



# Kia Ora —AND WELCOME TO NEW ZEALAND

From national park splendor and city sophistication to fishing rivers and foodie tours, the small island nation features a large range of offerings with broad appeal

BY KATHY OMBLER



Lamb behind the rocks of a New Zealand hillside.

Whatever visitors choose to do in New Zealand, invariably they comment on the friendly locals—the laid-back Kiwi folk who, indigenous Maori or not, welcome everyone with a sing-song *Kia ora!* (Greetings and good health!), and mean it.

*Manaakitanga*, loosely translated as hospitality, is about the Maori way of hosting with warmth and respect, of welcoming people as visitors who then leave as family, and it's a notion consciously embraced by the New Zealand tourism industry as a whole.

**A SNAPSHOT:** New Zealand is essentially about natural landscapes. One-third of the entire country is protected as conservation land. This includes 14 national parks, 19 forest parks and three World Heritage areas, encompassing scenery that will inspire, energize and fill your camera cards. Be they glaciers, mountains or fiords; rainforests, remote rivers or steaming volcanoes; you can take your pick on how you explore them, as actively or as passively as you wish.

Thus, two-thirds of the country remains for farms, orchards and world-renowned vineyards and for scattered cities and towns. Of the total population, more than 1 million people

live in Auckland; the remaining 3 million live throughout the rest of the country. So there is plenty of open spaces, and that's even accounting for the 30 million sheep!

New Zealand is, in fact, the last country to be discovered by humans. Polynesian voyagers arrived about 800 years ago. The Maori were followed by the English and Europeans in the 1700s, and more recently New Zealand has seen significant growth in Pacific Island and Asian populations.

**GET HIKING:** Such is the wealth of multi-day hiking in New Zealand's national parks that the top 14 choices have been identified as Great Walks; they are managed by a helpful online information and booking system for cabins and campsites en route. The Great Walks list includes the classic Milford Track, a four-day exploration of sheer mountain valleys and passes, waterfalls and lakes. This walk was described as early as the 1900s by a British travel writer as "the finest walk in the world." Golden sand beaches and granite headlands make the Abel Tasman Coast Track one of the most popular Great Walks, while curiously the Whanganui Journey, a canoe trip through the remote, forest-lined gorges

**Clockwise from top:** Views from Milford Track, Fiordland National Park, South Island. Canoeing on Whanganui River. Golden sand beach in Abel Tasman National Park. Clear, clean water cascading down the rocks to a pond in the Fiordland rainforest near Milford Sound.





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## Maori Culture

Nowhere else in the world will you find Maori culture, that of the first tribal peoples to settle New Zealand. But first, a point to be settled. One of the questions often asked by visitors to New Zealand is: “Do the Maori people still wear grass skirts and live in grass huts?”

In Rotorua, a major geothermal and Maori cultural tourism destination, it’s perhaps a fair question. Many cultural shows feature dancing, singing and chanting men and women clad in traditional-style flax skirts; and meals of smoky-flavored meats and vegetables dished up from underground hangi ovens in a village setting of thatched huts with dirt floors. These villages are, in fact, reenactments to show how earlier Maori used to live.

The cultural shows are simply that — shows, usually informative, often humorous and always stirring, delivered

from the heart. Maori (an overarching term for many tribal groups) today live in modern society alongside all New Zealanders. Maori also own both major and smaller tourism companies. As well as showcasing their own culture, art and history, they will be your hosts on tours and activities throughout your visit; whale watching, glacier and wilderness walking, jet boating, rafting, bird watching, cycle touring and wine tasting. Without doubt, they will offer a unique cultural and historical perspective to your New Zealand holiday.

**Originally a form of weapon training, the poi dance (clockwise from top) has evolved to become a fascinating display of skill and timing. Usually performed by women and accompanied by singing or chanting, the dance involves the twirling of balls on either short or long strings. Percussive sound is produced by striking the ball on the body or other hand, immediately reversing its rotation. Baskets of food, meat, vegetables are loaded in the *hangi* (earth oven) for cooking in this traditional Maori way. Warrior face carved in the wood. Traditional New Zealand Maori carving on a meeting house.**





Legend Photography



Courtesy of The Farm at Cape Kidnappers

Cycle touring is an active way to explore the extraordinary volcanic landscape of Rotorua, where tracts of native and exotic forest provide a deep green contrast to the unusual geology of the region. Cape Kidnappers golf course is hailed as a modern marvel.

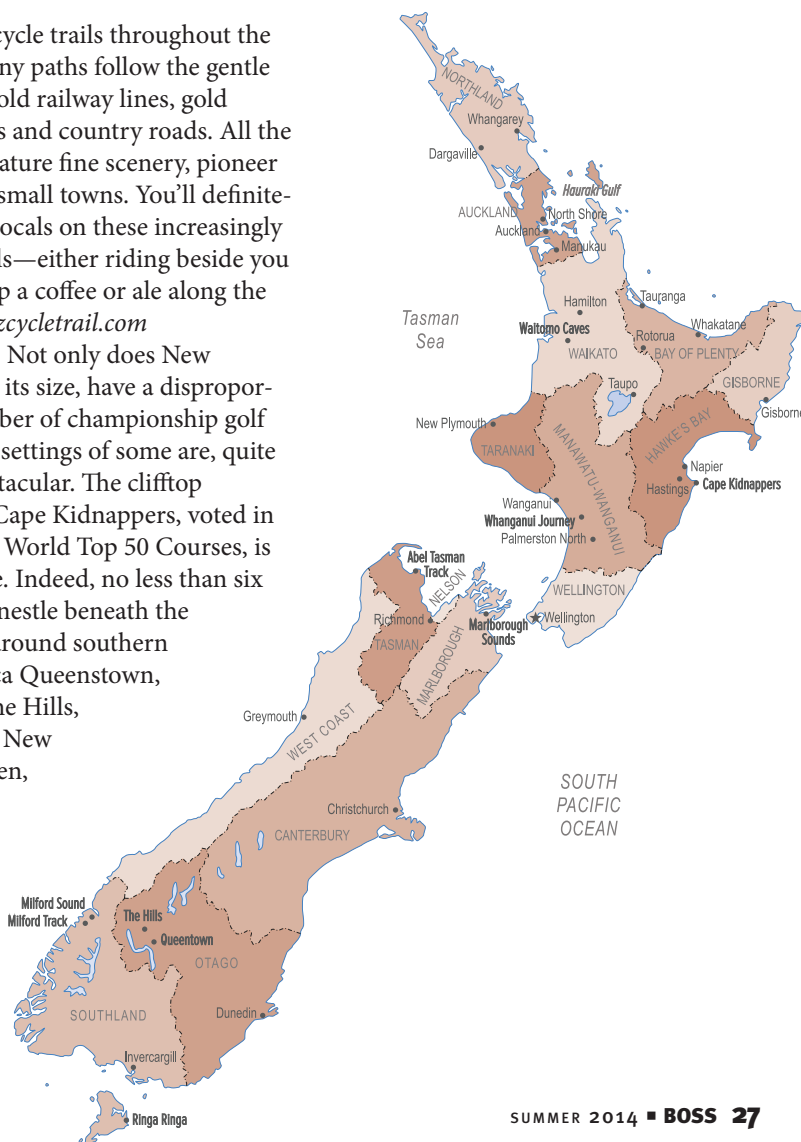
of the Whanganui River, is also included as a “Great Walk.” Never mind the terminology, this historic Maori waterway is stunning and quite suitable for novice paddlers. All Great Walks can be tackled independently, though fully guided and catered trips are available. [www.greatwalks.co.nz](http://www.greatwalks.co.nz)

**TAKE IT EASIER:** You don’t have to be a professional hiker to appreciate New Zealand’s parks. Short walks explore some of the finest landscape features; many of these walks feature clever little signs explaining how the landscapes came to be. Cruises—daylong and overnight—will get you onto the lakes, or into the drama of the southern fiords, where the glacier-gouged walls soar sheer from the water, waterfalls crash back down and dolphins come to party. If fly-fishing is your thing, a helicopter will buzz you from fishing lodge to remote park river, where prize brown or rainbow trout lurk in hidden, secret pools. [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)

**GET PEDALING:** Free-wheeling through the open tussock, pedaling an old forestry road, or cruising lakeside in the shadow of the mountains—all are part of a government-inspired scheme to boost tourism jobs has in recent years seen the development of a grand

network of cycle trails throughout the country. Many paths follow the gentle contours of old railway lines, gold mining trails and country roads. All the bike trails feature fine scenery, pioneer history and small towns. You’ll definitely meet the locals on these increasingly popular trails—either riding beside you or serving up a coffee or ale along the way. [www.nzcycletrail.com](http://www.nzcycletrail.com)

**TEE OFF:** Not only does New Zealand, for its size, have a disproportionate number of championship golf courses, the settings of some are, quite simply, spectacular. The cliff-top fairways of Cape Kidnappers, voted in *Golf Digest’s* World Top 50 Courses, is one example. Indeed, no less than six top courses nestle beneath the mountains around southern tourist mecca Queenstown, including The Hills, home of the New Zealand Open,





## New Zealand Fact File



**GETTING THERE** Air New Zealand flies daily to both Auckland and Christchurch from Los Angeles and San Francisco.

**GETTING AROUND** Air New Zealand flies daily to all major towns and cities. Few flights are longer than one hour. Smaller airlines also fly some regional routes.

- Driving is popular—just remember to keep left. Highways are well sign-posted. Driving from Christchurch to Queenstown takes about six hours. From Auckland, allow three hours to drive north to the Bay of Islands, also south to Rotorua. Auckland to Wellington is an eight-hour drive—you'd best stop over along the way, for example at Tongariro National Park and Waitomo Caves. Rental car and RV companies operate out of all major airports and provide a wealth of touring information.
- Two companies, Interislander and Bluebridge, operate vehicle and passenger ferry services between the North and South Islands (Wellington to Picton).
- InterCity operates daily bus services between all major cities and towns, while a host of private companies also run sightseeing tours and packages throughout both islands.
- Train travel is limited to three KiwiRail scenic journeys: Tranzalpine (Christchurch/Greymouth and West Coast), Coastal Pacific (Christchurch/Picton) and Northern Explorer (Auckland/Wellington).

**ACCOMMODATIONS** You name it, New Zealand has it; from luxury lodges at NZ\$1,000 (\$830 U.S.) plus per night to international chain hotels, backpacker lodges and camp grounds. A wealth of B&Bs and farm stays offer opportunity to meet the locals in their homes. Motels in New Zealand are of high standard and repute; many are outstanding for their comprehensive and modern facilities. Similarly, holiday parks offer a quality mix of motel units and cabins, plus powered sites for your RV.

Look for the "Qualmark"—New Zealand tourism's official, independent quality assurance mark for accommodation, activities and attractions. [www.qualmark.co.nz](http://www.qualmark.co.nz)

Currency is the New Zealand dollar. Banks, Bureau de Change kiosks and ATM machines are located in major airports and towns and cities. All major credit cards can be used; Visa and MasterCard are most readily accepted.

**CLIMATE** New Zealand generally has a temperate climate, though it changes significantly with latitude. The far north experiences subtropical weather during summer while inland alpine areas of the South Island can be bitterly cold (with sub-zero temperatures, snow and frosts in winter). January and February are the warmest months, July the coldest: ski time!

**The Luckie Strike cave in Waitomo is quite possibly the most physically demanding and beautiful cave in the country.**



and Millbrook, consistently voted best golf resort in Australasia. Or you could simply hack your way around the six holes of tiny Ringa Ringa Course, on Stewart Island. Green fees are \$5; the views rival those of Cape Kidnappers. [www.bestofgolfnewzealand.com](http://www.bestofgolfnewzealand.com)

**TRIM THE SAILS:** Surrounded by water, Kiwi kids grow up sailing. Olympic medals and the America's Cup (at times) have crammed the nation's trophy cabinets. So you'll be in safe hands if you join a pleasure cruise, perhaps exploring the forest-lined bays and inlets of the Marlborough Sounds, or Auckland's sparkling, island-studded Hauraki Gulf. Better still, learn how those first enterprising Polynesians crossed the Pacific, sailing only by the wind, navigating only by stars and currents. An outing on the Haunui, a traditionally built, double-hulled migration canoe on the Auckland harbour, can be a truly memorable experience. (You can count on the Haunui's crew, which just completed a 20,000-km, 18-month journey across the Pacific and back.) [www.wakaquest.com](http://www.wakaquest.com)

**SIP AND SAVOR:** New Zealand is about new world wine: innovation, intensity and flavor. Check any international wine awards and you'll find Kiwi Pinot Noirs, aromatics, Sauvignon Blancs and bubbly up there in the medals. Sipping one of these in the home vineyard with the winemaker—perhaps among the hillocks and rocks of Central Otago, or sun-drenched river plains of Marlborough—is an experience that's hard to beat. Even better is to match the





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Ian Brodie

wine with local fare: artisan, organic, export-quality fare such as grass-fed lamb and beef, wild venison or marine-farmed green-shell mussels. If you're city bound you'll learn how cuisine, coffee and craft beer can be taken very seriously in New Zealand. So get seriously gourmet, visit the delis, coffee roasters and brewers with Zest Food Tours, touted as one of the Top 10 walking tours for globetrotting foodies. [www.newzealand.com/int/food-and-wine](http://www.newzealand.com/int/food-and-wine) and [www.zestfoodtours.co.nz](http://www.zestfoodtours.co.nz).

**MIDDLE EARTH:** Modor, Mount Doom, Edoras—Oscar-winning director and local boy Peter Jackson considers the New Zealand landscape the perfect match for J.R.R. Tolkien's mystical, mythical world. *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* film location | tours are offered throughout Middle Earth/New Zealand, including the actual, ingeniously created Hobbiton set. [www.lordoftheringstours.co.nz](http://www.lordoftheringstours.co.nz), [redcarpettours.com](http://redcarpettours.com) and [www.hobbitontours.co.nz](http://www.hobbitontours.co.nz) •

Boats in a bay in Marlborough Sounds, New Zealand. Young vines in the Marlborough region of New Zealand. This area is said to be the best in the world for Sauvignon Blanc. There are 44 Hobbit holes at Hobbiton Movie Set Tours, which were reconstructed in 2011 for *The Hobbit* trilogy.

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