

BOY ON A BIKE

by Bronwen Wall



The wind howled in Mac's ears. He gripped his handlebars tighter. Something large swept into his peripheral vision. A four-wheel drive was on the beach. Dad had seen it, too, and was waving frantically. The driver waved back as he sped past.

"Dad!" Mac yelled into the wind. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get us a lift."

"Why?" Mac asked.

Dad rubbed a hand across his sweaty face. "I'm sorry, son," he said. "This is a crazy plan. I'm not sure we can do it."

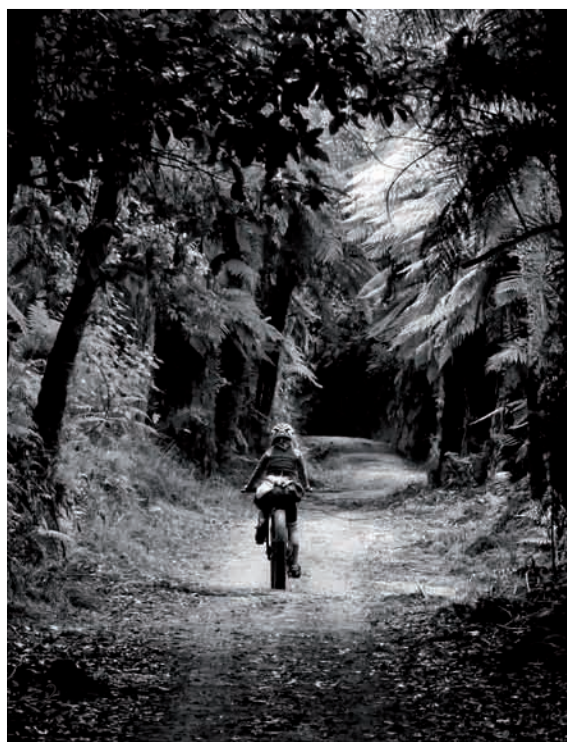
Mac squinted up at his father and grinned. "It's simple, Dad," he shouted. "Just keep pedalling."

THE CRAZY PLAN

A year earlier, Mac Madsen came home from St John cadet training with a plan. He wanted to raise money so that St John could buy more ambulances.

"But how will you raise this money?" his parents wanted to know.

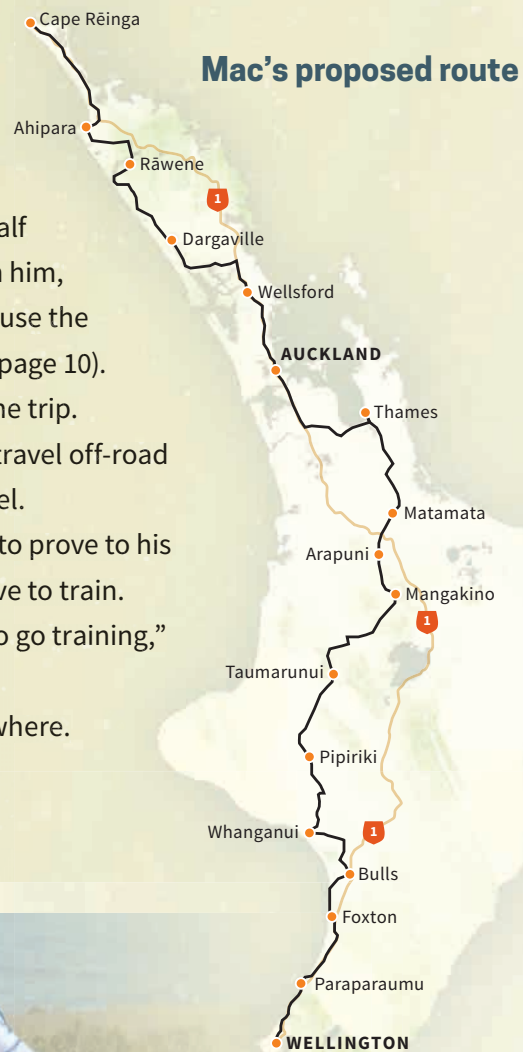
"I'll ride my bike," Mac said. "I'll ride it so far that people will know I'm serious about helping St John – and they'll want to help, too." Mac waved a book in front of his parents. It was a guide to cycling trips around New Zealand. At the back of the book, Mac had found the "ultimate" trip – cycling the length of the country!



But Mac was only nine years old, and 3,000 kilometres is a long way. Together, Mac and his parents worked out a compromise. Mac would cycle the length of the North Island, a bit less than half that distance, and his dad would cycle with him, following an agreed route. Plus Mac would use the safest bike they could find – a fat bike (see page 10). A fat bike would be sturdy enough to last the trip. Its thick tyres would also mean Mac could travel off-road – across sand, through mud, and over gravel.

There was one final condition: Mac had to prove to his parents that he could do this. He would have to train. “And I’m not going to drag you out of bed to go training,” his dad, Craig, warned. “It’s all up to you.”

But Mac didn’t need to be dragged anywhere. In fact, he says it was the other way round!



“I wasn’t put off by the early mornings and the training. I had a great goal and knew it would take work to achieve it.”

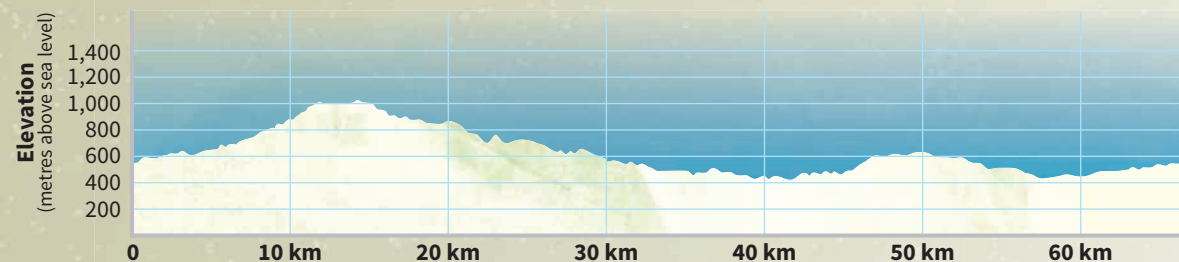


LONG TRAINING DAYS

Mac and his dad trained every weekend. Some days, they cycled up to 80 kilometres. Other days, their ride was shorter. Sometimes, in the holidays, they biked several days in a row. They trained in the rain; they trained in the sun. They trained through the dark of winter, getting up before dawn to make sure they could cover enough kilometres. “It was really fun watching the sun come up,” Mac remembers. Slowly, their muscles got used to the exercise. The two grew stronger and fitter, and their training rides became even longer.

At the same time, Mac researched his trip. How much would it cost? Where would they stay? What route should they take – and what sights should they look out for along the way? Mac also studied the elevation charts in the guidebook. These showed the height and length of hills and helped him to prepare mentally for what he would face along the way.

An elevation chart

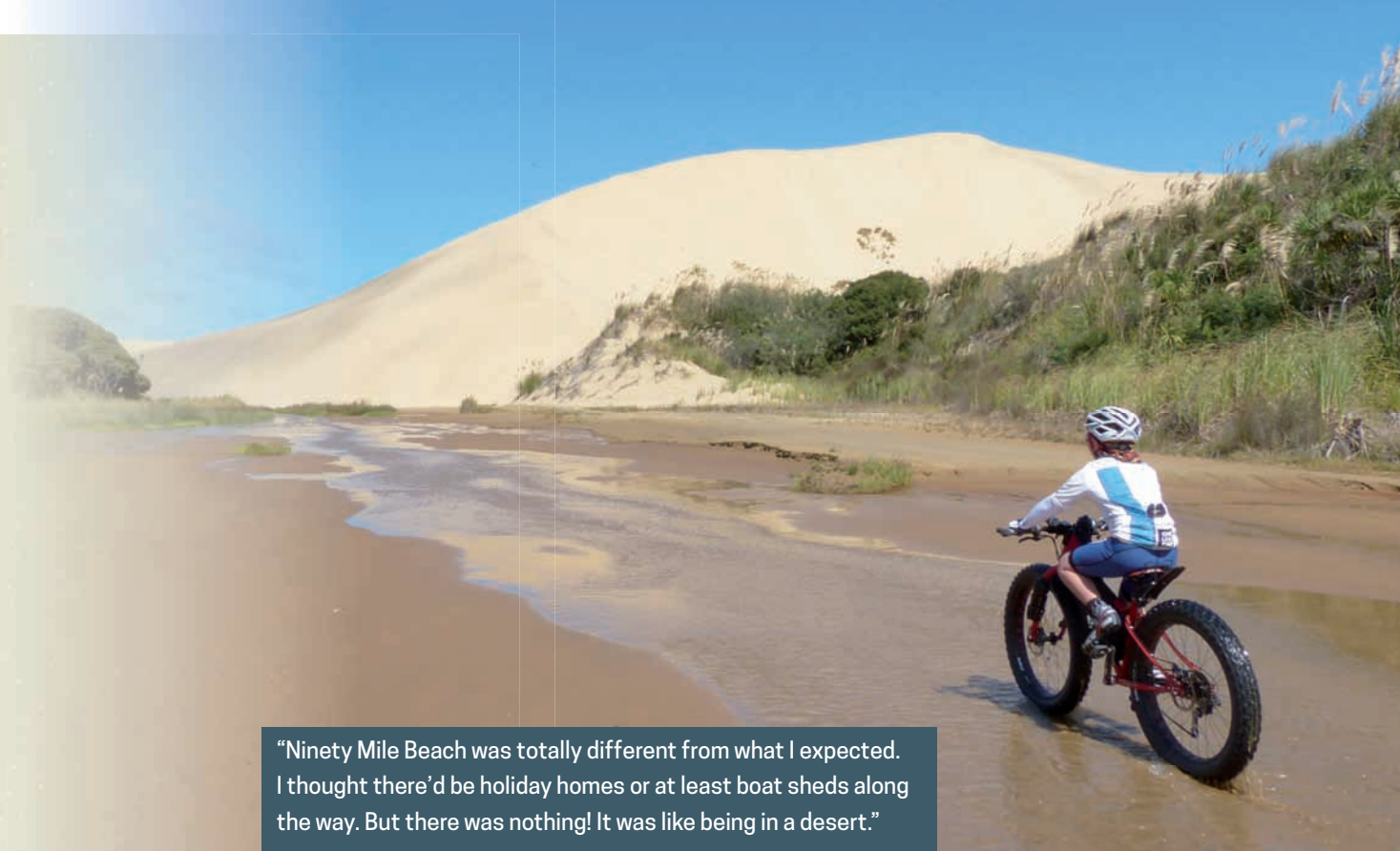


Mac didn't forget about the reason for his trip, either. He discussed his idea with the people at St John. They suggested that Mac decide how much money he wanted to raise and then establish a pledge page. Mac settled on the goal of raising \$5,000. Craig helped him to set up his own social media page to promote the fund-raising. Mac could post an entry at the end of each day of cycling, a bit like a diary, which he could share with his supporters.

Mac wrote and posted a first entry to explain his idea. Overnight, people began to read it. While Mac was at school the next day, those people were telling their friends. By the end of that day, Mac's pledge page had raised over \$1,500 – and there were messages of support from hundreds of people. Mac was suddenly nervous. People thought he was going to do something amazing. He began to wonder if he could really do it. Or would he let everyone down?

PEDAL POWER

It was the first day of their big adventure – and Mac and Craig finally reached the Ahipara camping ground shortly after ten that night. They had cycled 96 kilometres, mostly into a terrible headwind along Ninety Mile Beach. It had taken eleven and a half hours, and they were totally exhausted – with just 1,227 kilometres to go!



“Ninety Mile Beach was totally different from what I expected. I thought there'd be holiday homes or at least boat sheds along the way. But there was nothing! It was like being in a desert.”



“Sometimes, the weather was also different from what I'd imagined!”



“Pureora is a huge forest with ancient trees and ferns and amazing birds. It felt like we were miles from anywhere.”

In a way, it was good that the first day was the worst day. Nothing Mac and Craig faced over the following twenty-two days seemed as bad as that far-north beach wind. Plus Mac got fitter. The hills got much easier the farther he rode. By the time he reached Pureora Forest in the middle of the North Island, he was fitter than ever – and pedalling strongly.

“The Timber Trail through Pureora Forest was awesome,” Mac says. “I was so fit by then – it was like, ‘Where’s the steep part?’ We just powered over the hills.”

EATING ... AND TALKING



All that cycling made Mac hungry. He ate and ate and ate! “We were burning energy all the time,” Craig remembers, “and Mac was always hungry. We had to eat regularly – every twenty minutes!”

Craig couldn’t really complain about Mac eating a lot. But Mac didn’t feel the same way about his dad’s chatter. “The hardest thing about riding with Dad was that he talked all the time,” Mac says with a laugh. “He said it was to take my mind off the big hill climbs. But the hills didn’t bother me at all. Sometimes I had to tell him to stop talking – to just concentrate on the cycling!”

BURNING UP ENERGY

On average, a nine-year-old boy who weighs around 35 kilograms uses between 225 and 275 kilojoules an hour just watching TV. But when he’s cycling, he’ll burn through anything from 900 to 1,500 kilojoules an hour, depending on how hard he’s pedalling. That’s where the food he eats comes into play. Take a look at the table on the right to see the energy contained in various foods. What snack would you recommend Mac ate to replace 1,500 burnt kilojoules?

Food	Size of portion	Kilojoule count (on average)
Banana	Large	570 kJ
Apple	Large	430 kJ
Brazil nuts	100 g	2,790 kJ
Salted peanuts	100 g	2,510 kJ
Muesli bar	Small	720 kJ
Ham roll	Small	880 kJ
Yoghurt (sweetened)	200 g	470 kJ
Biscuit (plain, not chocolate)	Small	160 kJ
Orange juice	200 ml	300 kJ
Tea (with milk, no sugar)	25 ml whole milk	60 kJ

PEDAL ON

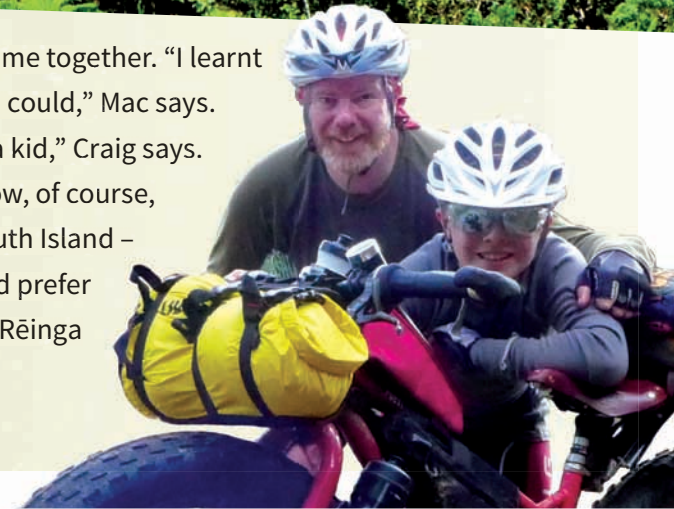
Twenty-two days after he first put foot to pedal, Mac cycled into Wellington. He felt all kinds of emotions. He was looking forward to getting home and seeing his mum and brother, but he couldn't help feeling sad that his adventure was coming to an end. For over 1,300 kilometres, Mac had been blasted by wind, soaked in rain, baked by the sun ... and he kept going through all of it. He biked through Whāngārei and Taumarunui and Whanganui – and dozens of other places he'd never been before.

Mac and Craig learnt a lot from their time together. "I learnt that I could do more than I ever thought I could," Mac says.

"And I learnt never to underestimate a kid," Craig says.

Mac raised over \$7,000 for St John. Now, of course, he wants to do it all again. Maybe the South Island – although if his parents let him, Mac would prefer to do both islands in one trip, from Cape Rēinga all the way to Bluff.

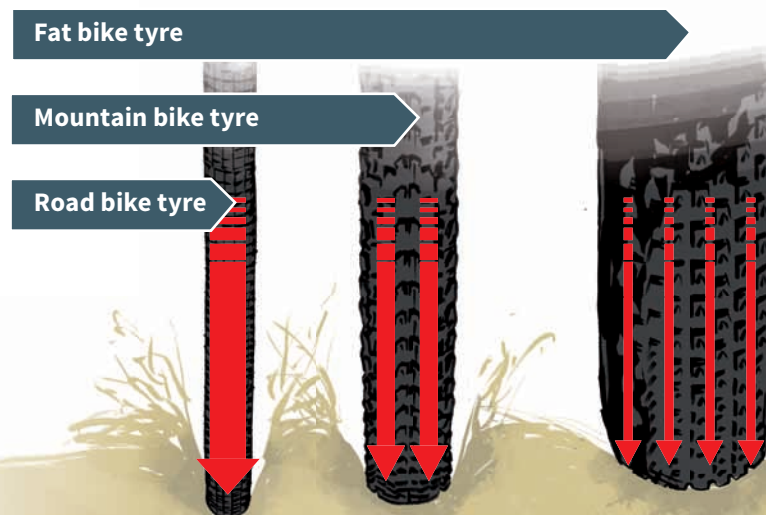
His dad's thinking about it.



FAT BIKES

In the 1970s, some cyclists in California began experimenting with bikes. They wanted a bike that was strong enough to cycle on unsealed roads as well as up and down mountains. They invented the mountain bike. This bike had a wide range of gears to make it easier to climb hills. It also had good brakes for the steep downhill. It had robust parts that could handle being banged against rocks and branches. And it had fat tyres with thick tread that could grip the dirt tracks.

Soon people wanted bikes that did even more. They wanted to ride long distances through mud, sand, and snow. But these are soft surfaces, and something heavy – like a person on a bike – sinks into them. So this bike's tyres would need to be even fatter than those on a mountain bike, to spread the weight over a bigger area.



Cyclists began experimenting by sandwiching two tyres together – then three tyres. It worked. These multiple tyres spread the weight further, which helped the bike to move easily over surfaces like sand and snow. Thankfully Mac's bike didn't have three tyres stuck together. These days, fat tyres are specially made. Mac's were 3.8 inches (9.6 centimetres) wide – that's wider than his leg! Most regular mountain bike tyres are about half that width.

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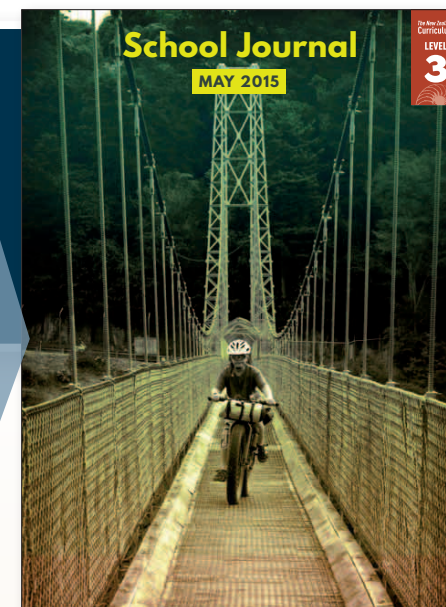
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