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TOURING NEW ZEALAND

When we decided to spend a month in New Zealand it was so we could see more than the large cities of Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Queenstown. We wanted to hike the mountains, kayak on lakes and learn about the history and culture of the native Maori. To pack it all in and not have to worry about driving in a foreign country on the “wrong” side of the road, we scheduled three tours with some free time between them.

We arrived in Auckland where we spent two days exploring the city on our own. Auckland is a waterfront city with numerous hills (as we found out is true of all New Zealand), lots of traffic and a sampling of every culture in the world. The views from the Skytower, the tallest structure in the city, were superb while the penguins at the Kelly Tarkton Museum reminded us of Antarctica. The St Patty’s celebration, complete with an Irish Elvis, had separate sections for “with” and “without” alcohol.

The northernmost part of the North Island has a ninety-mile beach we wanted to see. So we took a three-day tour north to the Bay of Islands. Four hours brought us to Paihia where we toured the Waitangi Treaty House and learned about the Maori tribes and their interaction with the original European settlers. The second day we rode to the tip of the island to see the place where the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean meet. On the way back, we rode down Ninety Mile Beach, which is only 64 miles long, and completely deserted. Prior to heading back to Auckland, I got my requisite boat ride in.

It was a daylong sail on a tall ship along the coast. This tour could have been individually arranged with ease, one bus company does the travel to Paihia, everything else can be individually booked there. Already it was starting to sink in how unpopulated the country is. With only 4 million people in an area the size of California, there is a lot of free space!

The second tour was a bus tour that used a system of rotating assigned seating based on where you sat the first day. This was our “cheapest” tour and it was reflected in the accommodations and organization, but it did let us see the interior of the North

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Bear Bear at the Wairakei Geothermal Power Development Station

LOOKING FOR ELVES

Did we decide to spend a month in New Zealand based on careful research, the recommendations of friends and a life long desire to see the island? Nope.. let’s be honest; it was the movie version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* that took us there. The scenery in the movie was so appropriate to the story we just had to see if it was real or the product of computer enhancement. Verdict?

It’s real! We stood at the base of Mt Doom, waded across the Ford of Rivendell and drifted past Lothlorien. On one sunny day we stood on the heights where the Orks ambushed the Riders of Rohan and admired the Misty Mountains in the distance. We saw rivers flowing down from high mountain glaciers to the sea through forests with huge trees that could easily be Ents.

When we hiked through the edges of the Old Forest, I kept looking over my shoulder hoping to get a glimpse of a forest elf. We didn’t see any but we did visit many places where they would have been right at home. The landscape is a perfect setting for heroic tales.

You will probably never meet an elf or a hobbit but, if you want to, you can visit Middle Earth for the price of an airline ticket.

NEW ZEALAND IN 3D



Castle Hill is the English translation of Kura Tawhiti. On the South Island, between the Torlesse Mountain Range and the Cragieburn Mountain Range, the Kura Tawhiti Conservation Area can be found. One visit and it is easy to see where the name comes from. There are limestone formations throughout the area. Legend has it, that the spirits of the ancestors live among these rocks and there are strong codes in place for rock climbers and visitors to show respect to the ancestors.

* * *



New Zealand is home to over 400 wineries and produces internationally acclaimed wines. Since most of the wines are produced from local grapes, New Zealand is not a large player in the international scene. However, the Sauvignon Blanc is rated throughout the world as a definitive benchmark for the varietel. Several of the better wineries have started to use screw on caps instead of corks, claiming that the number of bottles lost due to corks warrants it. Those I tasted were not adversely affected by the screw-ons.

Wineries are located throughout the northern and southern islands of New Zealand. This is **the “Tower” at Highfield Estate Winery** in Marlborough, a small winery which produces less than 200,000 litres. From the top of this tower, there is a splendid view of the Wairau Valley.

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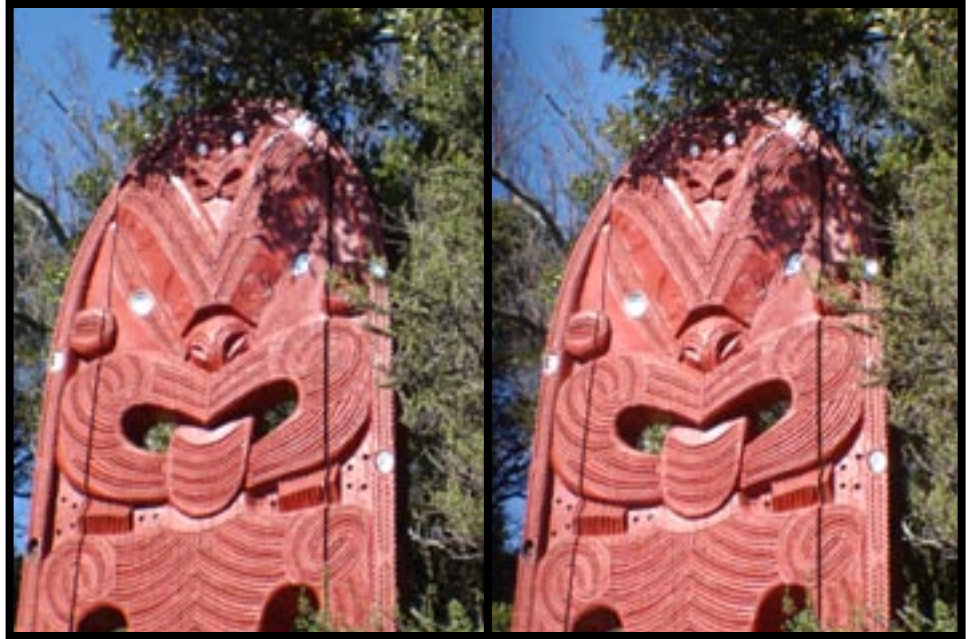
Pancake Rocks, Punakaiki, is located on the West Coast of the South Island. There is a 15 minute walk which leads through the water sculpted limestone which resembles stacks of pancakes. The geysers from the blowholes were not active during the time we were there,

but the sun was out, the dolphins were playing at sea and it was a wonderful time to enjoy the views down the Paparoa National Park coastline.

* * *

Maori started migrating to New Zealand around 650 A.D., the Europeans in 1642, and in 1840 the Treaty of Waitangi was signed whereby the Maori recognized the Queen and yielded to her the sole right of purchasing their lands and she granted them full rights and privileges of British subjects and guaranteed them possession of their lands, forests and fisheries.

Today, Maori make up 15% of the population and have maintained their culture and language, which is recognized as an official language of the country. The **Maori Arts and Crafts Institute**, established in 1963, trains Maori in their traditional arts and crafts. Only a select number of Maori are chosen to attend the Institute each year where they learn the traditional arts of **wood carving (whakairo)** or weaving (raranga). Wood carvings, such as the one in the top photo, can be seen on the grounds as one tours the Institute.



The Institute is located on the North Island in Rotorua on a plot of land that includes the famous Puhutu Geyser in the Te Whakarewarewa Thermal Valley. This geyser blows at least once a day, frequently up to 100 feet. Rotorua is also famous for its **boiling mud pools** (bottom photo). This mud has a high concentration of minerals and is used in many beauty products in New Zealand and has recently started to be exported to Thai.

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Like many sea coasts, the **Tasman Sea** provides a shoreline full of scenic views. The middle photo was taken at dusk at an isolated beach just north of Haast, a short drive from Lake Moeraki.



PHOTO ALBUM - THE NORTH ISLAND



Cape Reinga, where the Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean meet



The hole in Ninety Mile Beach where yesterday's tour bus was excavated



The Maori Meeting House contains carvings representing each of the 28 group of tribes



Mt. Ruapehu, a volcano which erupted in 1996, located in the Tongariro National Park



A Norfolk Pine tree stands against the overcast New Zealand sky



Steve sleds down a sand dune on Ninety Mile Beach



The R. Tucker Thompson anchored in the Bay of Islands for lunch

... THE SOUTH ISLAND



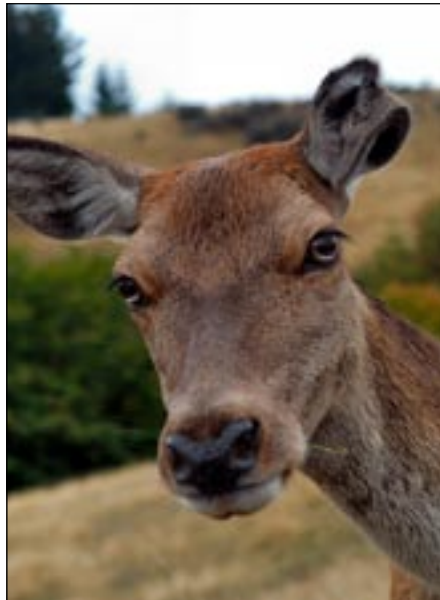
A cave in Milford Sound as seen from the *Milford Mariner*



The serenity of Lake Sarah at dawn



Just one of the numerous waterfalls on Milford Sound



Red Deer investigates the car at Deer Park Heights just outside Queenstown



Mountains reflected in Lake Sarah



Jura Glacier, just a short helicopter ride from Queenstown



This sign wouldn't be seen in the States!

TOURING NEW ZEALAND (CONTINUED)

Island and get us to Wellington. There were two long days of driving with stops to stretch the legs and take photos. At Rotorua we visited the Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve seeing geysers, mud pools and the Maori Arts & Crafts Institute. There we saw the arts of woodcarving and flax weaving being taught. Then on to Rainbow Springs to learn about raising trout for river release, sheep shearing and to see live kiwi birds.

Lake Taupo, the largest lake in New Zealand, is the caldera of a giant volcano. It was the first example we saw of a recurring theme in the landscape: a beautiful barren lake surrounded by mountains. Before dropping us off in Wellington, we got the traditional tour, then spent the day enjoying an aerobatic show, the Dragonboat Festival, and the LOTR exhibit at the National Museum.

The next day we flew to Nelson on the South Island where we met up with our final tour which would last 2 weeks and take us throughout the South Island. Our first stop was Lake Rotorua Lodge. It was like staying at a rich uncle's home where everything was meticulous, staff was friendly but not overbearing and everyone was waiting to accommodate the guests. There were several hikes outside the door, as there was at each location we stayed at on this tour. We hiked Mount Roberts and tasted wine at Montana (Brancott) and Highfield Estates vineyards in Marlborough.

On the way to Arthur's Pass, we explored Cape Foulwind and the Pancake Rocks (Punakaiki). Each was the kind of place to spend a day taking photos, not an hour just passing by. While staying at the Lodge at Arthur's Pass, we kayaked on Lake Sarah, explored the Kura Tawhiti Conservation Area (Castle Hill), celebrated our 5th anniversary, hiked Kelly Creek in the rain and spent a day in Christchurch. The trip to Christchurch was highlighted by a contrasting visit to the Royal Air Museum (veterans very much supporting the war effort) and an anti-war rally downtown.

The weather kept us from exploring the Franz Josef Glacier up close, but the sunsets at the Lodge at Lake Moeraki were superb. Hiking in the rain forests, kayaking to the Tasman Sea, walking the Tasman shore and seeing glowworms highlighted our stay.



Finally we headed to Queenstown, the playground of New Zealand, where just about every activity can be found. A day trip through Te Anau with a boat ride up Milford Sound, another day hiking along the Dart River, a jet boat ride skimming the surface of the river and a private helicopter ride to the top of Jura Glacier were the highlights.

The three basic elements of the trip that most astounded us and make us want to go back are the beauty of New Zealand, great local wines and the fact that in New Zealand it is believed that people are responsible for their own actions. This means that it is very hard to sue someone because you were doing something dangerous and got hurt – translation: no forms to sign every time you turn around! Yes, I think we'll be back.



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