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New Zealand for beginners

It's the movie homeland of "Lord of the Rings" and "The Hobbit." Home to All Blacks rugby team. Here's a look at New Zealand beyond those icons.

By **JOE DRAPE**
The New York Times

It had taken me three flights, two days and a white-knuckle drive up spiraling switchbacks in swirling snow to arrive at this bar stool near the shore of Lake Wanaka at the foot of the Southern Alps.

Now I was in hiking boots and layered in fleece with a steaming bowl of fish chowder in front of me. It was 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 and the All Blacks, its national rugby team, was a global powerhouse. I also knew thrill seekers came here to jump out of gondolas and off bridges attached to bungee cords and also relished snowboarding and skiing.

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."

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.

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.

Skiing and scenery

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

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ANDREW QUILTY / NYT

Travelers take in the view of Lake Wanaka in New Zealand. The country's South Island has lovely scenery as well as many destinations catering to thrill-seeking tourists.

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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.

From behind the wheel of a car, on a road without a guardrail pretending to keep you from driving off a sheer cliff, the snow-capped 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 back down the road.

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 half-pipe and a wealth of gentle intermediate runs, Cardrona accommodates most thrill seekers, as well as a strictly functional skier like myself.

It was springtime in the Southern Hemisphere, which meant afternoons down the mountain near Lake Wanaka were sunny and mild and lent themselves to "tramps," in the local vernacular, or hikes, west of here at Mount Aspiring National Park.

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 along the lake shore with strategic stops at the Edgewater Resort for a scone and the Rippon Vineyard for a wine tasting. It was cooler on the trails, and the wind rustled the red beech trees.

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.

It was during my initial hours in town over that bowl of fish chowder, however, that I got my best tips. The first of them came from Peter Byrne, who with his wife, Vicki, was the proprietor of the Lake Bar.

He saw me looking at the entries for the New Zealand horse races and ventured a guess that I was a betting man; he suggested I find my way to the Bullock Bar where there was off-track betting and the best steak in town. He was correct.

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 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.

"Where else are you going to see all this beauty? We love the outdoors. We feel alive. And look at all the smiles on these people. They keep me young. If you haven't fallen in love with us by now, darlin', I can't help you."

There was no need for further intervention.

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