

Travel

Hopelessly devoted to . . . laughs

A bus ride around Rarotonga proves hilarious, **Richard Moore** finds

BUS RIDES in new places can be interesting, exciting or even a bit daunting.

A trip from Houston to San Antonio springs to mind, where the person just ahead in the line for tickets had huge knife scars on his face.

Sitting on a bus allows you time to think, or chill, watching out the window as an unfamiliar landscape passes by. There's no need to know the road code, remember which side of the road to drive on, or even remembering when to indicate — that's all taken care for you by the driver.

Sometimes bus routes can be confusing, which is where the Rarotongan system shines above all others for simplicity.

Clockwise or anti-clockwise? Round the island's main road to the left, or to the right? It's simple.

And there is another joy for people on a Rarotongan bus, particularly tourists, and that is an amazing character known as Mr Hopeless.

As you hop on his bus Mr Hopeless greets you in a friendly fashion and proceeds to say that "I'm on day release" from prison and then launches into the kids' song *The Wheels on the Bus*.

Some tourists smile uncertainly, others are completely nonplussed.

However, by the time they hop off the bus they will have been won over by Mr Hopeless and his never-ending supply of jokes, songs and one liners.

A local hops on carrying a box of beer. Mr H tells him to stop drinking. And to remember to be back at the prison by 5pm. "He's my cellmate and that's food for our prison cell."

Next up a tourist proffers a bus ticket, which he clips. "Keep the change," he says with a straight face.



DRIVER OF THE BUS: Mr Hopeless is a man of many talents.

PHOTOS/
RICHARD MOORE

Then with an excellent voice he begins to sing *Hallelujah* by Leonard Cohen, pausing only to deal with new customers.

"That's 13 million euros," he says to the surprised patron.

The next in line hands over their cash and he says: "That's 18 billion euros change. You're very rich now."

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah. . .

Again he breaks from that beautiful song, looks up in the

rear-view mirror and asks: "Anywhere you want to go? China? Syria?"

Then he answers himself. "Nooooo, you don't want to go to Syria."

The day is drizzly and bus rattly but during his routine Mr H steers us safely around the coastal road. On the road ahead two lovely ladies are walking slowly.

Mr H says: "Can someone drive the bus? I want to go for a walk."

Laughter erupts. Everyone



REAR VIEW: Mr H is as informative as he is funny.



CRACK-UP: Passengers laugh at one of Mr H's jokes.

is having a good time.

Then he passes two cyclists and yells out the window: "Eat my dust!"

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah. . .

Mr H's commentary is funny and informative. He tells people where good restaurants are, to be careful of swimming near the entrances to the lagoon and to make sure they wear reef shoes because of stonefish.

An elderly man and his lady get off the bus and as he passes by he is told: "Don't forget your wife. I mean, the boss."

Two German travellers then hop on. He clearly remembers them from a previous trip.

He begins *How Great You Are* and as we pass Government House says to everybody and nobody: "If you come back this is where I'll be. Living in Government House. I'll be Sir Hopeless. I'll be the main man."

A passenger wants to get off at the Youth With a Mission complex.

"We just passed it," he

says, "you should have told me that last year!"

Then, moments later, he breaks into another massive grin and says "Just kidding . . . it's here."

Next up we stop at a resort and two young women clamber on.

"Are you staying here?" he asks seriously.

"Yes," one answers.

"What room?"

"710," she says as he loudly invites the entire bus to a party in their room that night.

Then he croons Willie Nelson's *Of All the Girls I've Loved Before*.

More parts of songs flow. Elvis' *Wooden Heart*, *Bohemian Rhapsody* and the South African and New Zealand national anthems.

Folk stand to get off to be greeted with "Take your time . . . and hurry up!"

All too soon we are back at Cook's Corner in Avarua and our journey is over. It has been a really fun spin around the island with a driver who should be protected as a national treasure by the Cook Islands.



Hey, I'm Oscar

Who doesn't like a nap in the middle of the day?

Oscar the Seal

If a seal isn't moving it is most likely sleeping, not in distress.

DOC HOTline
0800 362 468

Report any safety hazards or conservation emergencies
For Fire and Search and Rescue Call 111

It's normal for seals to . . .

- Sleep – a lot
- Have weepy eyes, cuts or abrasions/scratches
- Look skinny or malnourished

Watch seals from 20 metres away and keep your dog on a lead. Only call the Department of Conservation if a seal is being harassed, or is severely injured or entangled.



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai