

New Zealand



Having spent the last eight days in New Zealand, we need to provide an update of this amazing country while everything is fresh in our memories.

General:

We continue to have remarkable weather. Seas have been calm to moderate while underway and the weather for the shore excursions has ranged from the low 80s to the mid-70s. Ironic that as we travel North to South in New Zealand that the weather cools rather than warms, further confirmation that we are in the Southern Hemisphere.

Lorraine has been very consistent with her quilting project as we have found fabric shops in each port that had material locally made and themed. She is on her second 20" square so this project should be really nice when completed. Of course, she has also kept up with her exercise classes although fewer of these are conducted when we have back to back port visits. Same applies to me as exercise is basically the moderate 2-3 miles walking we are doing on tours. Running is for sea days.

Food continues to be consistently excellent. The ship took on major provisions in Auckland and changed out a number of the crew who, as previously mentioned, either ended a contract or are on vacation. In fact, crew member families came aboard in Auckland for a day for the crew staying on the ship for the entire voyage. Most of the current lecturers and entertainers have also rotated and the new folks are just as qualified and talented. All the lectures have been recorded so it is easy to review them in our cabin on the media system.

The media system onboard is basically a close-circuit, 40" TV with internal and external feeds. We can see our daily schedule, upcoming ports of call, restaurant reservations, daily menus at the regular and specialty restaurants, and our shipboard account information. We can also view an extensive listing of first-run movies as well as films by category (think Netflix). Regular TV is somewhat limited to CNN, FOX, and sports channels. The ship streamed the NFL playoffs live and we will see the Super Bowl. There is also a channel for TED talks and, of course, detailed information on upcoming Viking river and ocean cruises.

Entertainment is still provided every night although sometimes, especially after a long day of excursions, we have simply spent the time with new friends, read a book, or worked on projects such as this update letter. We finally did see the "mentalist," Anthony Lane, who not only gave a terrific show but held a very well attended session on how he did six tricks. We plan on showing them to you when we get home. Anthony teamed with a comedian/singer named Jo Little, also from Australia, who was very funny and had an excellent voice. She is 4' 10" but was a powerhouse (think Dolly Parton.) A Maori dance and singing group, Te Puawai, did a special evening show on the pool deck which was magical combined with perfect weather and a clear sky. The men performed some of their historical war chants that are used by their national rugby team to start each match. Employing Maori weapons that look like a cross between a spear and a sword (hard to describe), they are a pretty imposing group. The women danced and sang and used hollow balls on short ropes which they twirl and hit with their hands to make sounds. Incredible in person. Additional guest entertainers included Adam Mana, an Australian magician and illusionist, Will Martin, a New Zealander and singer (exceptional), and Rikki Jay, a Brit comedian who starred in London Weekend Television's "The Big Break talent Show."

Excursions:

1. **Bay of Islands (Russell).** Once the capital of New Zealand, the port town of Russell was the first European settlement in New Zealand. The Bay of Islands actually consists of more than 150 islands that are home to secret coves, beaches, and Norfolk pines (iconic tree in the tropics). We took the Bay of Islands and Kauri Forest tour. The bus tour gave us a good feel for the landscape which outside of Russell is rolling hills, corn fields, and sheep and cattle ranches. Our first stop after a 40-minute drive was at Rainbow Falls. The falls themselves are unique in that they are about 70' high and 35' wide with a good flow of water. At the base of the falls is a profusion of large rocks that cause the water to spray back high into the air. When the sun is out, it creates a beautiful, vividly

colored rainbow hence the name of the falls. First time we have ever looked *down* at a rainbow. We then travelled to the Kauri Forest. Kauri are a type of tree that survives hundreds of years. While not redwoods or sequoias, they are nevertheless, huge. The grove of kauri trees that we visited were approximately 30-35' in circumference and well over 100' tall. At one time New Zealand was two-thirds covered in kauri trees but logging, disease and human encroachment has greatly reduced their spread. They are now a protected species. Just a spectacular day walking in a magical environment.

- Auckland (2-days).** Known as the "City of Sails" due to the huge port, numerous marinas and hosting two America Cup races, Auckland is a very large, modern city. The population of New Zealand is only 4.6 million and approximately 1.4 million people or a third of the overall population live in the city and surrounding municipalities. The city reminds us of Seattle, Washington to include a Sky Tower. Coincidentally, we arrived on a national holiday celebrating the founding of the city. Two NZ navy warships were in the harbor and tents were set up everywhere in a carnival-like atmosphere. We did the Kiwi Countryside excursion which was a 4-hour bus tour of the region. As a highlight, we stopped at Haumoana Farm which is 200 acres and has sheep, cattle and fallow deer (a special breed of deer that are about half the size of the deer we see in the US.) The farm was beautiful. Open pasture areas were fenced for the different animals. A vegetable and fruit garden had a wide variety and all the plants and trees were so healthy and productive. We had tea and pastry goods at the farm and then had a demonstration of sheep shearing. It took a professional about 4 minutes to completely shear one large sheep. We then had a demonstration of sheep herding using two dogs, one a "barker" and the other a "herder." They worked together to move the sheep wherever they needed to be taken. Overall, just a nice visit with a wonderful local family. We definitely got the feeling that they are now in the "tourist herder" business more than just sheep farming. The second part of the excursion was to a beach along the West Coast. The beach itself was pristine with black sand and evidence of volcanic activity in the numerous sharp cliff formations in the area. These rock outcroppings are home to a huge population of gannets, a large, sea going bird. We saw hundreds of nests and both mature birds and young hatchlings (all white fuzz). They get colors as they age. All the young birds were constantly flapping their wings to gain strength to fly. The nesting cliffs are perfect launching sites for new birds because of the natural thermal updrafts. We could easily see 30 miles up and down the coastline. Dozens of surfers and paddle boarders. Simply beautiful. During free time in the afternoon after our return to Auckland, we took a 15 min, fast ferry over to Devonport, a harbor-side suburb of Auckland across the bay. We climbed Mt. Victoria, an approximately 275' "mountain" that afforded us incredible views back toward the port and city of Auckland. You actually have 360 degree views from the top but we stopped short as the path was very narrow and a pretty steep incline. Back to the gym! We walked around Devonport and returned on the ferry to the ship. On the second day in Auckland we did a city tour

by bus which included a drive by the War Memorial Museum, the Auckland Harbor Bridge, Royal New Zealand Yacht Club, and numerous local towns and bays. Auckland is a mix of restored Victorian houses and modern/contemporary architecture. The streets are immaculate. No discarded beer cans, cigarette packs, and coffee cups. No trash. We walked around Auckland easily and felt safe wherever we were.

3. **Rotorua.** Nestled in the Bay of Plenty, the port of Tauranga is in the shadow of Mt. Maunigami. An extinct volcano that can be seen for miles at sea before ever spotting the mainland, this mountain set the stage for our visit. Our excursion was to the geothermal springs located about 90 minutes' drive at Rotorua. The actual location is called the Te Puia Thermal Reserve and home of the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute. The bus driver narrated the tour through the countryside which include huge corn fields, more sheep farms but, most significantly, the largest kiwi fruit orchards in the world. Over 95% of New Zealand's kiwi production (over 100 varieties) is shipped overseas. The orchards themselves look more like vineyards. The kiwi trees are not very tall but have wide branches which are tied to trellis systems. This keeps the fruit off the ground but still easy to pick. The kiwi groves are enclosed by very tall hedges (20'+) that act as wind breaks. The other major activity is forestry and pine trees planted in the volcanic soil reach maturity in 17 years. Trucks carrying logs to the port for export reminded us of logging in Maine. We arrived at the Te Puia Thermal Reserve and were officially greeted by tribal chiefs and warriors with a special welcome ceremony and then a dance and song presentation. The best we have had in New Zealand and the South Pacific. This was followed by a buffet lunch of typical Maori food which included roast pork and chicken as well as vegetables and fruit dishes. After lunch, we walked to the hot springs. The main geyser (there are four in close proximity) is called Pohutu Geyser. It shoots water 35' in the air and lasts for about 45 minutes. It is the largest geyser in the Southern Hemisphere. Old Faithful in Yellowstone Park shoots about 60' in the air but only lasts for 10 minutes. It is the largest geyser in the Northern Hemisphere. Near the Pohutu Geyser are mud pools and steam vents. Our guide noted that they catch fish in the cooler parts of the local river and cook them in "steam pools." Great walk around the large park and very nice visit to the Maori Arts and Crafts Center where weavers and wood carvers were hard at work. Both modern and ancient tools are used and the level of craftsmanship was very, very high. Overall, well worth the long bus trip.
4. **Napier.** For only the second time on the trip we had a port visit cancelled. We thought we would be fine because the last cancellation related to the use of tenders in rough seas and Napier was to be a dockside mooring. Unfortunately, we had a strong following wind, high seas and a very narrow berthing location. The captain explained that we could go in and dock but that an approaching weather front might keep us from leaving the port on schedule. Safety of the ship, passengers and crew always win out so we circled the Napier Bay and left for our next destination. Note: Our shore excursion

was to be a “road train” tour through Napier which features art deco architecture and a nationally known aquarium. Perhaps another time.

5. **Wellington.** The political and cultural capital of New Zealand, the city is a mix of classic wooden cottages, art deco, and postmodern architecture. With a population of just under 500,000 Wellington is actually a composite of four boroughs with over 25% of the citizens from overseas. It has the feel of San Francisco with a very large harbor complex and then buildings and houses up the hills overlooking the city. Our first excursion was well outside of the city to a place called Zealandia. The world’s first fully fenced urban “Eco Sanctuary,” this is an unprecedented attempt at recreating the original forest and ecosystems to their original state (prior to human civilization.) While most governments work on a 2-year or 5-year planning cycle, Zealandia is based on a 500-year vision begun in 2000. There is a time capsule buried in an old artificial lake water system tower that reads in part, “To be opened in the year 2,500.”The park itself has over 15 miles of walking paths and our guided tour explained the measures put in place to restrict nonnative vegetation and animals from the facility. We saw many unique birds and plants to include two very rare Takahes which are flightless birds the size of small turkeys. Thought to be extinct in 1898, they were rediscovered in 1948. There are only 350 of these birds left in the world. We also saw a Tuatara (a small lizard) which looks prehistoric with spikes down its back. Our second excursion was a city and environs tour which included visits to several war memorials as well as a cable car museum and functioning cable car from the city to a high overlook at the Wellington Botanical Gardens.

6. **Christchurch.** At one time this beautiful city had a population well over 500,000, several very large office buildings, and numerous homes reflecting all architectural styles. On 4 September 2010 the city suffered a 7.1 magnitude quake. There was damage to some of the oldest buildings in the city, especially the churches, but the quake was deep. No loss of life. On 22 February 2011 a magnitude 6.3 quake hit the city. The center of the quake was in Lyttelton, location of the main port. This time the quake was very shallow and thus, did tremendous damage. 185 people were killed (130 in two downtown buildings) and several thousand were injured. The quake caused damage in two forms: rigid buildings collapsed from the shock waves and residential houses and cars were destroyed by “liquefaction” wherein the ground became permeated with water and house and cars sank and/or mud rose up to encircle them. Subsequently, over 100,000 residents left Christchurch for other parts of New Zealand or immigrated to Australia. Seven years later the city is still coping with the aftermath of the earthquake. Everyone we met could tell you exactly what they were doing when the earthquake hit. We took two excursions. The first was “punting on the Avon River.” A punt is a long, narrow flat-bottomed boat propelled by a “punter” who uses a long pole to push the boat. The Avon River runs through Christchurch and we punted along the river next to a 75-acre

botanical garden. For our second excursion we toured the garden and marveled at the size and age of the trees. Every specie was simply huge. We also drove by some of the rebuilding sites of public parks, residential areas, and the churches. Of the latter some are being carefully restored but for others the damage is simply too extensive.

Christchurch was the most “British” of the places we visited in New Zealand with house designs reminiscent of our military tour in the United Kingdom.

7. **Dunedin.** The city lies along a long, deep water channel on the Otago Peninsula. The commercial and tourist port is in Port Chalmers but the main activities focus on the city which is about a 20 minute drive. The population is about 130,000 of which 21,000 are students attending Otago University which is New Zealand’s first university established over 148 years ago. The student population is very diverse with most from outside of New Zealand. It is very strong in the technical sciences and has a world-class medical program. They have had 47 Rhodes Scholars. Dunedin has very strong and long roots with Scotland. In fact, “Dunedin” comes from the Scottish Gaelic “*Dun Eideann*” for Edinburg, the capital of Scotland. Settlers from Scotland began arriving on the Otago Peninsula in 1848. Our excursion consisted of a scenic bus tour around the city and countryside. There is a main road that follows the bay channel and then a parallel road up in the hills which became our bus route. Very steep inclines overlooking sheep-filled fields all appearing to be 30 degrees or more. Not a tour for the faint of heart but actually very safe. Excellent bus driver ... thank goodness. We left the tour bus in Dunedin and walked around the city. Once again, no trash or blaring horns. The street network in the center of the city is in the form of an octagon so hard to get lost. Local cathedral and government buildings provided a great reference point.

We are departing Dunedin this afternoon to “cross the big ditch” as the local say to Australia. We will be on the Tasman Sea for three days so a break from the two-a-day tour schedule although we enjoyed every one.