

Life & Arts Travel

New Zealand for beginners



New Zealand's South Island has so many destinations catering to thrill-seeking tourists it can feel like an extreme summer camp, but the scenery alone is breathtaking. At top, a bungee-jumper goes off a suspension bridge over the Kawarau River, near Queenstown. At left, travelers take in the view of Lake Wanaka from a jetty. And the Cardrona Ski Resort, right, near Wanaka, bustles with activity. Photos by New York Times

By Joe Drape / New York Times

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It had taken me three flights, two days and a white-knuckle drive



up spiraling switchbacks in swirling snow to arrive at this barstool near the shore of Lake Wanaka at the foot of the Southern Alps. Business had brought me here on such short notice that I barely had had time to buy a ski jacket – a weird experience in August while wearing shorts and flip-flops – let alone do any real prep work for my journey to New Zealand.



Now I was in hiking boots and layered in fleeces far from home with a steaming bowl of fish chowder in front of me. It was noon and time to breathe deep and figure out how I was going to maximize my experience in a country that I had never given much thought.



What I knew about New Zealand could fit on a bubble gum wrapper. “The Lord of the Rings” and “The Hobbit” had been filmed here – check. The All Blacks, its national rugby team, was a global powerhouse – check 2. I also knew thrill seekers came here to jump out of gondolas and off bridges attached to a bungee cord and also relished snowboarding and skiing off ramps and in half-pipes.



In fact, I was here to write about how elite athletes have descended on New Zealand each August for decades, transforming its South Island into a sort of extreme summer camp. None of these activities were exactly in my wheelhouse, and that was why tourism brochures were stacked between my chowder and cold beer. I was riffling them one-handed like a deck of cards when a woman appeared next to me and offered a comforting pat on my shoulder.



“Nothing to stress over, darlin’,” she said, her pointed glasses accenting a luminous smile. “Just wander the town and enjoy us. You’ll fall in love with the place, you will.”

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She disappeared out the door before I could offer even a smile. But it sounded like a plan: My time was as limited as my local knowledge, and surrendering to a strange land, indeed, might be good for the soul.

I had 72 hours to get the flavor of a place that I was neither particularly suited for nor would have necessarily chosen as a destination on my own.

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No one will ever mistake me for Bear Grylls, and I know that the Wild is going to beat this Man every time. Still, in a couple of days I managed to discover my inner extreme athlete, contemplate magnificent nature, catch a flick in a charming art house, gorge on steak and fish and even bet a horse race or two.

I spent my mornings on skis in the mountains to get to the Olympic athletes I was in the country to cover, which left my afternoons free to chart this resort town of Wanaka.

My days started with a meat pie and a flat white, which sounds rustic but was served with the newspapers at a number of coffee shops and was nothing more than an empanada washed down with a latte. It girded the stomach well for the drive up the mountain where the sheep huddled against one another for acres upon acres but then suddenly gave way to a steep, twisting, narrow dirt road.

On a postcard or from a well-fortified scenic lookout, the mountain range looks brushstroked by Michelangelo with the snowcaps a celestial white and bathed in golden light. From behind the wheel of a car, on a road without a guardrail pretending to keep you from driving off a sheer cliff, the peaks look more like forces of nature stalking your peripheral vision

and ready to fall on you at any time.

I will join the chorus of travelers and tell you that the landscapes of New Zealand are magnificent. They are enchanted and ethereal but also forbidding and intimidating. In short, it is the perfect location to create J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth.

I shivered with relief each time I pulled into the Cardrona Alpine Resort and tried to forget that eventually I'd have to make my way down. I accomplished that after a couple of hours of snowplowing down the mountain.

New Zealand offers challenges to skiers and snowboarders of all stripes – backcountry adventurers, expert mogul managers and freestylers. The Southern Alps are bald and knotty with few trees breaking up the terrain or shading the August sun. It means a fleece is often enough to keep you warm, and the wide runs encourage as much daring as you are up for.

With its jumps and Olympic-size halfpipe and a wealth of gentle intermediate runs, Cardrona accommodates most thrill seekers as well as a strictly functional skier like myself. It caters to families with a children's ski school and a raucous, casual lodge.

I did want a taste of a New Zealand outdoor adventure and chose a tramp that started in the center of town, took me to Roy's Bay and wound me along the lake shore with strategic stops at the Edgewater Resort for a scone and then the Rippon Vineyard for a wine tasting. It was cooler on the trails, and the wind rustled the red beech trees, giving me a chill as well as flushing the rifleman birds and South Island robins into the air.

Eventually, I arrived at Waterfall Creek, where I sat and enjoyed the waters of sparkling sapphire reflecting the soft edges of a snow-capped mountain range.

It looked like something out of "When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth," but colored and highlighted by Andy Warhol.

Admittedly, I was on much more comfortable ground in town, where I padded between boutiques and pubs and chatted up strangers until they became friends. Or maybe it was the other way around.

And then, of course, there was Carol Little, the woman in the pointy glasses with the husky, comforting voice who had urged me to wander Wanaka stress free.

I saw her on the mountain dressed, fittingly, as a fairy godmother, waving a magic wand and greeting all of us as we put on her skis. Eighteen years ago, her daughter was married here and Little had such an enchanted weekend that she decided to leave her home near Dunedin and make Wanaka her home.

There was no need for further intervention.

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