



Planning a Trip to New Zealand? An Insider's View

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Submitted photo

Penguins are among the many residents of New Zealand.

I'm a native Californian but a few years ago, I married a Kiwi, an American who immigrated to New Zealand and became a citizen. Now, each January, we escape the California winter to spend two to three months enjoying summer in the southern hemisphere. I've now spent almost two years in New Zealand, spread out over eight winters.

When I mention this fact to friends, most say that New Zealand is on their 'bucket list.' New Zealand tourism is booming, now its second largest source of income behind dairy farming. Every flight I've been on has been packed.

So in case New Zealand is on your bucket list, this is the first of a three part series on the country. This first article is more general, but I'll get down to specifics on the North and South Islands in the following ones.

For starters, don't be fooled by looking at a map of the world. New Zealand may seem like two tiny islands, but in reality, there is a lot to see and do. So much that if you try to cram it all into two short weeks, you may be left exhausted and disappointed and certainly not rested and refreshed from your vacation. The New Zealand tourism website gives you plenty of useful information to plan your trip. <http://www.newzealand.com>

So let's start with some general information about the two main islands that make up this amazing part of the world. New Zealand is roughly the size of California, 990 miles long and 280 miles wide. Four million residents share the country with 30 million sheep and ten million cows. Which means that the landscape is rural and uncrowded.

New Zealand's Maori culture is an integral part of Kiwi life. The Maori make up 14 percent of the population and their history, language and traditions are an important part of New Zealand's identity. You see the Maori language everywhere in the names of streets, towns and rivers.

To give the tribes a voice in the government, 10 percent of the seats in Parliament are held by Maori. In a recent tribute to their culture, the Whanganui River was granted the legal status of a person, something the local tribe had been fighting for for 160 years. The New Zealand Tourism website offers many opportunities to experience various Maori cultural experiences.

New Zealand is famous for its adventure sports. It pioneered the first commercial Bungy-jumping experience in 1988. Now, a few more thrills you can include in your itinerary include tandem parachuting, parapenting or paragliding, white water rafting, or rafting down a waterfall. Or try Zorbing, a ride down a hill inside a giant plastic ball. Young people from all over the world come to the country to experience its hiking, back-packing, cycling and especially, its adventure sports.

But whether your interests lie in adventure sports, food and wine, hiking, kayaking, or culture, you will find plenty of diverse and interesting ways to enjoy your visit.

Campgrounds, called holiday parks in New Zealand, are beautifully situated, on lakes, beaches and rivers, most have hot showers and kitchens for cooking, and some have Wi-Fi and laundry facilities. Many of them also offer motel units with a bed and sometimes a bathroom, (though there are always the communal facilities), and these rooms are less expensive than motels. These parks are also an interesting place to meet other travelers.

Many tourists rent motorhomes to tour the islands. These can be a fun option, but it is important to take a few things into consideration when choosing between a car and a larger vehicle.

First of all, most of the country is rural, with narrow, two-lane roads in each direction, with only a white line dividing traffic. Many are also hilly and windy, with sharp curves. In addition, you are driving on the left-hand side of the road, which is not familiar to Americans.

Motorhomes take up the whole lane in one direction and that can feel harrowing when traffic is coming at you in the narrow road. Also, in some more remote areas, the roads become one-lane bridges, just wide enough to get across, or turn into gravel, unpaved roads.

A smaller van, not self-contained, but with a bed and kitchen, could save \$45 to \$55 New Zealand dollars per day over the cost of a self-contained motorhome. An economy car could save \$100 a day over the price of a self-contained motor home. (Jucy rentals, <https://www.jucy.co.nz>). (To get the U.S. dollar amount, divide by .70.)

Motels in New Zealand usually have small kitchens with refrigerators, suitable for making breakfasts or picnics for the road. They always supply an electric kettle to make tea, plus the tea and milk (for the tea) and many have playgrounds for kids. So if you are renting a small car, with your gas savings, you could enjoy the motel option.

My point is, whatever your budget, there are enjoyable ways to make your trip possible.

One more point about driving. What looks like a short drive on the map may take a lot longer than planned because of windy roads. It's always a good idea to allow extra time. That also gives you the option for unexpected stops, which can end up being the real highlights of a trip.

New Zealand offers breathtaking scenery, unparalleled natural beauty and an open and friendly culture and people. So dust off that bucket list and plan your trip. You will have the trip of a lifetime.

Below, check out a few tips for speaking 'Kiwi.' Next time, New Zealand's South Island.

Also, the price of gas is double what it costs in the U.S. Motorhomes use a lot more gas, so that would have to be added into the cost. Renting a more economical van or an economy car and using the motel units, visitors can still take advantage of the many Holiday Parks, enjoying the beauty of nature that is what New Zealand is all about. Some rental car companies also offer simple camping gear as an extra option to a car rental.