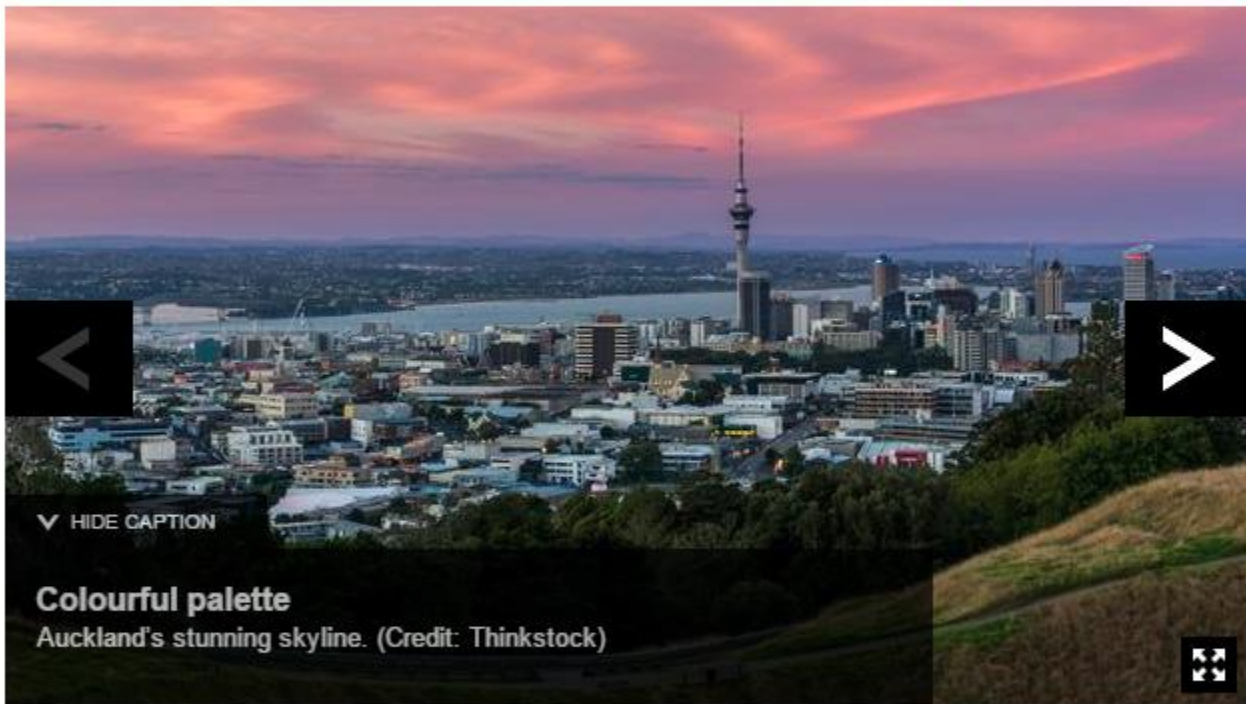


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# Is this the edgiest place on earth?

By Ramsey Qubein

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Innovation happens on the edge and "you cannot get more on the edge than New Zealand," according to Brett O'Riley, CEO of Auckland's economic development group.

Auckland may be NZ's biggest city but it retains a happy, village vibe, locals say. It's a chilled-out city surrounded by hills and incredible coastline. It's also fast becoming a commercial hub for global business, in part, driven by huge interest from China.

And while NZ may be a small economy its lack of red tape and corruption, greater personal freedom and investor protection are proving a big draw for entrepreneurs. This, plus a transparent and stable business climate make it mighty appealing.

This surge in Asian interest has been reflected in visitor numbers in the past year; a 5% increase in international visitors at conferences and events in Auckland, according to Statistics NZ. The numbers from the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment also show a rise in conferences and meetings.

Kiwis are sports fanatics and the 2015 event calendar is packed. And it's not all rugby. Kicking off the year with the ICC Cricket World Cup, then the Volvo Ocean Race the city will also host the FIFA U20 World Cup at the end of May. All are expected to draw more international business and cachet.

After Auckland's seven city and district councils united into one "super city" in 2010, the city's core has regenerated and grown. Downtown will become more liveable for locals and easier to navigate for business travellers and international visitors.

The popular Wynyard Quarter and Britomart areas, both waterfront districts, are being revitalised with new apartments, shops, restaurants, and tech company offices springing up. Major investment to build an integrated transportation system with metro rail lines is also on the way.

## **Airport**

The [Airbus](#) shuttle bus plies the 21km journey between [Auckland International Airport](#) and downtown every 15 minutes and stops close to most major hotels and landmarks (\$28 NZD, equivalent to \$22, roundtrip for the 45 minute ride).

Taxis are readily available from the arrivals area. There are two types of cabs: more expensive, but super-reliable Corporate Cabs (\$90 NZD one way, equivalent to \$70) and standard taxis (\$60 NZD one way, equivalent to \$47). Both can be hailed on the street, but Corporate Cabs will also take reservations making them more popular with business travellers, many of which will have travelled long-haul.

Allow time when making connections between international and domestic flights as the terminals aren't connected. Passengers can easily make the 10-minute walk between them or hop on the free bus that leaves every 20 minutes.

Most passengers are connecting from Air New Zealand's extensive network of long-haul flights. The growth in arrivals is largely attributed to a 14% increase in arrivals from China and a 10.4% increase from the US. While these are general arrival numbers, Air New Zealand reports strong business class bookings as well.

Air New Zealand is also gaining popularity as it boasts the only "lie-flat" bed seat in economy class, the [Skycouch](#), has become a favourite for business travellers on a tight budget. By purchasing the Skycouch fare, three standard seats with a fold-up section at the base transform into a cosy bed for one.

### **Money matters**

Both NZ and Australia were relatively insulated from the global recession and continued to thrive. Although property prices are on the rise, Auckland is still surprisingly affordable for a major city. Even a Kiwi speciality, the Flat White (steamed milk over a double espresso), costs just a few dollars.

Unique to the region, some banks have extended hours on weekends allowing busy professionals and business travellers a chance to do banking at almost any time of day.

### **Cultural know-how**

New Zealanders are exceptionally friendly and outgoing. If you need directions or assistance, don't be shy to ask passers-by on the street. In business situations, the egalitarian culture means that first names are used almost immediately in many situations, but wait for your local host to initiate any informality. More casual business dress is also quite common even for executives.

### **Hotels**

Most business visitors choose to stay in the central business district, where the waterfront [Sofitel Auckland Viaduct Harbour](#) is embarking on a renovation project to transform 172 rooms into more business-friendly spaces with ergonomic desks and improved bathrooms with strong water pressure to wash away jet lag. A new fitness centre and spa are on-site, and all treatments include a complimentary foot massage.

[Sky City Grand](#) is also undergoing renovations but keeping a buffer floor in between each work zone to prevent disruption to guests. The hotel, which has 316 rooms and is across the street from the largest casino in New Zealand, has launched three new restaurants [Gusto](#), [Masu by Nic Watt](#), and The Federal Delicatessen, as part of a project to revitalise the neighbourhood.

Federal Street, in front of the hotel, transitioned recently to a partial pedestrian area with lively bars, cafes, and outdoor seating areas. It's a great spot to watch bungee jumpers make the leap from [the Sky Tower](#), which is the tallest man-made structure in the Southern Hemisphere.

### **Dinner for one**

Fusion food, a combination of the best of antipodean and South East Asian cuisine, is NZ's big speciality. Head for Viaduct Harbour, the city's bustling heart at the edge of the CBD and home to the [Harbourside](#)

[Ocean Bar Grill](#) in the historic Ferry Building. Arrive early to secure a table on the terrace or reserve your business lunch in advance. It is not uncommon to see savvy business folk taking a solo lunch break facing the water. Try the crayfish laksa, which showcases New Zealand's penchant for blending local seafood with Pacific Rim flavours, or the slow-cooked lamb and tomato ragout, which is a menu hallmark of the country.

[The Sugar Club](#) at the top of the Sky Tower is the city's most panoramic eatery offering a tasting menu by celebrity chef Peter Gordon. Express business lunches are perfect for corporate diners whether solo or with a colleague. The raised platform that rings the restaurant provides entertainment for diners as they watch brave souls make the terrifying walk on the 1.2-metre wide, outside ledge of the building. Don't worry. They are tethered with a strong wire.

### **Off the clock**

Getting out of the city in your free time is easy, especially if you have two-to-three hours to spare. Hop on a ferry from Viaduct Harbour and make the 30-minute bay crossing to Waiheke Island, a small residential enclave that is home to organic farms and vineyards. Take one of the island's [food and wine tours](#) and sample delicacies from local purveyors including fresh olive oil and island-aged cheese.

If you're more of a thrill seeker with an hour to spare, see the city from the water by taking the wheel of an authentic America's Cup yacht with [Explore NZ](#), which takes guests on jaw-dropping excursions across the bay. Pick your side of the boat carefully as it is often seen blowing through the waters at a sharp angle. Whale and dolphin watching boat trips are also available.

### **Special considerations**

As with many islands, border controls are tight when it comes to bringing in fruit, vegetables, or other items like plants, wood or other natural products. This is part of an effort to prevent the introduction of diseases. The penalties are high and if you're bringing gifts for friends or colleagues, it's important to remember this.

The Auckland climate is also something to bear in mind when packing for your trip, the changeable weather can mean you can get sunshine, gales and hail all in one morning. Pack sun protection as the city has a high UV rating.

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