

THE SUNDAY TIMES

travel

BE INFORMED. BE INSPIRED. BE THERE

magazine

March 2015 £3.90

Thailand

We know the dreamy, steamy island for saints and sinners

New Zealand

Epic adventure — the easy way
Total Guide inside

Provence

The idyllic France you see when you close your eyes — and where to find it

Secret Euro cities

The six little-known lovelies you need to visit *this year*

First time?

How to do safari, cruise, ski... **Plus** India, China, Oz — for beginners

www.sundaytimes.co.uk



+ CAPE TOWN + MOSCOW + MARRAKECH + FLORENCE + TENERIFE + MALTA + THE SWISS ALPS

Total Guide

New Zealand

Postcard-style vistas, beachside chills and hair-raising thrills await at every turn Down Under

Page 56 Grape escape: bottoms up in Central Otago

Page 70 Wheely good times on a South Island road trip

Page 74 NZ's best beaches — more than just sea and sand

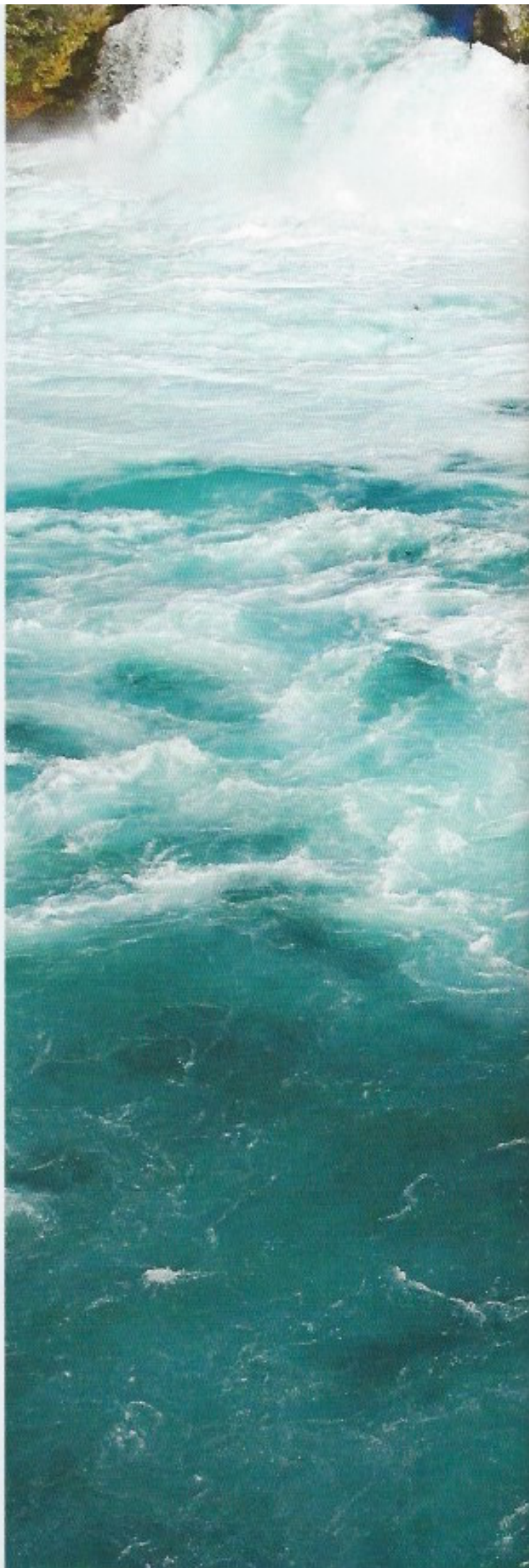


THIS WAY
TO THE GREAT
OUTDOORS

64

NZ

Just two letters... but a *world* of epic scenery, blockbuster adventure, timewarp charm, exquisite food and drink, and laid-back antipodean attitude. With so much to soak up, though — and, let's be honest, no idea when you'll ever pass this way again — you need to know what's worth one of your precious days and what's not. That's why we've filled the next 24 pages with only the country's true unmissables. Hold tight!





Fall hard for Huka Falls

Clear, sunny weather might be better for the snapshots, but raging Huka Falls is most magnificent when the rain is chucking down: the swollen channel of the Waikato River, New Zealand's longest, is forced through a narrow neck of volcanic rock, resulting in a **foamy, ferocious cascade spurting more than 220,000 litres a second.**

It's pretty as a picture when seen from the lookout above, but nothing beats the fresh mist flung upon your face from the maelstrom at the Falls' base, where turbulent white froth calms to cool aquamarine. Get up close on a river cruise (hukafallscruise.co.nz; £20 for 80 minutes), or better still, get onboard the hairdo-destroying Huka Falls Jet — you'll shoot within an arm's reach of craggy rocks, steep ledges, wayward trees and shallow banks in a revved-up jetboat (they're a Kiwi tradition) that performs 360° spins in the shallow water (hukafallsjet.com; £62 for 30 minutes). ▶





After the gold rush

Central Otago still has treasures on offer, says **Alicia Miller** (raising another glass)



As the brambly flavours rush across my palate, I feel them turn darker, serious, brooding. I give my glass a swirl and go in for a second gulp, savouring the wine's rich complexity. No wonder this is considered the king of Kiwi Pinot

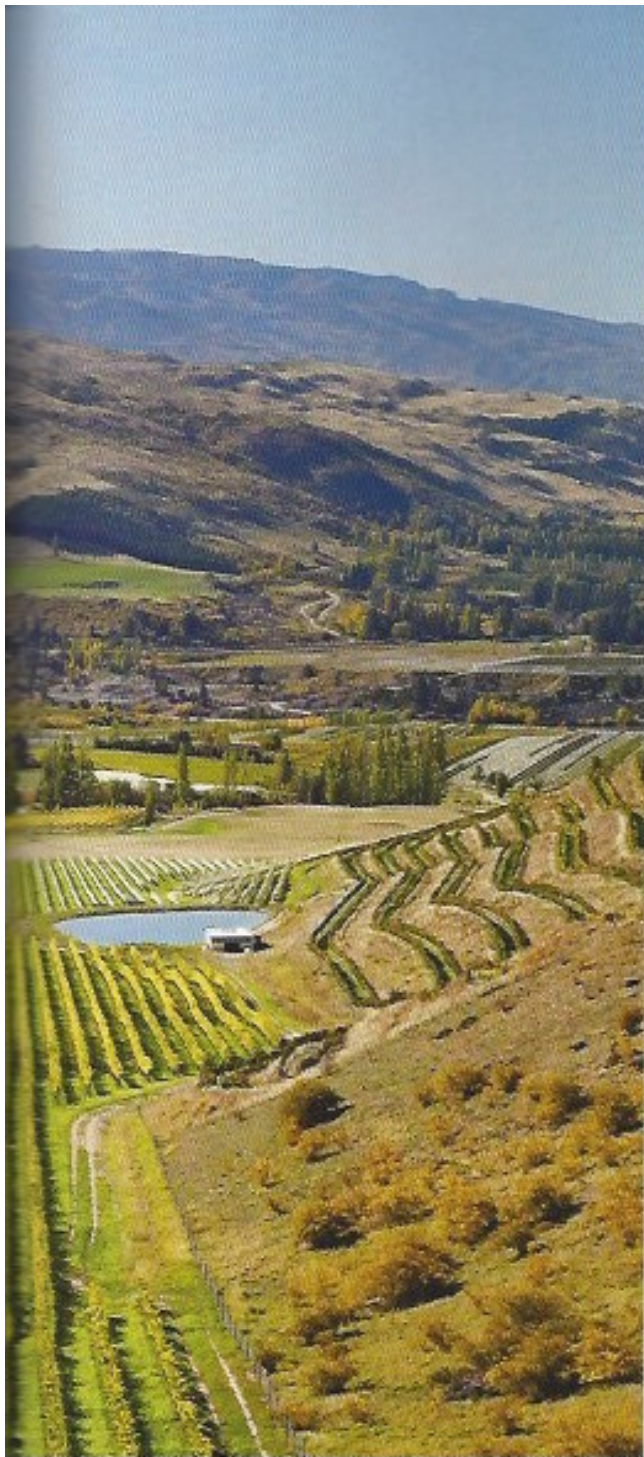
Noirs – just a few sips and I can feel my aching, dusty limbs reviving. But I'm stirred from my vinous epiphany by Felton Road's assistant winemaker. 'This is still the wine aging in the barrel,' he says. 'You can just imagine how good it'll be by the time it's bottled next year.' I stick out my glass. I need another taste before I can agree.

Arriving in Central Otago 24 hours earlier had been a shock. After the blue lakes, snowy peaks and lush greenery of Queenstown, I had driven just an hour and encountered a veritable desert: dramatic hills covered in rocky tors, barren apart from the odd vineyard and luminous river. So why was I – why was anyone – here?

Vine way to go: above, Felton Road Vineyard, one of New Zealand's most famous. **Opposite,** cycling on the Otago Central Rail Trail; **make mine a red**

The aquamarine river Clutha is the key – because back in the 1860s, when someone stood at the water's edge and dipped a hand into the water, they found it filled with gold. The Dunstan Gold Rush, which made millionaires of lucky locals in the late 19th century, attracted treasure-seekers from as far afield as California. Hamlets sprang up around Central Otago to house those who came to seek their fortunes, but when the supply ran dry a few decades later, the gold-seekers left. The towns, for the most part, were left to crumble behind them.

But as I pull into sleepy Clyde, I don't see a ghost town. Instead, there's a pretty little high street working a Wild West-gone-posh vibe. Period mudbrick houses, fronted with white picket fences and flower gardens, have been transformed into hotels, restaurants and boutique shops. There's a vintage-style cinema with enormous leather armchairs. Best of all though, there's Olivers, an adorable B&B (and soon restaurant and



craft brewery) in a gorgeously restored, right-side of kitsch former coaching house.

Wine is the new gold. And Clyde being a prime place for boutique vineyards in Central Otago, I head out exploring, making an appointment at nearby Two Paddocks, a vineyard and winery owned by actor Sam Neill. But like any other winery in Clyde, this isn't about spectacle (I can't spot a single autographed poster), but rather just about making good (very good) Pinot Noir. Wandering round the property, seeing the biodynamic garden, lavender and saffron groves, vintage Airstream camper and pet kunekune pig, Angelica, is lovely. But nothing beats the moment the Pinot Noir hits my lips. I take a bottle to go and drink it greedily later with a dinner of chicken-and-camembert pie from the local pub.

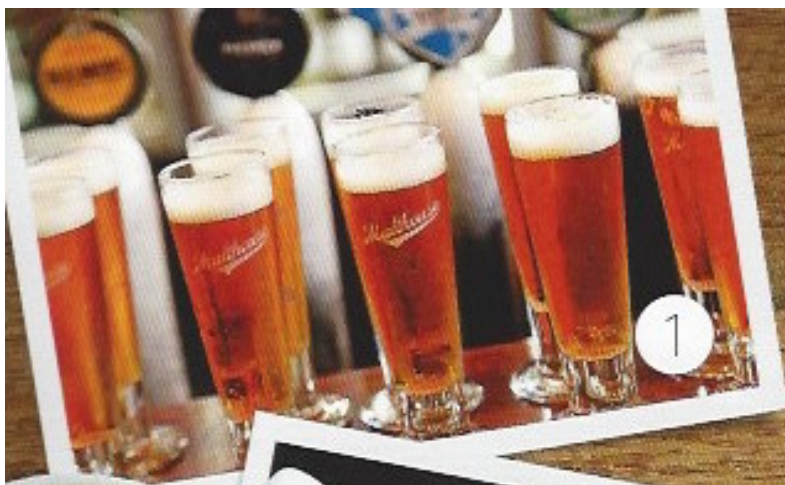
Where there's indulgence, there must also be penance, and for that, next morning, I am up early to ride the Otago Central Rail Trail, so called because it follows

SIPPING TIP

Fans of light to medium-bodied reds will adore the Pinot Noir here, but white buffs will also find fine Rieslings, Chardonnays, Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blancs

the line of a defunct railroad track to Dunedin. The full length is 150km or about three days' cycling, but I've cherry-picked the best (and, ahem, downhill) bit from Auriipo to Ophir. Along the dusty path – which crosses bumpy wooden bridges, snakes through tight rocky corridors and dives through pitch black, hand-dug tunnels – you can almost hear the old train chugging along. By the time I end in little Ophir (like Clyde, but smaller), I feel like a 19th century gold seeker myself.

There's only one suitable reward for my exertions – more wine. Over to Bannockburn it is, then, to visit Central Otago's, if not the country's, most famous winery: Felton Road – which is where I came in. I hold out my glass again. (It really is a very good Pinot.) Shebikesheebikes (shebikesheebikes.co.nz) has bike rentals for use on the Otago Central Rail Trail, from £22 per day. Olivers B&B (oliverscentralotago.co.nz; doubles from £115.) >



Wellington beauts

Follow our lead and hit the six sexiest spots in NZ's capital of cool

1 Garage Project

It's not just for tattooed-and-bearded hipsters — right now, everyone's intoxicated by Wellington's craft-beer scene. Tuatara Breweries' hoppy concoctions got things flowing a few years back — its bottles now rest on bar counters citywide — but Garage Project grabs the gong for the coolest set-up, its brewery and cellar inhabiting an old petrol station, all graffiti art and throbbing tunes. Regulars saunter in to sup or to refill plastic 2Ls with whatever's on tap that week. It's open for tastings every day, although if you like your beer bland, don't bother — pushing boundaries is the name of the game here, highlighted by lemongrass and grapefruit pale ale, stout made with cereal milk, and devilishly spicy lager with chilli, watermelon and rose petal. 68 Aro St; garageproject.co.nz.

2 Swonderful

Bohemian Cuba Street is the port-of-call for NZ vintage fashion — cig-puffing art students, fashion fanatics, yummy-mummies and

shoeless hippies mass here like nowhere else in the land. At Swonderful tap into the '50s vibe as you rummage for polka-dot dresses, flared shorts, jewellery, totes and stationery. If you're serious about shopping, try Good as Gold on Victoria Street (goodasgold.co.nz) — this multi-levelled shop stocks an eclectic edit of top-quality, very 'now' clothing. 241 Cuba St; swonderful.co.nz.

3 Wellington Chocolate Factory

The chocolate here is organic, ethical — and darn tasty. The single-origin bars are exquisite, but consider picking up the coconut-cream dairy-free, or quirky flavours including hop chocolate — they're delicious and they feature local art on their wrappers. Still hungry? You're in the thick of Wellington's artisan-food quarter, mere steps from Six Barrel Soda (sixbarrelsoda.co.nz) for modern fizzy pop; Fix and Fogg (fixandfogg.co.nz) for velvety peanut butter; and Goldings craft beer bar (goldingsfreedive.co.nz) to slake your thirst in style. 5 Eva St; wcf.co.nz.

4 Mojo Coffee

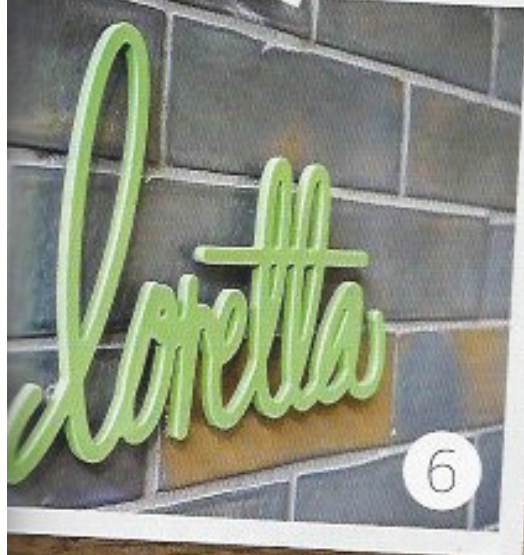
When is a coffee not just a coffee? When it's in Wellington, where it's also art, culture and social lubricant. In the heart of New Zealand's caffeine capital you'll find more cafes than people to fill them, but Mojo is counted among the best. Inside an old dockside warehouse, roasters radiate aromas of toasted beans. Come for the freshest-ever to take home — offerings change constantly to represent what's fresh and fabulous from coffee growers around the world. Or head straight for the cafe across the street, where they do a mean flat white, the signature strong-brew coffee-and-milk combo that's New Zealand's gift to the world. Shed 13, Kumutoto Plaza; mojocoffee.co.nz.

5 Museum Hotel

You don't have to stay at the Museum Hotel to appreciate its over-the-top lobby — in fact, the hotel's finest feature is open to all. It's arrayed with head-turning artworks gathered by the hotel's owner, everything rotated regularly to



5



6

'keep it vibrant'. On any given day expect to ogle a surrealist Mona Lisa, a shiny red motorcycle or a gaudy tin bull, as you head to the restaurant. Hippopotamus, to toss back a few cocktails and debate what it all means. 90 Cable St; museumhotel.co.nz; doubles from £128, room only.

6 Loretta

Within a tranquil womb of natural-wood decor, fresh, modern Kiwi cuisine is the order of the day at this new restaurant, sister to the popular Florida's, nearby. Whatever time of day hunger pangs strike, they'll serve up wood-fired pizzas, ricotta, walnut and rocket sandwiches and preposterously healthy salads. And if you need to offset the beauty of it all with a bit of grunge, pop down to Ekim's parking lot-cum-burger pop-up on the corner of Cuba Street and Abel Smith Street, to devour a Beefy Pete (cheese, bacon and guacamole). 187 Cuba St; Loretta.net.nz.



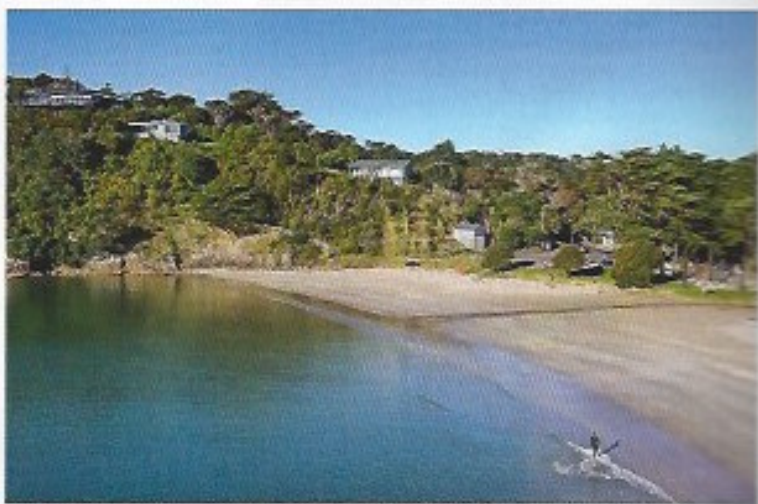
Commune with the kauri

Nature puts you firmly back in your box when you stand before Tane Mahuta. It's New Zealand's largest kauri, the country's iconic evergreen tree. Roughly 2,000 years old and 4.4m in diameter, it soars 18m before even the first branch appears — more monument than plant. It can be found in Waipoua Forest, which spreads along a stretch of North Island coastline. For keen green travellers it's a must, with raised wooden footpaths and trails into its fern-verdant depths. The best way to experience it is under canvas (or in a campervan) at one of the basic but beautiful Department of Conservation campsites (doc.govt.nz; from £5pp). There's a popular one with a communal kitchen in the Trounson Kauri Park.



Uncover a kiwi

It's rare, the sight of an ungainly kiwi bobbing along the forest floor; they've been wiped out across most of the country — but there's hope at Zealandia (visitzealandia.com; £38 night tour). Encased by kilometres of predator-proof fence, Wellington's sanctuary is a safe haven for NZ's national symbol and other endangered birds, including the flightless, purple-tinged takahe. Elsewhere, kiwis can sometimes be seen on Stewart Island, though the most reliable bet is an after-dark boat trip with Bravo Adventure Cruises (kiwispotting.co.nz; £72) to a beach where they feed. Birds your bag? On the Otago Peninsula, spot yellow-eyed penguins guarding eggs, and albatrosses gliding gracefully above the water (Monarch Cruises; wildlife.co.nz; £121 for a day).



KICK BACK ON WAIHEKE



When the weekend rolls around, Aucklanders get up to catch the early ferry to sleepy Waiheke Island. They cross shimmering waters, sometimes broken by the splash of orcas, and pour onto this little family-gone-trendy hideaway. The island's a beauty — rugged and wild in the east, with gentle hills in the west rolling out to sea — and has evolved into one of the country's finest wine regions. At picturesque Mudbrick (mudbrick.

co.nz), stock up on silky Vigners and elegant Chardonnays, as you sip rich, rounded Syrahs urged from the Jurassic soils, you can ogle pretty Cable Bay. Then take a pew at the Oyster Inn (theoysterinn.co.nz) to devour Te Matuku oysters and crayfish risotto. As the day cools, convention dictates retiring to a cute bach (holiday home) by the sea. Or better still, to a bungalow at Oneroa's breezily beautiful Boatshed hotel (boatshed.co.nz; from £354, B&B) >



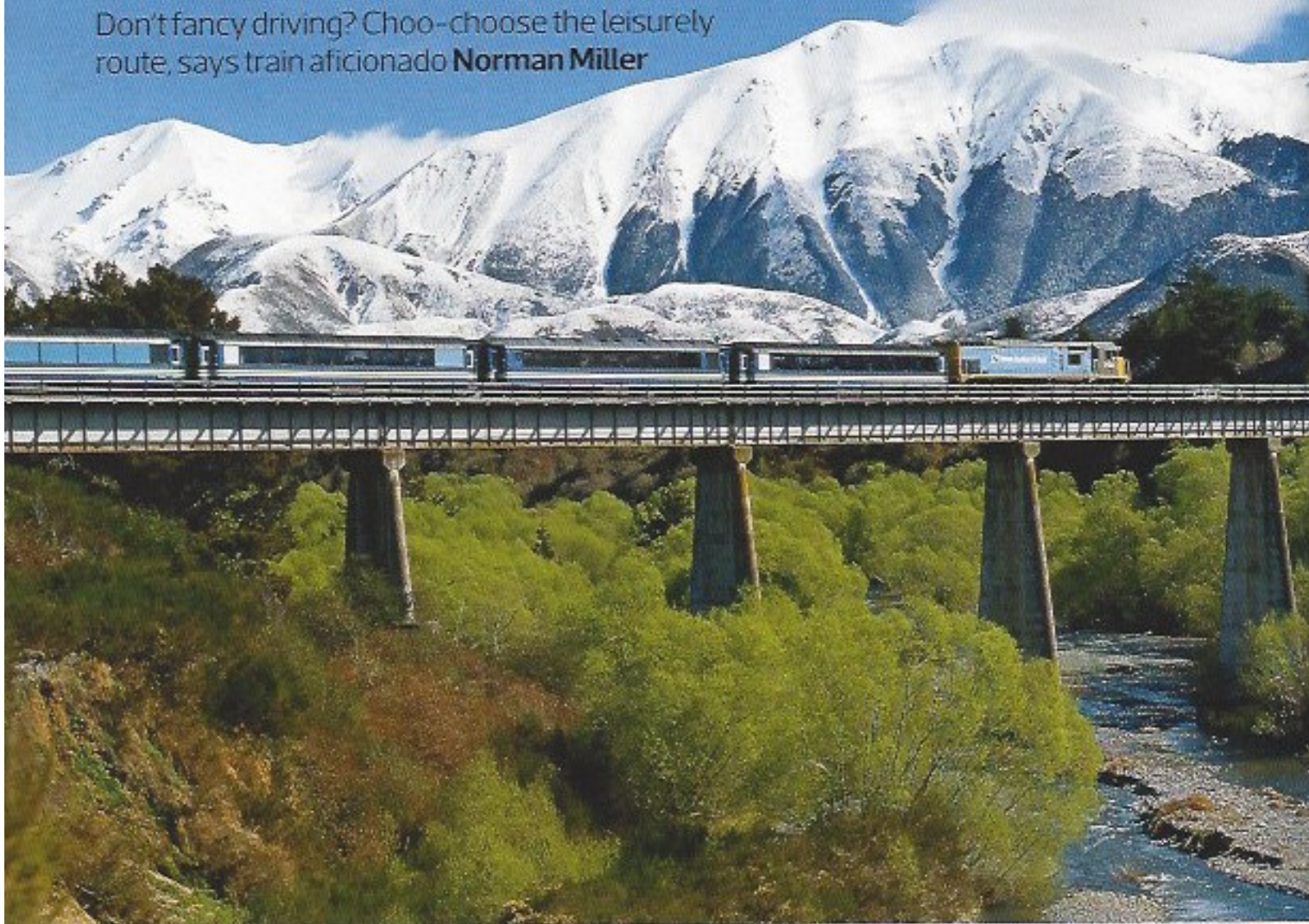
Meet with Maori

Heard of the *haka*? That thumping, gyrating, thigh-slapping dance made famous by the All Blacks? It's traditionally the war cry of the Maori, New Zealand's indigenous people. Discover more about them in Rotorua, North Island, the epicentre of modern Maori culture, kept alive and vibrant by Te Puia, a self-governing community in Whakarewarewa Thermal Valley. There are **carving and weaving schools, walking tours, hangi barbecues** (where the food is cooked on hot stones in a covered pit) **and live music shows, including the haka** (tepuia.com; day pass and performance £34). North of Auckland, nose around Te Hana Te Ao Marama's recreated *po* (fortified village) — there are tours every hour between 8am and 4pm from Wednesday to Sunday (tehana.co.nz; from £15). Or less formally, book into Moanara Beach Cottage, in the Bay of Plenty, where the owners, Miria and Taroi, descendants of the Ngati Awa and Tuhoe tribes, will happily talk to you about Maori life over breakfast (moanara.co.nz; from £69, B&B).



Get on track

Don't fancy driving? Choo-choose the leisurely route, says train aficionado **Norman Miller**



From the air, the view of the landscape between Auckland and Wellington isn't that inspiring. Down on the ground, it's another story. I'm swaying along in one of Kiwi Rail's brilliant open-air carriages, marvelling at

a Dakota DC3 plane painted bright blue, crowning a cafe in Mangaweka like a giant's cast-off toy. That sighting comes on the heels of the seven-metre-high statue of a sheep-shearer, rising like a wacky colossus over the self-proclaimed 'Shearing Capital of the World', Te Kuiti. Further down the line at Taihape, a huge upturned gumboot bares its sole at us as we pass. Whoo-hoo!

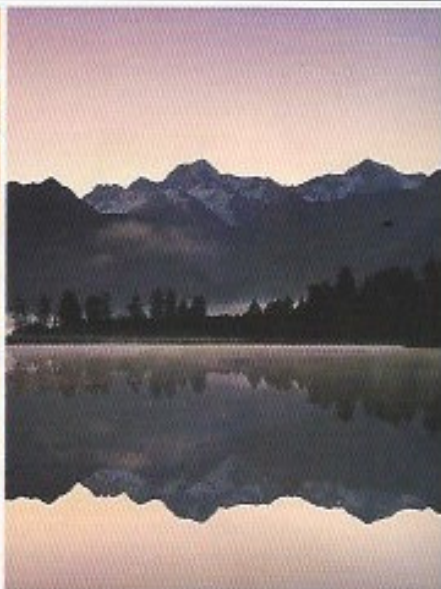
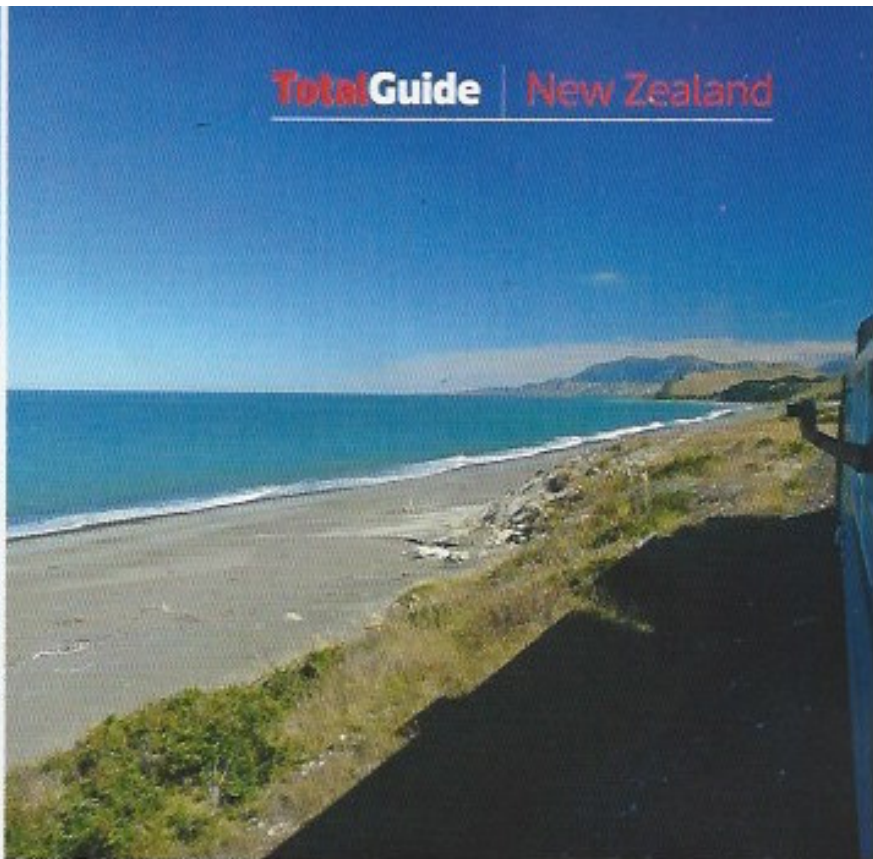
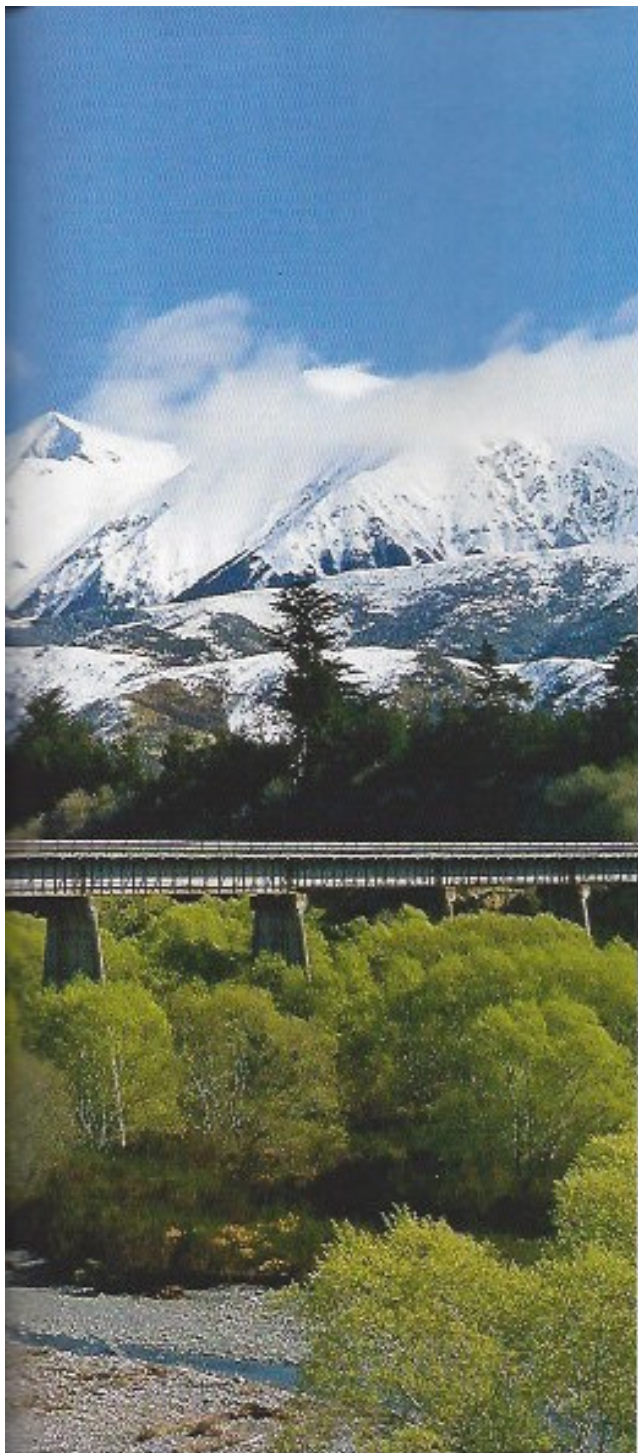
Along with surreal trackside sculpture, New Zealand's trains are steeped in laid-back charm – which is why I'm taking my time to criss-cross the country by rail, going from North to South and eventually over the mountains to Greymouth. The ding-ding-ding of bells at every

Rail way: the TranzAlpine's spectacular scenery. **Opposite, clockwise from top:** the Coastal Pacific service runs right by the ocean; Mount Cook and Mount Tasman reflected in Lake Matheson; crayfish – a Kalkoura speciality

crossing conjures memories of backwater towns in old Hollywood films. Staff exude genuine warmth. There's even a seductive whispering in my ear – the free commentary that enriches each view with local tales, mixing useful facts with vignettes of characters, such as 19th-century 'Ready Money Robinson', who paid for land out of a wheelbarrow piled high with dosh.

The Northern Explorer is the country's longest train route, a leisurely 10-plus hours, covering the 680km from Auckland to Wellington, with stretch-your-leg breaks en route. Don't diss slow travel – rattling past wild bush, golden prairie and volcanoes smoking at the heart of Tongariro National Park, the teenage Peter Jackson began to believe that NZ might pass for Tolkien's Middle Earth.

After a few days immersed in Wellington's cultural currents, I sail across the Cook Strait, through the Marlborough Sounds to Picton, to link up with the Coastal Pacific train service.



As we curve through Marlborough vineyards and low hills, the South Pacific appears like an explosion of blue. I can almost touch the sand as we career for 100km alongside beaches of seals to Kaikoura, where I alight by a dark, grainy shore. A majestic spur of the Southern Alps zigzags down into the sea. Clapham Junction it ain't.

Kaikoura is NZ's whale-watching capital (see also page 79), although its Maori name means 'meal of crayfish' (sold fresh from stalls on little bays where seals lounge in the sun). I lounge that evening at Fyffe Country Lodge, a luxurious Kiwi take on an English country house, beside a driftwood-strewn crescent of black sand. Next day, after an exhilarating morning on a boat out in the blustery blue Pacific, I swap whales for rails and begin the three-hour trip to Christchurch, a city I find buzzing with post-earthquake reinvention.

The TranzAlpine line is famous for a reason – its grand swoop over the Southern Alps. As we gain distance from

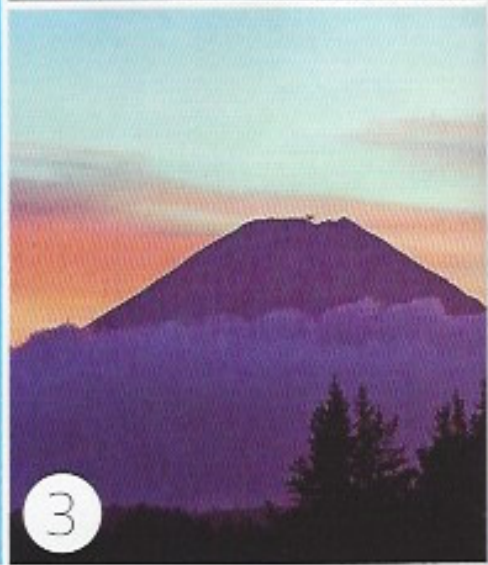
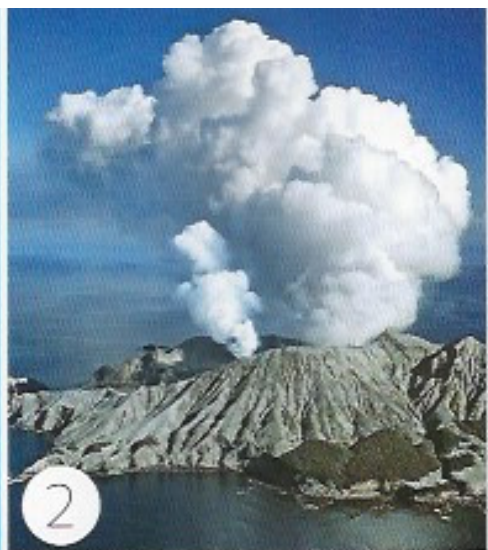
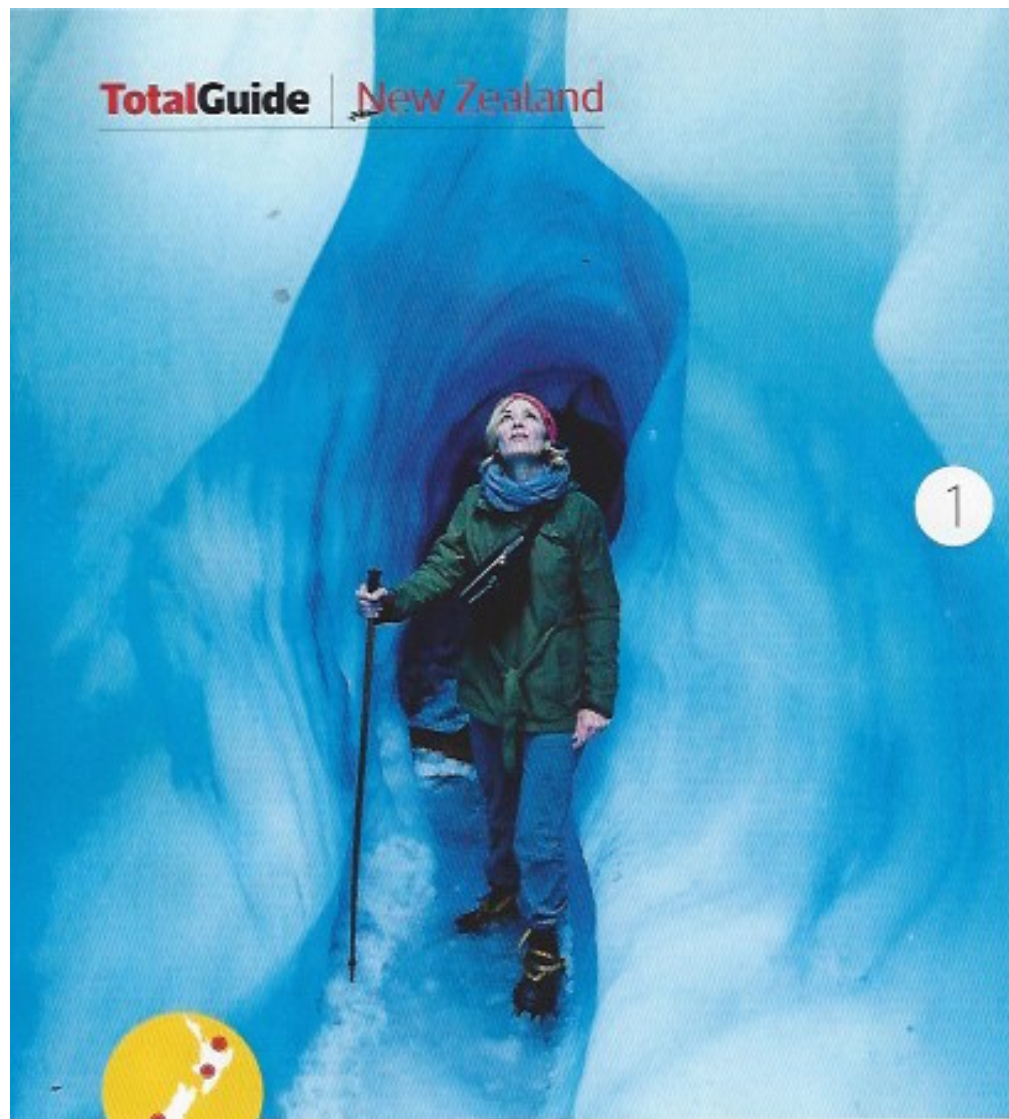
GRAVY TRAIN

At the start of the longer legs, pick out your favourite hot-food choice and ask buffet staff to reserve it – some options sell out fast!

Christchurch, the views get wilder, climbing through high prairie and muscular mountains. We disembark for a breather at Arthur's Pass, a gaggle of old buildings hemmed by beech woods, and a gateway to fortune in NZ's 19th-century gold-rush days.

The treasure now is the scenery. We descend past the sailing 'n' fishing mecca of Lake Brunner into thick forest. A once-booming gold town, Greymouth couldn't feel more end-of-the-line, its memories cradled in a pint-sized museum by a deserted quay. Inside, a '20s train map shows the skein of routes that once criss-crossed the islands. It's amazing how few remain. But it's quality not quantity that counts now – and New Zealand's railways have it by the carriage-load.

Kiwi Rail (kiwi/trails scenic.co.nz) runs from Auckland to Wellington from £103, Picton to Kaikoura from £36, and Kaikoura to Christchurch from £36. *Fyffe Country Lodge* (fyffecountrylodge.com) has doubles from £130, B&B. >



1

2

3

Go extreme

Don't just take in the view — to appreciate New Zealand's most awesome landmarks properly, you need to get involved

1 TREK ON GLACIERS

Franz Josef Glacier

South Island's Southern Alps cradle some of the most remarkable sights in the southern hemisphere, but few beat Franz Josef to the upper reaches of the classic bucket list. The glacier is a stunning ice mass, forming a dynamic duo with the Fox Glacier, and accessible only by helicopter. The journey merely makes a visit to its austere beautiful surface all the more special. You whirl through the air across Mount Cook National Park — tens of thousands of hectares of sprawling wilderness — and land for a tramp over the frozen surface, marvelling at the magic of ice as nature sculpted it (glacierhelicopters.co.nz; from £126 for 20 minutes, or combine with the Fox Glacier for 30 minutes from £160). Want to boost the exhilaration level even further? Sign up for the Heli Ice Climb, and test your nerves as you ice-pick along frozen aquamarine chasms (franzjosefglacier.com; £267) — or soothe post-hike limbs with a steamy soak in the glacier hot pools (glacierhotpools.co.nz; £13).

2 SAIL ACROSS A HISSING CRATER

White Island

Way out to sea, 50km off the east coast of the Bay of Plenty, an ancient marine volcano dozes — a jagged-edged, rocky doughnut in luminous waters of blue and green. Neither dormant nor fully active, it is unique in the world, proof of the dynamic nature of New Zealand's landscape: the country is still a work in progress — in the case of White Island, it's being thrust up from below the seabed. No people (and scarcely any plants) can live here — as suggested by the ageing ruins of a sulphur-mining factory, destroyed by a blast in 1914. But it's possible to spend a day walking across the almost-lunar landscape of gurgling mud pools, rushing vents and eerie sulphur crystals. Scramble through the crater, listening for the hiss of the fumaroles as they release steam, and watch for colonies of snowy garnets, the only residents. *White Island Tours* (whiteisland.co.nz) has six-hour tours to White Island from Whakatane for £103.

3 HIKE THE PICTURE-PERFECT VOLCANO

The Tongariro Alpine Crossing

Rust-coloured hot-water streams flow through the stark lava fields in the North Island's volcanic heart. And as the track climbs towards the vast bowl of the South Crater, steamy blasts are a warning that Tongariro is still highly active. The Tongariro Crossing is the king of extravagantly landscaped day treks, unravelling photogenic otherworldliness with every step. The 19.4km trek ascends steadily over ridges to more than 1,800m above sea level (so you'll get a good workout). To the right looms Ngauruhoe, which doubled as Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* — from the scarlet Red Crater peak, stained with minerals, you pick your way carefully back down past the Emerald Lakes, the route lined with billowing fumaroles and the belching Te Mari craters. Smoking! Go fully guided with *Adrift* (adriftnz.co.nz; £116), or use the shuttle service (tongarirocrossing.com; £16) to get back to the Mangatepepe car park starting point. >



TAKE TO THE AIR

For the finest vistas, you'll want to get up high. Really high. But which sky ride is for you?



SOARING IN A TIGER MOTH OVER WANAKA

Best for: Old romantics, airplane geeks, and adrenaline-dabblers.
The experience: Sailing through the clouds, your body exposed to the air — it's the closest you'll ever get to flying like a bird. Start in the vintage-styled hangar, complete with '40s tunes in the background setting the mood for your costume change into jumpsuit and Amelia Earhart-esque sheepskin-lined leather jacket (it's a good look and keeps you warm, too). The Tiger Moths ooze the charm of days gone by. Soon after your pilot eases you into lift-off, the peaks of Mount Aspiring and the glimmer of Lake Wanaka appear before you, and — of course — that blue expanse that you can reach out and almost touch. Wind in your hair, Wanaka beneath you, flying becomes a thing of romance.

The highlight? The barrel rolls. Pay the extra £12 to do some loops in the sky — it's scary for a second, then you feel like you're in *Top Gun* (classicflights.co.nz; £133 for 20 minutes, or £155 for 30 with aerobatics).



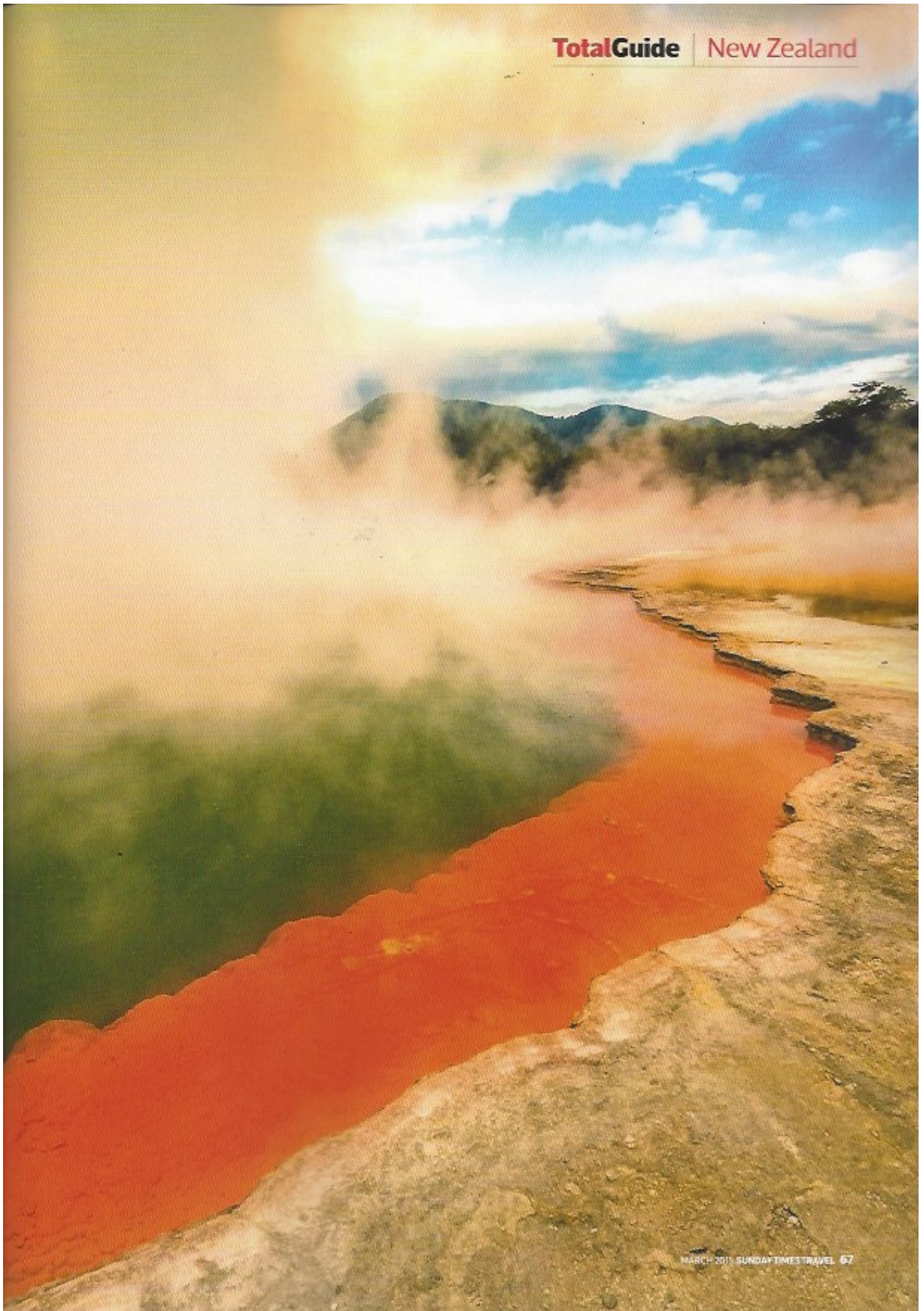
HOT-AIR BALLOONING ABOVE

CANTERBURY PLAINS
Best for: Couples, families, and Instagrammers.
The experience: Utter serenity. After helping to assemble the balloon in a farmer's field, you hop into the basket with New Zealand's champion hot-air balloonist, and ascend smoothly into the sky. The Canterbury Plains are a 300km-wide patchwork of farmland below you. Mount Cook and Kaikoura are, on clear days, on the horizon — and the Pacific Ocean stretches in unyielding tones of blue. Thanks to favourable winds, this is the most reliable place in New Zealand for hot-air ballooning (meaning you're much more likely to make the flight than in Queenstown). The view in winter, of snow-capped mountains and the sun rising over the Pacific, is nothing short of spectacular.
The highlight? Hearing sheep bleat and cows moo as you pass overhead — it's mighty quiet up there. From £171 for an hour with Ballooning Canterbury (ballooningcanterbury.com).



Get pampered at the gates of Hell

Rotorua is a town in a crater with a crust so thin that the fiery guts of Earth's molten core burst through with primordial savagery. Forces below the rocky landscape create exploding geysers, sizzling sulphurous waters and bubbling pools of mineral-rich muds — take a wrong step and you could be hard-boiled in an instant. Pohutu, in Te Puia geothermal valley, is the largest geyser in the southern hemisphere, sending a scalding hiss almost hourly onto rock caked with millennia of mineral deposits. At nearby Hell's Gate reserve, an ancient Maori homeland, the same power attracts spa day-trippers, who watch steam drift off 100°C pools prior to a dip in cooler silky mud. After a balmy sulphur bath, you might be a bit whiffy, but your skin will be as soft as a baby's bottom (hellsgate.co.nz; £48 with bath and sulphur spa). There's a more rustic experience at Waiariki Pools in Ngawha Springs, Northland: hand over £2 to the guy in the shed on the way in, strip off in the no-frills changing rooms, then ease yourself into the sulphurous waters bubbling in holes in the ground.





Get the glow(worm) in Waitomo

There's nothing quite as romantic as drifting under the twinkly roof of the Waitomo Glowworm Caves — until you think about what's creating the stardust above you. The glow-worms that light up the roofs and walls are actually gnat larvae, and the light they give off is designed to lure prey to a grisly death. But humans are too big to get caught in the spiderweb-like trails they dangle to trap insects, and the gnats don't bite. Besides, the magic is incomparable, when all lights are off and visitors, hushed to silence, are navigated through the caves on a small boat. The 45-minute cruise is relaxed, but there is an adventurous alternative: abseiling 35m into the caves, flying through the darkness on a zip-wire, then leaping into the icy underground river with an inner tube around your bum — ropes affixed along the cave walls allow 'tubers' to pull themselves through. Once there, **the torches go off and tiny bright dots fill the darkness in their thousands** (waitomo.com; cruise £25; abseiling £119). >



Hit the road

Hire a campervan and get the freedom to roam, says **Anna Hart**, as she explores South Island



As a restless traveller who loves exploring on foot or by bike, the idea of campervanning didn't fire me

with instant enthusiasm. But one thing I'd been told is that New Zealand rewards those who get out on the open road. Highways in this sparsely populated outdoorsy nation are peppered with cafes, picnic spots and basic campsites, while trails lead to tranquil forests – and you're never far from quirky B&Bs and vineyards.

So, impatient to get back to nature, we loaded up our Spotify playlist, scribbled all over a Department of Conservation map of campsites to overnight in, stocked up on RJ's liquorice and hit the tarmac...

Christchurch to Nelson, via Kaikoura: 399km; 3 days

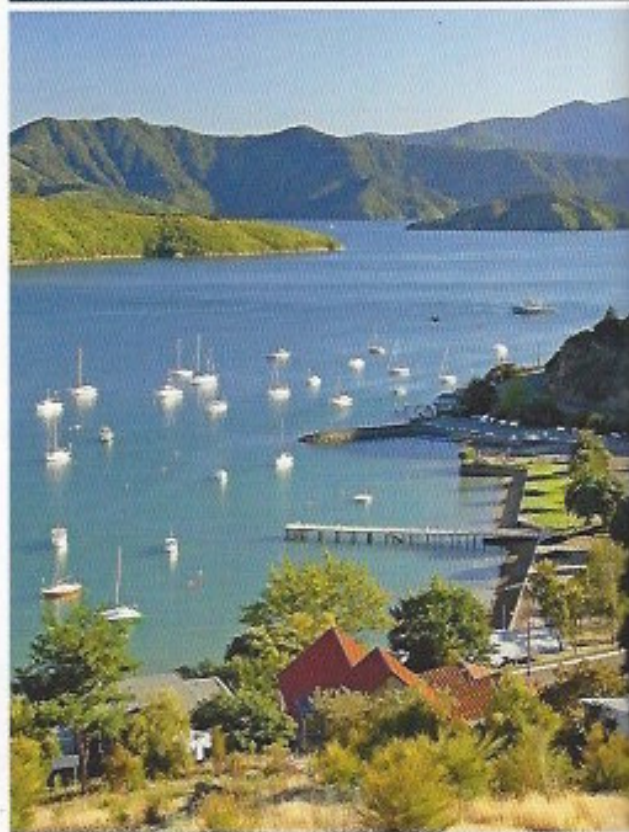
For me, variety of scenery is the spice of life. Happily, New Zealand possesses a positively fickle landscape. We're not far north of Christchurch when the rolling hills and neatly manicured rows of Riesling and Pinot Noir grapes of Canterbury's wine region, the Waipara Valley, give way to the dramatic peaks of the Southern Alps. We turn inland, towards the spa resort of Hanmer Springs, to celebrate the end of our first day with a reviving soak in the thermal pools.

Relaxed we may be, but we're up early the next morning, to wind along the rugged east coast, where the Southern Alps meet the Pacific Ocean. Kaikoura is firmly on the tourist map for its whale-watching, but for us, it's the driving there that is the main attraction. We scoff mussels from roadside Nin's Bin and seal-spot through the car window, watching seabirds dive into the waves, before walking the coastline.

Soon we re-enter wine country, this time the Marlborough region, through which we coast to the pretty seaside town of Picton. Many stop here but, looking for adventure, we drive off Highway 1 at Tuamarina past Rarangi Beach, along a gusty stretch of coast to Whites Bay. Here we spend a night without another soul in sight. This is what campervanning is all about...

Nelson to Queenstown, via the West Coast: 872km; 6 days

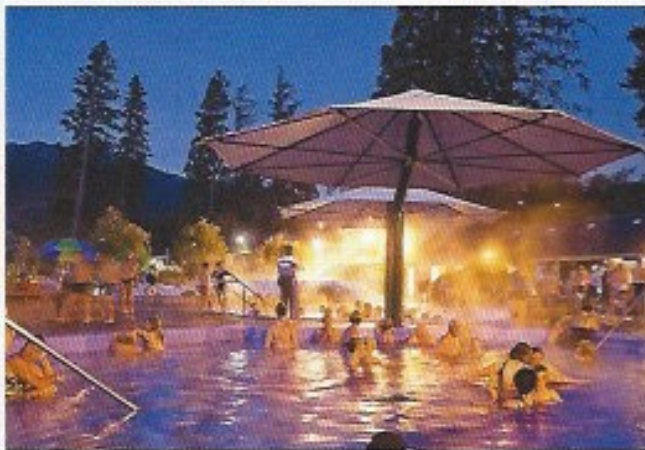
Most visitors skip the West Coast because it adds serious mileage on the clock, but we're in the mood for solitude, so we head to Westport via the Buller Gorge on Highway 6, where we stop off and walk the swing bridge – a more contemplative way to inhale your surroundings than the whizzy jet boats. The beaches of the West Coast are deserted and dramatic, strewn with driftwood, but cursed by sandflies,



Southern belle: above, flock-watching on South Island; yachts moored in Waikawa Bay, Picton. **Opposite, Mount Cook** looking over Lake Pukaki; beware penguins crossing on the west coast; **Hanmer Springs** spa resort

which make mosquitoes seem downright benevolent. We jump and twitch around in our jandals (the Kiwi term for flip-flops) as we light a fire, then give up and watch the sun go down in comfort through the window of our campervan. We drink Marlborough Pinot Noir from plastic cups – the way it's meant to be enjoyed, I suspect.

We're in no rush to reach the Fox Glacier – who's in a hurry to get cold? – so we linger in the heritage town of Greymouth, the end of the TranzAlpine railway line from Christchurch, walking the old railway tracks and mining tunnels of the Hokitika Gorge, drinking in views of lush vegetation and marvelling at the pioneer spirit that inspired recent Booker winner Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries*. Hokitika in the 21st century is more famous for grub than gold, and the



annual Wildfoods Festival in March is on every foodie's bucket list.

Franz Josef Glacier and Wanaka beckon, but again the journey there proves my favourite bit. Crossing the Haast River and working our way inland via the Haast Pass, we realise that road-trip scenery doesn't get much more dramatic than this, so jump out to wander awhile along roadside trails. When we hit Wanaka, we drive out towards Mount Aspiring. As the tarmac runs out, we exhale, and continue on into our own little slice of wilderness, for a day of mountain-biking with not a tour bus in sight.

The road to Queenstown serves as an ad for coming attractions, with a magnificent drive over the Crown Range and down to the shores of Lake Wakatipu. Skipping the busy downtown, we find a nice, quiet campsite just 15 minutes away.

We've got used to having New Zealand to ourselves, I suppose...

Queenstown to Glenorchy: 46km; 40 minutes

Most visitors sign up for a quick skydive in Queenstown then make a beeline for Milford Sound, but my husband, being Scottish, is keen to see some Highland scenery and we've been tipped off that the road to Glenorchy is a treat. It's uncanny – we feel as if we're driving north of Fort William, and then suddenly we'll spy a subtropical palm-tree giveaway. Watching the scenery speed past, stopping to picnic wherever we want, making sharp turns onto dirt roads that look too enticing to ignore, we're in heaven. Or rather, we're in New Zealand – drinking in the very freedom we hit the road for.

For campervan rentals, see page 80. >

Want to tackle North Island?

Whakapara to Russell:

Enroute to the Bay of Islands, make a detour off Highway 1 at Whakapara for a stunning coastal drive along the Old Russell Road, tracing the Whangaruru Bay and stopping for lunch at Helena Bay Hill Café.

Gisborne to Tolaga Bay:

Gisborne, with its quirky cafes, vintage shop, pop-up theatre and boutique wineries, is a favourite summer-break destination for Kiwi students, and it makes a perfect starting point for a trip up the east coast

towards rugged, isolated Tolaga Bay. Highway 35 is notoriously rough going, but you'll be rewarded with the views.

Wellington to

Castlepoint: A two-and-a-half-hour drive from the buzzy cultural capital takes you through the wine country of Masterton and Martinborough and on to the rugged coastline, ending at Castlepoint – this is what English beaches must have looked like a few centuries ago before mass tourism ruined it all.

Stay put: the luxury lodge at Walter Peak comes with views



Down at the farm

Don't leave them to the sheep — New Zealand's 'stations' occupy some of the country's most gorgeous landscapes. And they come with good old-fashioned Kiwi hospitality

THE AFTERNOON JAUNT West Wanaka

A farm visit might not automatically suggest thrills, yet nerves will tingle as you rumble up the rugged slopes towards West Wanaka station. Luckily, it's not the first time the 4WD driver has made the ascent to this isolated farm on the brink of remote and jagged Mount Aspiring National Park. And getting there is part of the fun, bumping along steep paths and over rock-strewn grasses, clipping spiny matagouri trees. Cows and sheep fill the frame, while at the summit the views of grey mountains against blue sky, and the glint of Lake Wanaka, carved by glaciers. There'll be tales of Maori burial caves or Prohibition parties at islands in the lake's centre, but nothing tranquillises quite like stopping to pet baby lambs on the way back down. *Ridgeline Adventures Wild Hills 4WD Safari*; ridgeline.nz; £120pp for four hours.

THE HOMELY STAY De Preaux Lodge

De Preaux Lodge may look like a modern homestay, but it's on a real working farm, and owners Joy and Ian know about life lived from the land. For guests, days are as hands-on as they'd like, amid the lush landscape of Matamata, in the

North Island (most guests opt for farm-lite rather than full-on muck-in). Watch the cows being herded between paddocks; in spring, help feed the calves or befriend pet sheep Daisy and Cookie. Dinner is a home-cooked family affair, sourced straight from the bursting organic garden out front, with meat from the farm's own livestock. *Depreauxlodge.com*; doubles from £88, B&B.

THE LUXURY RENTAL The Lodge at Walter Peak

A highlight of a visit to Walter Peak is boarding the century-old steamship TSS Eormslow for a 45-minute chug over the icy waters of Lake Wakatipu. This is a stunner of a station, ringed by snow-capped mountains, with a restaurant, shop and a sheep-shearing show for day-trippers (*realjourneys.co.nz*; from £40). But go one better and hire a private luxury station. The Lodge at Walter Peak has a wow-inducing view to the lake and, apart from the sheep grazing the hills, utter solitude. Caretakers Lucy and James will take you horse-riding and kayaking, or whisk you off for a private picnic lunch in an old shepherd's hut. You'll return in time for a glass of local Pinot with canapés from your private chef. Sleeps up to 10; from £880, minimum three nights; thelodge.net.nz.



Cook up a Franco-Kiwi storm in Akaroa

Settled by the French in the 19th century, Akaroa is a slice of Gallic gorgeousness on a peninsula southeast of Christchurch. The Tricolore waves from clapboard houses lining the waterfront; rose bushes bloom beside tropical flora, and across from the pier, the Akaroa Cookery School is unmissable. Passionate foodie duo the Bentleys extol the local bounty in their classes (18 in all). 'Fresh from the Wharf' (akaroacooking.co.nz; £114pp) starts at the fishmonger's to learn how to choose fish, before a lesson in salmon-smoking or butter-frying flaky grouper. Every class is liberally laced with wine, so overnight at Beaufort House, a cosy B&B just 10 minutes' walk away (beauforthouse.co.nz; doubles from £180).



See the All Blacks

The New Zealand national rugby union team is a force of nature (since 1903 only five nations have defeated the All Blacks in a Test match) and a way of life. To catch them in action, hit Auckland's Eden Park. It's sandwiched between two hip residential areas (Mount Eden and Kingsland), and just minutes from cafes, wine bars and tapas joints. The newly spruced-up stadium can accommodate 50,000 and, this being the NZ national sport, you'll see all sorts, from couples on a date to 20-strong family groups. On the way, stop for a pint of Mac's Gold at the industrial-chic Neighbourhood (neighbourhood.co.nz), and post-match, join the queues at Handmade Burgers (handmade-burgers.co.nz) for a £5 BBQ Bull.



Saddle up in the surf

New Zealand doesn't have to send the adrenaline soaring. Gentle activities can be just the ticket, too: say, **horse-riding in the sea-licked white sands of Pakiri**. This long stretch of coastline, north of Auckland, is so isolated you won't see another soul. (Where birdlife is concerned, mind, it's Piccadilly Circus: dotterels, fairy terns, blue herons and oystercatchers all call it home.) As you trot along, the silky sand is broken by palms, native bush and groves of ancient pohutukawa, aka the NZ Christmas tree (so named for its winter blaze of red flowers). Saddle up for an afternoon ride or consider a multi-day trip, which uncovers the beauty of the country's northern reaches, including Hen and Chickens islands, seen from Te Aria Point. Make it a week and you'll reach the wild western shores, to glimpse the restless Tasman Sea (horseride-nz.co.nz, from £35pp for an hour). >



Dune roaming: sand-boarding at Hokianga. Opposite, clockwise from top left, deserted

Wharariki; thermal pools on Hot Water Beach; the sands of Rapiro; catch the waves at Papatowai

Shore things

NZ's best beaches are more than just sand with a slice of sea. We pick our favourite five, each with something special in store



Best for dunes North Head, Hokianga

Thrusting deep into the Northland region of North Island is the wild Hokianga Harbour. At its mouth is a sandscape of mountainous dunes concealing strange wind-sculpted outcrops and canyons of golden grains. The spot where the 10th-century Polynesian explorer Kupe landed on the 'Land of the Long White Cloud', it reverberates still with Maori mystique. Visit with Pete and his crew (hokiangaexpress.webs.com; trips to dunes, sailing from Opononi Wharf, from £13pp).

Spend the night: Eco-luxury Kokohuta Lodge perches above the native bush near Opononi, with spectacular views of the harbour and dunes (kokohualodge.co.nz; doubles from £155, B&B).



Best for solitude Wharariki Beach

South Sea tales are littered with secret beaches, and New Zealand's finest contender is Wharariki, hidden away off the road to Cape Farewell, curving like a kiwi's beak out into the turbulent ocean at South Island's most northerly point. After a 20-minute walk across rolling farmland, you'll discover a shoreline straight out of a fantasy brochure: white sand framed by high rock arches, mysterious caves, and cresting dunes cradling seawater pools. If you're in luck, you'll get to see local seals indulging their penchant for surfing.

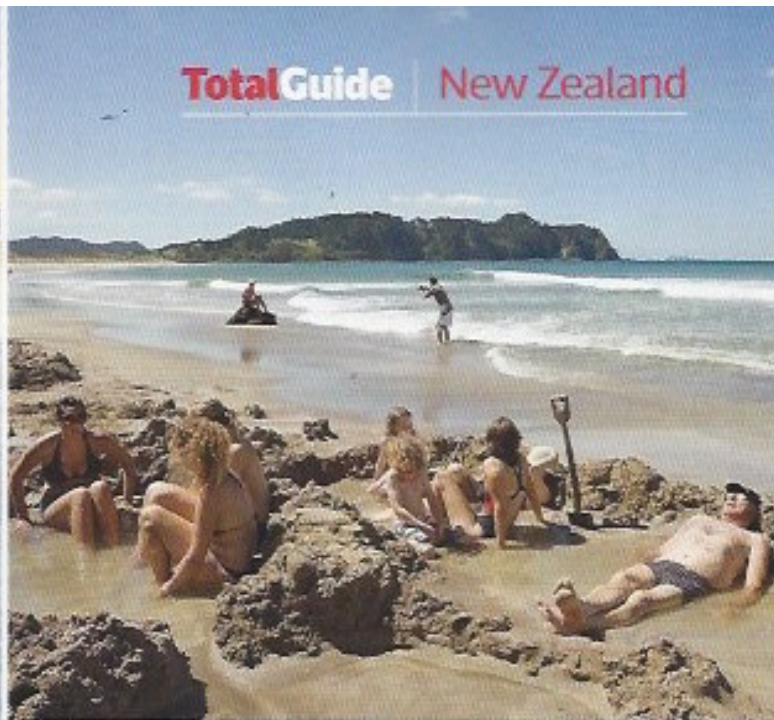
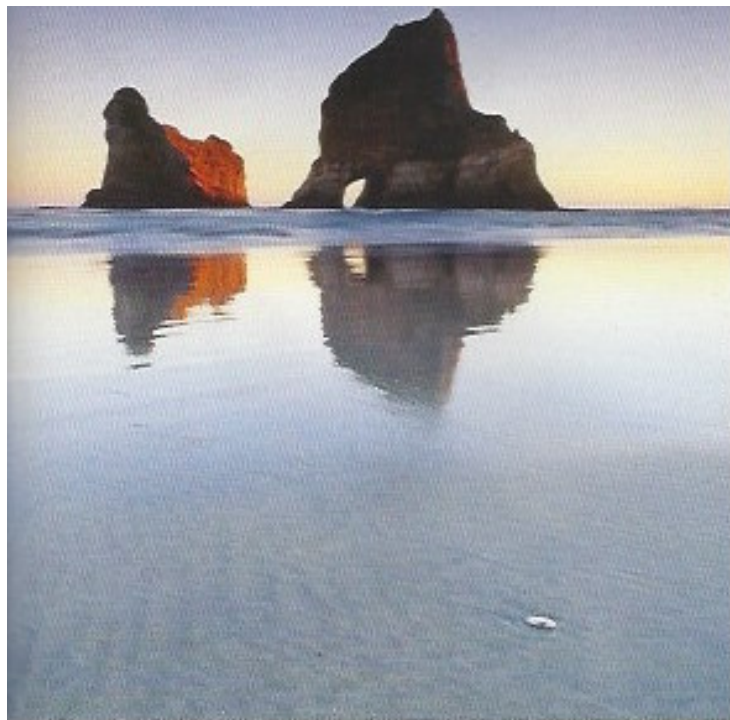
Spend the night: The evocatively named Adrift in Golden Bay (adrift.co.nz; doubles from £140, including breakfast hamper) has modern, comfortable studios and cottages.



Best for warm water Hot Water Beach

On the Coromandel Peninsula, North Island, hot tubs come courtesy of nature. Hot Water Beach is named for the geothermal waters rising to the surface from a stretch of Pacific sand bookended by cliffs crimson with the flowers of pohutukawa trees. Dig a basin within a couple of hours either side of low tide (see thecoromandel.com for times), then watch steaming water well up — your cue to take a mineral-laced soak, while you gaze at curious Castle Rock offshore. Afterwards, grab a coffee and a veggie bite at the timber-and-mudbrick Hot Waves Cafe (8 Pye Place), which is also where you can hire a spade for the day.

Spend the night: The beachside Ocean View Cottage (hotwaterbeach.net.nz; sleeps four



from £93, self-catering) offers contemporary wood-floored style with mod cons.



Best for waves Papatowai

Surf hotspot Piha, on the Tasman coast west of Auckland, basks in its fame, having served as the setting for TV show *Piha Rescue* (New Zealand's answer to *Baywatch*). But real hardcore surf nuts head to Papatowai, near Dunedin, in the South Otago region. 'Pros or kamikaze only' warns one respected surf site, and it's sound advice for a place pounded by some of the country's biggest waves. Tow-in teams are on hand to help the brave tackle the beach's long-barrelling right or ledging left; big boils and tendrils of kelp add to the stress of this pulse-quickenng surf beacon.

Spend the night: Hilltop Cottins (hilltopcottins.co.nz; doubles from £45, B&B) offers a range of homely rooms — or the whole house — just back from Papatowai Beach.



Best for history Ripiro Beach

Ninety Mile Beach, in the far north of North Island, is assumed by many to be New Zealand's longest. In fact, it's only 55 miles (88km) long. The real McCoy is Ripiro Beach, on Northland's western Kaipara coast, where you can sand-yacht along 63 miles (100km) of virgin Tasman sand. Here you'll find 20,000-year-old petrified forests, and scores of shipwrecks — among them a 15th-century Portuguese caravel, doomed never to claim this new land for Iberia. Watch fishermen net

flounder, kingfish and snapper off the beach — or try foraging yourself for green-lipped mussels from the rocks at Maunganui Bluff. Beyond the dunes, explore pretty coastal settlements with evocative names such as Glinks Gully, Mahuta Gap and Omamari. At Bayllys, you'll find colourful seaside cottages, excellent restaurants, little galleries and the Skydome, an observatory with a huge telescope trained on crystal-clear night skies (call 00 64 210 751228 to book a visit).

Spend the night: The prosaically named 76 Chases Terrace turns out to be a funky yellow bach (holiday home), which has stood beside Bayllys Beach for nearly a century. There's no TV, DVD or internet, but plenty of starry skies (holidayhouses.co.nz/properties/1670.asp; sleeps three from £65, self-catering) >



Eat New Zealand

Posh dinner or farmers' market fare? Whatever the occasion, NZ's got the grub

POSH PICKINGS

Auckland's top restaurants turn out plates you'd expect to eat in the world's most iconic cities. Peter Gordon, whose distinct brand of Kiwi fusion has made his name in London and Istanbul, is one of the city's culinary kings — but his polished cooking, at newly launched The Sugar Club in the Skycity (skycityauckland.co.nz; two sharing dishes from £29). Isn't the only thing on the city's menu. Down at ground level, at trendy, buzzy Depot (eatatdepot.co.nz; mains about £15), Al Brown (another Kiwi culinary icon) sends out obscenely scrumptious turbot sliders with lemony mayo, watercress and dangerously buttery toasted brioche buns. Even naughtier are the moreish smoked brisket tortillas with chipotle and pickled onion.

Across town, the French Café (thefrenchcafe.co.nz; mains about £16) may have been open for years, but its sleek, minimalist decor and Nordic-tinged food is very now, from the creamy egg yolk confit with smoked potato,

leek, parmesan and ibérico ham, to the seared duck breast with sweet spices, sprouting greens, mandarin and kumara (the local sweet potato).

But NZ's big city doesn't have the monopoly on the country's fine dining. Queenstown boasts one of the country's best restaurants in Rata (ratadining.co.nz; mains about £16). With a vibe inspired by the country's native rata tree — lots of wood and leafy details — the menu, by celeb chef Josh Emmett, celebrates South Island produce. Don't miss goat-cheese profiteroles with rata blossom honey (fantastic), merino lamb rump with spiced aubergine, broccolini, globe artichoke and parmesan beignets (double fantastic), or the Southland cheese roll — a riff on a Kiwi childhood classic — with bitter leaves, butternut squash, honeycomb and truffle dressing.

MARKET GOODS

Every Saturday morning, Aucklanders flock to the trendy Britomart precinct to start nibbling

away at its weekly market. They pick up crispy mussel or pawa (sea snail) fritters, then wander around the stalls, before drifting off for coffee at local roasters Supreme Seafarers (West Terrace) or a fanciful array of sweet delights at Milse (27 Tyler Street). Or they stock up on the seasonal bounty — perhaps walnuts or juicy avocados — plus cheeses and warm-fresh breads, to create a lunch-time picnic.

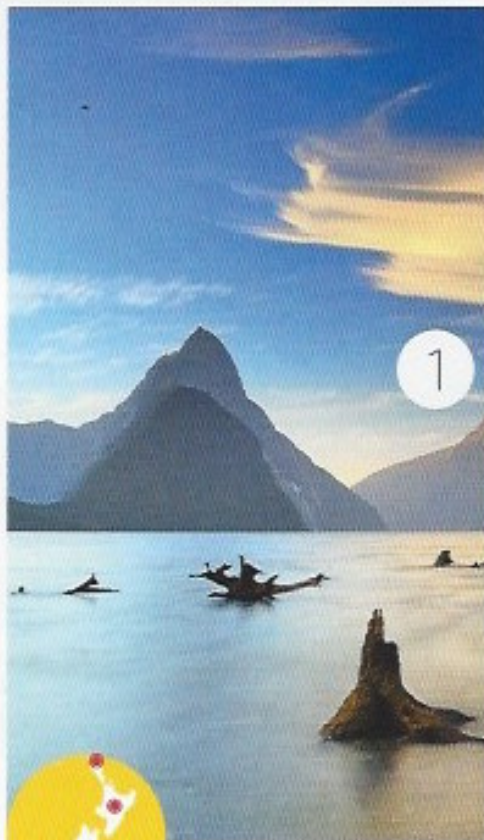
Further afield, hopeless romantics and serious foodies will fall for the Saturday farmers' market in bohemian Matakana, just an hour north of Auckland. A jazz quartet plays Ella Fitzgerald, children frolic on the rope swing, and couples on first dates nibble whitebait fritters, while debating which movie to catch at the local indie cinema. This is where Auckland's creative classes escape to when they've had enough of the city — to sip organic Feijoa bubbly from the Lothlorien Winery, buy raw macadamia butter from Nuts About NZ, and feast on slow-cooked polenta with roast aubergine from We Love Food. >



Do' Art Deco Napier
 All streamlined contours and in-your-face colours, the Art Deco style is more look-at-me Miami than rugged New Zealand. Yet Napier, overlooking the Pacific in Hawke's Bay, is a delightful Down Under oddity. In 1931 an earthquake razed the centre of the town. Art Deco was the style of the times and so it was injected into Napier's re-build, creating perhaps the farthest-flung outpost of that inter-war phenomenon. Daily walking tours (artdeconapier.com; £9) from the Napier Art Deco Trust on Tennyson Street give the inside track and provide access to the Daily Telegraph office, which looks like a set from *Citizen Kane*, and the Municipal Theatre. Stay at the Masonic (masonic.co.nz; doubles from £87, room only).



Rub shoulders with Hobbits
 You'd have to be living in Gollum's cave to be unaware that Peter Jackson's epic *Lord of the Rings* films were shot in NZ. Most sets have long gone, but the South Island scenery remains — and, tucked in the knolls of Matamata farmland, is Hobbiton, where you can take a two-hour guided walk around the set and see 44 rigorously maintained Hobbit holes. The tour ends at the Green Dragon pub, where you'll hear about Jackson's ferocious attention to detail (he had every leaf of a pear tree replaced, just to keep a three-second clip faithful to the books). Join the first tour of the day (9.30am) before the groups pile in, or book one of the evening visits with dinner at the Green Dragon (hobbitontours.com; tours from £39).



1



2



3

Take to the water

It's edged by ocean, but lovers of the wet stuff can get their kicks not far from the shore

1 THE FJORD

The classic NZ 'unmissable' from Queenstown is Milford Sound (realjourneys.co.nz; from £99 by return coach from Queenstown). It's a spectacular four-hour drive to the tip of the fjord (misnamed a sound), but the real show starts aboard the boat. The hills all around, including the epic Mitre Peak, rising 1km out of the water, are spellbinding in sunshine. In rain (and it's usually raining) things get really aqua-dramatic, water dancing in the breeze, blown upwards, scattering across the sky like icing sugar. If you're lucky you'll spot seals lazing on rocks — if even luckier, rare Fiordland crested penguins. To get a bit closer, ditch the cruise for an intrepid kayaking tour. Being on the water highlights the dramatic landscapes, and you'll make it into nooks that boats can't reach (seakayakfiordland.co.nz; from £62).

2 THE LAKE

New Zealand's largest lake, the grandiose Taupo, in the centre of the North Island, pushes the boat out with aquatic action. After all, with 620sq km of surface area, wake-boarding, stand up paddle-boarding or water-skiing are givens. To truly appreciate the scope of the lake (in truth the world's second-largest volcano crater, filled with water), join an evening voyage aboard 20s yacht

Barbary, and see the towering lakeside Maori rock sculptures. Only accessible by water, the detailed carvings, created in the '70s, rise dramatically on a smooth rock face an hour's sail from Taupo town. En route, you pass coves sprinkled with holiday homes, green hills, and a sacred Maori island. Heading home, they'll crack open the wine as you cuddle up with blankets under the big open sky (sailbarbary.com; £24 for two-hour Maori Rock Carving Cruise).

3 THE BAY

The point where the North Island's tip disintegrates into blobs of land before dissolving into sea is known as the Bay of Islands — and it's a house-boater's delight. You needn't worry about hiring your own; join any one of several overnight trips and you can kayak, snorkel and sleep above the gentle waves, taking in the epic scenery by osmosis. Spot penguins, marlins, whales and dolphins as you cruise. Try your hand at fishing for your dinner before the starry night sends you out on an evening kayak and star-gazing session. And don't forget fun hours swimming in clear lagoons, exploring WWII remains, spotting ancient Maori fortifications or stopping to play volleyball on remote, picture-perfect beaches (rocktheboat.co.nz; the Rock Overnight Cruise, from £118).



Get down with Moby Dick

For decades — right up until the '60s, in fact — the waters off Kaikoura ran red with the blood of dead whales, which supplied the oil on which the town prospered. Today, the cetaceans are still a money-spinner, but it's their grace and beauty at sea that draws visitors here to the east coast of South Island. You can whale-watch from the air, the sea or one of the many tramping trails in the surrounding mountains, though most popular are those boats run by the indigenous Ngati Kuri people: their Whale Watch Kaikoura fleet has scooped numerous Responsible Tourism awards (whalewatch.co.nz; from £75pp). It's the upswelling currents here — and the resulting 24-hour buffet of plankton and other whale food — that make this one of the world's top Moby-spotting locations (as well as the **only place in the world you can reliably see sperm whales**). But look out, too, for orcas through the summer months, humpbacks in winter — and dolphins pirouetting in the deep. At Akaroa, you can even swim with the tiny Hector's dolphin (blackcat.co.nz; £42). And that alone is worth a 25-hour flight... ■

Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

All flights to New Zealand make at least one stop, and no single airline has consistently low prices — so shopping around for discounted fares (usually £800–£900 return) to suit your travel dates is key. Generally, post-Easter to mid-June, then October and November, are the prime times for bargains.

Auckland is the country's major airport hub. The quickest, one-stop options from Heathrow, taking just under 24 hours, are with **Singapore Airlines** (singaporeair.com; from £869), via Singapore, or **Malaysia Airlines** (malaysiaairlines.com; from £790), via Kuala Lumpur. **Air New Zealand** (airnewzealand.co.uk; from £890), goes a slightly longer route via Los Angeles — but as it's also the domestic operator, it can work out cheaper if building onward journeys into the same ticket. For example, Heathrow–Auckland–Dunedin–Wellington–London in May costs from £1,052, but if booked separately with **Ethiad** (etihad.com) for the international leg and Air New Zealand for the domestic leg over the same dates, you'd pay £1,261. **China Southern Airlines** (csair.com) regularly offers sub-£800 returns, but often the catch is hellish 21-hour layovers in Guangzhou. **Cathay Pacific** (cathaypacific.com; from £879) offers the only one-stop trip from Manchester.

To fly into Christchurch, there is a sole one-stop option from Heathrow, with **Singapore Airlines** (as before).

If you're starting your holiday in Dunedin, Wellington or Queenstown, one possibility is to connect through Auckland with **Air New Zealand** (as before). Another is to fly via an Australian hub using a partnership: either **Emirates** (emirates.com) and **Qantas** (qantas.com.au), which fly Birmingham to Queenstown, via Dubai and Sydney or Melbourne, from £857) or **Ethiad** (as before) and **Virgin Australia** (virginaustralia.com), which fly London to Queenstown, via Abu Dhabi and Sydney, from £1,181). Emirates flies from six UK airports (including Newcastle and Birmingham), and Ethiad from three (including Manchester and Edinburgh).

If building in stopovers in Asia, the US, Australia or the South Pacific, a specialist travel agent such as **Trailfinders** (trailfinders.com) or **Roundtheworldflights.com** will likely find you the best deal, as complex itineraries usually have too many variables for internet booking engines or airlines' websites to deal with. For example, the latter quoted a Heathrow–Bangkok–Auckland–Sydney–Heathrow itinerary for £936, but for the same dates on the Emirates website the flights would cost £1,465.

GET AROUND

BY PLANE

A judicious domestic flight or two can save plenty of time and money. A one-way Auckland-to-Christchurch

hop, for example, can cost under £50 with **Jetstar** (jetstar.com) and takes just 85 minutes. Jetstar connects a few other major cities but Air New Zealand is the only choice on most routes, although **Sounds Air** (soundsair.com) hops between the bottom of the North Island and top of the South Island.

EXCESSIVE EXCESS?

Before making a booking, double-check your excess: it tends to be quite high in NZ (several hundred dollars is not unusual) and — unlike in the UK — you often can't pay extra to reduce it to zero

BY CAR

Driving is easily the best way to see New Zealand. Kiwis drive on the left, and since many roads (particularly in the South Island) are extremely quiet, there's little to terrify even the most nervous driver. However, mountain roads are winding and often closed or require snow chains between May and October. Watch out for policemen with speed guns on backwater roads — they'll pull over anyone breaking the standard 100kph limit.

The usual suspects — **Avis** (avis.co.nz), **Hertz** (hertz.co.nz), **Thrifty** (thrifty.co.nz) et al — are represented at most airports. Hunt for deals on comparison sites, such as **carrentals.co.uk** or **vroomvroomvroom.co.nz**, and expect to pay around £140 for a week in a VW Golf. **Ace Rental Cars** (acerentalcars.co.nz) offers economy vehicles from £22 a day — older, manual cars, collected from fatty off-airport locations.

Prefer a campervan? **Apollo** (apollocamper.co.nz) offers budget models from £120 for seven days. **Britz** (britz.com), **Jucy** (jucy.co.nz) and **Kea** (keacamper.com) are among the competition — which is fairly fierce so, again, compare prices before booking.

If switching islands via the ferry, note that with many companies you leave your car in Wellington and pick up another in Picton (or vice-versa).

BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT

They're brilliant for catching the view, but train services can be limited, slow and relatively expensive. The **KiwiRail** (kiwirailscenic.co.nz; from £100, one-way) Auckland-to-Wellington service takes just under 11 hours and runs three times a week. **Intercity** (intercity.co.nz) buses are generally more functional, running between major cities, with low prices (around £12 from Auckland to Wellington) if booked online in advance. Intercity also offers multi-day travel passes, but they generally work out more expensive. The

Van with a view: driving is the best way to see the country, so why not travel with sleeping arrangements?



Interislander ferry (interislander.co.nz) from Wellington to Picton costs from £33 and takes three hours. Hop-on, hop-off networks for backpackers, such as **Kiwi Experience** (kiwiexperience.com) and **Stray** (straytravel.com) combine transport with tour, so you get to enjoy some sightseeing. A massive range of pass options are available, but **Kiwi Experience's** 'Funky Chicken' covers most highlights on both islands in 21 days for £748.

GO PACKAGED

GRAPE ESCAPE

Discover The World (01737 214291, discover-the-world.co.uk) offers a nine-night 'Boutique Wine Trail' self-drive trip that includes full-day tasting tours of the Hawkes Bay and Blenheim wine regions, from £1,450pp, B&B, excluding flights. There's time in Martinborough to check out the premium cellar doors, and a day in Nelson, which can be merrily swilled away hopping between craft breweries. Also included is a boat trip at Waitomo, and two nights amongst the Art Deco architecture in Napier.

CULTURE WITH THE KIDS

Bridge & Wickers (020 34111948, bridgeandwickers.co.uk) sells a 12-day 'Craters, Coast and Culture' self-drive holiday on the North Island, with family accommodation in Auckland, the Coromandel, Rotorua, Tongariro National Park and Wellington, excluding flights, from £1,100pp for a family of four. The suggested itinerary has kid-pleasing activities, such as the glass floor at Auckland's Sky Tower and zorbing in Rotorua, plus educational stops such as the Te Papa Tongarewa national museum in Wellington and a Maori concert in Rotorua.

ANIMAL MAGIC

Responsible Travel (01273 823700, responsibletravel.com) has a 21-night, wildlife-focused odyssey around both islands, staying mostly in lodge-style accommodation, from £2,650pp, B&B, with car hire but no international flights. Highlights include a day spotting penguins, albatrosses and seals on the Otago Peninsula; looking for kiwis and other rare birds on Stewart Island; and the underwater observatory at Milford Sound. There's also whale-watching in Kaikoura and dolphin-viewing in the Marlborough Sounds. The package costs from £2,650pp, B&B, including car hire but not international flights.



PLEASE WIPE YOUR FEET
 Any outdoor kit — boots, tents, etc — you bring into NZ must be free of mud and grass. Border guards are rigorous with their checks to ensure foreign pests don't sneak in — if it's not clean, it might be confiscated.

MUDDY BOOTS MARATHON

Ramblers Worldwide Holidays (01707 331133, ramblersworldwideholidays.co.uk) runs a 21-night 'Great South Island Adventure' with a heavy emphasis on hiking. You'll walk challenging routes in the Mount Aspiring National Park, around Mount Cook and on the Franz Josef Glacier. Then there's a part of the alpine ridge — skirting Routeburn Track and four days completing the 53.5km Milford Track. Accommodation is twin-share most of the time, roughing it in bunk rooms on the Milford Track. From £6,399pp, B&B, with some other meals and return flights from Heathrow.

HIGHLIGHTS WITHOUT HEADLIGHTS

1st Class Holidays (0845 644 3939, 1stclassholidays.com) has the answer for non-drivers who want to pack in the star attractions: a 16-day 'Highlights of New Zealand' coach tour with the Trans-Alpine scenic train journey thrown

in. Also included are a dolphin-watching catamaran cruise around the Bay of Islands, a visit to Rotorua's mudpools, a steamship journey across Lake Wakatipu from Queenstown and a boat trip between the waterfalls at Milford Sound. From £2,418pp, B&B, based on two sharing, with 15 nights' mid-range accommodation and some other meals, but no international flights.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See the tourist board's website, **100% Pure New Zealand** (newzealand.com). The Department of Conservation site (doc.govt.nz) has better details on the national parks, walking trails and wilderness areas though. Use local weather (precaster) **MetService** (metservice.com) for planning around showers and snowfall. **The New Zealand Herald** (nzherald.co.nz) and **Stuff.co.nz** are the best sites for swotting up on local news. ■

WORDS: DAVID WHITLEY; PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; MAP: ADRIAN PHILLIPS/CCO.UK