

New Zealand 2014

What a shock to the system, having left home on a cold, wet and windy day we arrived at our daughter's to find temperatures of 30+ degrees, it took us over a week to adjust. Our flight was good, although we did miss New Year, going from early morning on the 31st Dec to early morning on the 1st January as we crossed the date line, and to cap it all we were asleep!

To explain, our daughter and family live near Napier in New Zealand, and several years ago we decided as we were planning on visiting each year, to export our original Murvi. It lives on a site near our daughters for about 9 months a year, awaiting our return. Having collected the van from the local storage area, and the first job was to remove all the dust, pollen and spiders webs, so much easier than the green algae we have at home. Having said that there is still a lot of van to wash and clean!

Once the van was clean, MoT'd and taxed we were able to spend time taking the grandchildren out and about. Maisie, our eldest now sleeps in the bunk slung over the cab seats, and is able to enjoy a couple of nights out with us.

It was then time for us to set off on our travels, this time to South Island. We crossed on the evening ferry from Wellington, arriving in Picton at about 0100, and spent the night with several other motor homes in the local RSA car park before setting off south. It is a lovely drive, partly beside the sea, and at other times through the rolling hills so typical of NZ. It had been suggested by the petrol attendant in Picton, that we take the Inland Scenic Route, to save driving around Christchurch with all its traffic. This was good advice, as it was a beautiful drive as well as very little traffic and mile after mile of straight road. That evening we stopped in grounds belonging to the adjacent bungalow, for just \$8 (£4) for the night.

Friday saw us continuing south, through Tekapo, where we stopped to admire the church of 'The Good Shepherd' and the monument to the shepherd dogs that made the initial farming possible just over 100 years ago.



The church has a wonderful altar picture window looking down the lake, it must be difficult to concentrate on a sermon with such a view to watch.

We arrived at Arrowtown that afternoon, meeting Liz and Geoff, friends from Ivybridge, who were house sitting there for a couple of months, having swapped homes with an family originally from Ivybridge who wanted to spend Christmas with their family.

It was lovely to meet up on the opposite side of the world! We spent the weekend with them, Geoff taking pleasure in showing us around Queenstown where we went up the gondola to what in winter would be the start of the ski slopes and in summer had lovely walks and bike tracks, (riders take their bikes up on the front of the gondola and then ride them down the hillside).



Having had our picnic we returned down to the lake and strolled around part of the lakeside. On the Sunday we went out for a meal, and my choice from the menu was 'Rabbit and Drunken Fig Pie', very nice, not something you would see on a menu in England!



We also visited some of the old Gold Rush townships in the Wanaka valley, with one boasting a hotel in continuous use since the 1860's. It is said as recently as the sixties the landlord refused to serve ladies.

Monday saw our departure, leaving Liz & Geoff to have a final week enjoying the sun before returning to England, whilst we went on to Dunedin with the aim of seeing albatross and yellow eyed penguins. We spent the night on Brighton beach! (it is a small beach village south of Dunedin) another official free site.

Dunedin, is a very Scottish style town with tartan, whisky shops, and lots of Americans from a cruise ship, even the architecture seemed Scottish.

From there we took a trip on the old Taieri rail track into to the central Otago, built to serve the gold town of Cromwell, returning with farm produce and fruit. Now it serves tourists and cyclists taking their bikes inland to ride down the central Otago track.



The track winds through the spectacular Taieri gorge with some stunning scenery and 100 year old viaducts

The following day we had hoped to travel further south around the Catlins to walk and see the yellow eyed penguins and flying albatross, but as the forecast was for rain and storms in that area we changed plans and went around the Otago Peninsula. Liz took her life in her hands and went out (just) into the 'roaring forties' and experienced some quite wavy conditions - all to see albatross in flight. I stayed ashore in comfort and read my book!



On the peninsula there is a penguin colony and rescue centre where they have built what can only be described as WWII trenches covered with camouflage netting to enable visitors to walk around and watch the yellow eyed penguins at close quarters. Apparently these yellow eyed penguins once so common on the east coast of New Zealand are now a threatened species.

As the weather further south was still poor this was as far down as we went. From here we started back up the east coast heading North.

The road follows the coast, and varied from lovely straight stretches beside the beach to very narrow cliff hugging twisty roads.



North of Dunedin can be seen the Moeraki Boulders. These are spherical rock formations that were formed naturally millions of years ago in the soft sandstone cliffs. As these cliffs erode, so the boulders are exposed.

This year we had promised ourselves a good look at a glacier. We drove up in torrential rain and camped at Aoraki, at the base of Mount Cook. Next morning showed the new snow hat had fallen overnight on the lower slopes of the mountains around us.

We had been advised at the local Tourist Information that the best way to see the glaciers was a boat trip on the melt lake.



It was very interesting looking close up at some now small icebergs in the lake, and then to go to the front face of the glacier (or as close as was safe to do so). They don't allow small boats too close to the face in case more ice falls and swamps the boat we were in.

As we left the camp site we went past a small heliport, and on the off chance looked in, only to find a woman waiting for someone to join her to make a trip viable. So we struck a deal and half hour later we were skimming the peaks in what seemed a very small helicopter with 3 passengers. That was just unbelievable, it felt as though we were missing the face of the mountain by just a few feet, and it was so maneuverable.



The trip included a landing on the glacier and with the soft snow I was soon up to my knees, the others managed to walk on the snow with no problem. My feet must be too small! The trip was awe inspiring.

We slowly meandered our way up past Ashburton towards Christchurch where we were able to stop over a couple of days with friends we met on Norfolk Island last year.

John & Marilyn made us very welcome, and showed us around the area. On the first day we went around the Banks Peninsular a beautiful undeveloped area. We could imagine if that had been anywhere near home it would have been full of million pound properties, instead of a relatively undeveloped area, with some small 'bachs' (basic holiday homes) and lovely empty beaches.



The main town is Akoroa, the only area of French occupation in NZ, and its French origins are still very obvious today.

The following day they showed us Christchurch, as we drove around the residential area they told us how a majority of these normal looking houses were in fact due for demolition, either because the foundations or floor slabs had broken. A large part of one residential area will not be rebuilt because of the risk of liquefaction in the event of another quake.



The main shopping area had been badly affected and had been mostly demolished, but the shop owners had taken steel shipping containers and converted them to shops, snack bars and cafes. It is going to take several more years before the city is rebuilt.



The main cathedral was, as many of you know badly damaged. Part of the main body of the church is still standing and could be rebuilt, but the original tower structure had collapsed. There is great debate as to what to do, rebuild as was or take the opportunity to have a new iconic building. Personally I think there could be a compromise, of rebuilding the original body of the church and have a modern new steeple and surrounding rooms, it will be interesting to see what they decide.





In the mean time on the site of another church they have built the 'Cardboard Cathedral'. This is an astounding construction, using again shipping containers around the base for use as offices and a small lady chapel, with large cardboard tubes and local timber as the main frame and polycarbonate as a covering membrane. It is designed to last 50 years, and is built to 130% of current earthquake building code. It is even more astounding when you consider that it was completed in just over 2 years of the earthquake. Outside the cathedral on a site of a demolished building is a memorial to the 185 people who died in the Feb 2011 earthquake.



It is very simple but very effective, 185 chairs of varying styles all painted white.

From Christchurch we continued our trip north and west, eventually arriving at Farewell Spit, the long sand spit that forms the northernmost tip of South Island. We took a 4x4 trip out along the spit driving along the sand to the lighthouse and albatross colony at the northern most tip. Albatross colonies are normally on cliffs but here is one of the rare ground nesting colonies.



This almost completes our tour of South Island, as we return across the north of the island through Nelson, Havelock and through Marlborough with its lovely views out through the sound to Picton where we take the ferry back to North Island and our family. It was unfortunate that the weather had not been too good previously with the result that the crossing was a little lively to say the least, with waves breaking over the front of the ship. Still we survived and now head back to the family in Havelock North.

After a couple of weeks back with the family, we left them to their own routines and set off around the lower part of North Island, we started by taking a road across the Ranges, a road only recently completely sealed. Halfway across we found a lovely spot for lunch beside the river.

It was so hot we both ended up in the river for a swim - very refreshing.

Our aim was a walk in the south of the Tongararo National Park, it was along an old carriage way to a disused railway viaduct. Those who know me know that I don't like walking up hill, and guess what, the whole walk to the viaduct was up hill, albeit a steady climb! For all that it was a very pleasant walk in part open and in part in native bush.



Unfortunately as we were making it back down it started to rain and of course our waterproofs were still in the van, we just don't think of weather changes here as much as we would at home. So of course we were wet by the time we made it back to the van, still it was warm rain.

We continued to drift north, stopping at a very quiet free camp site at Turangi on the edge of Lake Taupo, with lovely views across the lake.



The site was at the sailing club with use of toilets and fish gutting table, needless to say we didn't use the latter, but fishing is a serious business in NZ! But we did make use of the hot springs and swimming pool just down the road, a lovely way to relax at the end of the day.

Continuing our drift north we reached pastures new, spending a few days at Kawhia, a small village at the mouth of a large tidal inlet. Liz was in her element, as the mud flats became exposed, studying the local bird life, and when the tide was in she practiced her painting.



We did get to the main beach, where at low tide there was a hot spring near the water's edge. You need to take your shoes and socks off and walk along the edge of the sea until you feel warm sand. Then you start digging. We soon had a bath sized area with very warm water, so we donned our togs(NZ for swimming costumes) and laid down and soaked. Unfortunately we left the camera behind that day - typical. By the time we left, there were about half a dozen groups digging and lounging in the warm water. Beginning to move easterly towards Thames we stopped at one our favourite cities, Hamilton and took a couple days carrying out van maintenance and washing before meeting with Heather & Keith, who live near Thames at the bottom of the Coromandel peninsula. We enjoyed being shown around, we learn and see so much more with a local person showing you around.



Keith enjoyed showing us the large square Kauri tree that he last visited as a child, and

the local water garden, a tranquil relaxing spot. It was now time to return to the family and have a few days family break at a bach (holiday home) at Porangahau. The road back passes through Tirau - the **corrugated iron capital of the world**. The shops, the dog shaped I-site and even the church uses corrugated iron to advertise themselves.



On our way back, we couldn't resist a night at Taupo, parked overlooking the lake. We took the opportunity of being in the centre of town to have a nice meal out, the duck was superb it just melted in the mouth - wonderful.

It was now time to think about putting the van away and coming home. We had a last night at Clive, parked by the river as we started to empty and clean the cupboards, a thankless task but a lovely setting in which to get it done.



A lovely holiday, most of our camping was either free (official wild camping) or low cost with a family.