

New Zealand ? a trip of a lifetime

New Zealand?the land of the Kiwi and the Maori, of Alps, glaciers, fiords, plains, lakes, the Pacific ocean, the Tasman sea and the spectacular meeting of these two at Cape Reinga?..but as important, a country of friendly and very welcoming people. An extraordinary 21 day tour of the two islands that comprise New Zealand allowed me to see firsthand the many wonders of its North and South Islands.

The population of New Zealand is 4.5 million, 3.4 million of those living in the North Island with 1.4 million living in Auckland the largest city in New Zealand. The larger South Island is home to only 23% of the population. I found the two islands culturally very different. Almost 15% of the total population is Maori with 90% of those living in the north island. The Maori culture in the north island is very evident but barely obvious in the south island, almost like two different countries.

Our tour started at Auckland on the east coast of the North Island. A very beautiful city built on 50 ?almost? extinct volcanos, which appear as hills dotted around the city. There are two harbours, one on the Pacific Ocean the other on the Tasman Sea. A sunset dinner cruise on a 80ft sailing yacht in Waitemata (Auckland) Harbour gave us an intimate view of the yachting culture for which Auckland is well known. A four hour coach tour of Auckland left the impression of a very clean and tidy city, and indeed I felt this about New Zealand throughout my tour.

On our way north to Bay of Islands we crossed to the western shore and the Tasman Sea. We drove through a mountainous forest reserve and stopped to listen as a Maori guide related stories of their culture, and the immense 2300 year old kauri tree standing there. The kauri is an indigenous tree in the North Island but is almost extinct because of its hard wood and suitability for building. It is now protected and there are 2,000 left. At Pahia another Maori guide took us to the Waitangi Treaty Ground, a historic place in New Zealand history that marked their founding as a nation. It was evident to me that the Maori have made a dedicated effort to preserve their culture.

One of the highlights of my tour was the day long trip to the very rugged northernmost and spectacular point called Cape Reinga. The turmoil in the water where the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea meet was a memorable sight. There were huge sand dunes in the area which resembled snow hills and were used for tobogganing. We returned to Pahia driving on the beach in the edge of the surf for 60 miles! That was some experience.

Heading south we stopped at a working dairy farm for lunch before arriving at Rotorua south of Auckland. This is the home of the Maori culture. Here we visited a Maori village and were surprised with a geyser shooting skyhigh from a thermal pond. The area has massive geothermal activity. We also visited a site where the Kiwi bird is protected and saw them in the darkness of their environment. We saw a sheep shearing demonstration and attended a Maori Hangi which is a supper cooked in the ground? It was very good!

On the way south to Napier we visited the largest geothermal power plant in New Zealand. Five geothermal plants provide 13% of their entire power. I found it unnerving to observe the steam rising from this huge complex, and realizing that this much thermal activity was coming from below the surface of the earth (literally at my feet!). I got this same feeling when viewing the many mud pools that we saw during our tour of the north island, just boiling up and curdling on the surface.

One of the stories I heard of the earthquake that dramatically affected Napier in 1931 was that a friend of one of the tour drivers, who was standing on the point of his land overlooking the ocean at the time, actually saw the ocean floor rising above the water level twice. He said it was surreal. The word earthquake was used frequently in many different scenarios? I must say it was somewhere there in the back of my mind on the trip.

We visited a large gannet colony perched high on a cliff overlooking the Pacific, arrived at by a very scary 4WD journey on a dirt road. We also had a wine tasting experience and dined at Mission Estates Winery? both were good!

We continued south to Wellington. This is New Zealand's second largest city, on the southern tip of the island. A very beautiful

Maori museum was a highlight, but was surpassed by my walk along a beautiful sandy beach steps from my hotel, and wading ankle deep in the cool waters on a very hot day with a gelato in hand!

We travelled to the South Island by ferry across the Marlborough Sound to Picton. The approach is very beautiful with its mountains and bays and beautiful blue water. We drove south along the Pacific coast to Ashburton, just south of Christchurch, stopping to see a seal colony on the way. Next day we boarded the Trans Alpine Railway to traverse the New Zealand Alps. I stood in the open air front viewing car on the way and it was spectacular.

Disembarking at Arthur's Pass (3,000 ft elevation) we boarded the coach for the journey through the Alps to the Pacific Coast and south to Franz Josef. Nothing prepared me for the sheer beauty and majesty of this entire experience including the drive along the coast with the Alps on one side and the waves of the Pacific on the other. We arrived just in time to make an exhilarating helicopter flight to land on the Franz Josef Glacier just before the weather closed in. There are no better words to describe this than AMAZING!

Part of our journey south east to Queenstown was on a jet boat on the Haast River. Lovely scenic trip with waterfalls and several ?wheelies? for excitement! Queenstown is reminiscent of Banff. Set on a lake in the mountains, population of 20,000 but swelling to 1,300,000 with summer and winter visitors. It is a very popular skiing destination. Many movie locations are filmed in the surrounding area including scenes from Lord of the Rings. A Land Rover trip to view some of these included a perilous descent into Skipper's Canyon and a drive through a rocky river bed with water up to the door handles. We stopped to catch our breath with tea and panning for gold on the river bank. The Lord of the Rings is my next movie rental!

Our next stop was southwest to Te Anau in the Fiordland National Park where we were treated to a cruise on Milford Sound. This was my first experience of fiords and it was spectacular. The captain even took the boat right up to the base of one of the many waterfalls, much to the ?wet? surprise of those standing on the outside deck (writer not included)!

Before heading to Dunedin on the east coast we visited the glow worm caves. An amazing sight, the caves themselves not for the faint of heart! Dunedin is a bit of Scotland. More heritage buildings than I had seen elsewhere. For me a lovely visit to Lanarch Castle. This turned out to be a modern castle with a ghostly and strange history high on a hill above the city with an extraordinary garden. This time it was beer tasting at Speights Brewery and dinner?no complaints!

On the way northwest to Lake Tekapo we stopped off to see the Moeraki Boulders, huge balls on a large sandy beach, caused by mud in the ground gradually unearthed by the weather. We had a fantastic day for our visit to Mount Cook National Park, blue skies and 25°C temperatures. Mount Cook at 12,316 feet is the highest mountain in New Zealand. There is a statue of Sir Edmund Hilary in the Centre at the park. It was historic for me to stand and view the mountain with its snow cap. That night we were treated to a star studded heaven. Apparently because of its situation in the southern hemisphere there are more stars visible there than any I have ever seen.

CHRISTCHURCH, on the east coast, was our last stop and it was heart wrenching. The devastation caused by the earthquake three years earlier was still very much in evidence. This capital of New Zealand and third largest city is truly beautiful. The heritage buildings that are still standing are magnificent. The botanical gardens in the centre of the very large city park have one of the most beautiful rose gardens I have ever seen, and the first rose I stuck my nose in had an unforgettable scent. Most of the deaths during the earthquake occurred in the CCTV Bldg and that corner of the city is dedicated to them. There is a small square with 185 empty white chairs to memorialize those that died there. Viewing them is quite emotional. The magnificent Christchurch Cathedral was badly damaged and will be demolished. The congregation very quickly erected a ?cardboard? Cathedral in this area constructed of 98 cardboard tubes. It is quite extraordinary. I was truly moved by the resilience of the people of this city and their optimism.

In closing, I have been very fortunate to have been able to travel many times, mostly in Europe, but I have never experienced such a variety of terrain, spectacular views, friendly residents and interesting cultures in just three weeks?truly a trip of a lifetime.

By Terry Allamby

