

Kiwi road trip —American style

What happens when an American travels the length of New Zealand? A lot of surprises and heaps of laughs...

It all started at the Super 14 rugby match. As an American visiting New Zealand for the first time, I understood the game OK. But why was that kid riding around the field on a trike?

Luckily, I had a Kiwi translator, a journalist named James who would prove handy on our 3394km road trip across both islands.

The rugby incident proved a mere precursor to many things that perplexed and fascinated me as we left Auckland for Christchurch, aiming to see the best of both islands along the way. The first things

were the road safety signs. Talk about harsh! Signs

like, 'Blood Spilt, Life Guilt' are enough to scare me out of driving, full stop, let alone just speeding!

We took a detour up the Firth of Thames on the Coromandel Peninsula before heading south, down the other side along a stunning translucent greenish-blue expanse of water I took as the first hint of this country's near-mythical beauty. We had a rest at Cathedral Cove, a gorgeous and secluded spot fit for an afternoon of romance (though not with James).

We whizzed through Mount Maunganui to Rotorua, with its fabulous Paradise Valley Springs – quick visits to two great towns. Then it was on to Treetops, a luxury lodge deep inside an ancient forest and with wonderful hikes. New chef Pierre Vuilleumier is a master in the kitchen (pray for the pumpkin, cumin and coconut soup). Not cheap, but worth it.

We made our way to Wellington just in time to see the Volvo Ocean Race blow through town, and crossed the Cook Strait by ferry.

We stopped in Nelson before heading into Abel Tasman National Park, one of the gems of the south. There we found Zest Cafe, the best of a cafe culture that never ceases to amaze me. Walk into almost any cafe here and the food will be fresh, inventive and excellent.

At Zest, the green onion, ham and cheese scones were as big as small children, and the homemade muesli was good enough to order takeaway for Abel Tasman Park.

We kayaked into the park with Abel Tasman Kayaks from Marahau, the gateway to the park. The trip was excellent, all azure lagoons and a rocky, tea tree-strewn coastline.

From the park we headed for Golden Bay, one of New Zealand's most secluded regions, and the eco-friendly Sans Souci Inn, with its compostable long drop – a first for me.

But it's all about the Mussel Inn here – the eccentric craftsbrewery with some 12 killer brews. We used them to chase the excellent pan-fried John Dory. A memorable meal.

The West Coast proved breathtaking with its craggy coastlines and sapphire shores. It reminded me a tad of the Oregon coast, except Oregonians don't fashion art installations from river stones and driftwood on the beach at Hokitika.

We were itching for civilization when we reached Wanaka on its stunning lake just north of Queenstown, and we found it there. But it was Queenstown itself we were aiming for, with its high-octane adventure sports.

Within 24 hours, we'd both bungy-jumped off the A.J. Hackett original bungy site, the 40m Kawarau Bridge. I'd also willingly tossed myself into one of the world's most beautiful skies over Lake Wakatipu at an altitude of

BY KEVIN RAUB



Art on the beach at wind and sea-swept Hokitika.



Ducking in out of the wind at Cathedral Cove.



Above: the West Coast. Left: the bra fence, Cardrona. Below: Queenstown's take on a long drop.



4500m with Nzone: The Ultimate Jump.

We came off our adrenalin highs in Dunedin and Christchurch, where we exchanged the parachutes and bungy cords for damask linens and French cutlery.

At the historic Corstorphine House in Dunedin, I sank into the wonderful bed in my art deco-themed room – one in which Prince Charles slept just last year.

The next day we got up at 5am, to see the rare yellow-eyed penguin on its morning walk on the tip of the Otago Peninsula.

We hid in purpose-built sheds on the hillside, out of sight (they are terrified of humans). It was an amazing stroke of luck to see a four-month-old chick entering the ocean for the first time with its mum. The poor thing immediately freaked out and fumbled about in the water as if it was drowning until, in a dramatic turn of events, instinct took over and off it swam. What a treat.

Before Christchurch, we found a high-country retreat called Grasmere – a luxury lodge nestled deep in the Southern Alps near Arthur's Pass. This limestone homestead, originally built in 1858, was just what we needed after clocking up nearly 3500km on the road in two weeks. James went horse

riding, I hit the spa. Life was good.

At dinner that evening, our fellow guests asked us about our favourite experiences. There were too many – the endless beauty, incredible meals, friendly locals, excellent beer (I came to love Monteith's and Mac's, though I've gathered I'd be more manly if I drank Speight's), the wine and the eco-friendly attitudes. But I'm still not sure what that rugby kid was up to.

Fact file

TRANSPORT: A2B Car Rentals Limited, (09) 262 6200, www.a2b-car-rental.co.nz.

ACTIVITIES: Paradise Valley Springs, (07) 348 9667, www.paradisev.co.nz. Abel Tasman Kayaks, (03) 528 7801, www.abeltasmankayaks.co.nz. Nzone, (03) 442 5867, www.nzone.biz. Nature Guides, (03) 454 5169, www.nznatureguides.com.

ACCOMMODATION: Treetops Lodge, (07) 333 2066, www.treetops.co.nz. Corstorphine, (03) 487 1000, www.corstorphine.co.nz. Grasmere Lodge, (03) 318 8407, www.grasmere.co.nz.

Travel tips & specials

Turtle time

● Songkran Day, the Thai New Year celebration, is traditionally a time for Thais to free birds, fish, tortoises and turtles, and the tradition is now being used as an opportunity to raise environmental awareness. Turtle release happens mainly at Bang Tao, Nai Yang and Mai Khao beaches, after turtle eggs are collected by the Fisheries Department. This year the turtles will be released between April 13 and 15. Flight Centre has Phuket packages, including return airfares ex Auckland and seven nights' accommodation, from \$1229 per person, share twin. For details phone Flight Centre on 0800 747474.

Dip into Dubai

● Dubai just got cheaper! Book at the Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort and Towers before July 15, 2006, for stays between June 1 and August 15, 2006, and get 15 per cent off. Rates start at \$120 per person per night, twin share, including breakfast. Or pay for three nights and stay one night free at The Metropolitan Hotel in Dubai, on bookings made before the end of April, for stays between June 1 and August 31 2006. Rates start at \$140 per person per night twin share, including breakfast. Contact House of Travel on 0800 838 747 or www.houseoftravel.co.nz.

Taste of the country

● Kiwi celebrity chef Ross Burden is flying into Wharekauhau Country Estate in Featherston to host a cooking class at the luxury lodge. Using a wealth of fresh, local Martinborough produce to create his dishes, Ross' cooking classes, which take place between March 28 and 31, will focus on New Zealand produce such as kina, paua and lamb, as well as some internationally-influenced dishes. After each class, participants will be able to sit down with Ross and enjoy the fruits of their labour with a glass of New Zealand wine. Prices for the four-day, three-night cooking class is \$2500 plus GST, based on single occupancy. For information, visit www.wharekauhau.co.nz.

Shop til you drop

● Enjoy a girly shopping weekend break at Singapore's Copthorne Orchid Hotel. Stay for \$132.50 per night (down from \$275 per night) in spacious rooms that can accommodate a third person. The hotel is situated in a residential area just 10 minutes away from Singapore's premier shopping district, Orchard Road. Visit www.wotif.com/hotel2417 for more information.



Kevin plus lion cub at Paradise Valley Springs, Rotorua.