



## Travel Trunks

New Zealand: Fascinating Middle Earth a vast array for the senses

Mental picture... Boxing Day ... a round, jolly tourist, with very white skin dives beard-first off an impossibly tall bridge on a bungee jump... the stress now relieved after a big night in the sleigh.

Exaggeration? Perhaps, but New Zealand is a country where people are out doing wild and wonderful things. It is one big playground and a travel jewel of unequalled brilliance! As opposed to parkas and crackling fires, Christmas here means sun and surf and maybe a picnic or BBQ in lieu of a big hot turkey in the oven.

With a land mass about 20% larger than Alberta, it is

home to four million people and 50 million sheep.

This is not a misprint.

It's also a melting pot of cultures with European, Maori and everything in between comprising this society. Australia is about 1600 km's to the west and a lifetime away in attitude. In this sense, picture the relationship between the USA and Canada. Yes, we are close family, but...

The land itself consists of two main islands, oddly enough named the North and South, with myriad smaller atolls dotting the waters around it. South Island is one that was created through the grinding of

of the Pacific and Indian-Australian tectonic plates far below the Earth's surface. The North Island is a little different breed of cat. Born through the might of the planet's core, it is home to many tumultuous spires, with steam and ash burping out of them at varying times. Middle Earth is well represented here as the North Island volcanic peaks were used for the menacing backdrops for Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings movie trilogy. Meanwhile back in the south, the picturesque Southern Alps were used for the gorgeous panoramic views during Frodo's famous trek. Aragorn's baby blues never looked so good here.

New Zealand is a place where the people are ever so accommodating, yet ever so willing to try something verging on lunacy. This is indeed the extreme sports capital of the world! Some examples of this include "fly-by-wire" where one white knuckles it in a powered contraption that, attached to wires, flies around in circles inside a canyon. Another is black water rafting requiring one to float through pitch black, water filled caves, personal raft snug around your waist. Zorbing is from another planet as you ride inside this big inflatable plastic ball (like a hamster) and roll down hills, across water or whatever else they point you towards!

Not all activities are as frenzied, however.

Starting in the north, we would immediately find a spectacular area known as the Bay of Islands. This collection of 144 land masses is the target of many yachts and charter boat excursions and you may even get a chance to swim with the dolphins here! New Zealand is sub-tropical, meaning mid 30 degree summers and moderate winters.

Because of its volcanic history, North Island is home to geysers and boiling mud pools, fantastic caves and amazing lakes. In fact, Lake Taupo, the country's biggest, is so deep that up until a few years ago mankind had never reached the bottom. This is the aftermath of perhaps the largest volcanic explosion in history which took place almost 2000 years ago. The result today is a huge crater filled with fresh water and trout by the millions. It is an anglers paradise!

Tongariro National Park, a World Heritage Site, is home to three volcanoes. One is active, while the others play host to some of the finest snow skiing in New Zealand. The mysterious Whanganui National Park to the east features a meandering river and is prime territory for kayaks and jet boats.



Nearby Hawkes Bay is probably the sunniest of New Zealand's countless beach areas and is home to an eccentric art-deco theme, while to the west we find 90 Mile Beach, where the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean collide.

Getting to from North to South Island is more than easy, with ferries running a regular schedule that take about three hours. Marlborough Sounds is a great place to launch into the south, too. With many inlets, bays and islands, it makes for many a Kodak moment. Picton terminal is located in the belly of this area and is gateway to the biggest wine making region in the country. It resembles Napa with 65 wineries and all the "sideways" detours one might expect. Just pull up a goblet and enjoy!

There are 13 national parks in New Zealand and one gets the impression that you are always in one! The West Coast is another World Heritage area that runs all along the western shoreline and is in many minds, the most ethereal of New Zealand's natural attractions. Its lush vegetation and climate reminds us of the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island south of Tofino. Here you will find, rainforest, raging rivers, mountains and slowly creeping glaciers, towering limestone formations and isolated lakes.

The Southern Alps form the backbone of South Island and as we cross them, we run into the Christchurch/ Canterbury regions. The dazzling mountain vistas, stretching to coastal plains and finally the Pacific Ocean are quite a thrill, especially in a hot air balloon and many have stumbled over the words describing them. Picture the Rocky Mountains and neighbouring foothills leading on to golden sandy beaches, mountainous cliffs and a great big sea yawning at you. Whales, seals and dolphins provide the welcome.

Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest peak is the king of this mountain range and the pristine beauty of the place just makes you feel squeaky clean inside. The country's premier ski and lake resorts are located in Queenstown...kind of a Banff-like destination with all the attitude of your classic ski village. If you're lucky, you might run into Shania Twain picking up milk at the local market, as she lives not far from here.

At this point we are starting to run out of land, but finally to the west, remains a fantastic network of deep

mountain gorges, lakes and fjords. Fjordland National Park and Milford Sound is truly a staggering place to be and resembles the jutting shoreline of Norway. Countless walking trails and boating excursions are undertaken here and waterfalls hundreds of metres high are not uncommon.

It's really quite stupid how one country has managed to hoard such an array of natural wonders and the Kiwi people are quite proud of what they have, despite their low key demeanor. We haven't even spoken of the charming cities, either. And, yes... they are all well worth the time.

Seeing it all in one swoop is next to impossible, so it's a matter of picking your spots or doing an organized tour. Holiday House is a vacation company that serves all your New Zealand wanderlust and they've been doing it for a long time. If you want to go by airplane, rail, motor coach or a do-it-yourself RV option, they have all the tools to set you on your way.

The best way to start this process is by contacting Departures Travel. The great thing about Departures is that they have staff who have actually lived and traveled extensively in New Zealand. If you have a question, they have an informed answer.

We started out this journey with Christmas in mind and if you wanted to try something a little different from the norm, then New Zealand would be high up on anyone's list. The diversity of natural wonders and sense-tingling moments would be hard to equal in pretty much any other place. The fact that the festive season falls, when the weather is best, is also a nice attraction. Dashing through the snow with the Kiwis may be unlikely at this time of year, but the thought of toasting the season at a classy resort or on a gleaming yacht with a plate of fresh seafood waiting to be enjoyed, should dispel any longing regrets.

The old elf would be smiling.

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