

EDEN-LIKE BEAUTY FOUND IN NEW ZEALAND

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MARAHAU, New Zealand — You don't go to New Zealand to hang out in art museums. You don't fly more than 8,000 miles to check out the Kiwi nightlife.

You come for this:

A nearly deserted beach with sand sparkling like crystals of brown sugar. A bay that seems to glow an unearthly blue. And not a car or a road for miles.

This is the essence of New Zealand, a country the size of Colorado that packs in enough quiet beauty for the whole planet.

Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to imply that there's no action to be found here at the bottom of the world. To the contrary, this is the place that gave us modern bungee jumping and the Lord of the Rings movies. These people know how to get the blood flowing.

But nothing quite beats leaving the cities behind for a trek across the country, which is divided into two main, narrow islands, North and South. The terrain is sparsely populated — sheep outnumber humans 10 to one — and as varied as it comes.

New Zealand is, in short, a country begging for a road trip.

A good place to start is at the top of the South Island at Abel Tasman National Park. This classically beautiful park is a paradise for trampers, a New Zealand term for hikers. Tucked along the coast, the quiet coves and golden beaches are accessible only by sea or by foot and preserve an innocent, Eden-like quality.

We spent a day kayaking along the shoreline, appreciating the lush rainforest along the rising hills and sneaking up on seals frolicking on a nearby island. There was time for a swim and rigorous walk, too, but we had to skip the three to five-day trek along the coastal track that is so popular. When people go for a walk in this country, they don't mess around.

AUDIO SLIDESHOW
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The park's intentional isolation is a reminder of how green New Zealanders are in general. Environmentalism pervades every aspect of life, from the many menus offering organic fare to the socks and sweaters made from possum fur in keeping with the nation's effort to eradicate the non-native critter that has wrecked havoc on the ecosystem.

The attitude is more genial toward the islands' other wildlife. While New Zealand has no native land mammals except a couple species of bats, there are more than enough birds to befriend, including the flightless weka and the curious kea, a parrot always eager to tear the rubber off of cars. (The famous kiwi, alas, is endangered and nocturnal, a double whammy that kept our paths from crossing.)

There are millions of sheep too, introduced by colonists and now filling many of the rocky hillsides we passed as we drove across the island to the west coast. I never did get the hang of driving on the left side of the road, but navigating the mountainous terrain with its steep switchbacks was exhilarating.

Until, that is, my terrified wife kicked me out of the driver's seat. That was fine too, since it gave me more time to gape in awe at the landscape as we passed towns whose names alternated between traditional European ones



Fox Glacier, located near the western coast on New Zealand's South Island.
(RYAN E. SMITH)

and more difficult Maori monikers, derived from the country's indigenous people.

Once we reached the coast, we headed for Punakaiki and Paparoa National Park. It is famous for its Pancake Rocks, coastal limestone worn down over the years to look like stacks of flapjacks. If you come at just the right time of day, you can see the tide rush into caverns below, then burst out of blowholes at the surface.

At night, against a soundtrack of crashing waves, we laid down on a grassy field to enjoy the most magnificent view of the Milky Way I've ever imagined. For the first time in my life I saw the galaxy's famous swirls — albeit from the southern hemisphere — and it reminded me just how far from home, from all civilization, we had come.

The towns are thinly populated on New Zealand's western coast, and reservations must be made well in advance of travel during the summer (wintertime in the U.S.). There are no great crowds to complement the great beauty, but no bevy of boutiques or restaurants to cater to tourists either.

That's a nice way of saying there wasn't a whole lot else to do, leaving us free to explore at our own pace: hike a little, drive a little, stop and look for penguins a little. (Yes, New Zealand, bastion of flightless birds, does have penguins.)

Just make sure you give yourself enough time. Most travelers we encountered measured their trips in terms of weeks or months, not days.

Certainly, such thorough adventurers are rewarded. Only in a country like this could you emerge from a rainforest and find yourself at the foot of a glacier. Which is what happened when we drove a little further south and discovered Franz Josef and Fox glaciers, breathtaking rivers of ice just a few miles from the coast.

At the base, their enormity is obvious: the ice of Fox Glacier advancing from the mountains falls 8,000 feet over the course of eight miles. Its titanic presence as it bends through the valley leaves you feeling microscopic.

Standing atop the glacier after a rugged hour-long hike, however, is something else altogether. With ice-picks in our hands and metal cramp-ons attached to our boots, we felt like we were on top of the world. The magical feeling was only intensified by the blue glow trapped in parts of the ice.

From here we pressed further south towards the climax of any outdoorsman's trip to New Zealand: Milford Sound. Snuggled into the vast wilderness of Fiordland National Park, it is here that ancient glaciers carved deep fingers into the land as it met the ocean, leaving steep, narrow, and jagged cliffs to welcome it. Some call it the most beautiful place in the entire world.

Or so I'm told. Milford Sound also happens to be one of the rainiest places — it averages nearly 20 feet a year — and our visit took place in the middle of a constant downpour. It was so foggy that we could hardly see 20 feet in front of us, let alone to the top of stately Mitre Peak, rising more than a mile above us.

I won't lie; it was crushing disappointment. The others on our ferry boat felt the same and headed indoors to get dry and warm up, but a few crew members stayed outside with me.

This is when they love it most, they said: when it rains, when rivers of water spontaneously cascade down the sheer, rocky walls. And it was true. They were everywhere — dozens of foaming streams gushing down at breakneck speed, sometimes branching into a patchwork of rivulets, sometimes sticking together to form a huge, powerful waterfall.

Naturally, the sun waited to come out until after we left the park. By then I was very wet and a little bitter, but I got over it. After all, it's hard to dwell on the natural wonder that got away when you have a long, long plane ride home to dream fondly about all the ones that didn't.

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