

THREE KIWIS, A NISSAN MICRA, FIVE FREERIDE COMPETITIONS AND A 5000KM JOURNEY



By Neil Willman,
Pete Oswald,
Marc Walker
and the many others we met on the way

Contiki Freeride

Three kiwis, a Nissan Micra, five Freeride competitions and a 5000km journey round Europe beginning in Chamonix, France and ending, well who knows where it ended ... maybe it's still going. Lets find out...

Our plan was to head to Europe and compete in Freeride World Tour Qualifier (FWQ) events, ski some cool places, experience some culture and maybe have an adventure or two on the way. It was decided that we should base ourselves in Chamonix, the birthplace of big mountain skiing. It had a central location for traveling from, amazing terrain to hone our freeride skills on for the forthcoming comps as well as the mystique of being the freeride capital of the world.

Arriving with minimal money (kiwi peso does not go far in Europe), jobs were the first priority. Luckily we already had a house sorted with some other kiwi friends so all we had to do was concentrate on finding work.

Pete ended up a chalet maid – cleaning chalets – not the most glamorous job but scoring free food was a great bonus. Neil lucked into a ski workshop job by exaggerating his French abilities. While he struggled to tell his 'affluence' from his 'affluence' it kept our skis in shape and the fridge full of beers thanks to 'beer tunes'. This added to Pete's free food and we were sorted.

The downside of our jobs was that neither of us had as much time to ski as we would've liked. But we needed the money to fund our competition roadies that would begin in earnest in early February. So we did the hard yards; skied when we could and relished in our new playground.

Our first event would be in Flaine, France just an hour and a half down the road. Sam Smoothy had arrived in town and was bumming a ride with us to the comp. We are not sure if it was his influence but we somehow managed to drive through a storm, forget half our gear and run out of petrol. Hey, no one's perfect right?

On arrival we meet kiwi friend and Freeride World Tour judge Dion Newport and he joined us for an entertaining riders' meeting, one which painted a charming picture of the Euro attitude to mountain safety: 'We could put the orange sticks in front of the crevasses, but that's a lot of work. It's freeride you know – if you see a hole you don't jump inside!'

Day one of competition was Waitangi Day, so to celebrate MC P Oswald accosted the PA system and cranked the kiwi beats all day. Our first comp was a mixed bag. Neil got lost missing his line, Smoothy crashed into an elephant sized bomb hole but, inspired by his own DJ'ing, Pete 'the chalet girl' quipped for the finals with a big air to solid stomp, in the one-hit mini venue placing 5th for the day.

Our sour mood was sweetened by the amazing food and drink on offer, so we filled our bags and attempted to shuffle off inconspicuously with a 20-litre goon of red wine. Pete frantically skated away, battling the oversized goon sack with hotel staff in hot pursuit. He rounded a bend and dived into the trees. A clean get-away.

The finals face was much longer and gnarlier but Pete skied a solid, fast line with two big airs. Alas he took the second air too big, landing on the crest of a third. The resulting yard sale was heart breaking. Back pats, philosophical yarns and some

goon-inspired shenanigans followed, before some wicked tree skiing got us psyched for the nine hour drive to our next comp. Engadin, St. Moritz, Switzerland and the first 3 star (double points) competition of the season.

We arrived at 1am to discover friends Marc Walker and Luke Potts (honorary kiwi) asleep in our beds. We had no option but to spoon up to keep the hotel cost down. The names of the little spoons are classified.

We start the qualifying day scoping the course from below only to find out at the very last minute that we're allowed to ski inspect the venue from the top, another great call from the newly founded 'Team Kiwi'. We head straight up and unwittingly start inspecting after the competition has already started, narrowly avoiding disqualification we return to the bottom. However it makes little difference with everyone crashing except our rising star, Pete who skis strongly placing 5th.

Finals day sees the boys doing their best to blag free lift passes for watching/supporting/partying purposes. Neil who is now on crutches, after a heavy rag doll the day before for prize giving and Luke's luscious eyelids melt the impressionable young ticket lady. The team are in.

Up top, with helicopters buzzing and TV cameras rolling, Pete struggles to get the essential mind set necessary to attack the long and exposed face at speed and isn't happy with his run, coming in 17th. Sam who was pre-qualified for the finals shows his experience and skills and has an amazing run; skiing exposure and sending cliffs with pace and style. We can't stop cheering and waving our home made signs, his parents are even there and his Mum cries. We know we've just seen something special. Smoothy wins the competition – the second year in a row a kiwi has won.

The rest of Team Kiwi made up for their disappointments by representing in style at the after party. They were even conned into doing an uncoordinated haka, wearing tight yellow tees advertising chewing gum. The celebrations continued right through the next day and night, including no-naps ice skating, piggyback skiing and giant penguin curling.

As we move onwards the tour starts to feel a little like an organized bus trip. We're drinking with the same group of people that we've just met, but in a different place. Friendships, romances, bromances and scandals begin to form. The hunger drive back contrasts the nervous excitement of the way there.

After recuperating and training for a month back at our base of Chamonix, it was time to get back on the road for two more comps – Nendaz (Switzerland) and Jasna (Slovakia) – this time though it's 3000km's of driving, including traversing Austria and Liechtenstein. Marc sacrificed his 1980 Nissan Micra for the trip, upon which we unleashed our artistic talents before we set off. They say a picture speaks a thousand words!

Cramming the skis and gear into the car was somewhat of a technical task as we had no roof racks and skis that touched both the front and rear windcreens. The team consisted of three cars, four kiwis (Pete, Neil, Marc and team leader, Mr. Responsible 'Dion Newport), two Brits and a token Australian.

Nendaz would be worth double points, the competition format was interesting: choose two of the three available venues, both runs count – a fresh format for us all. Pete was the first to drop, skiing a sick line on the gnarliest venue. However disaster struck and he crashed on an unseen dip in the flats just short of the finish line. Marc tried his best to talk his way into a last minute entry but the strict Swiss were having none of it. Neil chose two solid, technical lines and stayed on his feet, qualifying fourth to go through and



And on the third day,
the chalet maid slept



Harry and Lloyd have dinner

compete in the finals the following day, alongside pre-qualified NZ teammate Janina Kuzma.

The finals venue had perfect conditions, steep with fresh snow and sunshine. An arduous ridge climb led Neil and Janina to the top as helicopters buzzed overhead. Starting well with a 360 off the first hit, Neil ended up at the top of the wrong chute after a sketchy landing on his 2nd drop, he finishes a disappointing 20th. Janina though, was the standout kiwi stomping her line to finish second, repeating her result from the year before and winning a 12,000 Swiss Franc watch for the Sick Bird Award. Again Team Kiwi excel at the afterparty, which lasts far into the night. Pete forgets where the key is stashed, so sleeps outside for an hour or more in temperatures well below zero.

Next stop: Slovakia. The team kiwi car begins the 1400km drive boldly leading the convoy in the completely wrong direction, resulting in instant demotion from route finding. Austria and Liechtenstein bought us a snowstorm, good pizza and a quaint motel. Central Europe in winter makes us think of vampires and werewolves lurking in dark castles surrounded by snow and bare deciduous trees. So we swap cars, exchange yarns and battle to keep together in a convoy as the Team Kiwi car struggles to keep up with Dion's flash rental. We're really in road trip mode now - eating purely from gas stations, getting lost because our GPS stops at the Slovakian border, singing along to songs we've never heard in languages we don't speak and laughing at funny place names like Chur and Wankdorf.

We arrived in Slovakia the next evening just in time for the riders meeting, where an enthusiastic vodka-fuelled local greeted us. The entertainment continued with his broken English presentation ("You find the mountain very easy, it is very big") and the explanation for the widespread intoxication: 1 Euro beers. Doh!

As the first day of competition was cancelled due to a snowstorm we enjoyed shredding Slovakian powder in the trees with only our crew. A situation we would never have been in if it wasn't for the qualifying tour.

The day after was our only forecast weather window. So as soon as the clouds cleared the girls were sent to the top of the face with minimal inspection time. The clouds continued disrupting much of the competition and making it difficult to score well. Pete was back on form and managed to ski a fast, solid line and finish 7th, his best result of the season.

During that evening's customary celebrations some helpful Frenchmen decided that it was a good idea to push the Team Kiwi car down a two-meter flight of stairs to the door of the bar. We found the trusty 'Maximus' miraculously in one piece as we left the bar, un-phased we carried on the party outside on the car! After parties can make an event; it's not all about the competition as only three people can stand on the podium. After all, the time, money and effort, the nervousness, stress, disappointment and stoke of competing needs to be released somehow.

Organizing to leave the next morning involves digging the car out and failing at searching for items that have been lost on the way: Neil's jacket and sunglasses; Pete's sunglasses, ski pants, expensive thermals, camera case, spare battery, hoodie, socks, undies, iPod and dignity are all missing, presumed lost. To compensate these losses we acquire a Slovakian girl named Mimi, who is in the kiwi car with her bags packed and ready to leave when our team manager Dion veto's the idea. The seat stays empty as Neil has already left to catch a late night flight back to Chamonix for work. He arrives a day and a half late, two hours before the boss gets back - who would've fired him and taken his last month's pay if he'd found out. Pete and Marc make a non-stop seventeen hour drive home.

The final comp for Pete and Neil is in Norway, which is actually the first competition of the 2010-2011 season. Our Norwegian buddy Anne-May that we met at the Engadin comp picks us up from Oslo airport and tour guides us through the beautiful Norwegian countryside to the resort of Roldal.

Unseasonal weather caused by a volcanic eruption in Iceland shortens the competition from three days to one, meaning the double points competition is decided on one run. We are all happy with the way we ski and relax in the sun to watch the rest of the competition. At prize giving that night, Neil scores a 4th place, his best of the season. A great result to start off what is technically the 2011 competition season, and a nice change after all the crashes of previous competitions. Pete places 25th which baffles us as he skied the same line but our host Anna-May takes third making it a great after-party.

We've had so many incredible experiences on the rollercoaster ride that's been the Freeride World Tour Qualifying Series. Travelling by necessity with one common goal: to assert worldwide kiwi domination in the field of freeskiing skiing. At each stage of our quest we were lucky enough to be immersed in the local culture, meet amazing new friends and experience Europe in all its glory.

Besides all the great friendships and partying, we did also manage to see and ski some of the most spectacular alpine areas in Europe while we attempted to demonstrate, on some of the best terrain in the world, that the best skiers on earth are indeed from Aotearoa. These adventures definitely had their trials and tribulations, but would we do it all over again. Haha, see you next year... Consensus: One of the best possible ways to see Europe. Life goal: Tick.



Pete honing his skills in Chamonix
PHOTO: JONO WILLIS