A Sting in the Tale

Tackling New Zealand’s spectacular Southern Alps, The Pioneer 7 Day Epic isn’t what you’d call an easy ride... especially when you’re still recovering from a near-death experience. 

WORDS HUW KINGSTON  |  PHOTOS © THE PIONEER

The humble bicycle is still one of the world’s most efficient modes of transport, and it’s a great device to explore the planet. Whether you’ve been riding all your life or you’re just starting your own two-wheeled adventure, the team at AG Outdoor have you covered for gear reviews, trip news and more.
I think there’s a bee on my back. Can you flick it off?” Megan innocently asked Laurence, standing behind her in the queue for the shuttle bus to Geraldine. I moved quickly between them and brushed the bee away.

In March 2013 Laurence was tending a beehive in his parent’s garden in Christchurch. One bee spied a gap in Laurence’s protective suit, down by his ankle. It stung him. Within minutes Laurence went into anaphylactic shock and collapsed. Fortunately his wife Viv and mum Jenny, a nurse, found him and gave CPR. For 20 minutes Laurence’s heart didn’t beat. The ambulance arrived and, once at the hospital, Laurence was put into an induced coma. Woken 24 hours later, all seemed pretty good. He sat up in bed, wrote some emails, saw his kids, then it went down hill. He suffered a stroke from which he woke unable to speak, unable to see, unable to walk. One bee, one sting.

Laurence Mote rode mountain bikes for New Zealand, racing full time around the world in the 90s and early 00s. The first time I rode with him I was blown away by the seeming effortlessness of his riding.

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The race

It seems odd that New Zealand has never really had a mountain bike stage race to call its own, despite being host for decades to world-renowned multisport events such as the Coast to Coast, and despite the government having invested hundreds of millions of dollars in mountain bike trails, including the all encompassing Nga Haerenga, the New Zealand Cycle Trail.

The first edition of The Pioneer in January 2016 has changed all that. With the spectacular Southern Alps of the South Island as a canvas to play on, this seven-day, 570km race from Christchurch to Queenstown lacked for nothing.

If the original pioneers of NZ explored as rugged individuals or in tribes, the modern pioneer was required to team up in pairs. I had caught up with him on a couple of occasions. His persistence, drive and, probably in no small part, his background as an elite athlete, had seen him tick off milestone after milestone. Balance and vision problems made cycling difficult but after time on the road bike he began to venture further and faster-off-road.

Upon hearing Laurence and his dad had completed a three-day MTB race in France last year I thought The Pioneer might be a possibility for Laurence, another step along his recovery trail. He jumped at the opportunity.

I had no idea what to expect of Laurence in the race. Fatigue was still an issue and he slept some hours each day. He was classified legally blind; permanent brain damage leaving him with peripheral vision but things less than good straight ahead. “You don’t drive over huge rocks with your car; I should be the same on the bike. Anyway I’m glad you’ve got a bright green Osprey pack. I can just follow you and your line,” was his typical laconic advice.

With strong backing from the NZ government, The Pioneer began in Christchurch, a city still recovering from the massive earthquakes of 2012 that had destroyed so much of what had been known as the Garden City. At the pre-race party, following the obligatory Haka, the Deputy Mayor sent us on our way with best wishes.
and the new city slogan ‘Anything is Possible’.

Whilst the first edition was dominated by Kiwis I bumped into plenty of riders I knew from Australia and others I’d met at stage races around the world, including Spaniards & ridden with in Italy and Americans from Mongolia. There were even two fellow Welshmen lining up, while Australia’s top mountain biker Dan McConnell had paired up with his Kiwi equivalent Anton Cooper as race favourites.

FROM THE GET-GO

Day 1 was a 22km warm-up utilising the trails in the hills behind the city. Warning us what to expect, we went up about as long and straight as the elevation would allow. My glasses steamed up terribly; the blind leading the blind. The sweetener was The Flying Nun, a heavenly descent of rock-armoured singletrack switchbacks. Laurence, on home ground, led me down, something that would become a habit throughout the week – so much for following my bright-green pack.

That afternoon some 300 bikes, bodies and bags were bussed to Geraldine. On the lush grass of the town’s sports field we were greeted by a brown coloured, contorted, giant mud crab-like structure that would move to be our base for the next week. This impressively designed canvas structure would be lounge, dining room, bar, stage, information bureau, device charging hub, movie theatre and device charging hub.

Those suffering in the heat sheltered under the meagre and uncomfortable shade of the matagouri, while others cursed the tyre-piercing thorns of this same bush.

‘Click, click’. We simultaneously changed down to our lowest gear on yet another climb. Great thumbs think alike, I thought to myself, just as Laurence pointed out the Two Thumbs range opposite. We finished another ripper of a descent and just before climbing again Laurence announced it was time for cous cous. He whipped out a meal of cous cous salad and we feasted as other riders passed our picnic.

For the fast pairs, finishing stages in four to five hours, there was plenty of time at camp to do what needs to be done: eat, drink, shower, massage, clean bike, rest and prepare. For mid-fielders like us, our six- to seven-hour ride times still allowed for these jobs if with less relaxation. It is the back markers, those rolling in after 10 hours or more, who face the greatest challenge as the sun drops low over the mountains. Worn out bodies need a break but can’t have one and too soon the 6am breakfast call comes around again.

My breakfast was coming around again on the 1000m climb soon after leaving Fairlie for the hard 75km stage to Tekapo. Push-walking was the order of the day for most riders; those in fancy, stiff soled carbon race shoes rueing both choice and blisters. The reward was an undulating ridge offering the first views of and the new city slogan ‘Anything is Possible’.
Feral deer make for fast-moving obstacles for racers as they tackle this steep ascent.
Sections of the Alps to Ocean cycling trail wound along the shores of mirror-calm Lake Pukaki, taking us into Mackenzie Country; flat dry, glacial outwash plains.

Had the gatecrashers not also realised their first day was the longest and hardest of all? A total of 113km, with near 4000m of elevation gain. It was a long day for everyone but lacked for nothing. Least of all a route that twisted and turned through superlative mountain country. I could have camped in a dozen places but had to make do with another coucous picnic, I found a bottomless mud hole that sent me over the bars to a bath but Laurence never faltered. Everyone was chasing the Grim Reaper, the shrink-wrap of 60km from Lake Ohau to Mackenzie Country; flat dry, glacial outwash plains. That evening we watched the sun slowly fade out there: bike lane out there.

Our penultimate day was a ride of two parts. The first was a ride of ballyhoo to celebrate the Kona team from Canada crossing the line. The Pioneer was very much about teamwork. Spanish teams looking rather forlorn, stood amongst the turquoise waters even more so.

How would you like to thank Tourism New Zealand, Air New Zealand, Ground Effect cycling clothing, Shimano packs, Maxxis Tyres and Specialized Bikes for helping to get him to and through The Pioneer. 81
The long-term Santa Cruz 5010 mustn’t have known what hit it when I brushed off the spider webs and dust and started prepping it for riding again. Having been off the bike for many months – and then riding a hardtail MTB intermittently – the slick orange screamer hadn’t seen a trail for nearly 12 months. It must have been even more surprised when it found itself being fitted with a new wheelset…

I had been running SRAM RAIL 50 wheels on the long-term 5010 since Bike Lane Editor, Tim Robson, first built the trail rig back in 2014. These had been great – they were fast, responsive and relatively light and served well under the bike at events such as the Mont 24. As any MTB reader knows though, their world is full of constant changes in both bike designs and standards, with one of the most obvious being the move to wider rims to increase the tyre’s contact patch on the ground – more rubber on terra firma means more traction. A wider rim with a more voluminous tyre also allows the rider to play with air pressures more to find that sweet spot of traction and speed.

Easton’s ARC alloy 32-hole rims come in three separate internal widths – 24mm, 27mm and 30mm – so I headed straight to the team at Summit Cycles and chatted to chief mechanic and wheel-builder Joe Dodd about getting a set built for the 5010. I was keen on the 27mm-width wheel set, as it would offer me substantially increased contact (up from the RAIL 50’s 21mm internal measurement) without being too wide and limiting (at time of writing) the appropriate tyre choice. Joe suggested a set of HOPE 2 hubs with DT Swiss Competition double-butted spokes for the best combination of strength without too much weight.

A custom wheelset may seem out of reach for many riders but if you are thinking of upgrading your wheels, then going down this path can be comparatively cost-effective and the results are brilliant – as these wheels have shown. The wider rims have proved tough and strong so far and the extra traction is definitely noticeable. A Maxxis Ardent 27.5x2.4 tyre up front ensures that extra width includes plenty of additional bite, and I went for a Maxxis Ikon 27.5x2.35 at the back to ensure rolling speed didn’t suffer. The wheel/tyre combo rolls fast and I can definitely feel a better connection to the trail – there’s no placebo effect here. And for those who don’t want to go down the custom trail, Easton also has its new Heist wheelset, which offers the same range of internal widths but with 28-spoke rims. Win, win, I say…