



Eugene Kaspersky

17 Winter Days in Summery New Zealand

An expedition to New Zealand
undertaken to discover, observe,
learn, and be enlightened

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Author's Introduction

Sometime in 2012, a group of like-minded souls – yours truly included – suddenly decided to drop everything – well, most things – and carefully research the country that calls itself New Zealand. But why? And who are these like-minded souls? These questions, and others, will be answered right here in this book.

But first, why New Zealand?...

Of course, everyone knows a bit about New Zealand (further – ‘NZ’), seen its beautiful countryside featured on the box from time to time, seen the All Blacks scare royalty with their Maori grimace-dances, and located it on the underside of globes and the lower right-hand corner of world maps. And recently there’ve been the well-publicized assorted hobbits and elves bounding about the country... But still – that’s not a great deal of kiwi-specific low-down. No. So we decided to get ourselves down there, and have a feel for ourselves: To see the vast open spaces and incredible landscapes in the flesh. Lest we forget that many who’ve already been there say it’s the most unusual, picturesque, mind-blowing place on the planet! Bold claim!

Besides, I have a personal interest in the place – and it relates to its claim to be the prettiest place on the planet. This is because for me – as many of you will already know – the most uniquely beautiful place in the world is Kamchatka – for its volcanism, bears, and breathtaking nature in general. I’ve long often wondered if there could be anywhere as good as the Kamchatka Peninsula, or – ye gods – better. So what’s it gonna be? KP or NZ? The folks I know who’ve experienced both weren’t able to provide full, proper answers. So that left us with just one option remaining: to leap half-way round the planet and have a look for ourselves...

So... NZ. What gives? First question – why’s it called New Zealand anyway? Naturally, I turned to the Internet. Turns out the first European to ‘discover’ NZ was a Dutchman named Abel Tasman – in 1642 (yes – as in Tasmania, the Tasman Sea, and the Tasmanian devil!), and he christened it ‘Nieuw Zeeland’, which means ‘New Land in the Sea’.

A bit of introductory geography: NZ is situated between 35 and 37 degrees latitude, and 165 and 180 longitude, which works out being on the

other side of the globe from Morocco, Portugal, and a bit of Spain. But, despite the generally warm latitudes, NZ is surrounded by very cold oceans, meaning silly-hot temperatures can quickly become silly-chilly ones. Just in the time we were there the temperature ranged between 10 and 33 degrees centigrade. But I’m getting ahead of myself...

...For now, just get the popcorn in and seat yourselves more comfortably, for here before you is presented an adventure I’d like to share with you: 2 x 30+ hour sets of flights and connections, 6000+ kilometers traveled on NZ roads, and 17 days in this unique country. All righty, off we go!...

Expedition Participants

**Eugene
Kaspersky**

Kaspersky Lab



E.K. –
your humble servant and guide

Here are
all 15 of us!



Getting There

New Zealand – it's like, sooooo far from just about anywhere on this darn planet. Well, besides Australia. So if ever you plan to get on down (under!) to NZ, be prepared: flying from Europe takes about a day and a half. From Moscow to Auckland you're in the air for more than 20 hours. From the US (San Francisco, LA) and also from Chile (Santiago) you're in the air for a good 13 hours.

From Europe you can fly to NZ via Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and no doubt other cities – and that's with just one connection. That's plenty of choice of real nice cities you could check out en route: I'd recommend making the most of the connection situation and spending a day or three in one of them (visas aren't always needed, or can be easily obtained upon arrival). And if you don't mind connecting twice – it's poss to fly via Australia.

When booking flights, beware of the potentially misleading term 'non-stop'. Inexperienced travelers may be surprised to find that, for example, the Emirates flight 'Dubai-Auckland' has a connection in Sydney. Also, on some routes you need to fly with different airlines of different alliances, meaning they might ask you to collect luggage and reregister it for the next flight. The lesson to be learned: pay special attention to all the details of the route/flights you're choosing from.

But let's say you manage the tix purchases, and off you fly a few months later... it's still not all plain sailing flying after that: there's still the non-trivial matter of jetlag. Extreme jetlag.

With a time difference with Moscow at nine hours, 12 hours with Western Europe, plus an even longer length of time for the journey itself, it doesn't come worse than this.

Best bet – sleep through as much of the flight as poss; if you don't – or can't – expect extreme grumpiness for a day or several upon arrival: not the best way to kick off your holiday.

Expedition Route



As everyone knows, any trip can be planned in one of two ways: to book a package of ready-made services from a travel agency, or to do all the organizing yourself. Via a tourist agency I'd normally say is the way to go, but this time we decided that some of us (the 'organizing committee') would do the route planning ourselves. Our home-grown travel agents' initial task consisted of the following steps:

1. To write up a list of the places deemed must-visits;
2. To plan the route;
3. To book the various rental cars, hotels and ferries, and buy the tickets for the plane there and back;
4. To make up a list of all the necessary kit and tackle and documents (visas, international driving licenses...) we'd need for the expedition.

The simplest step is the last one. The only pain in the proverbial with it: constantly having to kick the laziest folks – also in the proverbial – so that their visas aren't received the day before the flight but at least a fortnight before, so there's no need for re-shuffling all sorts of stuff in step 3.

And on the topic of documents... turns out NZ didn't sign the relevant convention on international harmonization of driving papers, so not all foreign driving licenses are valid there. International Driving Permits get round the issue, but they take time to procure...

And on the topic of kit and tackle... NZ is (rightly) real careful with its ecology, flora and fauna, and is very keen to prevent infections from 'alien' seeds. Upon landing there's very stringent sanitary and customs control. One's boots are asked for and the soles are closely examined. Sleeping bags seem to have no trouble, but used tents can be placed into quarantine for several days! Therefore, boots need to be thoroughly cleaned, tents – brand new. Or buy all your kit upon arrival. Prices – just a little more expensive than in Europe.

As regards booking hotels, cars and ferries – these days this is cakewalk for one reason: the Internet. But, as always, there are some nuances. For example, some hotels ask that a deposit be paid, and funds may be blocked on a credit card immediately upon booking. In most cases it's possible to cancel a reservation and get your money back up until two or three days before check-in. But it's always best to read the small print carefully. In our case we had to cancel a few times because of poor weather and closed roads, but we managed to do so in good time and rebook somewhere else without losing any wonga.

Cars – there are plenty of options to choose from. There are of course the ubiquitous Hertz and Avis, etc., but also some independent local rent-a-cars. If you decide to take the ferry between the North and South Islands in a car, the ubiquities want paying extra for the privilege (the cheek!); the locals don't.

All the above-mentioned prep and booking and reservations needs to be done in good time; especially if you're planning your trip during high season – December and January, like us. We started making preparations only in September, and found that for January many hotels were already fully booked up.

The list of places to visit was suggested by friends who'd already been to NZ. After having a look at the list we got more than a little panicky since at the outset we'd scheduled just two weeks for the whole trip, while the list basically was screaming at us 'THREE WEEKS NEEDED!' to check out just the most interesting places – at a minimum! Thankfully, in the end we opted for three weeks. We figured that if NZ's worth doing, it's worth doing well (aka vacationing to exhaustion:).

So we marked all the must-see places on the map, and came up with an overall plan for the journey from the South to the North (as advised), but

then switched that to North-South (which seemed better suited to our particular sightseeing/logistical requirements).

Then, when the high-level plan settled a bit and stopped prompting minor protests from our friendly collective – we finally got down to elaborating every day in detail and started booking the air tix, hotels, cars, and so on...

Though helped tremendously by folks who'd already been to NZ and in the know, such a planning task involves sifting through tons of information, blogs, photos and reviews. Thankfully we had willing volunteers! However, if you ever find yourself heading for NZ for two or three weeks, it might be worth considering – maybe, just maybe – whether it might be worth letting an experienced tour agency get involved. It might save you time, that's all ☺.

Not wanting to get into the details just yet, most of New Zealand is made up of two islands, illuminatingly named the North Island and the South Island.

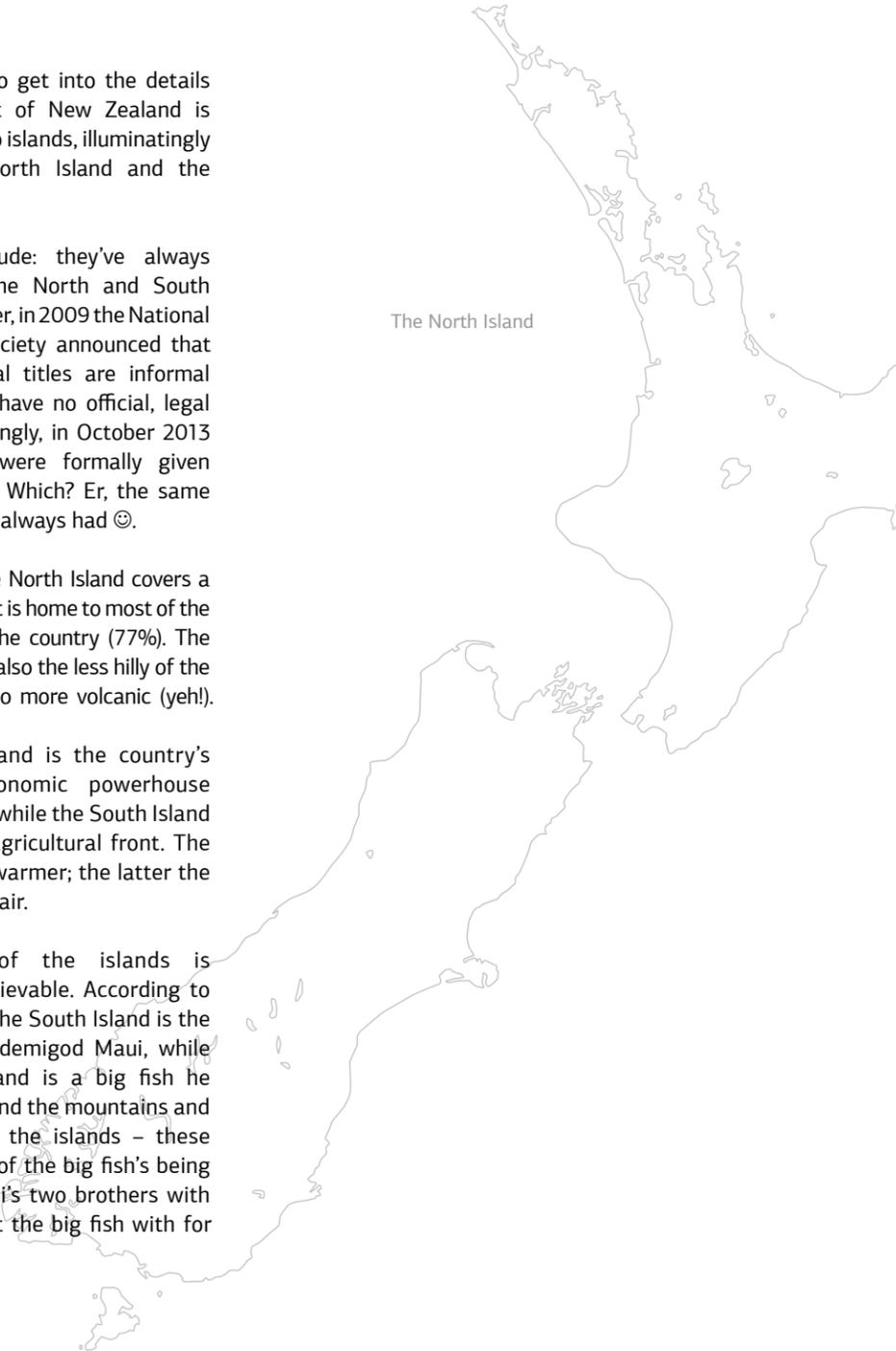
Curious interlude: they've always been called the North and South Islands; however, in 2009 the National Geographic Society announced that these historical titles are informal in nature and have no official, legal status. Accordingly, in October 2013 both islands were formally given official names. Which? Er, the same names they've always had ☺.

Of the two, the North Island covers a smaller area but is home to most of the population of the country (77%). The North Island is also the less hilly of the two – but oh-so more volcanic (yeh!).

The North Island is the country's industrial/ economic powerhouse (79% of GDP), while the South Island leads on the agricultural front. The former is the warmer; the latter the cooler of the pair.

The origin of the islands is thoroughly believable. According to Māori legend the South Island is the canoe of the demigod Maui, while the North Island is a big fish he once caught; and the mountains and valleys across the islands – these are the result of the big fish's being cut up by Maui's two brothers with whom he'd left the big fish with for a short time!

The North Island



New Zealand

The North Island

38°24' S, 175°43' E



Day 1

Warm-up

Piha – the birthplace of
NZ surfing (in 1958)



The North Island

So what should you do first thing upon arrival at the destination (and that's normally Auckland, the capital of NZ, situated near the top of the North Island)? Well, though this may seem at first paradoxical, the best thing to do is *not* sleep, even though you'll no doubt really want to (after flying for hours and hours and hours getting here). Otherwise, one's lazy organism will take forever readjusting itself to local time. Best of all – have a double espresso, get straight into a car, and drive off somewhere...

You really need to get to the beach at Piha and have a swim (and only a swim, no matter the mischievously suggestive name:). Just don't expect the ocean to be warm – it's actually quite nippy; but that's just what's needed - invigoration!

Besides the black volcanic sand and status as Mecca of NZ surfing, Piha is well known for its breathtaking sunsets and rapidly changeable weather. From Auckland it takes around half an hour by car. They say it's better getting there on foot if you've a day to spare, with indescribably beautiful vistas non-stop the whole route.

Day 1

Warm-up

Piha beach



The North Island

Day 1

Warm-up

Auckland's Sky Tower: 328 meters high: the tallest building, not just of NZ, but of the whole southern hemisphere!



There's plenty of interesting and fun stuff up this tower, including its SkyJump, where you can bungee jump from 192 meters up! For those of a less extreme disposition, walking around the center of Auckland is most enjoyable – with Albert Park a must-see; a drive around suburbs like Devonport is also worthwhile; and if you've still got time – a quick march around the Coromandel Peninsula is recommended too.



The Skytower boasts two observation decks; both need experiencing

Day 1

Warm-up

The view of the center
of Auckland from
Devonport



The North Island

The gastronomical Premier League of NZ is, not surprisingly, seafood. As you'd expect for an island, there's a lot of it on offer, it's sensibly priced, and always fresh. It's also always high up on the menu of every type of restaurant there is here, no matter which particular world cuisine they serve. But I especially recommend the Japanese and Chinese restaurants here. Since we feared that healthful and tasty food might not be all that forthcoming on our trip into the wilds (NZ needs to have at least some cons to go with the pros), we decided to cram the scan as best we could while in the capital. (Any old excuse for gluttony will do ☺)

Day 1

Warm-up

Oh, what roads
Oh, what skies!



The North Island

Navigating your way round NZ is both straightforward and flexible as its transportation infrastructure is fully developed, as you'd expect. You can go by foot on hilly hikes (more on this coming up soon...), sail on boats across fiords (alas, poor weather prevented us from doing so), ride bicycles or motorbikes, drive rented cars, hitchhike (didn't try it ourselves), fly helicopters, jetpack... There's also a nice touristy-train with open-top carriages.

However, if 'covering the whole [sic] of NZ in the shortest time possible' is the goal (as it was with us), then rental cars are the way to go. Just be prepared... you need to cover a heck of a lot of kilometers in a motor to fully do NZ: the country's gems of natural beauty seem to have a cunning knack for being hundreds of kilometers apart from each other. On the positive side – the lengthy roads you travel along are unequivocally unforgettable.

The roads here are mostly two-lane (one each way), with two-lanes-each-way only to be found in the big cities (Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington). Not that that's a problem though, for once you get out of built-up areas the roads are practically empty. Besides, the views they provide are magnificently marvelous. So marvelous that you get the impression that the surrounding scenery here is all carefully mowed, trimmed, painted, and Photoshopped (more so on the North Island)! Everything is flat, beautiful, spick and span, and incredibly bright and colorful. You're forever wanting to stop, stare and snap. Which is just what we did...

Day 1

Warm-up

The livestock that dots the paysages also somehow gets to be bright and colorful and neat and tidy here – just like their surroundings. It's as if before leaving the house for work in the fields they all take showers and spruce themselves up in their best clobber ☺.



Day 1

Warm-up



Driving on the right...
Driving on the left



The North Island

It was during my trip to NZ when I found out the main advantage of driving on the left: it's much easier (at least for the majority – right-handed folks like myself) to take photos while driving when the wheel's on the right (and before you have a go at the irresponsible recklessness of doing such a thing – take a look at the traffic here first!), especially since all cameras have their shoot buttons designed for right-handers.

Since I travel all around the world pretty much non-stop, driving on the left in a car with right-hand drive poses no trouble at all. (In fact, when I got round to making a few calculations, it turned out that I drive on the left more than I do on the right!) The other drivers all got the hang of it fairly quick too: a few right hands banging the door seeking the stick shift, and a few right hands reaching over left shoulders looking for the seatbelt... apart from that – a doddle 😊.

A bigger problem for us was the speed limit: nowhere in NZ does it ever go upwards of 100 kilometers per hour – no matter how perfectly smooth, empty or straight the roads are.



Day 1

Warm-up

You always want to stop and gawp and snap when driving across NZ. At things like, for example, this caramel-colored hill in the middle of NZ pastures

Tourist trains: they don't travel all that far, relatively speaking, but – oh my g'day – what views they must provide! Unfortunately, we had to put a train trip off till next time...

The North Island



Day 1

Warm-up

"It's a stinker", "what awful weather we've got today", etc...: words never uttered in NZ; you just need to wait half an hour!



As I've already mentioned, you need to do a great deal of traveling around the country if you want to see it all, or most of it. In 17 days we covered around 6000 kilometers – including hiking days – which works out at around 300 to 500 kilometers per day. You've been forewarned: it's not for the road-shy.



Day 1

Warm-up

Prices for fuel are... given in NZ cents! So a liter does not in fact cost more than 200 NZ dollars

There are plenty of gas filling stations, but their working hours are real short. Always have half a tank in reserve. The prices (in NZ cents (1USD == 1.5NZD)) aren't so bad

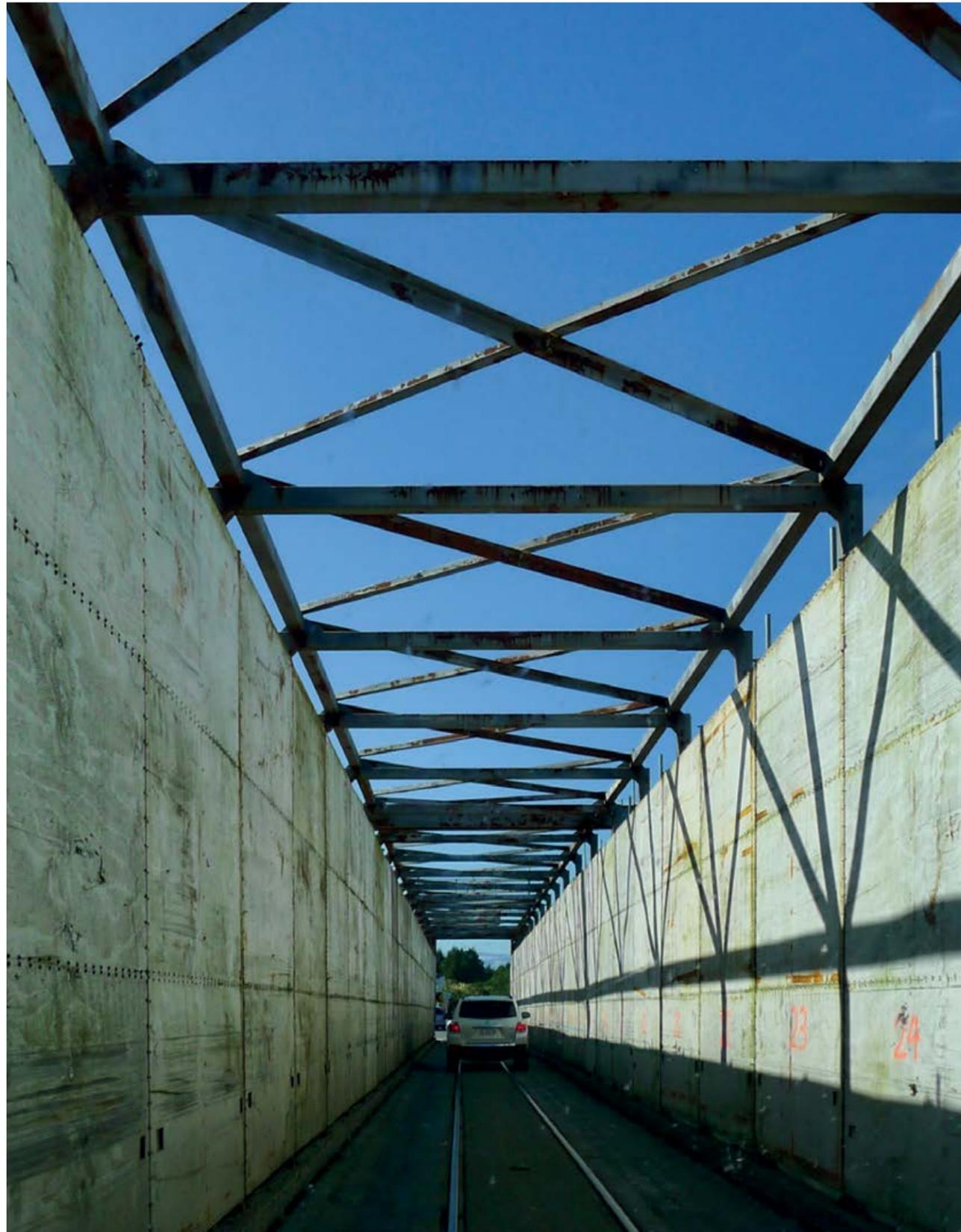
The North Island



There are thankfully no large predators to be found roaming the wilds in NZ (besides humans). So that means no bears like in Kamchatka. But it does resemble the Kamchatka Peninsula on snakes - they're non-existent here too. They say that worms don't exist here either.

Judging from the road signs, it's not only cows and deer that like to cross the road in NZ, but also kiwi and penguins!

So, where do we turn if a train comes?!



Useful Advice for Wanderers and Travelers

- Many gas stations (outside the large cities, that is) close around six, seven or eight in the evening, and some don't open on weekends at all! Only if you're lucky can you find round-the-clock ones, but you can only pay for gas at them with bank cards (since there's no attendant). One such automated gas station we used refused to accept non-Oz/NZ cards! Accordingly, don't leave filling her up until evening or until the gas gauge lights up red. Nourish your motor in timely fashion.
- There's a strong police presence here. They sit and lie in wait at the side of the road or drive about here and there in unmarked cars (so no 'bending' the traffic rules! (see next point)). Going over the speed limit by 5mph or more is punished swiftly. And illegally parked cars are always being hunted down in the built up areas. Parking bays are marked '5', '30', '60', or '120' – the number of minutes you're allowed to park there (for free). So best not lose track of time on your suburban saunters.
- If you plan to move around these islands in 'see everything' mode, be warned that you'll have no time for washing clothes. Still, taking a stock of T-shirts, etc. with you isn't necessary – there are loads of them in every tourist store here so you can pick them up as you go along. And regarding all other types of shops – you probably won't get round to checking any of them out as they close long before dusk.
- The climate in NZ ain't bad at all, so it's best to stick to light garments: shorts, t-shirts and sandals; but have a waterproof jacket close to hand.
- There are generally no mosquitos or other bloodsucking airborne insects here, but a few times swarms of sand flies swooped down on us for a bite, and we were itching for quite a while afterwards. Thus, a tub of insect repellent should also be close by.



NZ Language

The first time I was in Australia I was somewhat perplexed. Of course, I'd heard that they speak Australian English, but I never thought it would be quite so... Australian! However, it turns out I understand Oz-Eng better than NZ-Eng. The main difference with NZ-Eng is in the pronunciation and its use of certain peculiar slang terms.

Another time, at some tourist attraction or other, a group of English folks were stood next to us. Their excursion guide was telling them something in the local dialect (of, er, the English language). When the guide at last announced a break and walked off somewhere, I overheard one of the English tourists turn to another to admit: "Did you catch any of that? I'm afraid I didn't understand a word!"

I was once refueling the car at pump number seven. I go to pay and say to the girl behind the counter: "seven". Only after a few minutes was she able to finally understand what I was saying: "Aaaaahhh: siven!"

Averylongwordona-rilanguageisign

NZ – a dream destination for tourists from all over the world



Day 2

Subterranea
and Hobbiton

Visiting the Waitomo
caves is pleasant, but
so is getting out of
them too. Not for the
claustrophobic



The 'intensity' of our trip was carefully planned: early on it was all easy going and plain sailing; later on both the tempo and severity were upped. The first few steady days were mostly spent on or near Highway 25 in the northern part of the North Island and round the Coromandel Peninsula. And since the northern part of the North Island isn't all that remarkable in terms of natural wonders, we concentrated on what it does well: undergroundness, aka subterranea.

Subterraneus No. 1: Natural

The Waitomo Caves – all three of them: Glowworm, Aranui and Ruakuri. Each is allocated a specific length of time for visitors' tours, a maximum number of tours per day, and a maximum number of tour participants. If you're a cave freak and want to check all three out, I'd strongly advise booking online well in advance. Otherwise you'll have the situation like we had: Aranui and Ruakuri were both fully booked up and we only just managed to get into Glowworm (around which tours are conducted every hour). But, oooh, how glad we were to have made it!

The Glowworm cave is unique in that, as the name suggests, it's full of glowworms, aka *Arachnocampa Luminosa*. And what an amazing sight they are! Visitors travel on a boat through the cave's tunnels where the roofs are blanketed with brightly glowing constellations made up of thousands upon thousands of the luminous larvae. Highly recommended!



Day 2

Subterranea
and Hobbiton

It's Shire, child



The North Island

I do apologize, but I can't show you any original photos of them – since we couldn't take any. Regular and semi-pro cameras are forbidden from taking pics – lest they disturb the incandescent insects. Fair. So you'll just have to admire them with your own eyes (yes – that means 'get yourself here!'); and (try and) enjoy the silence, unless you (understand Russian and) overhear Russians whispering (ever so quietly – honest!); "watch out – you keep your mouth open all agog like that for much longer one of those glowworms is going to fall into it!" Oh those Russians.

Subterraneus No. 2: Hobbiton

Hobbiton – the real-world version of Tolkien's Shire in Middle-Earth – is now famous all over the world after being used as the set for filming the series of movies about the lives and exploits of hobbits, elves, orcs, trolls and the rest. It's situated near the town of Matamata, around 200 kilometers from the Waitomo Caves.

Now, should you ever decide to visit both subterranea in one day, you'll have to be very careful to get the timing right. The last tour of the hobbits' village begins at 17:30. Thankfully, we were able to persuade the kind management to make an exception for us and give us an after-hours excursion of the place ("Pretty please? But we've come a reeaal long way, you know!...", etc., etc. ©).

Day 2

Subterranea
and Hobbiton



At one time there was a real farm here. Then they built the film set. Then they shot the film. Then they wanted to pack up the set and take it away – at first. Then they reconsidered – and decided to turn it into a museum. Smart idea. At 80 dollars a head and plenty of tourists wanting to see Shire up close – a tidy little business.



Day 2

Subterranea
and Hobbiton

Spinklers get turned on
every evening



Day 2

Subterranea
and Hobbiton

First stop here –
the Hobbiton tavern,
naturally! It serves
a good variety of
hobbit-ish beverages,
including alcoholic ones

Meeting hobbits
themselves wasn't
included in the
excursion. Shame



Day 3

Geothermalities

The North Island's grandiose geothermalnesses: the perfect aperitif to whet the appetite for upcoming volcanism...



The North Island



On the third day of our trip we experienced: geysers, hot springs, cauldrons, pot holes, fumeroles and other assorted volcanisms with geothermalnesses – all categorically mandatory for visiting, closely inspecting and admiring.

Just one day (like we had) is far too short a time to spend here. Still, at least all the best geothermality sites are conveniently situated just 20 minutes from one another by car.

Te Puia is a thermal valley with boiling mud pools and other underground hissingness. Erupting every hour, its main feature is the Pohotu Geyser, which fires vertical streams of boiling water up around 30 meters high (which, incidentally, can be viewed from the comfort of the balconies of the rooms of the hotel next door). And for those who love ethnological expeditions there's a lot here to be learned about the traditional Maori way of life, folklore, arts and crafts.

Waimangu is a volcanic valley containing several breathtaking craters with multi-colored lakes, streams and underground sprinklers. The lie of the land (actually, the whole hydrothermal system) here owes most to the eruption that occurred in 1886, but also to the Waimangu Geyser, active from 1900 to 1904, which was the most powerful geyser in the world: its eruptions would shoot boiling water as high as 400+ meters up (that's an Empire State Building of boiling water and steam!). It's just a shame the geyser retired more than a century ago.

Day 3

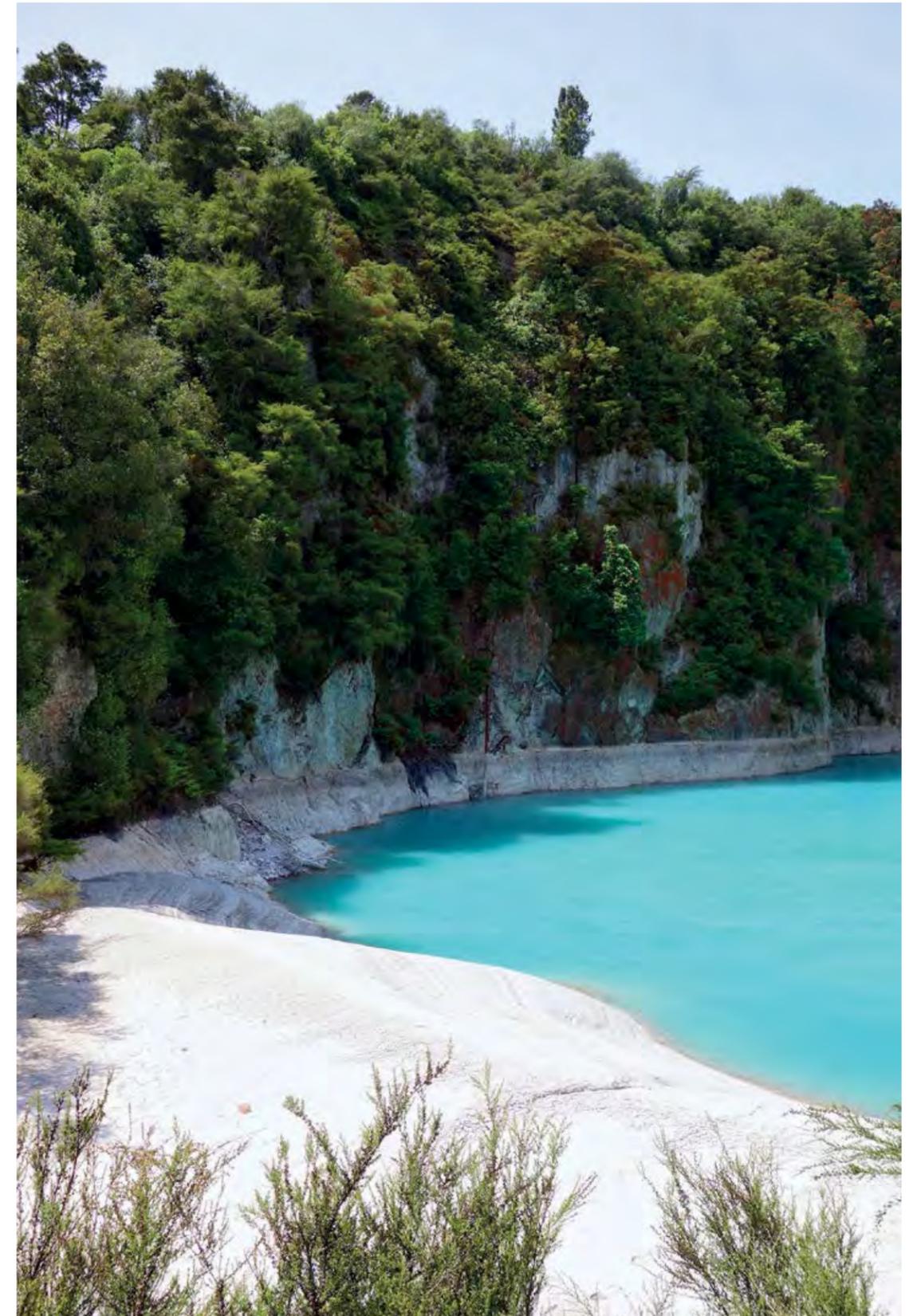
Geothermalities



Frying Pan Lake

Frying Pan Lake is one the largest hot springs in the world (not the largest, as the local tourist pamphlets (and Wikipedia) have it). It's said that the temperature of the water in the lake is 55 degrees centigrade (so, alas, too hot for a dip) and every second 110 liters of underground boiling water goes into the lake.

The Inferno Crater and Inferno Lake are unique wonders – I've never seen anything quite like them! The level of the lake changes cyclically for some reason by around 10 meters (at least, that's what the local pamphlets say), with a whole cycle taking around 38 days. Oh, and you wondered why the lake's called the Inferno Lake? It's piping hot – almost boiling – and also rather acidic. So no skinny-dipping – again!



Inferno Crater

Day 3

Geothermalities

In NZ the thermalities are fitted with neat paths and other 'civilized' installations



Wai-O-Tapu is another geothermal valley, with boiling water of assorted colors, mud pools and hot steam – all set among lush green forest. Note that the park closes at 5pm, so it's best to get there early; I'd say a good three hours are needed at least to cover all of Wai-O-Tapu's gorgeous geothermalnesses.

All volcanisms and thermalnesses are fully kitted out with modern conveniences. I mean things like proper parking, good paths and fences, souvenir shops, and both direction and warning signs. Some sights of particular touristic interest can only be accessed for a fee, so there's no roaming about where you fancy (like in Kamchatka). Another thing: all the attractions close for the night. They too need a good night's sleep!

HOW hot? No swimming here. Only the chance of being boiled... like an oyster



Day 3

Geothermalities



Ugh, the smells!
But the sun halo at the end of the day made up for them!



Day 4

Volcanism

The main volcanism on the North Island: Tongariro – around which you could wander, and wonder, for weeks on end



I dream of one day having a three or four day visit to this place; better – a week or two! To be able to climb up all the accessible peaks, walk round all the craters, and stroll down the valleys with turquoise lakes.

Alas, some areas were closed – a crater had recently started sneezing repeatedly, spitting lava and rocks, and getting up to various other volcanic mischiefs. Of course all the paths were closed immediately – to save silly tourists who might want to observe an eruption up close. What can I say? If you are silly and want to see an eruption up close – get yourself to Kamchatka!



Day 4

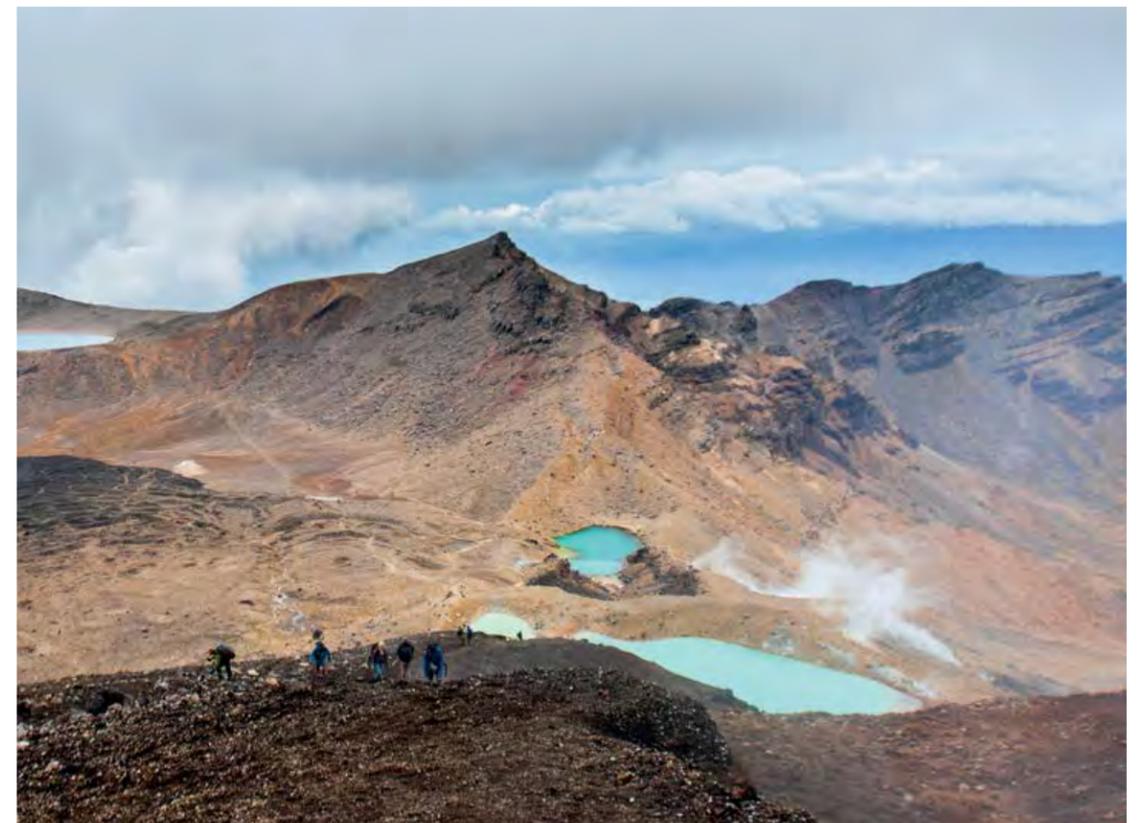
Volcanism

Just like with the other natural tourist attractions of NZ, the country's volcanic attractions are tamed with all the creature comforts you could wish for



Curiously – pleasantly – all routes are fully and clearly signposted, with nice gravelly paths and/or elevated wooden/metal mesh paths and stairs. There are even toilet cubicles.

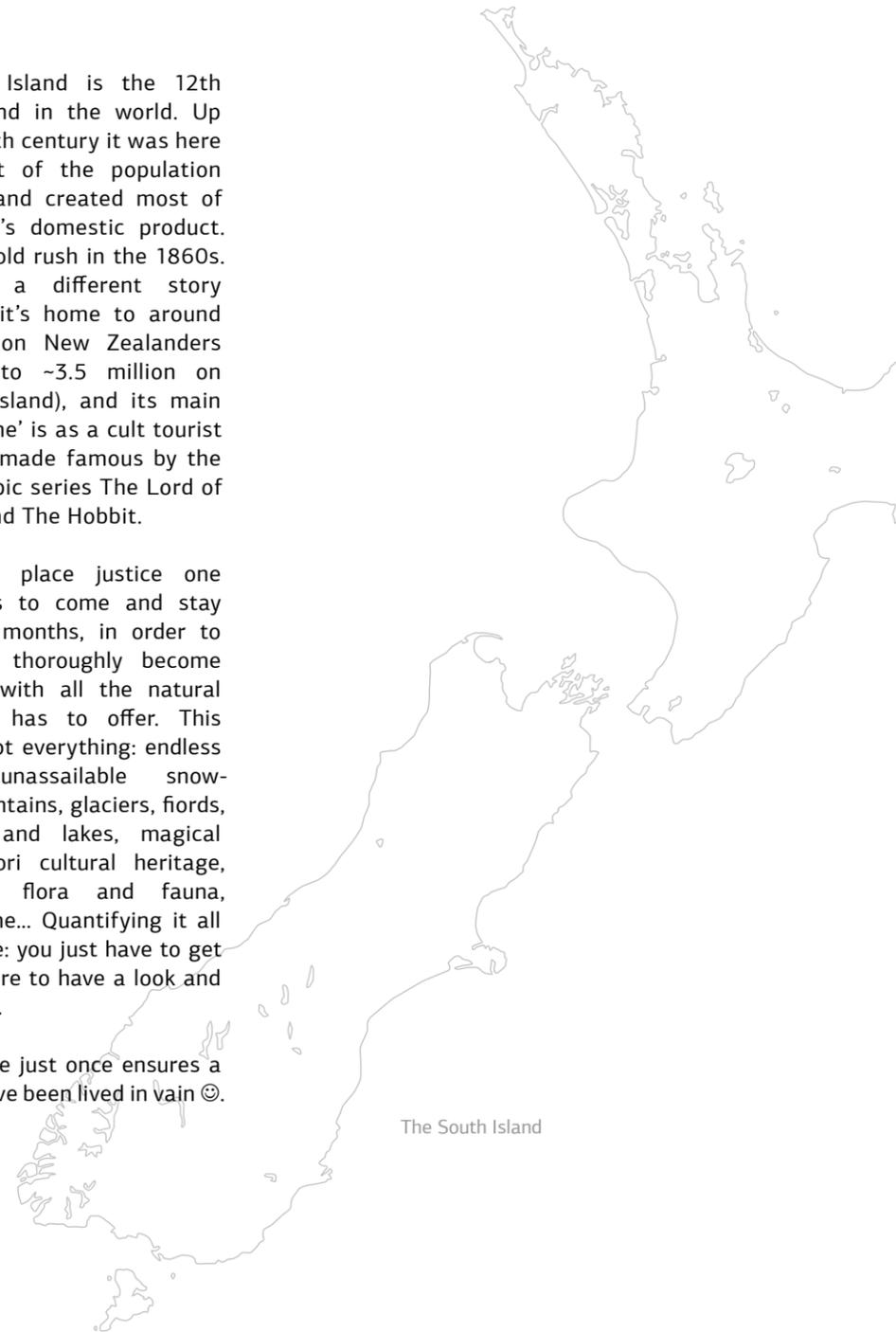
But! Despite the full-on civilized tourist conveniences, it's still highly recommended to get properly kitted up for walking here. Most importantly – suitable shoes, socks and other anti-blisther gear. You'll be walking not just for several hours; you'll also be up and down like a yo-yo by around a kilometer every day. Oh, and don't forget clothing. Up near the peaks it's very windy, cold and wet, so what seems too warm and unnecessary down below will be real useful up top – if not for you for someone else.



The South Island is the 12th largest island in the world. Up until the 20th century it was here where most of the population both lived and created most of the country's domestic product. Why? The gold rush in the 1860s. Today it's a different story altogether: it's home to around just a million New Zealanders (compared to ~3.5 million on the North Island), and its main 'claim to fame' is as a cult tourist destination made famous by the cinematic epic series The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit.

To do this place justice one really needs to come and stay for several months, in order to calmly and thoroughly become acquainted with all the natural wonders it has to offer. This place has got everything: endless beaches, unassailable snow-topped mountains, glaciers, fiords, hill rivers and lakes, magical stones, Maori cultural heritage, outstanding flora and fauna, amazing wine... Quantifying it all is impossible: you just have to get on down there to have a look and feel yourself.

To come here just once ensures a life won't have been lived in vain ☺.



New Zealand

The South Island

43°59' S, 170°27' E



The Wellington-Picton ferry



The South Island

The definition of touristic greed: scheduling 17 days to explore both islands of New Zealand – North and South! You really need a month on each! The North is packed with volcanism, while the South, though much less volcanic, features the most beautiful of undulating mountains – especially along the west coast. The South in general is wilder, and much less inhabited than the North. An advertisement at Christchurch airport summed it up nicely: the South beats the North easy as it has “33% more territory, and 75% less population!” Convincing. Not sure the Northerners would agree, mind ☺.

Day 5

North-South



Goodbye North,
hello South!

The South Island

Day 5

North-South



Zillions of sea creatures gave their lives to form this NZ natural beauty!

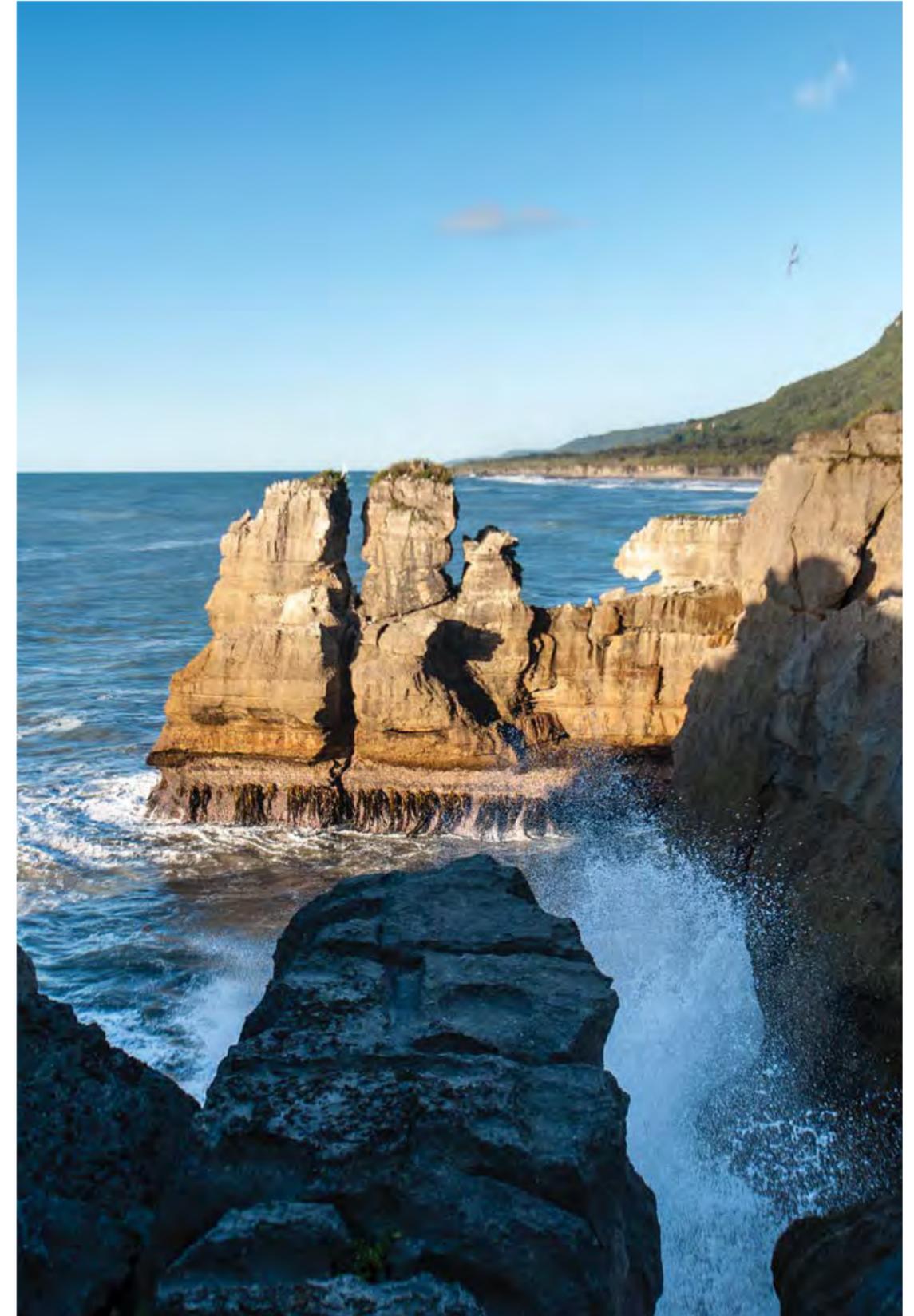


The main attraction along the sensationally scenic State Highway 6 is Punakaiki.

This curious rocky phenomenon was formed out of a prehistoric block of compressed sea flora and fauna remains, which by some freak of nature then came to protrude above the surface of the sea, and which then was chiseled away at by the winds and rains and ocean sprays for eons.

We got to it approaching dusk, and a good job too: the rocks were imbued with an awesome fiery orangey-red from the setting sun.

All the while our cameras were snapping away uninterruptedly as if of their own accord, while our heads were becoming a little spaced with all the overwhelming beauty that kept bombarding them.



The sea's been crashing against these cliffs for time immemorial. So long they've gotten themselves UNESCO Heritage Site status

Day 5

North-South

Ocean spray sprinkling green NZ pastures. Now you know why NZ dairy products are so tasty and travel so far and wide around the globe



The South Island

Day 6

Unexpectedness

Both the climate and the great outdoors of the South Island are unpredictably treacherous. But that's how we like it!



No expedition is insured against unexpectedness – be it unpleasant or otherwise. But the South Island of New Zealand had more nature-weather surprises for us than we'd expected...

The first of these was announced to us just off the ferry while at the car rental place: getting to where we were headed for the night was totally out of the question. There'd been torrential rain so freakily heavy it had washed bridges and even whole villages away along our route, which was closed and would remain closed for several days. As a result, alas, we didn't make it to the Franz Josef Glacier, which had been highly recommended for a visit. Oh well; next time...

The second surprise: we had to postpone our trip to the Milford Sound fiords – again because of heavy rain. To get to the fiords your car needs to squeeze through a very long and very thin tunnel – which was completely flooded and impassible.

Day 6

Unexpectedness



Problems on the roads add a certain element of adventure to navigating your way across the South Island. Flooding blocking your intended route at first is an annoyance; but the alternative route you then have to take often turns out to be more interesting than the first



Sometimes unexpectedness strikes all of a sudden: the road you're on has been closed by the local sheriffs or rangers and you need to make a detour.

Main thing: don't despair. Just swiftly adjust your route, call the hotels you now won't be staying at to cancel, and call new hotels to book rooms. For this it's best to buy a local SIM with unlimited Internet. Such mid-expedition flexibility can be applied in a similar way if you want to avoid the rain and follow the sunny weather: you just go off your planned route for a day or two away from the bad weather, then pick up where you left off a few days later.



Day 7

Trek

There are more hiking paths in NZ than you can shake a walking stick at. Fate would have it that we selected out of all of them the Routeburn Track, and we didn't regret it for a minute



The South Island

Yep, the time has come to get out from behind the wheel, pack the sleeping bags, tents and provisions into the backpacks, and head out on foot up the NZ hills!

NZ (especially the South Island) is covered with a dense network of touristic paths of varying lengths (from an hour to several days) and difficulty (mostly flat, or up-and-down like a yo-yo). They kind of act like a magnet – attracting to the country on-foot tourism fans from all around the globe.

Again, like everywhere in NZ, all the paths are firm, gravel-covered affairs, and no matter how far you get from the base camps you always find neat and very helpful steps, toilet cubicles and footbridges across streams. Even the grass verges along the edges of the paths appear to be neatly mowed!

Along the longer routes are camp sites with all the basic conveniences, including covered kitchen/eating areas with tables and running water, and even artificial turf areas to make sleeping in tents more comfortable.

It's best to book camping spots in advance via the respective website – not of the tourist board but of a special ministry!

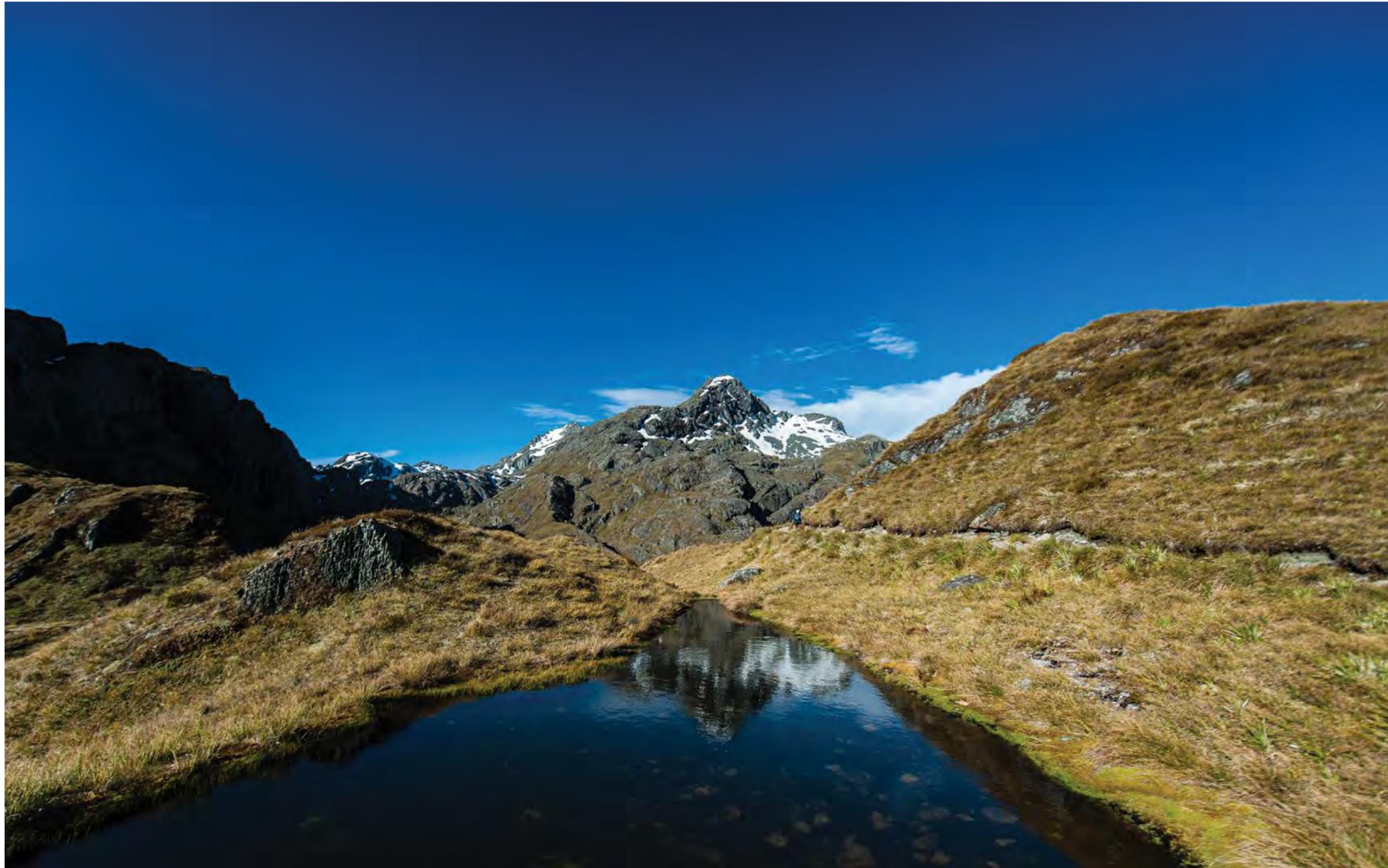


Day 7

Trek

The higher you go,
the more beautiful!

The South Island



Routeburn: it's not a (convenient) round trip; you set off along it, and it ends some 20 kilometers away. So we decided to walk the length of it the first day up to Lake McKenzie, to have a day walking around said lake on the second day, and then to walk back to our cars parked at the start of the track on the third day. On paper, it seemed the two walks along the route's quality paths would be a doddle – even with backpacks on; what we didn't take into account were the changes in altitude we had to cover – something like 1000 meters! Ouch!

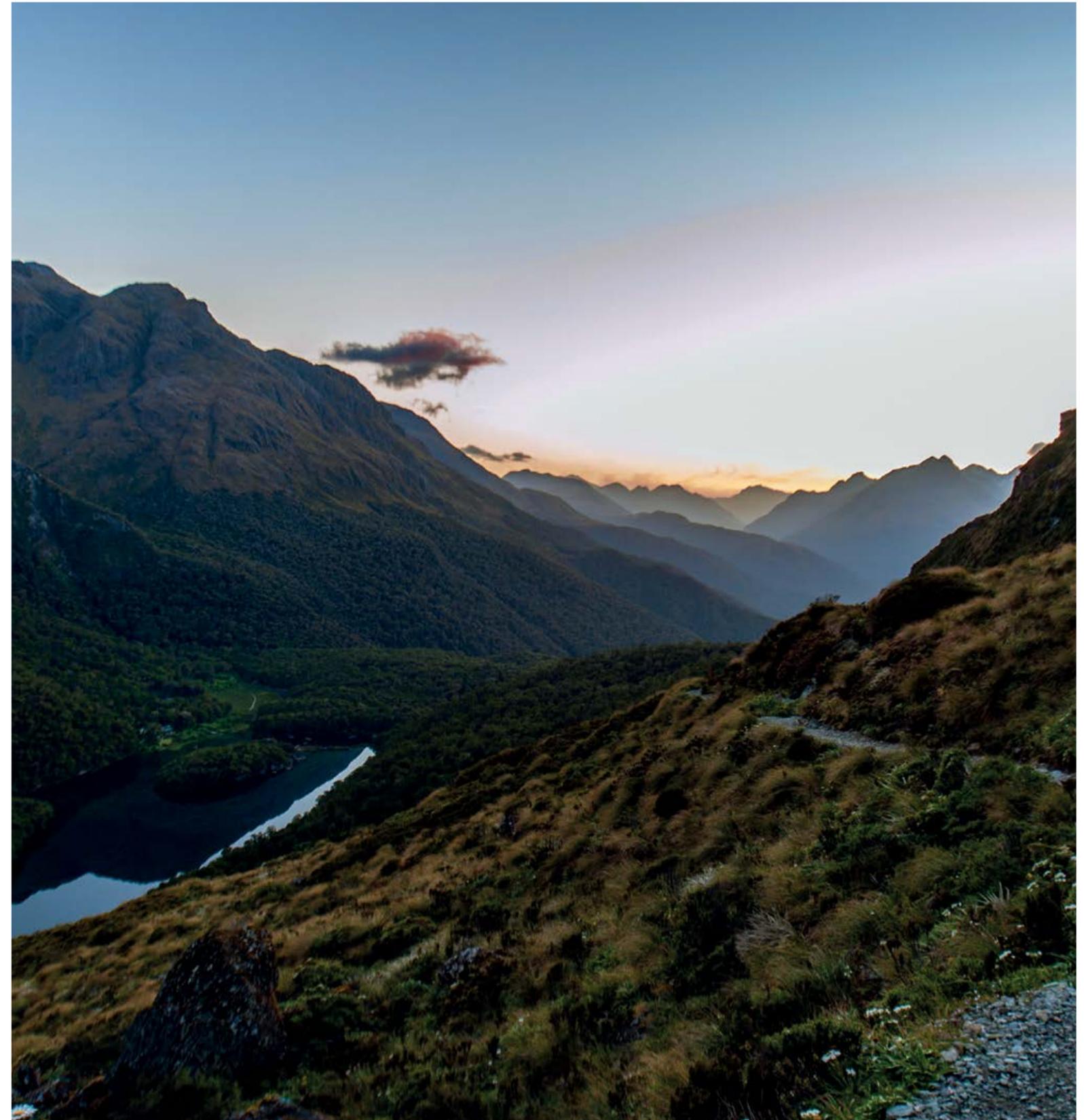
To cut a long trek story short, Routeburn's a belter of a track, but you need to physically train for it if you're going to do it like we did; for the average sedentary office worker it's real tough – nearly too tough.

Day 7

Trek



At Harris Saddle, wholly whacked after seven hours of hillwalking, we came to an eminently encouraging signpost: 'To McKenzie Basin – five hours left'. Eek!



Day 7

Trek

Around 2000 meters
above sea level



The South Island

Day 7

Trek

Lake McKenzie



The South Island

Day 7

Trek

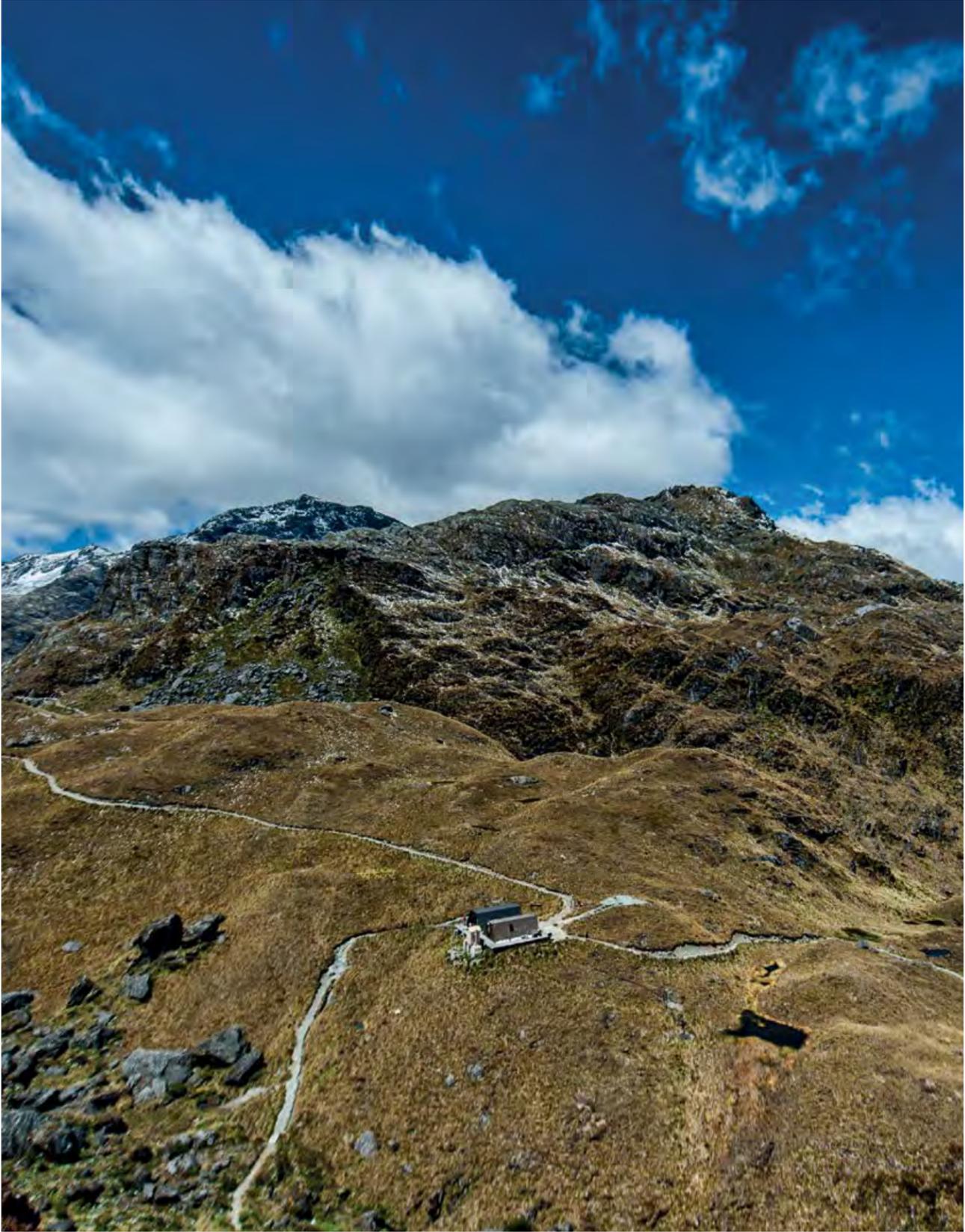
The magic of Lake McKenzie can't be expressed in words; you need to see it swim in it to really get it



Day 7

Trek

The Internet reports that the Routeburn Track is widely considered to be one of the most beautiful paths in the world (in the 'easy' category). What can I say? The Internet doesn't lie: it's true!



Day 8

Places of Hobbitation

The noise generated by the Earland Falls can be heard kilometers away; its water is very tasty too



The South Island

Rumor has it that the hobbit theme brings NZ billions of tourists' dollars. Dedicated guides on hobbit places are sold that show you all the sites where filming took place, to which many tourists get to and tick off each, take photos, and move on to the next Lord of the Rings or Hobbit place. Really, NZ is one big film set ☺. On our second day on the South Island we got to see some Hobbitation for ourselves, including the 174-meter-high Earland Falls, which apparently featured in one of the film sets (of Elrond's castle in Rivendell).

Besides the waterfall there's plenty of other cool stuff to see round here – all of it not merely picturesque; all of it boundlessly beautiful! I really recommend a trek here for all the walkers among you.

Here's an intriguing split rock we saw during a breather near Lake Mackenzie.



Wizardly surreal NZ forest. The trees look as if they're alive and might get up and walk off

Day 9

Rain

Rain in NZ shouldn't be a problem to tourists – at least, to tourists traveling in comfy all-terrain vehicles along smooth roads with a full trunk of foodstuffs



Mountainous landscapes + peculiar ocean currents + peculiar climate, including peculiar winds = a LOT of rain in places like Fiordland – the southwestern mountainous expanse with UNESCO World Heritage status. Local printed matter puts it another way: there's rainfall 200 days a year here. A wet western wind gets up into the hills causing much precipitation there. The result – water, water everywhere, affecting the scenery all around in a big way: varnishing and brightening the views, forming turquoise-colored lakes, and generating magnificently magical waterfalls and hill streams. On the negative side, all that water also causes plenty of havoc: flooding tunnels and blocking roads with landslides.

But looking on the bright side, at least rain doesn't fall here constantly – i.e., all day. It can be pouring down of a morning, but come midday the sun's shining brighter than a meteorite falling over Chelyabinsk. Therefore, even if rain's drumming on the roof of the hotel (or tent) if you're ever here – don't get down and change your plans. Keep calm and carry on! Before you know it the weather will turn out nice again just as quickly as it got bad earlier.

Rain-wise, the only things you really need to pay attention to are announcements about road closures caused by the showers. These need to be checked at the very start of a journey when renting your car, in the hotels en route, and/or online.

In our case, we got to Te Anau only to find ourselves under torrential rain, and to our horror we learned that the road to Milford Sound would be closed for several days! So we again had to change our route – adding 1000 kilometers to our travels.



But things weren't so bad: the views were so nostalgic (for a Russian) – silver birches and puddles!

Day 9

Rain



High tide river!

I wonder, is that dam meant to be breached like that, or is it another calamitous consequence of the ruinous rains?

The South Island



Though the water looks inviting, taking a dip in it is fatal!



We found here in NZ four utterly unique natural wonders with nothing to compare to them anywhere else on the planet, as far as I know, at least.

First, there are the glowworms that line cave ceilings making them look like a star-spangled cloudless sky. Nothing comes close to a spectacle like that.

Second, there's the volcanic Inferno Lake. Sure, wherever you find volatile volcanic activity anywhere in the world, you always find plenty of multicolored lakes of varying levels of acidity and temperature, but to see the level of such a colored lake changing drastically in cycles (of over a month) – now that's unique!



Ok, who wants to play... but what?



Third, there are the Moeraki Boulders. We came upon these mysterious round stones on our 11th day in NZ.

Remarkable phenomena. Round stone balls of various sizes scattered over the beach – in all around 40 of them. Some of them get washed off the beach and into the ocean – underneath which, they say, could lie some several hundred. The balls aren't of a homogenous texture inside – as can be seen from some of them that have broken up and fallen apart. It's as if different types of rock got glued together eons ago.

What are they, how were they made, and where did they come from? Today's scholars can't say for sure, only able to come up with: "they formed themselves in the Pliocene epoch from dirt at the bottom of the sea". Such an amazing and mysterious place. It's trite, as I utter this phrase quite often, but... this place really is must-see :).

And finally, the fourth NZ uniqueness – the Milford Sound. A fantastical fiord with wonderful waterfalls – correctly considered to be the eighth wonder of the world by Rudyard Kipling. But more about that in a bit...



Lake Pukaki, lenticular clouds, Mount Cook.



It would be unthinkable not to mention NZ's spectacular lakes in this travelogue – even though we didn't actually have time to study any of them in great detail.

NZ's lakes are simply magical – huge, turquoise, surrounded by lush mountain ranges and other pulchritudinous paysages... and that's on both islands. Alas, we mostly just drove past them – sometimes several lakes a day, occasionally lunching on their shores, and some of us even taking a dip in them; but that was about it.

The Maori names for the lakes were all aptly exotic sounding: Taupo, Tekapo, Pukaki, Wakatipu, Te Anau... And incidentally, we were told that fully equipped camping sites can be found along the shores of most of the lakes and that it's best to spend the night not cooped up in a hotel but in a tent at one of these shore-sites to get the best NZ-lake experience. Will have to chalk that one for my next NZ trip!

Day 11

Lakes

This is Lake Pukaki again, this time from the direction of Mount Cook





The lakes of the South Island: luring, alluring, lush



The South Island



Day 12

Cook Glacier

On hot – January! – days, whatever you do make sure you keep lathering on the high-factor sun cream and quaffing plenty of water



The Mount Cook National Park is another South Island must-check. Glaciers and glacial lakes – and paths all over the place making them all nicely accessible – plus roaring rivers, splendid suspension bridges, superlative scenery and magnificent mountains.

Mini-icebergs normally float atop Lake Tasman, but they'd all been melted by the recent warm heavy rains. To view the glaciers (and if there are any – the icebergs) you take a boat across the lake, then take an off-road vehicle and travel across the glacier in the direction of Mount Cook; then, after a little further on foot, the most astounding views open up. The whole of this excursion takes around five or six hours, but it's best to leave at the crack of dawn so as to be able to spend all day there and get plenty of strolling in – since there's a good path.

We were told how the glacier is shrinking (in length) by several hundred meters yearly, that the level of the glacial lake was much lower just 20 years ago, and that if the glacier keeps on melting at such a rate then in around another 20 years it will disappear from the valley altogether.

Mount Sebastopol (named in honor of the Siege of Sevastopol in 1854-5) provides the best views (especially at nightfall) of magnificent Mount Cook and the neighboring valley (five hours there and back). The hill paths on Sebastopol really need to be made good use of too. The sights to be seen therefrom are really sensational...

Mount Cook has three peaks. The highest – 3724 meters. The best view is from Sebastopol mountain at dusk



Day 13

Main course

Kipling called Milford Sound the eighth wonder of the world. I fully agree!

The South Island



Milford Sound can be driven around on a road that's about 30 kilometers long, surrounded on both sides by dauntingly massive cliffs down which trickle thousands of streams, flow dozens of rivers, and gush innumerable waterfalls. Breathtaking, spellbinding sights! Total and complete blowing of the mind. One of the most unique, bewitching places on Earth I've seen – and I've seen a few. Milford Sound: a must-see, simple as that.

Milford Sound can also be traversed by boat, giving a different – lower – perspective on the streams and waterfalls. There are plenty of excursions on offer too, including a night tour – bedding down for the night somewhere in among the fiords. Romantic!

Kea – a mountain parrot. Friendly, but... feeds on, inter alia, the fingers of curious tourists!

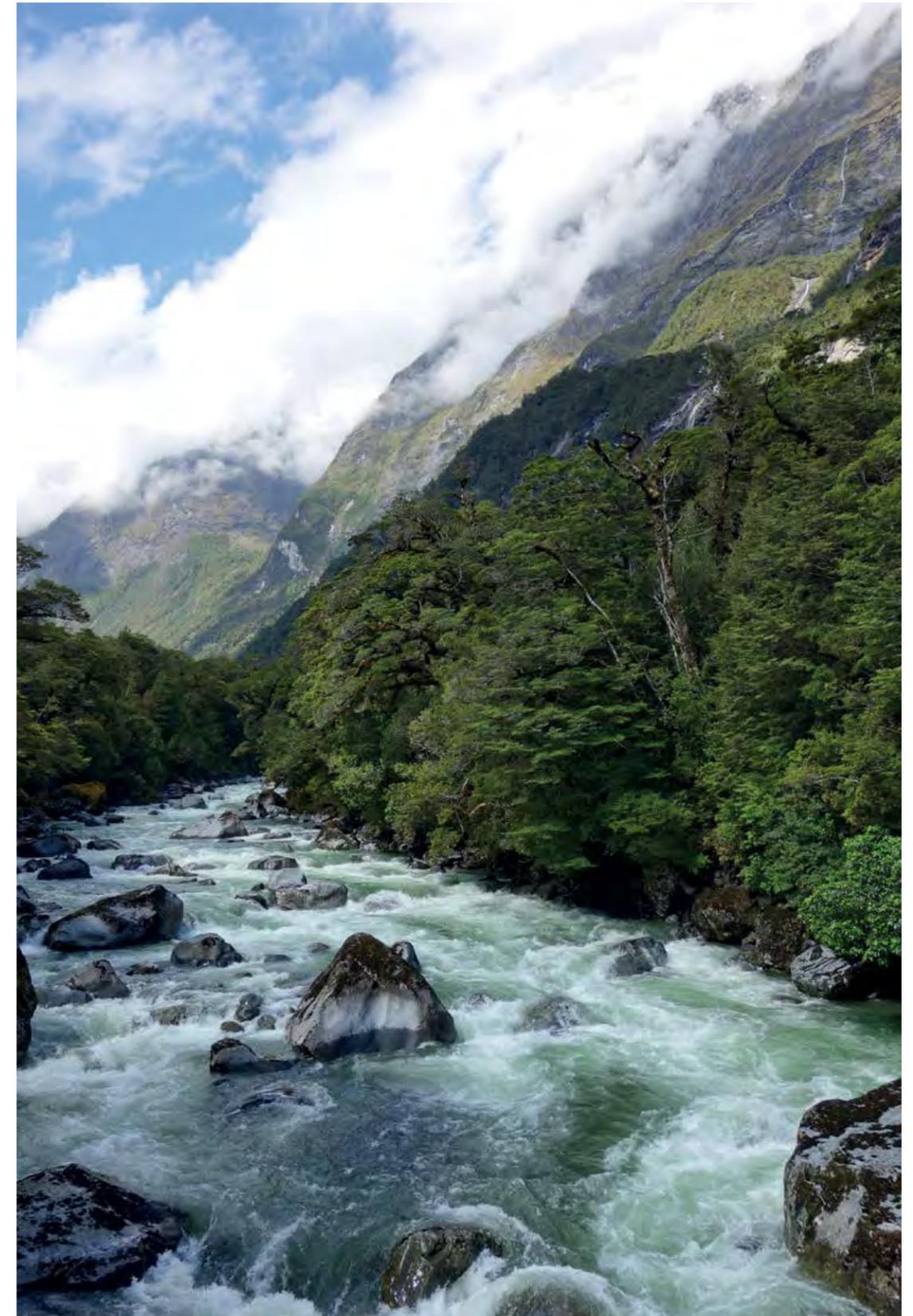
Day 13

Main course

Warning: navigating Milford Sound can be slow – not because of the harsh climatic conditions, but because of the regular need to stop, take pics and relish the views



We had just several hours at Milford Sound. Most regrettable. However, the beauty to be observed during that short time was more outstanding than usual: right after heavy rain, i.e., with water being shed everywhere with maximal gusto. Impressive.





Around a million tourists come to Milford Sound every year. Any more and there'll be traffic jams



Sybarites and Travelers

Our group practically straight away split into two smaller groups: the restless and the sybarites.

The first group was the active group wanting to walk, look around and climb wherever possible – and impossible 😊. The other group liked to take things easier: a spot of swimming, flying in helicopters, and seeking out genuine local cuisine and so on. They were rewarded for their efforts too: they even got to try some of the celebrated NZ lamb. But since NZ cuisine is hardly the country's strongest point, to get fed well takes time. And, as if you can't guess, your humble servant belonged to the first group; therefore, I didn't get round to sampling the local lamb. Not that I minded – I can eat that at home too 😊.

Nevertheless, the sybarites did all still get to see all the must-sees... apart from the best one – Milford Sound! Go figure 😊.

The onset of natural cataclysms meant that the only way of seeing Milford would be by taking a car 500km one way, having a quick look at the Sound, and then another 500 back! Plus it was raining cats and dogs that morning.

Naturally, this put a lot of the sybarites off straight away: they'd come for seeing sights, not traveling all day in a motor car. Others were still weighing up whether to go in the morning, but had one look at the rain and decided against. Still others loaded up their things and got into their cars and... still didn't go!

In the end only four of us drove to Milford Sound. After 200km on the road the sun started peeping through the clouds, but that still seemed insufficient to shake us from our gloom from the long haul. After another 200km my travel companions started to look at me reproachfully... but in the end (phew!) everyone understood it was all worth it!

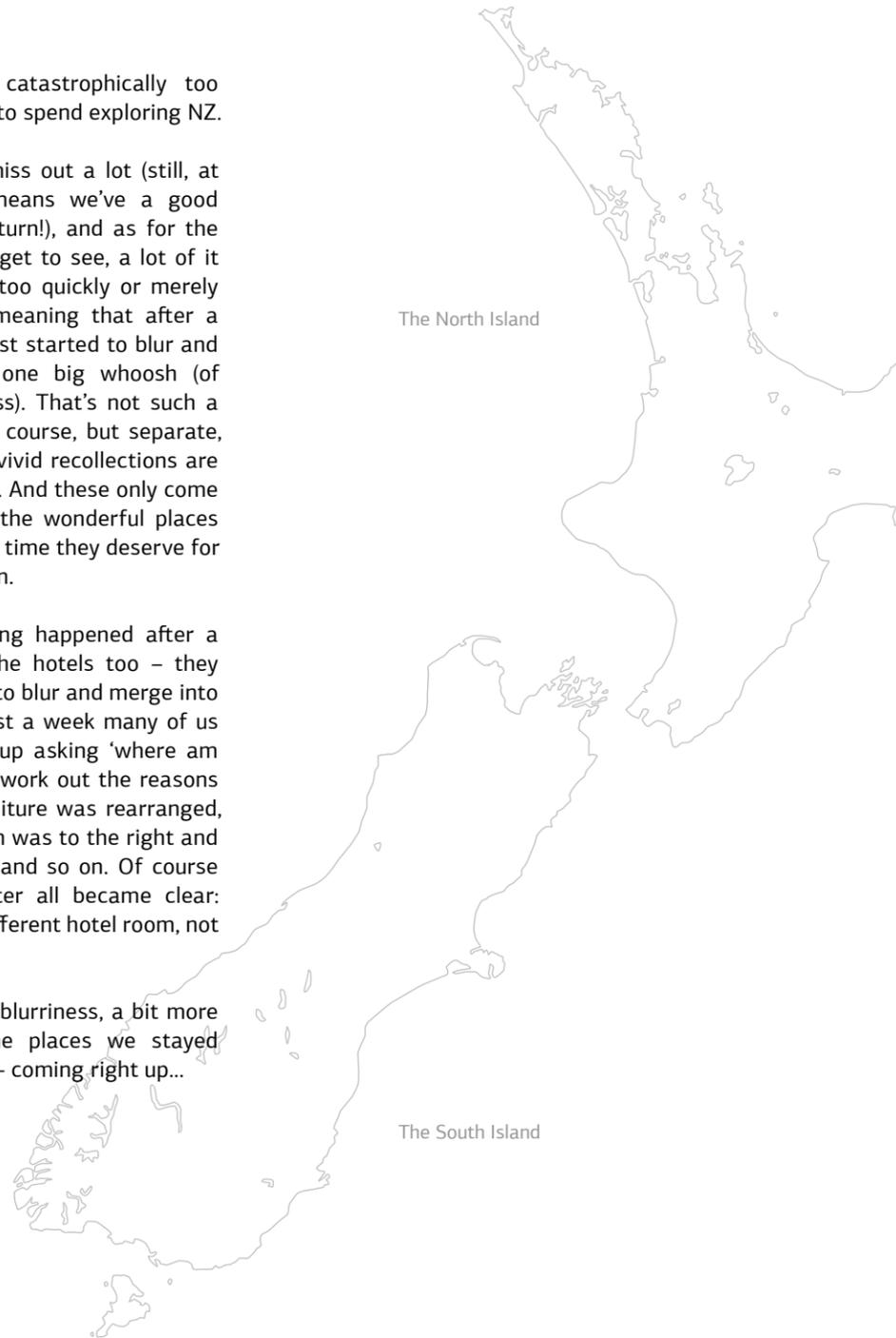
The next day the sybarites joined us by chopper to 'look around the sound'. Sounds glamorous, but they missed out on a key element of the Milford experience: they didn't drive along the road that goes 'round the sound', which is so awesome it's now a UNESCO World Heritage Site 😊.

17 days is catastrophically too short a time to spend exploring NZ.

We had to miss out a lot (still, at least that means we've a good reason to return!), and as for the stuff we did get to see, a lot of it was viewed too quickly or merely in passing, meaning that after a while it all just started to blur and merge into one big whoosh (of wonderfulness). That's not such a bad thing of course, but separate, distinct and vivid recollections are what I prefer. And these only come about when the wonderful places are given the time they deserve for full inspection.

A similar thing happened after a while with the hotels too – they also started to blur and merge into one. After just a week many of us would wake up asking 'where am I?', trying to work out the reasons why the furniture was rearranged, the bathroom was to the right and not the left, and so on. Of course a second later all became clear: this was a different hotel room, not yesterdays.

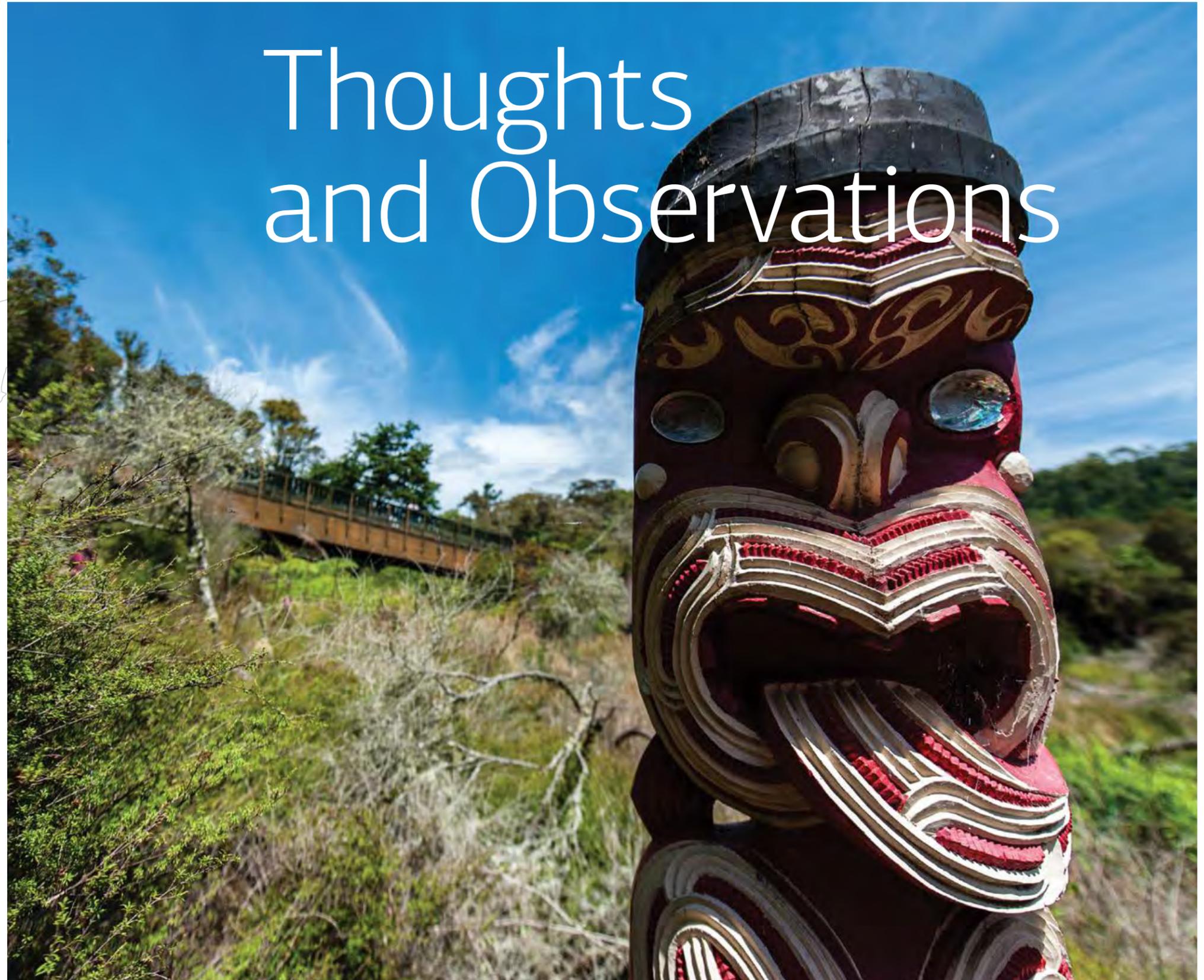
Still, despite blurriness, a bit more detail on the places we stayed overnight in – coming right up...



The North Island

The South Island

Thoughts and Observations



Day 14

Mistakes and plans
for the future

Franz Josef Glacier
Photo: natala007 / Flickr



Thoughts and observations

I've mentioned how unexpected torrential rain ruined our plans several times. Indeed, despite our heroic efforts to see everything, repeated rearranging of the route, and the extra hundreds of kilometers on the road – some must-sees remained completely inaccessible and thus unseen. They'll just have to wait till next time...

There were six must-check-outs we missed, as follows:

1. We didn't get round to seeing the far-northern part of the North Island. They say it's home to endless sandy beaches, dunes and other such natural beauty. Besides, I just love getting to the very furthest points of any country or continent ☺.
2. State Highway 6 – along the west coast of the South Island. We got to see only its northern section, but if the southern part is as beautiful – a leisurely drive along it is mandatory. Especially for lovers of hairpin bends.
- 3 The Franz Josef Glacier – accessible from the above-mentioned Highway 6. They say it's an amazing sight to behold. The glacier descends almost onto the road itself so you don't even need to leave the car. Perfect for lazy tourists!
4. Hooker Glacier. It was a formidable wind that blew us off course this time, which was also shaking suspension bridges so much as to make them totally impassable.
5. A boat trip across Milford Sound. The Homer Tunnel you need to go through to get to it turned out to be flooded.
6. Kaikoura and the whales' feeding ground in the sea right by it. We did make it here (on our 15th day) but we didn't see a single whale – not even one of their fins. Not far from the shore the ocean bottom abruptly deepens by about three kilometers (as our guides told us), and it's way down there where the whales were hunting for giant squid. Something to do with the darn rain again.



Now let me provide a summary of the NZ hotel/motel situation, at least – the one we experienced



In all we changed hotels/motels 13 times, and stayed at a camping site on one occasion. Most of our overnight stops were at common-or-garden 3-4 star town hotels. On one occasion we had to make do with a... doss house that had just one shower and toilet for the whole floor!

A particularly nice hotel was one called Sudima on the shore of the volcanic Lake Rotorua with all its steam vents and thermal springs – and untold numbers of seagulls!

Day 15

Lodgings

The view from the hotel
of Lake Rotorua



Thoughts and observations

Day 15

Lodgings

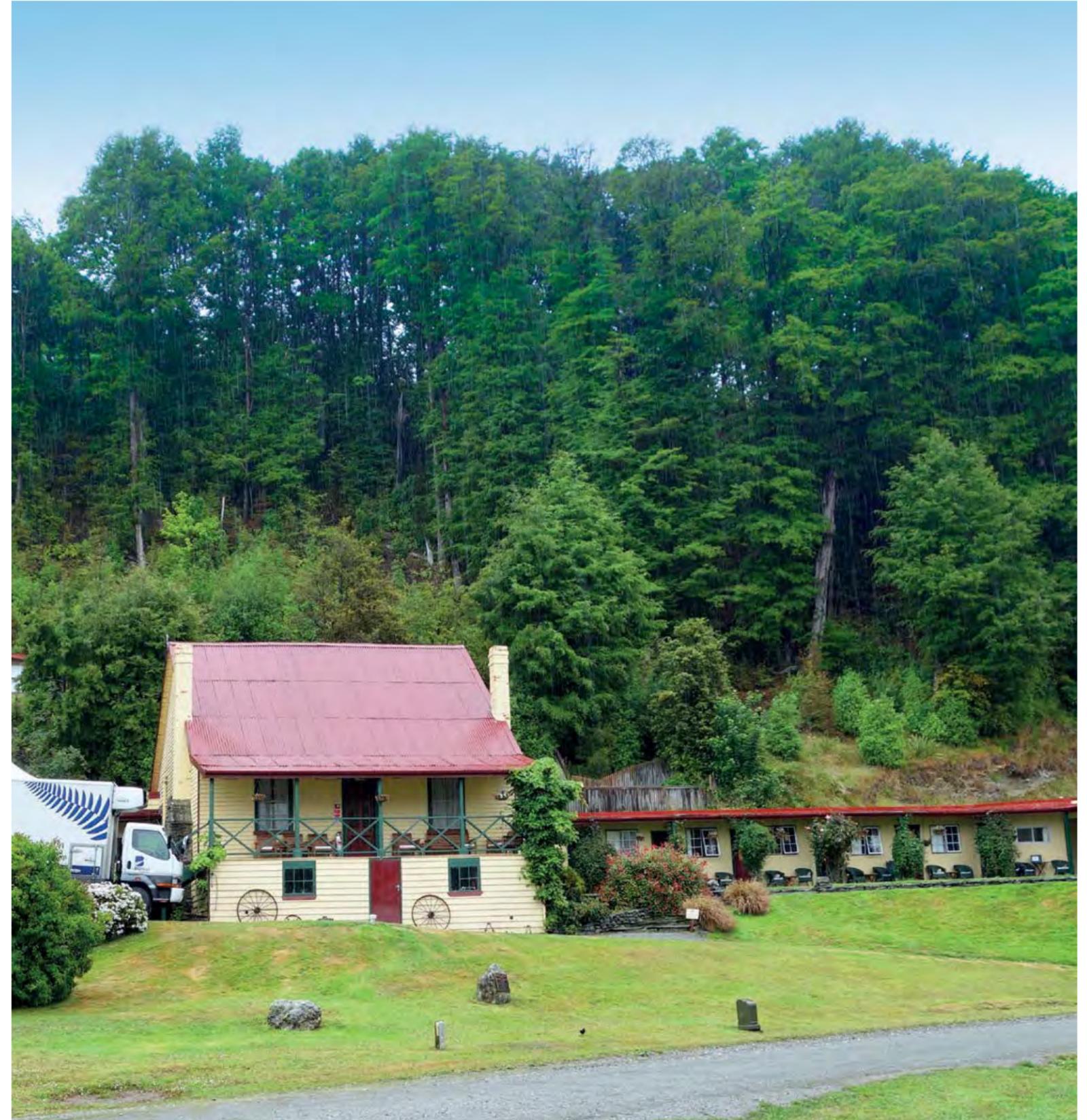


The hotel on the shore of another volcanic lake – Lake Taupo – with ducks wandering about just outside the windows and hot streams leading down to the lake

...And a few of the other abodes we stayed the night at – from the humble to the homely, the awful to the awesome



Thoughts and observations



Here we were fed game – I think dear. After three days on the Routeburn Track, we'd have eaten a whole horse too!



Don't Make a Cult Out of Food, and How We Met the NY in NZ

Curiously, surprisingly, disappointingly, most of the hotels we stayed in didn't give us breakfast! Instead, they served up some kind of... rabbit food – totally inedible fodder of unknown origin, laid out in miserly portions... For example: a box of corn flakes plus milk, five boiled eggs, several slices of ham, a small loaf of bread, and some kind of manmade substance that tried to pass off as cheese – not each, but for 15 hungry travelers!

So just make sure you stock up with plenty of instant noodles and other such trashy tuck that doesn't go off quickly if ever heading out on an NZ road trip. After a week or so of expecting the breakfast situation to improve, we eventually turned to such unhealthy but at least filling and tasty foodstuffs to break our overnight fasts. We all came to the conclusion that NZers don't like cooking and/or can't cook. Gourmets who like to eat tastily, healthily and elegantly can have a bit of a nightmare on the road in NZ. They need to either spend time and gasoline on searching for edible lunches and dinners, or have to go cold turkey on prison-like rations!

We were to see in the New Year on the North Island in the beautiful coastal town of Raglan. What we wanted was fairly straightforward: to find some kinda eatery, sit, feast, chat, drink champagne, sing and dance (all in that order)...

The result was we ended up in a... saloon that resembled a motel by a highway in the US Mid-West. Ground floor – food, second – rooms. For dinner we were offered whisky, vodka, gin, etc – but no food! Thankfully we had two bags of French fries. Oh well, it had to do; as they say – any port in a storm :).

Btw, the french fries were left over from that day's lunch on a fish farm where we were hoping, naturally, for fresh fish and oysters. Yeah, right! What was served up was uneatable. Even that sophisticated condiment called ketchup couldn't make the oysters edible. Maybe they'd got them mixed up with used chewing gum? Chewing gum and ketchup – great. The accompanying french fries weren't much better. I suggested binning the lot, but my astute son decided we'd be best keeping hold of them, just in case. In the end, that wise moved saved us!

Later when all this was behind us we all agreed that, though fairly traumatic at the time, it was – by far – THE most memorable New Year's Eve... EVER!

Day 16

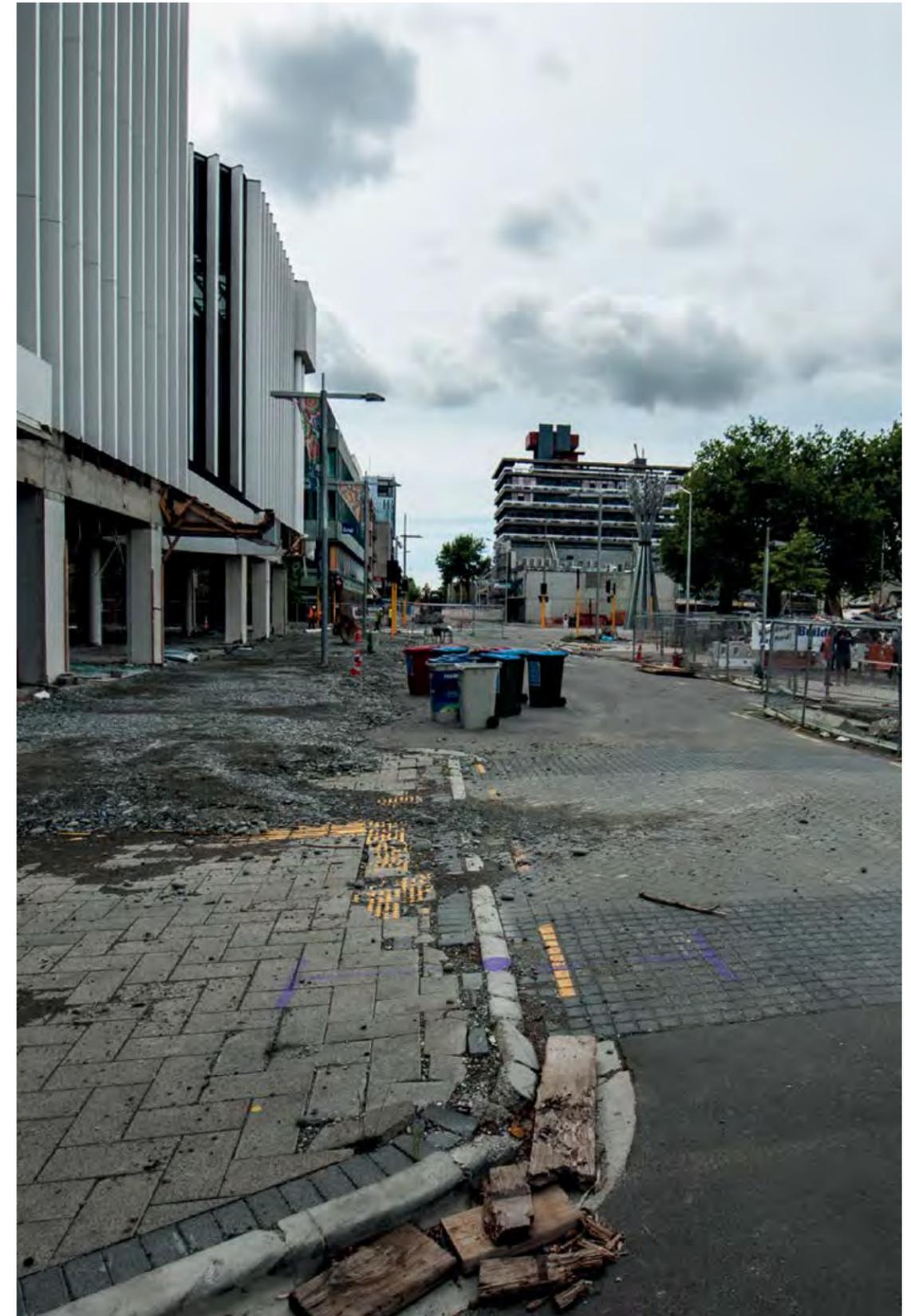
Christchurch

The city slowly but surely recovering after an earthquake



Thoughts and observations

Our last night was in Christchurch. Two years earlier, on February 22, 2011, a powerful earthquake hit the city killing 185 (including children) and causing widespread damage. Some parts of the city are still closed – cordoned off by fences, and are gradually being demolished. And where once there were supermarkets (demolished by the earthquake) now stand temporary stores and banks – in converted 20-foot freight containers.



Day 16

Christchurch

185 chairs, tables and children's furniture items – a memorial to those who tragically died in the earthquake



Thoughts and observations

Day 17

Summary

Extreme jetlag led to one of our group catching this spectacular sky at the crack of dawn – over the valley of the Tasman River



Thoughts and observations

And that was that – our NZ expedition was over. 17 days of intense up-tempo tourism was behind us, but the nostalgia was already kicking in. For some it started three days before the flight back home! For NZ is a magical place; so magical it draws you back when you leave.



Lord knows what happens here when all the snow melts!

Russia is somewhere over there



But just before I bring this travelogue to a close, I must report on how well we did in fulfilling the two main objectives of the expedition.

First objective: to see with our own eyes what we'd heard and seen so much about on the TV and Internet. Result? The objective was fulfilled practically completely – with the exception of a few force-majeure-caused omissions. Both islands were fairly exhaustively traveled, inspected and photographed.

Second objective: this was personal: to clarify, FINALLY, which is better – Kamchatka or NZ. I've heard many folks say that NZ is the most beautiful place on Earth – but in most cases they haven't experienced Kamchatka. In Europe and America most folks haven't even heard of Kamchatka. Now, it's no secret I'm the world's No. 1 Kamchatka fan, but... does it beat NZ in being the most beautiful place on the planet?

So, on volcanism and geothermalness Kamchatka beats NZ – actually, its North Island – easily.

...If we add the magic of the South Island (Mount Cook, the breathtaking beauty of the lakes, the mountains in Fiordland, Milford Sound, all kinds of bonuses like Hobbits in their burrows, whales in the ocean, glowworms in caves, and stone balls in Moeraki, and lots more) NZ annihilates Kamchatka – easily!...

...with one caveat:

All of Kamchatka's natural pearls are situated relatively close to one another – along a single line approximately 500 kilometers in length; whereas with NZ – you're talking thousands of kilometers, and two separate, quite distinct islands...

...So I'd say Kamchatka – on both beauty and uniqueness – is cooler than either NZ island taken separately. Did you catch all that? ☺

Eugene Kaspersky

17 Winter Days in Summery New Zealand

An expedition to New Zealand undertaken exclusively to discover,
observe, learn, and be enlightened...

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The Maori – the indigenous inhabitants of NZ – call their country Aotearoa, which means ‘land of long white cloud’. What do we know about NZ? Not much: that it sits in the southeastern ‘corner’ of the globe, and the Lord of the Rings was filmed there. Many say NZ is the most unusual, beautiful and mind-blowing place on the planet. One friend even goes so far as to say it’s worth spending the rest of your days there!

For me, the most unique and beautiful place on the planet has always been Kamchatka – with its volcanism, bears and other natural awesomeness. So all these folks saying NZ is better got me all curious. And folks who’d been to both places weren’t able to decide which was best. There was only one thing to do: get there myself – to the other side of the planet and judge for myself...

After 17 winter days in summery NZ, I came to the following conclusion:

The two islands of NZ together are cooler than Kamchatka. That means NZ now occupies the top spot on my list of the Top-100 Must-See Places in the World!

Eugene Kaspersky

