find or reach accommodation during daylight hours and a little mascot – I have a little lamb I bought for \$3 at an op shop.

Belinda: What are some important preparations for long distance cycling?

Myrtha: do a course to learn how to repair your own bike so that you can be self-reliant. Know your bike well – practise using it in your home country first on short stretches then go on longer ones before you go to another country. Plan well and make sure you have everything you need.

Belinda: what have been a few highlights of your time in New Zealand?

Myrtha: the Pohutu Geyser in Rotorua, Cape Reinga, sleeping in a tent on the sand dunes of 90 mile beach, cycling from the Firth of Thames along the East Coast Rd via Miranda hot pools to Waihi and Tauranga because it was pretty flat and had beautiful sea views.

Myrtha has certainly been an inspiration and we wish her "Alles Gute" as she continues her cycling journey.



Inside train wagon