

Nothing beats New Zealand

Looking for an adventure? Planning the trip of a lifetime? Be inspired by our Travel Editor's exciting odyssey on the other side of the world

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US AND OUR 'VAN



Helen Werin...

is MMM's Travel Editor and spent a very happy part of her childhood in New Zealand, but this was her first return visit and, hopefully, won't be her last



A three-berth Venturer on a Mercedes Sprinter (automatic) hired from Britz

 [britz.com](https://www.britz.com)

This was a better model than the budget two-berth we'd booked. Handover (and return) was efficient. We liked the 'van, but for a few annoying niggles: the impractical tap over the miniscule washroom sink, totally unreliable water and waste water gauges and the grey water splashing back, very unpleasantly, all over the washroom floor (it could not have been fully emptied by the previous users, as the rules state). We thought we'd checked most things before setting off, but these were problems that only later became apparent.

It was pleasing to drive, had plentiful storage and the bed was very comfortable. Everything we needed was supplied, including towels, bed linen, kitchen equipment, picnic table and chairs (take more tea towels and disposable cleaning cloths)

LEFT The Devil's Staircase, the road alongside Lake Wakatipu

TOP TIPS

- Buy sand fly spray for your body; you'll need it! Their bites itch for days. Maoris used to slap on fat and mud on as a repellent
- Carry plenty of bottled water on board; on some basic sites, water can be from a tank, stream or lake
- You are not allowed to park against the flow of traffic
- 'Responsible camping' means that you can't park near homes and must not leave any trace. You can be fined NZ\$200 (£97.30) for overnighting where there is a no camping sign
- Roads are generally very good. There are very few laybys on some South Island roads, so take the chance to stretch your legs when you do find one
- Pack warm clothes and rain gear for Fiordland, even if the sun is shining, as weather is extremely changeable
- In South Island, Pak'nSave and Countdown (Woolworths) are cheapest for groceries and have the best selections
- Make a checklist for your hired van and tick it off as you check everything before you leave the depot. Some issues may not immediately become apparent so aim to spend your first night within two hours of a depot so that you can return if necessary

"It's like entering Jurassic Park," our campsite neighbours had enthused the night before our trip to Milford Sound. They were right!

Colossal, sheer cliffs – on which Sir Edmund Hillary had honed his skills in preparation for his ascent of Everest – enveloped us either side. Mountains as far as the eye could see astounded us as we emerged from the mineshaft-like Homer Tunnel on our way to the famous fiord.

Thanks to our neighbours we'd been bursting with excitement about what we felt sure would be the highlight of our trip down under – the sound itself and the fantastic journey to reach it (more about that in a moment). That evening I messaged my children to say that, indeed, it was.

I was doing New Zealand a disservice, totally underestimating its natural wonders, its wild, dramatic and, at times, unnerving, beauty. Many, many more outstandingly memorable moments were to come...

Best of all were some of the wild or 'freedom' camping spots. At Lake Pukaki, in the Mackenzie District, we woke to the sight of Mount Cook (3,724m/12,218ft), Australasia's highest mountain, sneaking its snowy peak out of a drifting cloud. We'd enjoyed dips in the ice-blue glacial-fed water before eating al fresco in the welcome shade of the pinewoods.

Much later, after a glorious sunset, we marvelled at the sight of the upside-down (to us) Orion in the sparkliest sky that I've ever seen (Aoraki Mackenzie is an International Dark Sky Reserve). It had been Pukaki's 'neighbour', Lake Tekapo (45 minutes away), which had given us such an

awesome welcome earlier as we'd headed towards some of the country's highest mountains, its mirror-like sheen reflecting the surrounding Southern Alps in cloudy turquoise waters.

Helicopters buzzed low around the craggy mountains as we approached the airfield for Mount Cook. Another Brit whom we met on the road made us very envious of his heli-flight over Mount Cook and swooping low over seemingly bottomless crevasses before landing on the Franz Josef glacier. His warning that he could not walk very far on the glacier because of the danger of these crevasses slightly dissuaded us. Well, that and the huge cost of such a trip!

We were made even more aware of this ever-changing landscape and the creaks of the mountains as we walked the Hooker Valley and Kea Point routes in Aoraki Mount Cook National Park. A sudden roaring noise, unlike any sound I've ever heard before, filled the air as huge chunks of snow clinging to Mount Sefton tumbled noisily down the mountainside and an explosion of snow billowed up like smoke. The usually-cheeky keas eluded us (as they did throughout the trip) despite the trail's name, but our main focus was on Mount Cook, its peak glistening like a beacon in the glare of the afternoon sun.

Whilst the icy blues of Pukaki and Tekapo were reminiscent of Swiss lakes, Lindis Pass reminded me of Scotland. Sharp peaks resembled the Dolomites, while hawthorn and beech trees along the Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail hinted at the English countryside. Rust-coloured hills and valleys around Cromwell revealed other delights;

THE JOURNEY

We picked up our campervan in Christchurch in late February and toured South Island for 11 days, plus two nights in Christchurch in the excellent self-catering Ramada Suites ramadachristchurch.co.nz. The fuel costs cover our travels from Christchurch to Picton. All figures, except flights, for South Island only. Campervan hire for entire 21 days of our trip was £2,579.30 (NZ\$4,765)

THE COSTS

Flights Two adults: Economy, Birmingham-Christchurch, Auckland-Birmingham, via Dubai.....	£2,670
Campervan hire (NZ\$2,495.95).....	£1,351.06
Fuel Average 29mpg (NZ\$326.73).....	£176.85
Site fees (NZ\$293).....	£158.60
Accommodation fees Christchurch, two nights (NZ\$174.97).....	£94.71
Attractions Two adults: Christchurch gondola and tram, Milford Sound cruise and minibus with lunch (NZ\$438).....	£237.09
Public transport Two adults: buses from Christchurch airport-city centre and Christchurch-gondola return. Taxi from Christchurch centre-Britz office (NZ\$77.62).....	£42.02
Total costs.....	£4,730.33

1,325 miles



RIGHT Walking the Kea Point Track in Aoraki Mount Cook National Park



ubiquitous roadside shops and stalls selling cherries, apricots, plums and red pears at bargain prices.

The former gold mining town of Arrowtown, between Cromwell and Queenstown, is a coach party magnet, its 1860s wooden buildings transformed into gift shops, fudge emporiums and cafés. It's very photogenic, but twee tourist hotspots are not for us.

Nearing Queenstown, the town's 'adrenaline capital' status was blatantly apparent as we watched young women bungee-jumping from the old Kawarau bridge, swan-diving confidently in to the gorge and dipping their heads in the foaming water.

We got our thrills for free on numerous walking tracks through dense bush, craning our necks to look up at incredibly tall ferns and red pines. From near our campsite at

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Moss-covered trees at Cascade Creek, Fiordland National Park; Lake Wanaka; Stirling Falls in Milford Sound

BELOW Tram passing restaurants in New Regent Street, Christchurch



Fox Glacier township we crept, torches turned off, on to the Minnehaha Walk (¾-mile loop) in search of glow worms. The insects' lights twinkled all around us, some in large groups like miniature Christmas decorations, others like tiny lone stars.

We especially liked Te Anau, not only because, as the gateway to Fiordland, it was the launch pad for our Milford Sound thrill but also because of its trails. The lovely lakeside path eventually joined the Kepler Track, one of the multi-day walks for which walkers have to book overnight accommodation. When we stepped off the path, the soft, mossy carpet bounced under our feet and colourful, long-tailed birds scurried around us, seemingly unafraid.

But let's go back to that Milford Sound moment when we emerged from the tunnel to experience the 'lost world' sensation. The bus driver smiled knowingly at the ▶



INFORMATION

Find everything from untamed wilderness to rich culture

newzealand.com/uk

For Milford Sound trips
cruisemilfordnz.com

For Department of Conservation campsites information

doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-stay/stay-at-a-campsite

doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/know-before-you-go/love-this-place

Learn about responsible freedom camping

newzealand.com/int/feature/free-camping

For the Queen Charlotte Track
qctrack.co.nz

App to find sites

campermate.co.nz

More wild camping info

freedomcamping.org

ABOVE The View of Views at Lake Matheson near Fox Glacier

collective ‘wow’ from his passengers. This open-mouthed admiration continued all day, from when we boarded the Cruise Milford boat to navigate between the cliffs and mountains plunging straight down into the water to when we sailed right up to a couple of the falls. One stupendous cascade splashed the deck covering with such tremendous force that it sent those passengers who had dared to brave the power of nature frantically dashing for the door. Yes, waterfalls are everywhere at Milford Sound; the drizzly weather enhanced our experience, creating a soft-focus, dream-like aura.

It was Milford Sound’s notorious amount of rainfall that had forced us to use a minibus to reach there. The Milford Road had only just reopened, to bus convoys only, following a storm that had sent massive boulders down river, flooded properties and left the vast Eglinton Valley under water.

The force of nature in this harsh environment is frightening. I peered out of the window where crash barriers hung over gaps where the road used to be, relieved that we were not driving ourselves. The extra cost of the minibus was worth every cent, enabling us to soak up our incredible surroundings in a relaxed fashion.

At Cascade Creek nature reserve we

stopped to walk among giant beech trees covered in mosses and lichens in ethereal late afternoon light.

At Lake Wanaka we ambled around its shores under the gaze of Mount Aspiring before our drive through the Haast Pass, with ridges towering above us on one side and steep, forested valley walls running with waterfalls. A group of young skinny-dippers splashed around at Fantail Falls in joyful celebration of their surroundings.

The View of Views on Lake Matheson totally lived up to its name, leaving us and other awestruck visitors in a hushed reverence by the effect of Mount Cook, the Fox Glacier and Mount Tasman reflected in its mirror-like stillness. The viewpoint is reached by a pretty 1½-mile round walk through bush and we were reluctant to drag ourselves away from this gorgeous spot. Even with strong memories of how spectacular New Zealand is (I’d lived there as a child) I was constantly surprised at just many more amazing places were to follow...

The Southern Alps have thousands of glaciers, but only the huge tongues of ice of Franz Josef and Fox reach the forest-clad valleys. From a distance, the Franz Josef glacier appeared blue. Later, we trailed in the wake of ant-like figures further ahead walking across the wide and rocky riverbed

towards the glacier viewpoint – a one-and-a-half-hour return walk).

Along the Tasman Coast the trees have been beaten horizontal by relentlessly strong winds. After Lake Mapourika we wound around alarming landslips, rubble and washed-away trees littering the road.

The Great Coast Road between Greymouth and Westport (classed as one of the top 10 scenic drives in the world) sweeps under rocky walls, gouged with high-sided gorges and above crumbling cliffs on the other, before plunging down to black sand beaches. Mammoth rocks offshore are thick with vegetation.

At Punakaiki, the geological formations created by seismic activity and the pounding of the Tasman are astonishing. Waves have beaten through gaps in the limestone with such ferocity that they have carved out the cliffs behind, creating blowholes from which water explodes magnificently at high tide.

Buttresses of thin slivers of limestone are stacked in towers, hence their name, Pancake Rocks. From a boardwalk wending above the Tasman, we peered in to the holes (whilst wearing waterproofs, of course), awaiting the resounding crash of water and the jets of spray, surrounded by the mighty tiers of ‘pancakes’.

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Jumping into the Pelorus River at Pelorus Bridge; Walking the Queen Charlotte Track, near Anakiwa; Ngakuta Bay, Marlborough Sounds

There are several private campervan parks and motorcamps and ‘Yes. Camping!’ signs north of the Pancake Rocks.

Throughout New Zealand, we found it very easy to wild camp or use designated Freedom Camping spots, occasional Department of Conservation sites and local authority overnight places. We weren’t much impressed by the commercial sites (see panel).

One of our biggest regrets was only having time to walk a small part of the 60km (37 mile) Abel Tasman Coastal Track. From Marahau on Sandy Bay, the undulating path through beech forest and across small gullies mostly skirted the coast above granite cliffs, now and then descending to wide, deserted beaches.

Yachts and small water taxis skimmed around islands of all sizes as we strode towards Anchorage Bay and back (25km/15 miles); you can arrange boat transport unless you want to return the same way.

Our big mistake was in driving back to Kaiteriteri via the narrow, tightly twisting Sandy Bay road. I clung to my seat trying not to look over the drops (no barriers in many places!) choosing, instead, to focus on the beautiful deep blue of the Tasman. I’m sure that the occupants of the enviable properties tucked into the bush, with their ▶

JUST TO SAY...

Before anyone writes in to ask: “Why didn’t we do this?” or “Why no mention of that?” I just want to say that three weeks of touring over both islands really only gives the teeniest taste of what NZ has to offer. I would suggest at least a couple of months if you are fortunate enough to have the time and money

glorious sea views, didn't appreciate our warning toot-toots at every bend.

The scenic coastal Rocks Road took us towards Nelson, via the Waimea Plains, where vines and orchards shape the landscapes. At Pelorus Bridge, youngsters leapt off sun-scorched rocks in to the river.

By now we were high on anticipation of what lay ahead: the Queen Charlotte Drive between Havelock and Picton. Intrigued by the tourist board website's claims that riding this road is "like cruising the Marlborough Sounds without a boat", I'd enthusiastically traced it on Google Street View and couldn't wait to see it for myself. Indeed, South Island had saved some of its best until last.

The Marlborough Sounds, an intricate mass of sunken river valleys, with secluded white-sand beaches fringed by native forest, make up nearly a fifth of the entire New Zealand coastline. Yes, that's how



ABOVE Picturesque nineteenth century buildings in Arrowtown

BELOW A Freedom Camping spot beside Lake Pukaki

convoluted this area is. It's 40km (25 miles) of incessantly windy road to Picton on the Queen Charlotte Drive, every centimetre of it a showcase of outstanding natural beauty. Noisy cicadas buzzed as we joined the Queen Charlotte Track at Anakiwa, hiking through the beech forest to Davies Bay before dropping down to Ngakuta Bay, trying to imprint every gorgeous vista on our memories.

If we hadn't gone anywhere else in New Zealand but the Marlborough Sounds – and you could spend weeks walking the tracks or kayaking around all the inlets – we would have been fulfilled. Happily, our wonderful adventure that had begun in Christchurch, where we'd rattled along on vintage trams and ridden the gondola to the top of the Port Hills, was to continue across the Cook Strait. North Island had a lot to live up to.

To be continued in the next issue (September 2020). [MMM](#)



CAMPSITES

Commercial sites are mostly not to UK club standards; units can be pitched very close together, so don't expect UK rules about spacing to apply! Facilities can be shabby, though were always clean. Most commercial sites and motorparks have full kitchens with cooking equipment and places to sit, as well as a common room with books, TV and games. There is usually free WiFi and cheap laundry facilities. Be aware that not all commercial sites have toilet and grey waste dumping facilities, even if they have all the other services. Hours are usually 2pm check in, 10am check out. The DoC (Department of Conservation) has more than 200 sites from serviced to free basic sites. Bookings are required for all serviced sites and for some scenic and standard sites between 1 October and 30 April, otherwise there is a self-registration system at the site or at DoC Visitor Centres

Winchester Motor Camp, Lot 386,

Temuka Orari Highway, Winchester

☎ 0064 224 115125

📍 winchester-motor-camp.business.site

📅 All year 🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch and electric: \$NZ20 (£10.83)

Albert Town Campground, Lake Hawea

Road, Wanaka ☎ 0064 34 437883

📍 wanakalakeview.co.nz/alberttown

📅 All year

🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch: \$NZ20 (£10.83)

Fox Glacier Lodge, 41 Sullivan Road,

Fox Glacier ☎ 0064 800 369800

📍 foxglacierlodge.com 📅 All year

🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch and electric: From \$NZ30 (£16.24)

Omarama Top 10 Holiday Park, 1

Omarama Avenue, Omarama

☎ 0064 34 389875

📍 top10.co.nz/omarama-top-10-holiday-park

📅 All year

🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch and electric: From \$NZ50 (£27.07)

Fiordland Great Views Holiday Park,

129 Te Anau-Milford Highway, Te Anau

☎ 0064 32 497059

📍 stayfiordland.co.nz

📅 Dates vary, contact site

🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch and electric: From \$NZ48 (£25.98)

Motueka Top 10 Holiday Park, 10

Fearon Street, Motueka

☎ 0064 35 287189

📍 motuekatop10.co.nz 📅 All year

🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch and electric: From \$NZ32 (£17.32)

Picton Campervan Park, 42 Kent Street,

Picton ☎ 0064 35 738875

📍 pictonholidaypark.co.nz 📅 All year

🇺🇸 Two adults, pitch and electric: From \$NZ40 (£21.65)

This feature was written prior to the coronavirus pandemic. We are publishing it for your enjoyment and to help you plan future trips. Readers must follow the latest government advice before leaving their homes [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)