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ISSUE: FEBRUARY 15, 2007

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A Kiwi Road Trip

It's the adventure of a lifetime — a 2,109-mile odyssey through verdant **NEW ZEALAND** — and we're taking you along for the ride. Bungee jumping, skydiving, and all. By Kevin Raub. Photographs by Warren Clarke.

THE SUDDEN SWOOSH OF WIND is disorienting, not to mention the first few somersaults. Which way is up? I wonder. The deafening roar of the Cresco turbine aircraft is gone in an instant. What have I just done? The pressure eases as quickly as it began; my eyes eventually open, watery and blurred; and a serene calm ensues as the earth below comes into focus. From this vantage point, Lake Wakatipu is a cobalt blue oasis surrounded by a lush, green, mountainous dreamland. It takes a few seconds, but my brain eventually registers that I have just voluntarily thrown myself out of a perfectly good airplane — something that, like most sane people, I've always said I'd never do. But, as anyone who has ever visited Queenstown, New Zealand, can attest to, never say never ... around these parts, anyway.

Billed as the adrenaline-junkie capital of New Zealand — if not the world — Queens-town is one of the final stops on a 2,109-mile road-trip odyssey I've undertaken with James, a Kiwi and a fellow journalist, through both of the islands of this South Pacific wonderland, which has been made instantly recognizable by a surge of recent Hollywood affairs (the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *King Kong* among them). Minds are changed quickly around here. To not bungee or skydive or parabungee or canyon swing means you won't have much to add to the dinner conversation that evening.

And this reversal of thinking happens in an instant. One minute, I'm safely on the ground, laughing it up with friends over a couple of pints of Speight's Old Dark 5 Malt Ale as we talk about the idea of jumping off bridges or out of airplanes. Ha-ha. The next minute, I'm airborne and plummeting to earth at terminal velocity (that's around 120 to 130 mph, in case you were wondering). Queenstown is the kind of place that flips switches in you that you weren't aware you even had. It's the kind of place that makes you think a 45-second free fall from 12,000 feet is a perfectly normal part of the day, like your morning cup of coffee. It's the kind of place that makes New Zealand special. And, as I'm soon to discover, there are many other things that do as well.

Days one and two:

Auckland to Rotorua

One of the first road signs we see on State Highway 1 out of Auckland says "If you're prepared to speed, be prepared to kill." Wow. That's heavy. James is used to New Zealand's graphic approach to curbing traffic violations, but for me it's a jolt. Fortunately, we need not worry about such things. We scored a major deal on our rental car from an outfit called A2B Rentals and ended up with a beat-up 1995 Toyota Sprinter with 66,000 miles on it — we're lucky if it pushes 50 mph. Off we go.

To the northeast of Auckland is a jutting stretch of land called the Coromandel Peninsula, one of the most beautiful parts of the North Island, the island that often gets the short end of the New Zealand stick. South Islanders will say things like, "There are only two kinds of people who live in New Zealand: those who live in the South, and those who wish they did," and so forth. Oddly, North Islanders tend to agree. Still, there is much to be seen here.

We hug the opaque green waters of the Firth of Thames on our way to Cathedral Cove, a stunning patch of sand accessed via a hilly coastal track (or by boat, though the rental company didn't throw that in to the deal). This secluded haven is framed by jagged white cliffs and bisected by an enormous rock arch that resembles the nave of a looming cathedral. It would be a perfect spot for a romantic picnic (though not with James).

We wake up the next morning in Mount Maunganui, a superb surfer's town on the northeast coast, where James grew up. It's not big on the tourist map — I'm not sure why — but tell any Kiwi you're from "the Mount," and the jealousy is palpable. Here I'm introduced to the spirulina smoothie, a wonderful morning wake-up drink that's ubiquitous in New Zealand. At Sidetrack café, the best of many charming cafés along the Mount's beachfront, it's a frothy, earthy, grass green concoction that's healthful and tasty at the same time. It will become the first of many surprisingly pleasing café experiences along the road.

That evening, we roll into Rotorua, where we find the Zorb. Now, you've seen the Zorb on TV. It's that big, plastic bubble-looking thing that rolls down hillsides, with people inside. Kind of fun, kind of cheesy, right? Well, James and I pile inside with low expectations and come out on the other side a wet, laughing mess. Oddly enough, tumbling down a nearly 500-foot hillside in a plastic bubble full of water with another person is a lot more fun than it looks. I hear having three people is even better.

Days three and four:

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Rotorua to Wellington

The next morning, we hightail it out of Rotorua, but we don't get very far. Tucked away deep in an 800-year-old forest just outside of town is Treetops Lodge, our first taste of luxury on a trip that will see accommodations range from campsites and hostels to ecofriendly inns and historic hotels. Everything at this boutique lodge is fashioned from the land, all without disturbing the thousands of pheasants and deer on site. But the coolest animals are the Australian brushtail possums, normally considered pests in New Zealand but more like resident mascots here.

Now, I know American possums are basically glorified rats, but these cute little buggers are more like small dog-raccoon hybrids. Every night, they turn up for a bit of masterful chef Bruce Thomas's leftover venison crepinettes or organic lamb, which they quite politely eat right out of our hands. Who can blame them? As far as high-end, all-inclusive luxury lodges go, this place has stellar food. We decide to call it a night after James gives me a snooker lesson on the lodge's old English kauri-wood snooker table, one of just 10 left in New Zealand. Let me tell you, the mechanics of pool might help you a bit, but snooker ain't easy (though that could be blamed on the Tohu Marlborough Pinot Noir).

By the time we reach Wellington, at the southern end of the North Island, the town is buzzing. Regarded throughout New Zealand as the arts-and-cultural hub (and throughout the world as the home of *Rings* and *King Kong* director Peter Jackson), it's sort of the country's San Francisco. We swing for the fences here by trying to get into a bar that is so trendy even Liv Tyler was reportedly given the heave-ho during the filming of *Rings*. Motel Bar is located in an alley, at the top of a flight of dark and dank stairs — kind of like every inconspicuous bar in Los Angeles is. I don't know what Tyler did, but we walk right in. We toast the North Island over the best Negroni I have ever had (and the most expensive, at \$11).

Days five through 11:

Wellington to Queenstown

You could fly domestically to the South Island, but then you'd miss taking the hopelessly scenic Bluebridge ferry across the Cook Strait. As we sail out of Wellington, we see the finish of Leg 3 of the Volvo Ocean Race, an around-the-world professional sailing race. If you have never seen an America's Cup-type sailing event, let me tell you that it's quite a spectacle. The Movistar and ABN Amro One boats sail past so close to us that we nearly catch the spray across our faces.

Two hours later, the ferry approaches Queen Charlotte Sound, and we circle a few times. (The narrow gap that leads into the South Island is only big enough for one boat at a time.) Soon, the rugged vastness of the South Island comes into focus, a stark contrast to the more developed North Island. We land in Picton and speed off to Nelson, en route to Abel Tasman National Park.

Before hitting the park — one of the South Island's most beautiful and most visited attractions — we grab breakfast at Zest Deli, a prime example of New Zealand's organic, forward-thinking café culture. Various organic olive oils, tapenades, chutneys, and honeys line the walls. And the onion-ham-and-cheese scones must weigh five pounds. I opt for the homemade toasted muesli, the best I've ever eaten — and likely the best I'll ever have. I drop \$7 for a tiny container of it to take on the road with me.

We camp that evening at Kaiteriteri Beach Motor Camp, a gorgeous beach resort outside the park. Its cornmeal-textured beaches are sparsely populated, as camping is the main accommodation here. Being a city boy myself, and James being an Aucklander, we don't actually have a lot of tent-construction experience between us. But how hard can it be? Three hours and five guys later, we're all tucked in.

THERE ARE TWO ways to see the pristine coastlines of Abel Tasman National Park: by kayak and by foot. There are no roads inside the park. We opt for a one-day kayak trip, and it does not disappoint. Crystal-clear lagoons and postcard-perfect sands emerge from every corner of this coastal bushland, one of New Zealand's most environmentally protected regions. We munch on steamed green-lipped mussels, a specialty of the area, on the secluded Medlands Beach and wallow in our surroundings.

From Abel Tasman, we're supposed to head south to Queenstown, but we drive entirely out of our way to visit the Mussel Inn, contender for the title of Coolest Bar in the World. It's located in Golden Bay, north of Abel Tasman, near Takaka, one of the most secluded parts of the South Island. There is only one road in and out of Golden Bay, SH60, which is also home to another one of those morbid road signs (this one reads "Blood spilt, life guilt"). More jovial, however, are the penguin-crossing signs. The Mussel Inn is a self-described "Kiwi woolshed meets Aussie farmhouse." I call it a rustic, eccentric craft brewery that's like no other (there is a cell-phone collection nailed to the telephone pole outside). They make 12 killer brews, with names like Strong Ox Strong Dark Ale and Black Lamb, some of which include local manuka-tree tips or New Zealand-harvested habanero chiles. We use them to chase the excellent pan-fried John Dory. It's a historical evening and more than worth the extra miles, if not the whole flight over from the States.

Over the course of driving the next few days, it becomes apparent why Peter Jackson sticks to filming here: It's full of near-mythical terrain that varies wildly around every turn. We see mirror images of California's Big Sur coast and of Napa wine regions, of Colorado's Rocky Mountains, and of Brazilian Atlantic rain forests. You never know what you might come upon next. There are surging rivers, majestic gorges, endless vineyards, soaring peaks, and, for something a little different, restaurants serving possum pies. (Yes, you read that last line right.)

Days 12 through 14:

Queenstown to Christchurch

On the 12th day of our trip, we arrive in Queenstown by noon, and as we approach along SH6, the town's looming mountain range (appropriately named the Remarkables) is visible, even from miles away. Within a half hour, we're on the Kawarau River, white-water rafting down the rocky gorges that surround the town. It doesn't seem too extreme — until I'm dumped into the river on the second rapid. Still, James and I have both caught the Queenstown bug.

Within 24 hours, we've bungee jumped off the world's original commercial bungee site, the harrowing, 141-foot Kawarau Bridge. (Bungee jumping as we know it today was actually invented in Queenstown by A.J. Hackett.) I have also willingly tossed myself into one of the world's most beautiful skies at 15,000 feet — James missed the 220-pound skydiving weight cutoff by eight pounds — for no other reason than Queenstown made me do it. Seriously. If you have any doubts about your ability to do such things, forget Wheaties; just go to Queenstown.

To bring myself down to earth, the next day, in Dunedin, I wake up at five a.m. (in the exact same bed at the historic Corstorphine House that Prince Charles slept in back in 2005, no less) in order to catch a glimpse of the yellow-eyed penguin, the rarest penguin in the world, on the tip of the Otago Peninsula. These endlessly fascinating creatures get up every morning at dawn and walk down the hillside (where they nest) and into the ocean (where they feed). We hide in purpose-built sheds on the hillside (the penguins are terrified of humans). By an amazing stroke of luck, we see a four-month-old chick, alongside its mother, entering the ocean for the first time. The poor thing immediately freaks out and fumbles about in the water as if it were drowning, but then, in a

dramatic turn of events, instinct takes over, and off it swims. It's one thing to watch *March of the Penguins*, but seeing these amazing animals in the wild makes you feel as if you've witnessed a miracle.

THE ODOMETER CLOCKS in at 3,394 kilometers (2,109 miles) by the time we arrive at our final destination, the high-country Grasmere Lodge, outside Christchurch. Located in scenic Arthur's Pass, the lodge, a limestone homestead originally built in 1858, is bound skyward by the majestic Southern Alps, and by 13,000 acres of tussock-covered hills at ground level. It's a scene out of a Cormac McCarthy novel, minus the Mexican-American edge. At breakfast, we're startled by management, who invite us to check out a flock of Kea, the world's only Alpine parrot, which have congregated by the pool.

We head over thinking we'll likely miss them, but these amazing green parrots actually sit around and pose for the cameras. They're not afraid of humans, and they don't run as we approach. What a treat.

I end the day as any honest man just off the road would: at the spa. While I'm pampered with the Mountain Man package (back massage, facial, foot massage, head massage — that's what I'm talking about), James opts for horseback riding. His guide, Heather, tells him about the ominous Mount Bailey, which is right next to the lodge. It's made of fine schist, and people climb up and then actually slide down on their rear ends to the bottom.

I take one look at the steep and staggering peak, which stands at 6,017 feet, and one word comes to mind: *no*. I didn't spend enough time in Queenstown to do *that*.



NZ Survival Guide

American Airlines offers codeshare service to New Zealand with Qantas. If you're interested in eating, using, visiting, or throwing yourself from anything in this story, here are the details (in order of appearance).

A2B Rentals Limited
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011-64-9-262-6200
www.a2b-car-rental.co.nz

Cathedral Cove
Coromandel Peninsula
011-64-7-866-5555
www.whitianga.co.nz/hahei.html

Sidetrack
Mount Maunganui
011-64-7-575-2145

Zorb Rotorua
Rotorua
011-64-7-357-5100
www.zorb.co.nz

Treetops Lodge
Rotorua
011-64-7-333-2066
www.treetops.co.nz

Motel Bar
Wellington
011-64-4-384-9084
www.motelbar.co.nz

Bluebridge Cook Strait Ferry
011-64-4-471-6188
www.bluebridge.co.nz

Zest Deli
Nelson
011-64-3-546-7064
www.zestdeli.co.nz

Kaiteriteri Beach Motor Camp
Kaiteriteri
011-64-3-527-8010
www.kaiteriteribeach.co.nz

Abel Tasman National Park
Nelson
011-64-3-528-2027
nationalpark.abeltasman.co.nz

Abel Tasman Kayaks
Marahau
011-64-3-528-7801
www.abeltasmankayaks.co.nz

The Mussel Inn
Takaka
011-64-3-525-9241
www.musselinn.co.nz

Queenstown Rafting
Queenstown
011-64-3-442-9792
www.rafting.co.nz

AJ Hackett Bungy
Queenstown
011-64-3-441-0260
www.ajhackett.co.nz

Nzone: The Ultimate Jump

Queenstown
011-64-3-442-5867
www.nzone.biz

Corstorphine House
Dunedin
011-64-3-487-1000
www.corstorphine.co.nz

Nature Guides Otago
(for viewing penguins)
Dunedin
011-64-3-454-5169
www.nznatureguides.com

Grasmere Lodge
Arthur's Pass
011-64-3-318-8407
www.grasmere.co.nz

Kevin Raub is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among other publications. He fancies himself quite the daredevil now.

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