

New Zealand - 2026 January 18 to February 12

It finally happened; we traveled to New Zealand. After thinking about touring there for years and having many opportunities pass on by, we finally made it to Kiwi Land. Due to the South of the Equator location, the longest days are around December 22, so we decided to try for the early summertime there. We were too early; there was rain almost every day on this trip. For reasons that will remain unknown, we decided on a train-based deluxe trip called Great Journeys of New Zealand.

Delta Airlines offered a non-stop flight from Los Angeles to Auckland, New Zealand, on the North Island. This was followed by a train trip to Wellington, a large ferry ride across to the South Island, another similar train from Picton to Christchurch, the Alpine Express from there to Greymouth on the west (wet) side, then a bus ride down the west coast, a jetboat up the Haast River, and then over the mountains to Queenstown. Chris went on a long bus trip to Milford Sound and flew in a small plane back. The escorted tour ended there after 15 days, so we took the minibus/train to Dunedin on the South Coast, where we stayed for 4 nights, flew back to Auckland, and then back to Los Angeles.

One day in time disappeared (international dateline) on the trip there; it reappeared on the trip back. The pre-arranged tour for the group of 17 persons took care of transport, places to stay and activities. That tour was capably escorted by Emily from Auckland who kept the diverse group together and organized for the scheduled activities and places to stay each night. Every day had breakfast at the hotel; several lunches and dinners (especially on the train) were included. On the North Island, we liked the visit to the tea plantation with the classic English tea (New Zealand style), the visit to the Glow-worm cave in Rotorua, and an evening sunset boat ride around a bay. Chris joined the group on a hike in an ecologically isolated (fenced) mountaintop where flightless, native kiwi birds and native forest are protected. The capital city of Wellington (famous for Hobbiton) had an active commuter train service and looked much like San Francisco with its hilly, flowery environment surrounded by the bay.

Now on the South Island, our favorite part of the trip was the boat ride out to the isolated abalone ranch where the grower from Morro Bay in California was creating blue pearls from abalone. Then we visited the Blenheim wine region and rode the train to Christchurch where we went punting on the Avon River through the city park. Christchurch was built as a very classic British city. Much of the downtown area was being rebuilt after an earthquake. The train ride across the "Southern Alps" to the west coast was very scenic; we liked the hotel near the beach and the small zoo with penguins, kiwis, and rare lizards. We rode on three independent gondolas up to the top of hills in the North Island (volcanic area) National Park, Christchurch, and Queenstown. Now, on our own, we took the Cheeky Kiwi trip through the old desolate gold mining area with towns that looked like they did in 1885 and boarded the spectacular Taieri Gorge train to the very nice town of Dunedin with its fancy railroad station, authentic old buildings, botanic garden, and large bay with fur seals and birds including the only large island albatross colony. Those long wingspan birds normally live on small isolated islands.

The entire journey involved first-rate service, transport, and accommodations. Therefore, the cost far exceeded the cost of any other trip we have taken. We were too soon for a possible extension of the Taieri Gorge diesel powered train to the old depot in Middlemarch, or additional passenger service on existing South Island freight lines. At the end of the trip, we discovered the electrified Auckland city rail system that offered frequent (10-minute) service with a short bus connection to the airport. It leaves from a large building on Queen Street across from the Ferry Building that looks just like a railroad station with the usual clock in front. The large glass-enclosed Maritime Museum nearby on the shore shows educational information about various methods over history to explore new areas.