

The aerial view of marine terraces, raised beaches, or geological benches, headlands and bays near Wellington in New Zealand.

Images by Corbis



# NIRVANA FOR NATURE LOVERS

Placed firmly on the map by the Lord of the Rings trilogy, New Zealand is home to some of the world's most spectacular scenery, writes Ellen Boonstra.

## First Stop: Auckland

Those landing in Auckland (population 1.3 million including surrounding areas) should resist the urge to head straight to the great outdoors in favour of a sampling of New Zealand's urban life. Affectionately nicknamed the 'City of Sails' for having more boats per capita than anywhere in the world, the gateway to New Zealand is a vibrant and multicultural city offering an eclectic blend of fashion, food and arts.

Auckland is also home to Trelise Cooper, the nation's number one fashion designer, whose bohemian-inspired creations are often snapped up before they hit the shop floor. You'll find her boutique, along with many other designer stores, at Princes Wharf. Not far away is the Viaduct Harbour area, replete with lively eateries where you can dine in the open air.

If you're one of those people who like to brag they've seen everything but is short on time, why not cheat a little and take in all of Auckland's highlights in one fell swoop? From the Sky Tower, some 238 metres colossal, the Southern Hemisphere's highest building (but then there's not much manmade competition in these parts), you have a glorious view of the entire city, stretching to 80 kilometres on clear days.

## Getting to the Heart

A two-and-half-hour drive (235km) south of Auckland lies Rotorua. This picture-perfect township straddles a volcanic plateau punctuated by geothermal marvels like geysers and hot springs. Scenic lakes, trout fishing, mountain biking trails and forest walking tracks - they're all here in overabundance. It's also the pulsating



A sneak peek into the nightlight of Auckland, New Zealand



**Interesting facts about New Zealand** • The indigenous Māori name for New Zealand is Aotearoa, commonly translated as "land of the long white cloud" • An eternal fascination for anyone who visits the country –the sheep to person ratio. Current estimates place it at nine sheep per human, down from a peak of 22 to 1 a couple of decades ago • Looking at the map, you'd think New Zealand is only made up of two large islands, plus a few smaller ones scattered about. By last count, however, there are close to 800 islands • Bungee jumping was invented in New Zealand. Before the Europeans arrived, New Zealand had no predatory animals, making it a heaven for birds. Many of them have lost the ability to fly • Other famous movies shot in New Zealand: The Piano, The Last Samurai; The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe; Perfect Strangers and parts of Matrix and Mission Impossible 2.



heart of Māori land for those seeking the chance to experience a dose of indigenous culture.

Moving a bit further south we reach Taupo, famous for a lake the size of Singapore, fed by melted snow from the mountains. This popular resort town is also the birthplace of the expert consulted for this piece - His Excellency Bede Corry, the ambassador of New Zealand to Thailand. "The feedback that I get from Thais who've visited New Zealand is incredibly positive," he says. "They talk about the people, the beauty of the landscape, about how close they can get to it. You can be part of it, you can walk in that beautiful rain forest, you can swim in those beautiful beaches, you can play in the snow... They love that real connection to nature."

## The Natural Way

Our next stop on the North Island, close to its southernmost tip, is Wellington (population 200,000). New Zealand's capital city is built around a charming harbour, established in the middle of the 19th century, and it's full of terrific shops, restaurants, museums and art galleries. In a mere hour and a half, visitors can be in a totally different climate in the Martinborough area, which produces some of the world's greatest Pinot Noirs and other wines. While there's no official national dish in New Zealand, visitors will delight in the quality, freshness and often organic nature of its produce that can be experienced in restaurants and cafes wherever you go.

An hour north of Wellington is Kapiti Island where under special conditions tourists are allowed to visit this extraordinary wildlife sanctuary. Kapiti boasts some of the most unusual birdlife you will ever come across. It's the place to go "tramping" which - lest you get the wrong idea - is New Zealand speak for "hiking". Kiwis are very protective about their outdoors. "Many of us, wherever we grew up, were never far away from a beautiful beach, forest or lake," Bede Corry explains. "People feel a very strong sense of the landscape accordingly and that's reflected in our laws and our approach. This is a bonus for tourists who get to see this landscape in such a pristine state."

## Island Hopping

From Wellington it's a short journey by ferry to yet another very different landscape - the "sounds" (large flooded valleys) of the South Island. It's here where you have the opportunity to get up close and personal with all sorts of marine wildlife, from whales and dolphins to seals and albatrosses. Unlike the Australian outback where hardly a month goes by without a news report of some hapless wanderer being swallowed alive by a bloodthirsty

Top: The soothing tranquility of the Avon River in Christchurch  
Upper right: Close-up of Maori statue, one of the indigenous culture found in Tamatekapua Meeting House, Rotorua  
Upper far right: Maori women cook basket-held food in Rotorua's boiling springs.  
Below: A sculpture of a kiwi, New Zealand's national bird, stands in Queenstown.



## TRAVEL NEW ZEALAND

**Right: The thermal wonderland Champagne Pool hot springs within the Wai-O-Tapu geothermal area in the Waikato region**  
**Below: Wellington Harbour in New Zealand, a magnificent lake-like expanse of sheltered water surrounded by hills with a narrow entrance to the sea.**

creature, there's no such danger in New Zealand. There are no poisonous snakes, ferocious crocodiles or nasty bugs. That's because there are no snakes or crocodiles, period (although you might come across the odd creepy-crawlies). With the lack of predators, some surmise the wildlife has perhaps gotten a little too comfortable for its own good since many of the bird species - including national symbol the Kiwi - have lost their ability to fly.

### Tip of the Iceberg

Travelling further south, our next destination is Christchurch (population 400,000), possibly New Zealand's most leafy city. Aptly dubbed 'Garden City', the town centre is compact enough to discover on foot and there's nothing more pleasant here than meandering along Avon River with its verdant banks, poplars and weeping willows.

During the winter season, New Zealand's second largest city has the enviable distinction of being within two hours of skiing, golfing, bungee-jumping, rafting, mountain biking, hot-air ballooning and wind surfing. Christchurch is a great base from which to explore the Southern Alps, the mountain range that runs along the western side of the South Island. Adrenaline addicts can get the biggest and most natural high through exhilarating sports like skiing, heli-skiing and snowboarding. Superlative landmarks to watch out for include Treble Cone (the biggest ski resort), Mount Cook (the highest mountain) and Franz Joseph Glacier (the longest glacier).

### Safe Landing

Here we arrive at the final stop of our country tour - Queenstown (population 10,000). Surrounded by marvellous mountains, crystalline lakes and lavishly wild rainforests, this resort town is another major attraction on the tourist map. Now the snow has melted, it's the perfect time of year to enjoy the spring in all its glory, whether by foot, mountain bike or skateboard. Queenstown has a reputation as a premier wine and gourmet centre, while the former gold mining town of Arrowtown (20 minutes away) also features excellent restaurants and bars.

'The great thing for tourists is the extraordinary diversity in the landscape inside a relatively small land area. So you can have very different holiday experiences inside the same country because the landscape is so different,' the ambassador concludes. ☞

#### SMOOTH AS SILK

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