

New Zealand

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Air New Zealand flies to Auckland nonstop from Los Angeles. The coach class seats on Air NZ Are very roomy -lots of leg room, comfortable seats - on both the 777 and the 747. Service was good. The seat have individual monitors, with on demand movies.

We arrived in Auckland at 6:30 am and immediately took a van to Rotorua, about a three hour drive. We stayed at the Heritage Rotorua Hotel. Our room had a view of the geysers from the Wakarewarewa Thermal Reserve, amazing. The hotel has a new wing and an old wing, the rooms are nicer in the new wing and these have the views of the geysers. The lake is about a 30 minute walk to the lake from the hotel. The hotel does have a nice restaurant, and nice outdoor pool.

In Rotorua we visited the Wakarewarewa Thermal Reserve with its steam geysers and hot springs, there we also saw a performance by the local Maori tribes, and saw demonstrations on wood carving and local handicrafts.
www.whakarewarewa.com

We also went to the Agrodome Sheep Show for sheep shearing demonstration and Rainbow Springs.

In Rotorua you can also ride the Skyline Gondola, the view of the lake from here was great. Once at the top, you can take the chair lift down – or you can go on their luge run – it's a sled that you steer down one of three courses, which as fun and not too scary. www.skylinerides.co.nz

In the afternoon we flew to Christchurch – the weather had been mild (50's) and wet in Rotorua, but definitely turned Cold in Christchurch. Christchurch is a modern city, looks a bit European, with its old church, etc. There's lots of parks in the city as well. There is a tram or trolley that runs around center part of the city; they offer a dining car experience in the evenings. It's a 4 hour ride around on the tram with a 3 course Meal for \$85.00 NZ (about \$51.00US). The US Antarctic Center is located near the airport in Christchurch.

In Christchurch we stayed at the Copthorne Central, and older hotel, in a good location to walk to restaurants, shops, and Cathedral Square,

The next day we took the TranzAlpine train from Christchurch to Greymouth. – from the east coast of NZ to the West Coast of NZ. The views are spectacular for the entire trip as you climb over Arthur's Pass. The trip takes about 4.5 hours. The cars are comfortable, there's a food car where you can purchase lunch, and there's an open air car where you can take photos.

On arrival in Greymouth we were taken to visit Pancake Rocks and Blowholes. We were to have been able to Kayak or hike here, but as it was absolutely pouring, so we just toured the Rocks and blowholes. The area is named this because of how the rocks have been formed, looking like a stack of pancakes. From here we drove to Punakaiki Resort Hotel. This is a small rustic hotel located right on the coast; all rooms have a view of the (rocky) beach. The rooms are basic but good size. From our hotel we could the waves crashing on the beach! One thing to note, when you leave the room and take the key that has been in the light switch, ALL power goes off , so in the winter the heat goes off too so our room was VERY cold when we returned from dinner – they do have electric blankets which quickly warmed the bed!

The next day we headed south towards Franz Joseph Glacier – we stopped at Hokitika, town established during the NZ Gold Rush, also an area where Green Stone comes from. Our next stop was Franz Joseph Glacier – since the storms continued this day we were unable to take our HeliHike (helicopter trip to the glacier, a chance to hike on the glacier, and fly back to town. At the end of the day it had cleared enough that they did take us on a helicopter tour of the glacier area. I've been in a helicopter before, but it still was a bit of a scary although exciting experience – our helicopter did bounce around a lot – the views were amazing though. Also in Franz Joseph is the Hukawai Glacier Center, with an educational center with display of the history of glaciers, and offers indoor ice climbing. www.hukawai.co.nz .

There's also the Glacier Hot Pools – a series of covered outdoor hot pools of various temperatures, built in a rain forest setting. Both of these places are walking distance from the center of town, as was our hotel – Scenic Circle Franz Joseph Glacier Hotel. This is a large property, actually three older properties now as one. Rooms were basic, comfortable, there's a restaurant on site, although most would prefer to walk into town to other restaurants I'm sure. As it's one of the larger properties here, it accommodates a lot of the tour groups.

It was a full day drive from Franz Joseph to Queenstown, with sightseeing stops along the coast, at Paringa Salmon Farm and Haast. This day was made longer by the fact that we had to put chains on our bus to get over the pass outside Haast. The drive into Queenstown was beautiful; the scenery of the mountains coming up from the lake is amazing. It's amazing to see these huge mountain ranges (known as Southern Alps) and at the same time the foliage is mostly tropical – ferns, beech trees, etc. Queenstown looks to me like a European ski village – cobblestone streets lined with shops, restaurants and inns. As Queenstown is located on the lake and close to a couple ski areas, it's a year round resort area. There's a new crop of high end hotels and resorts opening up next year, will be located just outside the downtown area. We stayed at the Crowne Plaza – a very modern hotel, rooms were smaller than any others we stayed in, but had all the amenities. The location was good, just across the street from the Wharf, which is the departure point for the Milford Sound tour and the Walter Peak excursion. The hotel is also walking distance to a lot of shops and restaurants. It was very cold in Queenstown, Low 2, high 5 Celsius – and this year the snow has come a month early.

One the night of our arrival we took the steamship TSS Earnslaw across the lake to Walter Peak Farm for a dinner and sheep shearing show. As it was winter it was dark and there was nothing to see from the steamship, I think it would be much more enjoyable in the summer.

From Queenstown it's a 5 hour bus ride to Milford Sound, and a 4 hour ride back (less stops On the way back) it's a long way to ride for a 2 hour tour on the water. I'd suggest that travelers either opt for the flight back, or stay in Tea Anau which shortens the drive considerably. Milford Sound is lovely, I'm told it looks a lot like the fjords of Norway, we were lucky to have a clear day; the sky and the water were very blue! The flight back to Queenstown, it's on an 8 seater fixed wing turboprop, the view was amazing. The flight takes 35 minutes.

Our final excursion before leaving New Zealand was a jet boat ride on the Shotover River Canyon – it was quite fun, and we didn't really get wet, the ride is probably about half an hour, and it's just a short drive from Queenstown, so it makes a good half day excursion. www.shotoverjet.com

Overall New Zealand is a beautiful country, very green like Portland, and not too populated, there's only 4 million living there, with ¼ of that living in Auckland. The South Island is quite beautiful and amazing; the mountains rise almost straight up from the valleys. When I got back to Oregon I thought it looked flat here!