

Trip Review



South Island Explorer

Trip review from an April New Zealand adventure

By Pat Ballard, JOURNEYS Director of Sales

For years I have had world travelers tell me that I “have” to go to New Zealand, Land of the Long White Cloud. They told me it was “pristine and beautiful, civilized and sensible.” In fact, that combination of words delayed my exploration of the country for years. I didn’t want too much comfort or familiarity. I loved the exotic. I loved Asia! Well, New Zealand has dramatically altered my ideas on amazing travel. Every day I was awed and challenged by new experiences. Every evening I enjoyed a delicious hot shower and deluxe accommodations with stunning views of mountains and rivers. I was exhilarated AND pampered, and I was hooked. My colleagues are laughing a lot and saying, “We told you so!”

New Zealand is located just southeast of Australia, and New Zealanders refer to their large neighbor as “that island across the pond”. New Zealand has two main islands, North and South, and a total population of only 3 1/2 million people. The South Island, focus of our Deluxe Wilderness Explorer, is larger than the North Island and yet far less populated. It also boasts more spectacular scenery and a greater variety of climactic zones.



About the Maori

To appreciate New Zealand, one should learn a little about the Maori, the indigenous people. The ancestors of the Maori were originally from the western Pacific. Being farmers, they raised pigs and chickens and grew many crops. They were also skilled shipbuilders, which no doubt accounts for the exploratory voyages they made to eastern areas where no humans had previously settled. Maori legend says that the first Maori to make the crossing to New Zealand was Chief Kupe in the 10th century. He sailed from an area thought to be near Tahiti and it is believed that he left verbal directions for the voyage which were passed on to future generations. When the Maori arrived they had to adjust to

much colder temperatures and changes of seasons unlike any they had previously known. Being totally dependent upon their immediate environment they quickly learned to be resourceful and thus turned into one of the most complex of stone age cultures.

Maori life was, and still is, strongly associated with myths and legends which are passed verbally from generation to generation. Maori believe that a strong connection to the past helps ensure a strong present generation. Much like what has happened with the Native American society in recent years, there is a powerful movement today to increase awareness of Maori culture and its influence upon the development of New Zealand.

It is impossible to travel any distance at all in New Zealand without coming into contact with either a lake or town or waterfall that bears a Maori name. The stories that accompany the names are a fascinating part of travel in New Zealand and one that you will have the opportunity to experience time and time again. In fact, New Zealand currency features the tattooed face of a Maori chief. Today the Maori are well known for their wood, bone and jade carvings. One of the best places to see these crafts is in Hokitika, a small town on the western coast of the South Island.

Arrival in Christchurch

I arrived about 8 a.m. and was met by Brian Lucas, JOURNEYS' representative in New Zealand. The group wasn't departing Christchurch until 1 pm. so I had time to explore the area around the art centers and museums. I particularly enjoyed the Canterbury Museum. Renowned for having some of the finest cultural and natural collections in the country, it is housed in one of the city's most historic buildings. My favorite place was the Arts and Crafts center located just across the street from both the Canterbury Museum and the Botanical Gardens. If I had it to do over again, I'd plan to arrive in Christchurch a day before the trip starts in order to explore more of this victorian-style city.

Our group consisted of 9 travelers. Six of us traveled in a 9 passenger van and the other three went in the 6 seater. Each van is beautifully outfitted with a built in cooler and storage area in the back. There were even rain parkas and bug repellent for the client who forgets to bring his own.



Southern Alps and Wild Rivers, Chivalry and Beach Banquets

After a quick tour of Christchurch we headed up a nearby mountain where we stopped for a wonderful view of the city. Brian then produced vinyl covered maps and proceeded to give us a full trip orientation which made me realize that this might truly be a very great trip, even though it was "civilized. Leaving the Canterbury Plains, primarily farm land, we crossed Porter's Pass and entered the Waimakariri Basin making a stop at Castle Hill rocks. Formed on the ocean floor and thrust up, these sedimentary rock formations were fun to climb on and afforded nice views of the valley and the Torlesse mountain range.



Later, those of us who wanted some good exercise hiked to Bridal Falls and on the Dobson Nature Trail. Shorter, more level walks were available for those who preferred them.

Our first day ended at Arthur's Pass Wilderness Lodge about 4 PM. Built in 1996, it is nestled in a mountain beech forest, surrounded by the Southern Alps and wild rivers. All the lodge rooms overlook the river and mountains. The dining room, with its two-story wall to wall windows, provides a magnificent view! This was one of the most lovely lodges I've ever visited anywhere. We spent two nights here, using the lodge as a jump-off point for some beautiful walks. The facility is also a working sheep farm and we were taken to see sheep shearing, and we were treated to a display of sheep dogs working the flock, which we all found fascinating.



Meals at the Wilderness Lodge were a food enthusiast's delight. We were presented with Fillet of Monkfish steamed in fresh herbs and coconut milk with gingered courgettes, and Denver Leg of Cervena Venison roasted in pesto and served with red onions, raisins and pine-nuts with red wine sauce. My favorite was Baked Fillet of Grouper served on a bed of snow peas with a passion fruit butter sauce. The king of deserts was the baked chocolate mousse cake with clotted cream and berries.

New Zealanders, known as Kiwis, say that the difference between the east coast of the South Island and the west coast is that they have droplets on the east and "liquid rain" on the west. Naturally this is why the west coast has such wonderful subtropical rain forests. Tannifers and cabbage trees, which don't provide cabbage and really aren't trees, abound had medicinal value to the Maori. The forest changes from beach to broad leaf. Ferns hang from the hillsides and everything is a lush green.

We followed a road that had been the old stagecoach trail, which was originally used by the Maori to reach the west land, but when the gold rush began in 1864 the Pakhea (white man) replaced the trail with a road passing through the Southern Alps. The west coast was heavily mined for gold and there are many remnants of old miners' tunnels. One of these tunnels opened up into a beautiful section of the rain forest, but unfortunately had about 3 inches of water on the floor. It was here that Brian first proved himself to be a true Sir Galahad. Two women in our group didn't relish the idea of getting their new hiking boots muddy, so without hesitation Brian carried them, one at a time on his back, through the tunnel and out into the forest.

Besides carrying women across streams and through mud puddles, Brian is incredibly knowledgeable about birds, trees, ferns, animals, history and most everything pertaining to the South Island. Organization is also certainly one of his strengths and it was apparent in the way each day flowed so smoothly.

Our delightful lunch on the day we left Wilderness Lodge was at Hokitika on a beach on the Tasman Sea. We had two different quiches, lunch meats, lots of fresh fruit, several varieties of cheeses, wine and other assorted drinks. Tea times were also very memorable! Anne is an excellent baker and we always looked forward with anticipation to the twice daily stops. The amazing part is that all of these delights came out of the back of their vans and we never once saw them pack it all up! I think they did it during the night when all the rest of us were asleep.



Hokitika is known for its jade and bone carvings. The Maori highly valued the jade for its decorative properties and for use as weapons. Nowadays they mostly carve it into beautiful jewelry for tourists. A gold shop that creates handmade jewelry merits a visit. Normally not much of a shopper, even I could not resist buying a jade pendant and a replica of a kiwi bird which now sits prominently on my bookshelf in the JOURNEYS office.



Fox and Franz Josef: Mighty Glaciers

The Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers, in Westland National Park, are unique. Nowhere else in the world, at this temperate latitude, are glaciers moving this quickly or advancing so close to the sea. We made a brief stop at the Franz Josef in the late afternoon and learned the astonishing fact that this great river of ice travels, on the average, one meter a day! We spent the night at Westwood Lodge. A cozy place having only 6 rooms, it was a welcome sight after a cold and drizzly visit to the glacier.

The next morning we visited the Fox in a downpour. Undaunted by the weather, our spirited party spent about 4 hours hiking to and scrambling around the glacier. Some of the trail up to the glacier is fairly exposed, with 30-foot drop-offs, but we kept a grip on the permanently affixed chain handrails. We learned to use crampons (extremely easy) and took lots of photos during the brief respites from the rain. We managed to get soaked to the skin while having a wonderful time! Some in our group opted out and spent time doing a couple of short walks off the glacier. We jokingly called them “sissies” and they called us “NUTS!”



A Privileged Stay in the Wilderness

The splendid experience of Lake Moeraki Wilderness Lodge is available only to the privileged few who are fortunate to get reservations. (The bookings which are made available to JOURNEYS clients on a few months notice have actually been secured for us almost two years in advance.) Here I really felt far away from civilization although the lodge is fairly modern. Perhaps it was the absence of phones that made it feel this way, but more likely it was the manager and his “woody” ways. He has been the impetus behind many ecological projects in the area. The lodge is quite self sufficient. It has its own hydro-electric plant, pigs to feed food scraps to, a huge composting area, and an ambitious re-cycling program. Like the Wilderness Lodge, the meals were superb. We spent two nights here and we left with great reluctance.

On our second day at Moeraki some of us chose to do a quite difficult walk through the rain forest and out onto the beach to see the fur seals. The first part of the hike was fairly easy through gorgeous rain forest and across a beautiful little stream which gave Brian yet another chance to play Sir Galahad. In order to avoid the incoming surf, we had to climb up and down large boulder piles, but the sore legs were definitely worth it. We all took wonderful pictures of the seals, beach, rocks and crystal blue sky.



The climb up the hillside from the beach at the end of our visit to the seals was a true test of a hiker. My first realization that this wasn't going to be a “stroll” was when our guide said, “Please wait on the beach for me until I string the ropes up to the top.” “Ropes?” we questioned with dismay. “Yes, it's 400 feet up and there's no trail and it can be quite slippery.” “Ropes,” we agreed.

Back at the lodge in the afternoon we had the choice of kayaking lazily on the lake or touring the hydro plant and other facilities. In the evening we were treated to the most beautiful night sky I have ever seen. Kerilee, our

Maori guide, pointed our Orion, Scorpio, Gemini, Mars, the Milky Way and the Clouds of Magellan. We were then treated to a short walk up the road to see Glow Worms hanging from the cliffs by the roadside. Glow Worms are really a type of maggot that glows when digesting its food. Moeraki is truly a nature lovers paradise!



Onto Queenstown and Fiordland

As we left the coast the next day and headed inward, the change in scenery was dramatic. We left behind the large Rimu trees and rain forest and again entered the mountains and beech forests. Lunch this day was at Wanaka Lake which is about 30 miles long and 1,000 feet deep. Lakes of that depth seem to be common in the South Island. How serene it was to eat wonderful food sitting among the driftwood watching a white faced heron catch fish! All of us looked forward to lunches each day because Brian and Anne always picked spectacular places to stop.



Some of the nicest parts of the trip were spontaneous happenings. For instance, the day we left Moeraki we came across a flock of sheep blocking the road. We started talking to the musterer and he invited us up to his paddock and gave us a demonstration of how he works his dogs and told us about life as a musterer.

Queenstown is a popular vacation spot for Kiwis and foreigners alike. The town had only 12 residents by the end of 1862. During the next six months, thanks to the discovery of gold, the populations swelled to 8,500. The town has now developed into a true resort town with the very best dining, shopping and hotels in New Zealand. The New Zealand government has imposed strict regulations

on building and development in order to protect the environment.

From Queenstown it isn't too far to Fiordland National Park and Milford Sound. For years I have heard of the beauty of this place. Leaving early in the morning, we drove past lovely countryside dotted with crystal clear lakes that reflected the mountains, tussak grass meadows, and hanging glaciers. The fiord at Milford is 14 miles long, breathtakingly beautiful and usually quite calm. The waters mirror the impressive Mitre Peak. Our 50-passenger boat for the Milford Sound cruise was purposely chosen by Brian because of its size and its gregarious captain, Dennis, who gave very personalized service to our little group. We saw seals and all sorts of water fowl and had fun watching the playful dolphin that rode off our bow for quite a long time. We had close-up looks at Stirling and Bowne Falls, to name only a couple. The captain was a master at nudging his boat up so close to the falls that those in the bow got thoroughly soaked!

Our second day was left free for us to choose any of a variety of optional activities such as hiking, helicopter scenic flights, shopping, bungee jumping, sky diving, hot air ballooning and hang gliding. Several decided to go on a winery tour complete with sumptuous lunch, but I opted instead for jet boating and canoeing on the Dart river. Jet boats are a Kiwi invention and I have to admit, somewhat abashedly, that I had a lot of fun on the ride. The rails you hold onto to keep from flying out of the boat are heated electrically to keep your hands warm in cold weather. Because of the boats' design they are able to speed past rock outcrops with only inches to spare (you are told to keep your arms inside the boat), twist through narrow canyons and make 360 degree turns within their own length.



After our exciting ride up the canyon, we were deposited on the rocky shoreline for the beginning of our canoe adventure. The canoes were inflatable and held two to three people. Being a slight coward, I opted to go with the guide. What an amazing contrast to go back down the river quietly in our canoes after the hair-raising ride on the way up. The combination was terrific. All too soon it was over, and we headed back at the end of the day to the luxury of a hot shower and fine dining.

New Zealand as the Beginning of an Extended Pacific Exploration

Everyone in our group was sad to leave and all felt that they'd had a very special time in New Zealand. Kiwi hospitality, Maori art and history, dynamic geology, rich and varied natural environments, the absolutely highest standard of guiding, accommodation and service, and a great spirit of fun placed this experience at the very top of most participants' life lists.