



# Kia Ora, South' Island!

**We were thoroughly charmed by our first trip to New Zealand, and not only by the spectacular winter beauty of its land and seascapes. The local people were sincerely welcoming and friendly without exception, and the food and wine in a class of their own.**

It's tempting to try to see the whole of NZ in one trip, but unless you have a month or more, it's not a good idea, especially if you're driving. Friends of ours did both the North and South islands in three weeks last year, starting in Auckland in the north, and admitted to being tired out – “just chasing destinations” – half-way through their journey around South Island.

So, we decided to see just South Island this time. Taking the direct SIA flight into Christchurch (a third of the way down the east coast) we drove south and inland to adventure capital Queenstown; then across the Southern Alps to and up the rugged West Coast via Tauranga Bay and Westport; all the way to the picturesque towns of Nelson and Picton in the north, then to Blenheim, right in the middle of Marlborough wine country; and finally down the east coast back to Christchurch.

## **First Stop: Christchurch**

The historic conservation area of central Christchurch is best explored by tram. With your NZ\$12.50 ticket, you can hop on and off at will for two days. The driver entertains you with a stream of information, pointing out places of interest along the way.

Good places to jump off and explore include the picturesque New Regent Street, lined with an eclectic

variety of shops including Cubana Cigars, the Pastel Shoe Dyers and a couple of alfresco cafes. Don't miss the Arts Centre – it's a hive of outlets for arts and crafts, with some particularly beautiful and original jewellery from a number of NZ's top designers.

## **Accommodation**

Huntley House is probably the most exquisite hotel I've seen. The main house has the feeling of an English country manor house in its heyday, with discreet service to match. It is all glowing wooden panelling, tasteful chandeliers, burnished silver and old leather, with welcoming fires in every grate.

The hotel is in an excellent position, five minutes' drive from the airport and the same from the city centre. It has been in owner John Reid's family for decades and was transformed into a top hotel, aimed almost exclusively at overseas visitors, in 2004.

It fully deserves all the superlatives you can think of. The spacious rooms and suites are the last word in elegant luxury and the service immaculate. We particularly loved the pre-dinner drinks next to a roaring log fire and Chef Brian's clever canapés

**by Verne  
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*Huntley House*

– complimentary, whether or not you're dining in. But it's a real place: there are no bulk-bought old library books here; on the fly-leaves of many of the lovely old volumes on the shelves, you will find owner John Reid's name in boyish lettering.

### Food

#### **Huntley House Restaurant**

In the kitchen of what must be the most elegant country-style hotel in NZ, Swiss-trained chef Brian McNulty works his magic. If you stay at the hotel, you have the fun of being able to watch from the breakfast-room as he prepares your eggs for you. We joined our hosts, David and Cheryl French, to enjoy his excellent three-course set dinner (\$95p.p.).

I can also highly recommend the outstanding food and wine at Rotherhams, in Rotherham Street off Riccarton Road.

#### **Tranz-Alpine Express**

This four-and-a-half-hour trip (one way) from coast to coast across the middle of South Island leaves Christchurch at 8.15am sharp, arrives at Greymouth in time for lunch and brings you back around 6.00pm. It is rated one of the world's greatest train journeys and is not to be missed. (Book at [www.tranzscenic.co.nz](http://www.tranzscenic.co.nz).)

The morning mist soon lifted as we traversed the Canterbury Plain before wending our way through some of the most stunning mountain scenery imaginable. Sunlight shone through bands of high mist (or low cloud?) and dramatic valleys plunged to roaring ice-green rivers.

#### **To Queenstown**

Taking the scenic route from Christchurch to Queenstown, our longest stretch of driving, we turned off State Highway (SH) 1 at Rangitata to follow SH79 to Lake Tekapo and Lake Pukaki – don't miss the Mt Cook Lookout – via Cromwell to our destination. The

number of mountain ranges is astounding; whenever you think you are moving away from the snowy peaks, another lot appears from another direction.

As for Queenstown itself – wow! This picturesque town on the shores of Lake Wakatipu is a world away from Christchurch. There is a host of brand new accommodation scaling the mountainside almost as determinedly as the adventure-seekers who flock here.

This is the self-proclaimed Adventure Capital of the World! It is the home of bungee-jumping, kayaking, tramping, skiing or whatever else takes your fancy. Fittingly, as we arrived on that icy afternoon, the sky was full of the bright, birdlike hang-gliders that regularly hurl themselves off the top of the mountain above Queenstown. You can get up there by cable-car (\$19 return) and ski-lift. Brrr!

Sadly, our only day of bad weather thwarted plans to fly over and land at Milford Sound. We had booked with Air Wakatipu; the normal price is \$315 p.p. for a three-hour trip, including a landing. Elspeth, manager of The Dairy Luxury Boutique hotel, also recommends Milford Sound Flightseeing. Instead, after the obligatory cable car trip – the views would be stunning on a good day – we drove the 19km to Arrowtown, a historical gold-mining village – for a pleasant and informative visit to the Lakeside District Museum and lunch.

Having learnt something about the pioneer settlers in this area made the one-and-a-half-hour lake cruise





on the venerable TSS Earnslaw, a 1912 vintage steamship, doubly evocative of a time long past. I like tourist-oriented activities like this boat-ride – and the Christchurch tram – because they give great commentaries on points of historic interest that you might otherwise miss. If you time it right, you can stop off at the elegantly colonial Walter Peak High Country Farm for a spot of high tea and sheep-shearing.



to visit. And that's not all! She personally bakes all the lovely goodies that are put out for tea each afternoon and makes the free-flow of cockle-warming gluhwein that's available in the kitchen between 5pm and 7pm.

There's a plethora of bars, restaurants and take-away outlets within easy walking distance of the hotel. We had a good meal – lamb again! – at the popular Tatler's.

**The Dairy**

Like everything else, Steamer's Wharf is just five or ten minutes' walk from The Dairy Luxury Boutique Hotel. ('Dairy', by the way, is NZ-speak for 'corner store', which is what this hostelry used to be.) It's a warm, cosy place, full of character. After a day on the slopes, rapids or whatever, guests gather informally on the big, leather sofas in front of the fire to share their experiences over a glass of wine from the honour bar. The rooms are spacious and comfortably furnished.

As was the case wherever we stayed, Elspeth likes to give her guests personal service. She will recommend restaurants, suggest and book activities and give whatever help and advice you may need. There are mountains to climb, slopes to ski and wine estates

Another find was Joe's Garage, down at the waterfront. The coffee was memorable, the all-day breakfasts superb and the place heaving with rain-thwarted skiing types.

**The West Coast**

The difference between the Lake District around Queenstown and the West Coast is amazing. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't the azure sea, the mountainous shoreline or the richness of the temperate rainforest we suddenly found ourselves in.

We spent the night in Fox Glacier, in a comfortable, spacious room at the pleasant Te Weheka hotel.

Morning dawned clear and windless for the scenic highlight of our holiday: a helicopter ride over Fox Glacier. A chopper is the ideal machine for



exploring a glacier, as the pilot is able to manoeuvre it within a few metres of the contorted ice formations. The flight was breathtakingly exciting, and landing on thick snow at the foot of Mount Tasman in the vast emptiness of the Alpine landscape was deeply exhilarating. It was just 2°C up there, according to the pilot, but the adrenaline rush kept us warm!

What make these glaciers extremely rare is that they slide down into the verdant growth of a temperate rainforest. I'm sure a team of botanists could spend a decade studying the shaggy yet delicate, prehistoric-looking ferns, mosses and other plant life that cover every inch of stem and bark on the ancient trees along the Minnehaha Trail, on your right just as you enter Fox Glacier. This 15-minute walk is enchantingly picturesque, a perfect background for hobbits and fairies. It's no wonder they chose this country to shoot the *Lords of the Rings* trilogy – so many of the special effects were already in place!



### To Taurunga Bay

From the glaciers, we drove up the west coast through Hokitika and Greymouth to Taurunga Bay, just outside Westport. Stunning, craggy scenery greeted us at every turn of the road – short, relatively straight stretches with some devilishly difficult mountain passes. You wouldn't want to do this in bad weather!

The guidebook disparaged Hokitika, whose glory days in the 1860s gold rush have been replaced with a low-key prosperity based largely on tourism, but we liked it.

It's a good place to shop – its jewellery factories, with showrooms, produce mostly jade pieces but also ones made of paua shell and bone.

The Pancake Rocks at Punakaiki are a pleasant ten-minute walk from the road, and not to be missed. If you're lucky, you'll be there at high tide to see the full blowhole effect.

We got the last room at the attractive and comfortable Omau Settler's Lodge at Cape Foulwind. **(Call Paul and Grace at (03) 789 5200.) A couple of minutes'**



**drive away is The Great Beach House at 41 Tuaranga Bay, declared Best West Coast Hotel in 2005. (Book on (03) 789 5225.)**

### To Nelson

Yet more wonderful scenery greeted us on the way to Nelson, taking the route along Buller Gorge. When we got to our lovely lodgings, the 19th-century Baywick Inn, our hosts, Tim and Janet, suggested we have lunch at the deservedly award-winning The Boatshed on Wakefield Quay, to enjoy its panoramic estuarine view during daylight.

### Baywick Inn

In 1997, Tim and Janet bought this beautiful Victorian house (built in 1885) and lovingly restored it. It is now a luxurious character B&B. All four of the upstairs guests rooms are comfortably and authentically furnished – I loved them all, but chose the one with a small sun-room and a ball-and-claw bath in the *en suite* bathroom.

Like everywhere else we stayed, we found a warmth and willingness to pass on information on walks to take, craft places to visit, hills to climb. And we were tickled when our hosts went out to a wine-tasting, trustingly leaving us with the keys – the sole occupants of their valuable property!

Tim explained that, by a happy geographical coincidence, Nelson escapes much of the bad weather that plagues the country – it basks in year-round sunshine. Proud of its architectural heritage, this exceptionally pretty cathedral town is home to many artists and artisans – you can visit a variety of noteworthy residences, galleries, potters' studios and so on in the course of a mapped-out walk.

Janet pointed us in the direction of the popular Harry's Bar for dinner, but the genial and all-knowing Amod behind the bar agreed immediately that we



hadn't come from Singapore to New Zealand to eat Asian food, so he sent us off to top-notch restaurant, The Cut, located in a period house at 94 Collingwood Street. There we lapped up the local Nelson oysters, roasted rack of lamb (yes, again) and lovely, warm service. (Call (03) 548 9874.)

**Blenheim via Picton**

At the cute village of Havelock, the mussel capital of the world and along SH6 from Nelson, we took the gruelling but stupendously beautiful coastal road along Grove Arm, the western extension of Queen Charlotte Sound, to Picton. The picturesque harbour town of Picton is where the Interisland ferries that link South Island with North Island arrive and depart. After a casual lunch of freshly fried blue cod and chips wrapped in newspaper from a take-away joint on the Picton High Street (served by possibly the surliest woman on South Island, who had to be the owner – no one would ever hire someone like that!), we went on to Blenheim.

**D'Urville Hotel**

Right in the town centre, this lovely neo-Grecian converted bank is a delight. All the rooms are decorated differently; but each is quirkily elegant with witty, neoclassical touches. Ours, the Angel Room, had romantic, gauzy white drapes with touches of celestial blue; the *en suite* bathroom featured gold walls and a ball-and-claw bath.

It was nice to see that women rule this esoteric roost: manager Lesley Schultze is ably assisted by Antonia Pewhairangi-Wallace and just a couple of others. Only the chef, Lawrence Purser, is male. The bar is popular with locals, and the restaurant features innovative dishes using the freshest of local ingredients – including the young shoots of the piko piko fern: a first for me.



Apart from sailing around the sounds, the main reason to visit Blenheim is to sample the famous Marlborough wines. For more on this, see page 178.

**Blenheim to Christchurch via Kaikoura**

We stopped to view an established seal colony just south of Kaikoura, and a couple told us to go back a few kilometres and walk up a path to see a group of seal pups at play. It was an unforgettable sight – about half a dozen pups frolicking under a waterfall about 200m upstream from the beach.

Lunch was a plain, cold, boiled crayfish, bought for about \$60 from Cay's Crays – a roadside caravan. We ate it off the newspaper it was wrapped in, sitting in the car and looking out over the ocean. Superb! With fishy fingers, we continued up the coast back to Christchurch for our last night in New Zealand.

Well fed, well wined and well satisfied with the country and its wonderful people, Roy and I agreed that this was just about the best holiday we had ever had. Roll on North Island!

**Accommodation:**

We found masses of hotels, motels, lodges and B&B establishments wherever we went. It's hard to imagine them all being fully booked, but if I were visiting in high season, or during NZ or Australian school holidays, I wouldn't take the risk.

For a list of upmarket and boutique accommodation, get hold of the Friar's Guide. Note that some B&Bs don't take children; it's wise to check in advance.

**Getting there:**

SIA has direct nine-to-ten-hour flights into both Auckland (North Island) and Christchurch (South Island). Air New Zealand has a plethora of easy and affordable flights that criss-cross the country, so you could combine driving with one or two flights to reduce the driving – you'll save time, but lose out on the magnificent scenery that is to be found in every corner of this splendid country.

**When to go:**

Unconstrained by school holidays, we went in the first two weeks of the wintry month of August, which is off-peak even in winter-sport destinations such as Queenstown. Though nights were cold and peak temperatures ranged from 10°C to 13°C, the weather gods smiled on us: we had glorious sunshine and only one day of rain.