



Photos: Rob Tucker

The long and bumpy road

It's been quiet on the road news front lately, so here's a bulletin.

There are 1014 bumps on State Highway 3 on the drive south from Te Kuiti to New Plymouth.

I know this because the navigator and I counted them while travelling home from Auckland after Labour Weekend.

The bumps - those severe enough to rattle the dashboard - include joins at either end of multiple patches in the tarseal, both ends of about 20 bridges, strips of seal where the metal has worn away, ragged edges, uneven joints - but no actual potholes.

The last is no surprise, perhaps, because we saw two vehicles with "road inspection" signs on them, presumably containing vigilant roading people on the lookout for blemishes big enough to actually break something.

Nothing broke in our car. But its low-profile tyres - whose purpose on any vehicle using New Zealand's roads escapes me - provided an uncomfortable ride on a journey made all the more gruelling by cloudbursts of spray and road film accompanying what seemed an endless procession of multi-wheeled trucks dominating kilometre after kilometre of two-lane highway whose passing lanes are rare as smooth macadam.

I use the word "highway" ill-advisedly. The road between New Plymouth and the Waikato is the second-worst lowish-digit state highway in the country. Only the one around East Cape is bumpier, judged on extensive campervan and caravan-towing exploration we have done in recent years.

I know Taranaki is on a government promise to spend up to \$135 million to fix this deteriorating barrier between us and Auckland, but you have to wonder why it has taken, and continues to take, so long.

JT column for November 5 2016

The list of reports, investigations and recommendations about this damnable strip of goat track is nearly as long as the journey, and there's a suspicion it's only finally receiving serious attention because of the growth of ever-bigger trucks in an age of declining freight options.

Whatever, history suggests that despite the best intentions of everyone involved, this is a piece of road that ain't going to be fixed in a hurry.

Which brings us to the travel topic du jour - the Lonely Planet accolade.

Experience in places like Tasmania suggest that being tagged in the backpackers' bible as one of the best on the, well, whole planet, has a positive effect on visitor numbers for at least two years following the tagging.

It may have come a trifle too soon, if we're hoping the influx will arrive via Auckland, which seems logical.

However, further research throws up the possibility that being separated from the country's main international airport by a memorably awful road may not be an insurmountable impediment to tourism industry nirvana.

There are two reasons to think that.

The first is that backpackers are supposedly not averse to seeking adventure beyond main tourist trails, and if they travel by bus they won't much notice the rough surfaces.

If they come by hired campervan, they probably won't give a second thought to the prospect of burst tyres and wrecked suspension arms (or whatever it is they put into vehicle under-carriages these days).

The second is that while Lonely Planet may not be the preferred authority for mainstream tourists, the fuss over its pronouncement will be widely disseminated within the world travel industry.

There's also the possibility the incoming will fly. On that count, some might say the LP acclaim is again premature, since we've only just settled on grand plans to upgrade New Plymouth airport.

I'm not sure that matters. Some seasoned local air travellers say they love arriving home here because there are none of the security barrier and luggage retrieval complications of flasher airports.

So, when can we expect something to be done with the road north?

This week, a top transport agency official was in Taranaki to brief local government people on progress.

My hope is he had a chance to talk to our own champion of road repair, Murray Chong, who's adept at finding potholes and reporting them to the authorities via Facebook.

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We could do worse than despatch Murray on a road trip north to confirm what was very apparent over Labour Weekend.

If he has any trouble finding the trouble spots, he can take direction from a sign in the middle of the Awakino Gorge.

Its handy illustration has warned of two large, evenly rounded bumps that occur uncannily close together, and that seem to have eluded road crews for years.