

A Fortnight in New Zealand

Sitting at a McDonalds lapping up the free internet, thoughts turned to the most efficient (ok, the cheapest) way to see New Zealand on my round-the-world-trip. I had thought to head down that way a few years ago, and the only choice then, as now, was to ride the big green busses of the Kiwi Experience. Clicking on the “commit” button that day I had no *real* idea what I was in for.

By the time I boarded the bus in Auckland, I had spent three months in Africa followed by a month in Nepal and Australia; making me feel that this would be just another leg in a longer journey. I was also fairly confident that I would be the designated “old fart” on the bus; the slick website images showed page after page of well-tanned twenty-somethings having the time of their lives attempting any number of death-defying adventures. While not exactly my peer group, at 47 I wasn’t exactly ready to concede that I wasn’t capable of being well-tanned and having the time of my life either.

Pulling away from the curb, we were probably only a few blocks down the road when a brunette makes her way to the front and asks the driver if we’re heading north or south. Apparently she was looking to head north to the Bay of Islands and noticed that our departure had a definitive southern direction to it. A hasty call to the office let the girl know that the northbound bus left an hour earlier, obviously with her not on it. It gave the author a humorous moment, but was only a prelude for the days to come.

The Kiwi Experience turned out to be an inner-island shuttle between credit-card swiping terminals. The first “swipe” took place on a misty beach where a majority of riders went kayaking at a place called Cathedral Cove. The trip was good and afterwards the group pulled into the first of many hostel accommodations suitable for cattle or humans; Hot-Water Beach. After a quick meal we all headed to the beach to experience the hot-waters. Bubbling up from deep beneath our feet, random spots along the shore would suddenly become hot-pools, provided you did a decent job of digging with the short shovels provided. By the time we got there, large pool areas had been designated with foot-high berms and occupied by all manner and nationality of tanned flesh.

The original group of 24 quickly became acquainted through shoveling, standing, sifting and shifting amongst the hot pools of water. Returning to the hostel, we all settled down for a few beverages and what appeared to be an innocuous game of UNO; suitable for ages 8 and up, or so the box said. The 11 players took almost three hours to be winnowed down to the final pair. By this point we were all past caring but a bond had formed.

From that “Hot Water Beach” we would explore Glow Worm Caves in Waitomo, Skydive and trek the Tongariro Crossing near Taupo before the group splintered a bit. Christmas was approaching and several in our group wanted to spend Christmas in Taupo instead of Wellington, so they stayed behind. I pushed on to River Crossing on Christmas Eve, then took 2 days off the truck as well to rest up in Wellington. I met up with the guys again there in Wellington where they had taken a shortcut and were only a day behind. The bonds formed on the north island were deeply annealed once we took the ferry to the South Island.

In Kaiteriteri there was the “bucket night” at a small bar where we closed down the place drinking out of large galvanized “buckets” of beer. Then it was onto Westport where our first rainy night had us partaking in a three-legged pubcrawl thru 3 bars in town.

The Pu Pub was next where we had a costume party and steak fry. Franz Joseph was next for New Years. On New Years Day most went glacier hiking while I hiked the mountain next to it to get better shots of the glacier.

From Franz Joseph on the 1st we drove to Wanaka to partake in a “centurian” where the goal was to drink 100 shots of beer in 100 minutes. It was a hard, but not impossible task. From Wanaka, it was on to 4 nights in Queenstown. I ended up staying on 2 more nights until I went trekking.

Walking up the steps of that green bus in Auckland, I had no idea it would be a time-machine, transporting me back 25-years to a time when I had more stamina and less worries. For a fortnight in New Zealand the flashback was a definite high-point for me.

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