

## **Bragg New Zealand Trip Dec. 30, 2013 – Jan. 20, 2014**

We effectively “missed” *New Year’s Eve* 2013 as our flight left Los Angeles on Dec. 30, 2013 and arrived in Auckland, New Zealand on Jan. 1, 2014. It was a small price to pay for the opportunity to spend nearly three weeks in the beautiful country of New Zealand which is made up of 2 primary islands: the South Island and North Island. We arrived on the North Island but immediately hopped a plane down to Queenstown on the South Island where we would start our adventure and then eventually work our way back northwards again.

This was Steve’s 2<sup>nd</sup> trip to New Zealand; his first was nearly 25 years ago when he spent 3 weeks camping and hiking his way around the country on a very limited budget. This was my first trip; it fact since both girls were there in 2012, I was the last in the immediate family to make a visit. Steve did most of the planning for the trip with the following key goals:

- To do some well-known hikes he hadn’t yet done, specifically the Milford and Routeburn Tracks on the South Island and the Tongariro Crossing on the North Island
- To show me some of his favorite places from his prior trip – Mt. Cook National Park on the South Island and Mt. Egmont National Park on the North Island
- To explore some of the areas he hadn’t gotten to on the prior trip

I’d say the trip met all those goals and more quite successfully!

### **The Milford Track**

The word “track” is New Zealand for what we call a “trail.” Before the completion of the Milford Sound Road in 1952, it was the only overland means of getting to the ruggedly gorgeous Milford Sound, a fjord on the southwest coast which opens to the Tasman Sea and which is one of the top tourist attractions in the world.

The Milford Track is considered one of the world’s *great wilderness walks* and thus attracts a global pool of hikers for its 34 miles – a 4 day, 3 night trek – it is a one direction hike. There are 2 methods of “doing” the Milford Track, both regulated by the Department of Conservation (DOC):

- 1) Independent hikers: these hikers are self-supported and thus must carry via backpack all their needs in terms of food, clothing, sleeping bags, cooking equipment, etc. Each night independent hikers must stay in DOC-maintained huts which are heated and provide communal bunk rooms, communal restroom facilities, solar-powered lights, and basic cooking facilities (no shower facilities). DOC limits the number of independent hikers starting the trek to a maximum of 40 per day.
- 2) Guided hikers: these hikers are supported by a company called *Ultimate Hikes* which under contract with DOC provides private lodges for up to a maximum of 50 hikers per day. These private lodges provide the hikers with heated rooms (both private and 4-bunk variety with linens & pillows provided), restrooms (both private & communal) with hot showers (with provided shampoo, conditioner, and soap), laundry areas and drying rooms, prepared breakfasts and dinners with self-fixed lunches, power provided via generator, comfortable communal lounge areas, bar facilities, etc. Thus, guided hikers only need to carry, via backpack, weather-specific clothing (e.g, rain gear), lodge clothes, personal toiletries, and their lunch for the day.

As one would imagine, the cost of being a guided hiker is significantly more than being an independent one but we felt the difference was well worth it for multiple reasons, including:

- Our backpacks weighed between 10 and 15 pounds whereas those of independent hikers were easily 40 pounds on the light side and quickly went up from there
- Knowing there was a hot shower at the end of a very wet and chilling multi-mile hikes was invaluable
- Knowing that our soaking wet rain gear and clothes could be washed and dried before having to don them again the next day was priceless
- Sleeping in a private room and not being concerned with who might or might not snore meant we were well rested each day

- Enjoying a cold beverage and snack during ‘happy hour’ while conversing with our fellow hikers was exceedingly pleasant
- Having a staff to prepare and serve varied and delicious breakfasts and dinners, including such treats as hokey pokey ice cream (a New Zealand classic) was wonderful
- Enjoying a hot beverage along with a substantial lunch at some of the private lunch “huts” (sometimes also heated) was a welcome break
- Learning about some of the local flora and fauna as well as the area’s history from knowledgeable guides helped enhance the overall experience

### Day 1: Milford Track

Via an Ultimate Hikes coach we traveled the 106 miles from Queenstown to the town of Te Anau, about a 2 hour drive. There we had lunch before boarding the coach for a short drive to the village of Te Anau Downs where we boarded a boat for the 35 mile trip (about 1 ¼ hours) to the northeast end of Lake Te Anau and *Glade Wharf*, the start of the actual Milford Track. From there, we had only about a mile hike to *Glade House*, our first lodge on the track.

The *Glade House* has been around since 1895 though in several different versions. In its visitor logs, I was able to find the Feb. 1968 Sierra Club trip that my parents were members of. When talking with my Mom about her memories of hiking the Milford track, having “wet boots” was a very clear memory some 45 years later, I now better understand why.

Despite the quite rainy weather, our group of 46 hikers and 4 guides gathered for a group picture and then most of us broke into smaller groups and took an optional nature hike in the area. After settling into our accommodations (hot shower, dry clothes, and laundering of hiking clothes), we socialized with our fellow trekkers over a beverage of choice and some nibbles. After a delicious multi-course meal, the group formally introduced themselves – we had folks from Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Croatia, Italy, Japan, Korea, and six of us from the States. Lights go out at 10pm -- the generator goes off then – you leave your light switch in the “on” position so when the generator starts up again in the morning your lights come back on and act as your morning alarm! The provided hot water bottles were a nice touch as well.

### Day 2: Milford Track

We awoke to thunder & lightening and continuing rain. After a hearty breakfast of one’s choice of porridge (oatmeal), cold cereals, yogurt, fruit, eggs, bacon, grilled tomatoes, and toast we assembled our lunch for the day. Various sandwich makings along with fruit, cookies and bags of nuts & trail mix were set out for each to make a customized lunch sack up with. We left Glade House at 8:30am and headed down the trail, suited up in full rain gear. We quickly encountered the first and longest of several suspension bridges along the trail.





We managed to keep our boots relatively dry for the first half hour of hiking by hopping and carefully picking the path. However, when the trail and the Clinton River, which ran alongside the trail, “merged” we just had to plow on through the water which in spots reached our knees. In addition to the obvious downside of hiking in the lots of rain (wet clothes and wet boots) there is a significant upside to doing so on the Milford Track – the countless waterfalls that grace the rock walls of the valley in which you are hiking. It is a stunning sight to see huge waterfalls cascading down all around you. Once the rain stops, it is amazing to see how quickly these waterfalls dry up and disappear. One of our guides said that of the likely 100+ waterfalls we saw that day, if it hadn’t been raining we would have seen only a few.

The day’s 10 mile trail follows the Clinton River through a forest of Beech trees then up towards the Wetlands (of course, everything that day qualified as such) before it begins to gently climb as it enters the West Branch of the Clinton Valley where rock walls tower up to 4000ft in this glacier ice-carved valley (this glaciation has occurred over the past 2 million years). We stopped at the Hirere Falls Lunch Shelter for a hot drink and lunch but wet, cold feet encouraged us to complete the remaining 3 miles at a quick pace though we certainly continued to enjoy the myriad of waterfalls presented during open spaces along the trail of the Clinton Canyon.

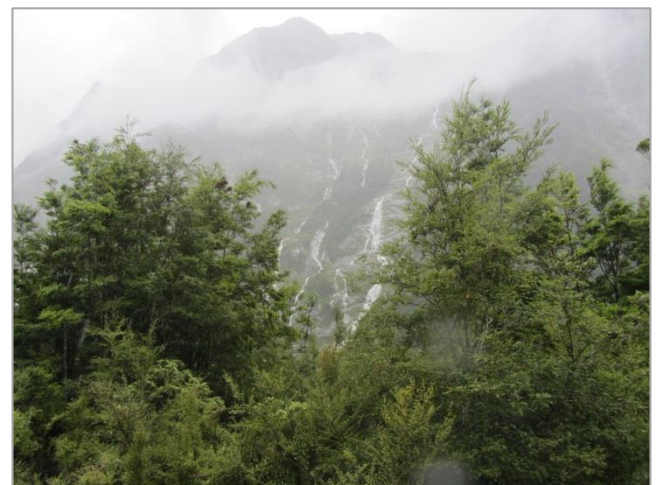
Our destination that day was the *Pompolona Lodge* – aka known as Tree House Lodge as it is built on a hillside among the trees. The current lodge was replaced not long ago after the old lodge which was near the river was destroyed via flood waters. It, like most of the other Ultimate Hikes lodges was built and continues to be supported with the help of helicopters. Thus, the helicopter pad right next to the lodge.



As previously mentioned, doing laundry is an essential task upon arrival at a lodge (particularly if it is raining). A piece of not-so-modern equipment is an essential part of the process: a hand crank wringer! This tool allows you to very thoroughly remove much of the water from clothing after you have hand-washed it in a laundry sink and before you place garments in the lodge’s “drying room” thereby vastly improving the efficiency of the drying room (a room pumped full of heat which is distributed via a large fan).



Yes, that is the trail



Here today, gone tomorrow waterfalls





For that afternoon's "tea" we were served scones. Once again we enjoyed getting to know our fellow hikers. I ended up playing several games of *Uno* with a family from Perth, Australia who included the youngest members of our group, 9 year old Lucy (she was there with her Mom, Dad and 12 year old brother and 16 year old sister). We again enjoyed a delicious dinner and very comfortable night.

### Day 3: Milford Track

We awoke to something unfamiliar to us: no rain was falling! Today's 9 mile hike involved the most vertical gain and subsequent loss of the trek: we first climbed up to Mackinnon's Pass at about 3300 ft so a gain of almost 2000 ft and then had a sharp descent of nearly 3000ft to Quintin Lodge.



Leaving Pampolona Lodge the trail gradually begins to climb through the lush bush of Clinton Valley where you see a myriad of shades of green. You then break out of the bush -- the trail up to the pass includes a series of switchbacks which then deposit you at the Memorial dedicated to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1888 discovery of the pass by Quintin Mackinnon and Ernest Mitchell.



NO rain gear!



Trail above bush line to Mackinnon Pass

It was quite blustery atop the pass but a cup of hot chocolate from one of our guides helped as did the stunning 360 degree views.



Monument to Mackinnon and Mitchell on Mackinnon Pass

From the monument, it was a short hike to the lunch hut. Along the way we were treated to the sight of four Kea birds riding the thermals then landing in hopes of a handout. These parrots are known for both their intelligence and curiosity and are only found in forested and alpine areas of the South Island.





Kea- the world's only alpine parrot

As with most alpine areas, if you look close enough you'll see a variety of small flowering plants growing close to the ground. Since we were hiking in mid-summer we were treated to a variety of wild flowers – mostly in shades of yellow and white but with an occasional purple or red one.

After our lunch break it was all downhill literally. First we had a steep descent above bush line and then crossed over a winter avalanche area strewn with large rocks and debris. Entering back into the bush we followed a stream downwards through moss-covered forest. A series of steep wooden staircases built alongside the roaring stream greatly helped in navigating the trail. We were quite thankful for the continuing lack of rain as well.



Atop pass looking back to Clinton Valley



Descending staircase aka trail



As I find going down to be much harder on the body than going up I was very happy to finally reach Quintin Lodge and rest my weary legs and feet, not to mention enjoying a hot shower and

cold drink. Speaking of cold drinks, you can get water along the trail anytime you want – just put your water bottle into any moving water and enjoy – no need to worry about bacteria.





#### Day 4: Milford Track

The relatively good weather of the previous day deserted us as rain once again greeted us upon waking. So we donned our wet weather gear for our final day on the Milford Track. A short distance beyond the Quintin Lodge we were afforded a view of the top two leaps of Sutherland Falls, the world's 5<sup>th</sup> highest waterfall at 1904ft. We hiked through lush rainforest and enjoyed a stop at the thundering Mackay Falls and Bell Rock – you can crawl in and stand up inside the rock.



Sutherland Falls - World's 5th Highest

We were joined on the day's hike by some quite noisy thunder and lightning and even had some hail join in the fun for a while. Our lunch stop was a quick one – between the pouring rain and the sandflies keeping dry under the shelter's roof, we weren't inspired to dawdle – in fact, most of us ate standing up while constantly moving to keep the sand flies from alighting.



Steve in rainforest

The Milford Track officially concludes at the charmingly named "Sandfly Point." We reached said point after hiking 13.5 miles. Luckily, there is a hut where we could hide out from the sandflies while waiting for the boat which would take us to Milford Sound.



Lunch on the Move



End of the Milford Track

A short boat ride deposits us at the commercial boat docks of Milford Sound – home to several large boats which take tourists out for a spin in the sound. Our such tour will wait until the morning, right now we are much more interested in getting to the Mitre Peak Lodge for a hot shower and dry clothes! That evening we enjoy a final group dinner and are awarded our completion of the Milford Track certificates.

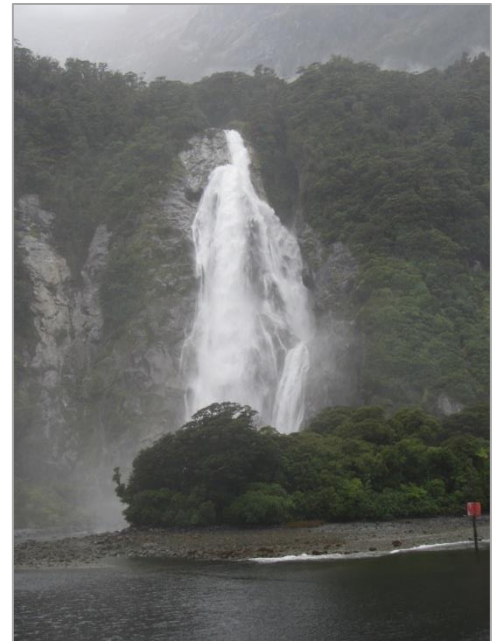


### Day 5: Milford Track

After breakfast our group boards a boat for a tour of the Milford Sound under overcast skies. It is believed that the Milford Sound has been a destination of the Maori people, New Zealand's native population, for about 1000 years. It was not "discovered" by Europeans until 1812 – its narrow, steep-sided entry from the Tasman Sea did not invite earlier exploration by such notables as Capt. James Cook. Part of the vast Fjordland National Park, Milford Sound is technically misnamed, it should be known as Milford Fjord (a river formed valley subsequently flooded by the sea is called a sound, however, Milford Sound was formed by the erosive effects of a glacier and is more correctly a fjord). Milford Sound gets an average of nearly 7000mm of rain annually (275in) and averages over 180 days of rain each year – it is considered one of the world's wettest places. The Sound is approximately 16km in length (9 miles) and has two permanent waterfalls – Lady Bowen Falls and Stirling Falls – both very impressive. Mitre Peak punctuates the middle of the sound. We also enjoyed seeing seals lazing on the rocks at the base of towering cliffs.



Milford Sound – Mitre Peak in background



Lady Bowen Falls

At the conclusion of the boat tour of Milford Sound we boarded a coach for the 120km (74 mile) ride to Te Anau via the Milford Road. This road travels through Fjordland National Park and the Southern Alps and is the only road access to Milford Sound. The drive along the road is spectacular – you see evidence of the glaciers which formed this area everywhere: U-shaped valleys, rivers of rubble, etc. At one point the road becomes a one-way tunnel with natural granite lined walls (Homer Tunnel). We departed the coach in Te Anau while most of the rest of the group stayed aboard for the remaining 180km (111 mile) ride back to Queenstown. Te Anau is a quaint little town that sits on the eastern shore of Lake Anau (the largest lake on the South Island) and is a hub of outdoor activities for the area. We stayed overnight in Te Anau where I enjoyed a much needed massage. The next morning we met up with another group from Ultimate Hikes to do the Routeburn Track.

### The Routeburn Track

The way we did it, the Routeburn Track is a 3 day, 2 night lodge-to-lodge hike covering just over 20 miles. It starts in Fjordland National Parks and finishes up in the Mt. Aspiring National Park. Once again we chose the "guided" version of the hike as opposed to doing it "independently." Unlike the Milford Track, the Routeburn can be traversed both ways.

### Day 1: Routeburn Track

Via coach from Te Anau we arrived at the trailhead, "the Divide" and guess what? It was raining quite steadily! We quickly donned all the rain gear before heading out and up – we climbed steadily for nearly 3 miles before a short descent to the Lake Howden Hut for a lunch break – we ate inside but as we were quite damp we didn't dawdle.



After lunch the trail climbed to Earland Falls (240 ft high falls) – this is considered one of the wettest section of the track and we had to agree. In fact, the falls were running so intensively due to all the recent rain, we had to take the “emergency track” detour which involved a steep but short descent and then ascent through the bush. One of the guys hiking with us tried to get, via the standard trail, close to the falls but was literally blown backwards by the force of the water. Fortunately, not long after the falls, the weather began to clear and we enjoyed some great views of the surrounding snow-capped mountains, including Mt. Aspiring (elevation 9951ft). The Lake Mackenzie Lodge was our destination at the end of the day’s 7.5 mile hike. We were greeted by the Lodge Manager and a batch of freshly made fudge! As with the other Ultimate Hike lodges, this one offered us hot showers, laundry and drying facilities, delicious meals, comfortable beds, etc. Before dinner we learned a bit about the other 20 folks joining us on the hike (2 of the folks were also on our Milford Track trip).



Yep - those are water droplets on lens



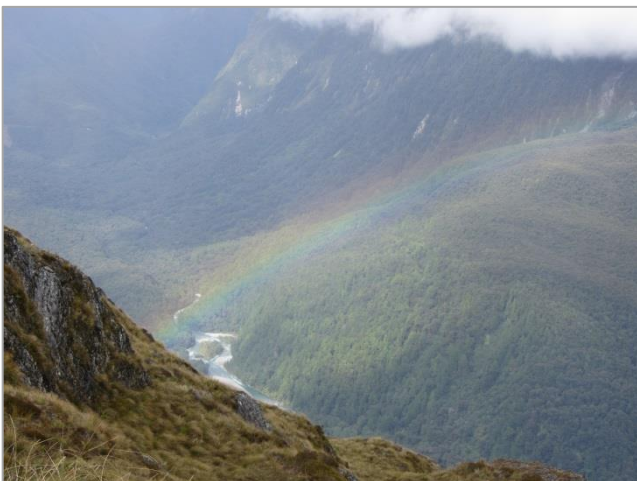
Mt. Aspiring



Lake Mackenzie and NO Rain!

## Day 2: Routeburn Track

No rain greeted us this morning ... hurray! After a hearty breakfast we hit the trail. We had about a 45min climb from Lake Mackenzie to get above “bush line” where we had wonderful and expansive views including all the way to the Tasman Sea, far to the west. We had just the occasional spit of rain and at one point we were treated to a rainbow in the valley below us.



Hollyford Valley is below us



Hiking above tree line was a nice change of pace, especially when the sun shone brightly. In addition to the fantastic views we also enjoyed the colorful wild flowers – most yellow and white (the pollinating flies and moths don't see color). The trail traverses along the Hollyford Face, the most exposed section of the track, and at one point even includes stairs as it climbs towards the Harris Saddle where we stopped for lunch and hot beverages at the hut.



Railing available if needed!



Sunglasses come out for the 1st time!

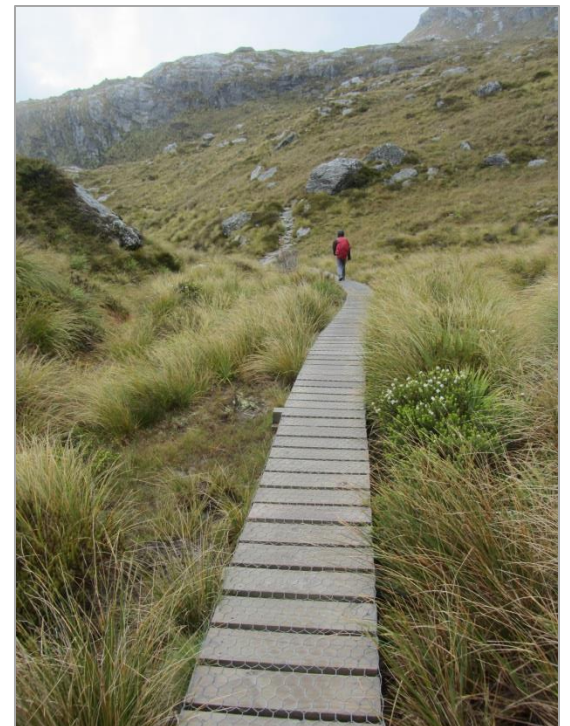


Track along the Hollyford Face



Steep trail but having the stairs sure helps

After lunch, the track winds around Lake Harris before dropping into the upper Routeburn Valley which is still above tree line.



Boardwalk protects fragile areas





Routeburn Falls Lodge & lower Routeburn Valley

After nearly 7 miles on the track we arrived at the Routeburn Falls Lodge which is spectacularly located where the river exits the alpine basin (right at tree line) before tumbling 300m to the grassy flats below. The lodge is built on the side of a mountain and sits in and amongst the trees. For our final evening with Ultimate Hikes we had to “catch” our dessert via the infamous pancake toss (i.e., crepes).

### Day 3: Routeburn Track

The good weather continued to hold as we headed down valley to the Routeburn Flats. The Lodge Manager told us it was the first departure “in sunshine” in 17 days! We had an easy 5.9 mile hike with stunning vistas before entering sun-dappled beech forests and enjoying the raging and tumbling blue-green waters of the river. We ate lunch at the end of the trail before boarding the coach for the drive back to Queenstown (via a stop at the pub in Glenarchy for a tall cold one).



Routeburn Falls Lodge



Routeburn Falls







End of the track with sunshine

While hiking in New Zealand it is important to understand a couple of things about the flora and fauna of the country:

- New Zealand was formed when part of the ancient supercontinent of Gondwana broke apart. Gondwana included most of the landmasses in today's Southern Hemisphere, including Antarctica, South America, Africa, Madagascar and the Australian continent, as well as the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent, which have now moved entirely into the Northern Hemisphere. Thus, the flora of New Zealand shares a common base with other Southern Hemisphere areas but due to the long geographical isolation period of the islands it also boasts many unique flora species. For example, the beech forests of the South Island reminded me of those we saw in southern Chile. And while ferns are typically tropical plants, New Zealand, with its temperate climate has several unique species; including the silver fern whose unfurling frond inspired the Maori shape Koru (Koru means "loop" in Maori). The Koru is integral to Maori culture, art and tattoos and has become widely integrated into the culture of New Zealand, including the logo for Air New Zealand. The unfurled silver fern is also a popular symbol in New Zealand, including the national "All Blacks" soccer team.
- The land masses which make up the islands of New Zealand were once nearly, or perhaps totally, submerged under the ocean (23 million years ago or so). This may be one contributing factor as to why there were not any land-based mammals in New Zealand for millions of years before humans arrived there (bats and seals are native, non-land-based mammals).
- I know, everyone thinks of sheep when they think of New Zealand but they along with many other mammals were imported by both European and Maori settlers into the island. Thus, while you're hiking you will likely not see any critters. What you likely will see are traps placed regularly along the trails. These traps are used to catch *stoats*, a weasel-like animal brought in from Europe in the late 1800's to "control" the rabbit population (rabbits were also introduced by the Europeans). Instead of doing much about the rabbits, the stoats instead went after the native bird population as they were mostly flightless and ground-nesting ... thus easy prey. Additionally, the native birds had never had mammal predators and so had no evolutionary means of avoiding them. Bottom line: within 6 years of the introduction of the stoat in the 1880's the native bird population had already suffered significant declines. The earlier introduction by the Maori of such rodents as rats as well as human-based hunting also had a significant impact and contributed to the eventual extinction of many of New Zealand's native birds.



AIR NEW ZEALAND



Back to our NZ travels ...

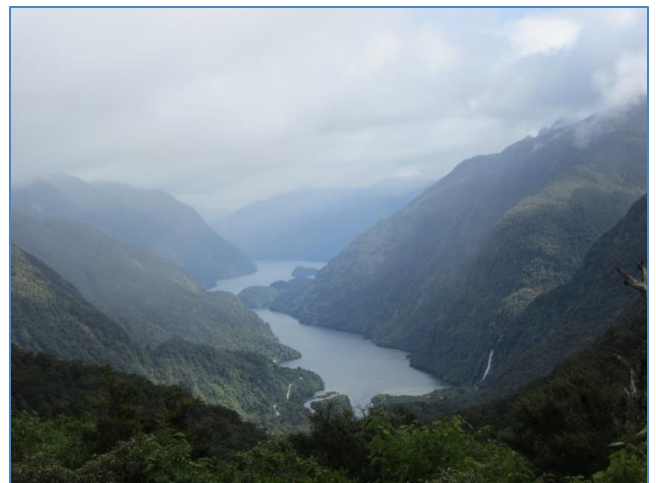


Upon our arrival back in Queenstown we initiated the next “adventure” element of our trip ... we picked up a rental car! Yes, New Zealander’s drive on the “wrong side” of the road. As Steve had previously driven significant miles similarly in the UK, Australia, Tasmania, and in NZ, he was the designated driver while I served as his trusty navigator. My primary role was to enforce the verbalization of the “look right, look left, look right” policy at every intersection and round-a-bout (i.e., traffic circle).

Queenstown is a lively and happening hub of adventure on the South Island. Bungy jumping was “born” in the area and has since evolved into a variety of like-minded thrills (bungy swings) plus a wide variety of adrenaline junkie options (jet boating, sky diving, 4-wheel drive tours, etc.). Steve noted that Queenstown had changed quite a bit since he had last visited: in addition to general growth, the town which had once sported mostly artisan shops was now a haven of consumerism: we didn’t see a single artisan shop but we did see countless sporting good shops, high-end specialty shops (e.g., Louis Viton), and restaurants. While we concluded we were definitely well above the average age of the tourist population we certainly enjoyed strolling through the town on a beautiful summer’s evening doing lots of people watching, a little shopping, and enjoying some good food.

### **Doubtful Sound**

We weren’t quite ready to say goodbye to Fjordland National Park so early of morning of Fri, Jan 10, we drove (Steve drove) 170km (105 miles) south of Queenstown to the lakeside town of Manapouri. There we boarded a boat, crossed Lake Manapouri, and arrived in West Arm where a massive power station was built in the 1960’s to power an aluminium smelter some 171km away. Here we were met by Captain Chris of Deep Cove Charters who ferried us, and 8 others over the Wilmot Pass to Deep Cove where his 62ft long boat, the *SeaFinn*, is anchored. We would be enjoying the sights and sounds of Doubtful Sound via an overnight cruise on the *SeaFinn*.



Looking down into Doubtful Sound

Doubtful Sound is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest of the 14 fjords within Fjordland National Park (Dusky Sound is the largest). It is three times longer than Milford Sound and its sea surface area is roughly 10 times larger than Milford Sound due to its greater length and its three arms: Hall, Crooked and First. After enjoying a lunch of fresh crayfish (ham for me), we spent the afternoon cruising the sound and its arms, watching the bottlenose dolphins, seals, and diminutive blue penguins (they only get to about 15in in length), enjoying the soaring of the gulls, terns and the majestic albatross, and watching some of our fellow passengers kayak and fish. We even had a short sojourn out into the Tasman Sea. After a dinner of freshly caught fish and NZ venison, the *SeaFinn* was settled into a tranquil cove for the night and we settled into our cozy bunks. At some wee hour of the morning, I had a visit the bathroom which was located onside on the main deck. I was treated to an amazing sight – a cloudless, moonless Southern Skies night in an area with absolutely no light pollution. There were so many stars visible that the sky looked hazy in spots – an incredible and unforgettable sight.



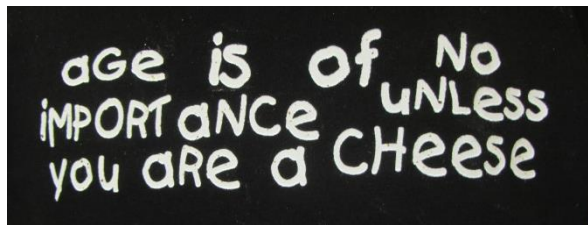
Sunny but chilly on Doubtful Sound



The next morning after breakfast, the boat returned to Deep Cove where we disembarked and reversed the prior day's travel to return to Manpouri. We bid Fjordland a fond farewell as it was time to check out more of the South Island.

### Wine Country to Mt. Cook to East Coast

New Zealand has multiple wine growing regions covering both its North and South Islands. We enjoyed an afternoon in the Central Otago area which is just east of Queenstown. The area is at 46 degrees south latitude so it is the world's most southerly grape growing region. The area is chock full of wineries – we could have spent several days just wine tasting! So we limited ourselves to just a few and purchased some white wine to enjoy during our travels (we had recommendations from a Queenstown couple we met on the Doubtful Sound trip). In addition to wineries, we stopped at a *Cheesery* for some baked brie (yum) and at an orchard for some fresh fruit ice cream (double yum). The area certainly reminded me of parts of California with its golden hills, vineyards and orchards.



The wine country area is also home to some of NZ's famous bungy jumping sites. We happily watched some "fliers" with absolutely no desire to try it ourselves (as Andrea & Victoria did)!

We overnighted in the small town of Twizel where we caught some nearby great views of Mt. Cook, our destination for the following day. Our innkeeper suggested taking in the views as the weather was expected to close in the next day, and it certainly did.

We awoke to rainy and cloudy skies and they continued as we drove into Mt. Cook National Park and checked into the Hermitage Hotel. We had hoped to do some day hiking but instead spent the day indoors: checking out the Sir Edmund Hillary Alpine Center's exhibits and films (Hilary did a lot of training for Everest on Mt.



Mt. Cook

Cook). That evening we dined scrumptiously in the hotel's beautiful Panorama Room and fortunately while we were eating the clouds partially cleared and we enjoyed some timely views of the peak. We had signed up for a "Southern Skies" class at the planetarium which would have included live night sky viewing via telescopes. We enjoyed the classroom portion of the session but the continuing rainy, cloudy and gale force wind conditions precluded us from the outdoor portion.



The following morning the rain had stopped but Mt. Cook remained shrouded in clouds. We enjoyed a stop at the Visitors Center and then took in a short hike in the Tasman Valley area to an overlook of a glacier. Steve had done the same hike some nearly 25 years ago and remarked that the glacier had significantly retreated over that time period. We encountered a couple of interesting other sites during the hike:



Roof attached to weights via chains

1) The roofs of shelters and toilets were attached by chains to heavy weights to prevent them from being blown off (apparently the gale force winds we had experienced the day prior are fairly common in the area)

2) A hunter carrying out the *Himilayan Tahr* he had shot that morning (related to wild goats, they are imported to the NZ Southern Alps for recreational hunting purposes)

Speaking of hunted animals ... deer are not usually hunted in New Zealand, instead they are



Hunter with Himalayan Tahr

“farmed.” New Zealand is the world’s largest producer of venison. We had already seen several deer farms on the South Island as we drove about. They are easy to distinguish from the more common sheep farms – the wire fencing which surrounds deer farms is nearly 3ft higher than the fencing around sheep farms (deer are much better jumpers than sheep). Deer were originally imported in the late 1800’s for sport hunting. However, by the early 1900’s their population had grown to such a degree that official culling efforts began. Sale of the resulting venison sparked the start of deer farming in the 1960’s. In the 1970s helicopters were used to catch live wild deer to help populate deer farms. We were told that young men leapt from the landing struts of the helicopters and grabbed the animals, tranquilized them with dart guns, or used a net gun, which fired nylon net over the deer. As you might imagine this was a risky endeavor for both pilot and “hunter.”

Leaving Mt. Cook National Park we headed towards the east coast via continuing California-like landscapes. We stopped in another fruit growing area for a lunch of fruit frappes and locally crafted chocolates. The day’s journey ended at a delightful B&B, *The Olive Grove*, set in an olive grove overlooking the multiple bays of the Akaroa area (located southeast of Christchurch). After a delicious happy hour at the B&B enjoying NZ wine and various homemade olive oils & dipping goodies, we got a late bite in the quaint seaside village of Akaroa which has an historically strong French influence.



Nourished with a hearty breakfast at the B&B we headed north along the eastern coast. We had a short driving tour of Christchurch where Andrea had so enjoyed her semester abroad there in the Fall of 2012. The city is still very much recovering from the earthquake that devastated so much of its downtown area in Feb. 2011. There are still stacks of shipping containers being used to hold up the sides of damaged buildings.



The east coast of the south island, at least on the day we drove along it, was a very placid sight – turquoise waters along sometimes rocky and sometimes sandy shores. The sunny day certainly contributed to our enjoyment of the drive up to Picton where we took the ferry to the North Island the following day; a 3 hour 92km crossing that was quite calm the day we did it.



### South Island vs North Island

In the mythology of the Maori, New Zealand's native people, the South Island is a "canoe" from which a "fish" (the North Island) was pulled from the sea. Here are some other comparisons between these parts of NZ (pronounced "N Zed" by Kiwi's):

- South Island is larger with just over 58K sq miles vs. North Island's nearly 44K sq miles. Together they are roughly the same size as Colorado
- Roughly 76% of NZ's over 4.3 million in population live on the North Island; over 30% of the population calls the city of Auckland home



Why are New Zealanders called "Kiwis"? The name derives from the kiwi, a flightless bird, which is native to, and a national symbol of, New Zealand. The NZ military was the first to be called Kiwis as all regiment signs incorporate the Kiwi. The usage of the term "Kiwi" is not considered offensive; it is generally viewed as a symbol of pride and endearment for the people of New Zealand.

### Wellington to Mt. Egmont

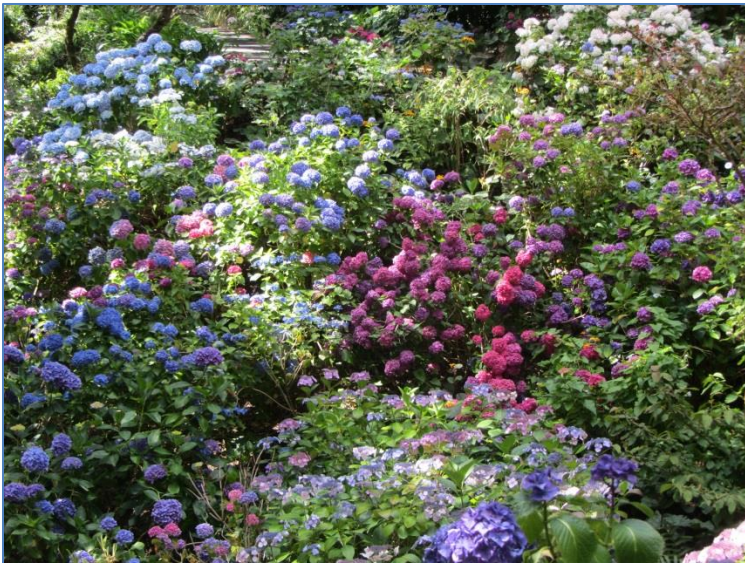
The Interislander ferry arrives on the North Island in the City of Wellington. After picking up a rental car (we had left the prior one back on the South Island), we checked into our downtown hotel and then headed out to explore Wellington. Wellington is the capital city of New Zealand and in many ways reminds me of a small San Francisco as it is situated on the hillsides overlooking various harbors and bays. A short walk took us to the "Cable Car" (funicular) which took us to the



Looking down on Wellington



top of a hill where the Wellington Botanic Garden is located. Established in 1868, the garden covers about 61 acres and includes such specialty gardens as Australian, Hydrangea, Succulent, Fernery, Camellia, Rhododendrons, Rose, and Begonia. As it was summer, we enjoyed many colorful



Hydrangeas



Agapanthus

blooms, especially the hydrangeas, roses, begonias, and agapanthus. We saw “ribbons” of agapanthus planted along many New Zealand roads as it is often used to frame driveways and fence lines. Hydrangeas were another popular planting along roads.

Wellington’s city core is very compact and thus very walkable. We enjoyed the city’s vibrancy and crowds – a marked change from earlier in our trip. The next morning, after a stroll along the central waterfront area, we drove to the western outskirts of the City where working class houses built at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sit perched on steep hillsides, often only accessible via steep stairs from a narrow road below. We saw several instances where a mechanical “lift” ran along-side the stairs so that groceries and other items could be moved up to the house.

We headed north out of Wellington and before too long we were driving along the western coastline of the North Island – rocky with surging waves and swells of the Tasman Sea, quite different from the placid east coast and the Pacific Ocean of the South Island.

We lunched in the town of Bulls. As evidenced by the town’s directional signs, the town of Bulls didn’t take itself too seriously! We ate a typical lunch of *pie* – savory pie that is. Andrea had discovered the deliciousness of New Zealand “pies” during her time there and had educated us about them. Thus, once we arrived in NZ, we wasted no time at all in consuming a large number and wide variety of said pies during our travels. NZ pies are hand-sized, fully crusted and traditionally contain chopped meat and gravy (e.g., mincemeat, steak and gravy, venison, lamb, chicken, bacon, etc.). We also enjoyed some more untraditional pie flavors such as spinach & feta and egg & cheese. A pie lunch was often topped off with a “slice,” a pan-baked cookie then sliced into rectangular shapes (aka bar cookie). I especially enjoyed the ginger slice (a ginger dough base topped with a ginger crunch icing).







Mt. Egmont

We overnighed in a “country lodge” (out in the middle of the country for sure) on the western slopes of Mt. Egmont. Mt Egmont is an active volcano (last activity in mid-1800’s) and is one of the most symmetrical volcanic cones in the world. Its elevation is 8261 ft (2518 m).

The following morning we drove around to the visitor’s center on its eastern slope where we checked out its exhibits and then took a short hike. Steve had climbed the peak on his prior visit.

Via the “Forgotten World Highway” we headed towards the center of the North Island to the Lake Taupo



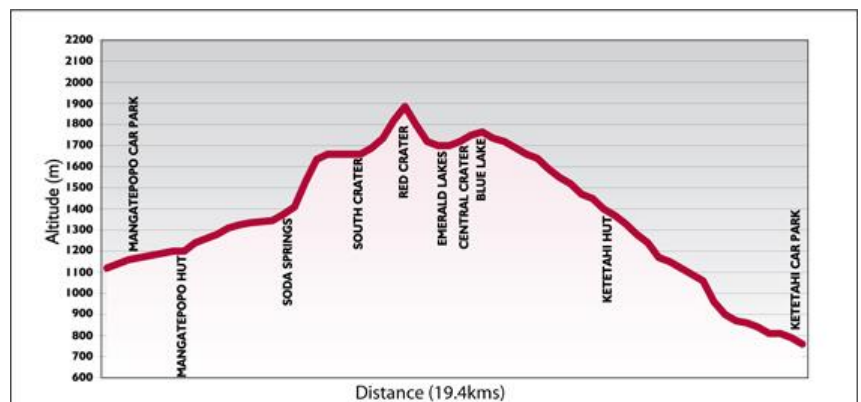
region. During that drive we certainly felt as if we were in a forgotten world ... very Jurassic park like so the emergence of a dinosaur from the huge fern forest which surrounded the road in areas was not an impossibility! At one point the

paved road turned to gravel (not so noted on map) and at another we traveled through a very narrow and dark one-lane tunnel.



### Lake Taupo – Tongariro Alpine Crossing

Lake Taupo is New Zealand’s largest lake and is a mecca for fishing enthusiasts. We stayed a couple of nights in the Creel Lodge in the town of Turangi; one of the house rules was “No Fish Cleaning in Rooms” – they had a separate room dedicated to that purpose. Not being into fishing, we were instead in the area to do the *Tongariro Alpine Crossing*, considered to be one of the top ten day treks in the world. Tongariro National Park is NZ’s oldest national park and is also a World Heritage area. The alpine crossing is a one-day traverse through the stark and spectacular terrain of Mt. Tongariro and Mt. Ngauruhoe, both active volcanos. We were picked up at our lodge about 6:45am for a shuttle up to the trail head at the Mangatepopo Car Park (the trail can be hiked either direction but the vast majority do it the direction we did to avoid a longer, steeper climb up to the crater). According to our shuttle driver, the weather was “the best during this season to-date” – dry, sunny, and crisp!



Tongariro Alpine Crossing





As the hike profile shows, you basically climb up to *South Crater* and *Red Crater* via a trail that skirts and then crosses old lava flows from 1870 and newer ones from 1975. From *Red Crater* we took the side trip up to the summit of Mt. Tongariro which afforded us fantastic views of the area. From *Red Crater* the trail drops steeply

to *Emerald Lakes*, minerals leeching from the adjoining thermal area cause their brilliant color. The easiest method of navigating the loose scree terrain trail downwards is a stride/slip technique that feels weird at first but works.



Atop Mt. Tongariro looking across at Mt. Ngauruhoe



Emerald Lakes

The smell of sulfur is definitely apparent in this other-worldly area, evidence that the crater is still active. We took a lunch break near the lakes but with nothing to



shelter the brisk winds, we didn't make it an overly leisurely one. After lunch we continued along the trail which at points reminded me of the "ant farms" of my childhood ... long

lines are ants in single file following one another. Our shuttle bus driver estimated between 3,000 and 4,000 folks were making the crossing that day (bad weather



Red Crater area



the prior couple of days likely caused a backlog, thus the larger than normal crowd). Annually, the crossing attracts over 60,000 hikers, mostly during the October to May period.



Notice the wind-blown pack straps



Hiking with thousands of others

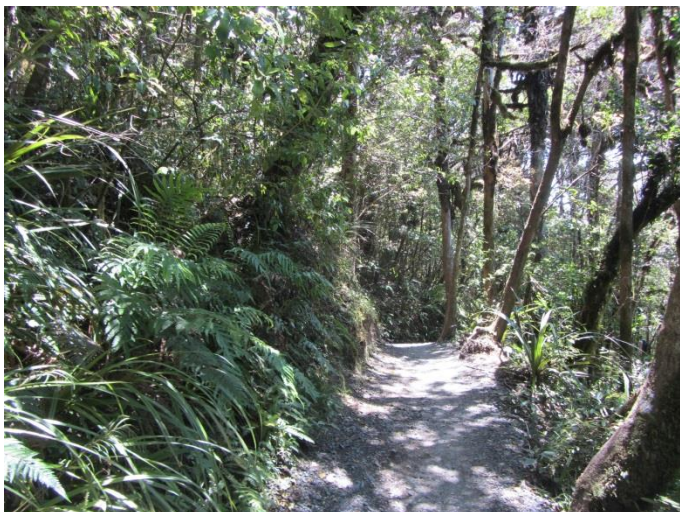
Once through the crater area, it is all downhill, literally. At points along the trail you can see live steam vents off trail, more evidence of this being an active volcanic area.



Below the Ketethi Hut, the trail descends through tussock slopes to the

forest bushline where a podocarp hardwood forest provides a stark contrast to the barren areas above. This area is sometimes referred to as "The Devils Staircase." It is indeed a staircase with dozens of flights of wooden steps built right into the mountain side, separated by undulating stretches of gravel. From a distance it looked rather easy, but it was

indeed diabolical. Near the trail's end, the Ketetahi Car Park, we encountered a sign warning of a *lahar* hazard area. A *lahar* is a type of mud flow or debris floe which emanates from a volcano and travels down a river valley. It can cause tremendous devastation due to its speed of travel and the depth of the flow. Just a couple of days before, a lahar had let loose in the area sometime during the night and ended up covering part of the nearby road with mud.





The hike is 19.4km long (12 miles) if you don't do any of the optional side hikes. As we did the additional hike up to the summit of Mt. Tongariro (1967 m) we ended up doing a total of about 14 miles which took us roughly 7 hours.

There is no potable water along the trail so you need to carry your own water and food as well as clothing for the changing weather conditions. We were well prepared but observed several fellow hikers who didn't appear to be so as they carried limited water and their clothing options didn't seem appropriate for the windy and chilly conditions found at the higher elevations. At the start of the hike we were told to call "111" if we were hurt and needed help. We observed one woman with a badly sprained ankle and later saw a helicopter which we presumed "rescued" her – we later learned there is an average of one helicopter rescue per day on the crossing during the hiking season.

After catching the shuttle bus back to our lodge and cleaning up, we rewarded ourselves with a pizza dinner washed down with some NZ strawberry-kiwi hard cider. Earlier in the trip we had discovered that hard cider is readily available both "on tap" and in bottles in a variety of flavors. Over the course of our travels we sampled a variety of hard cider flavors in addition to strawberry-kiwi including apple, pear, and feijoa (sometimes called a pineapple guava, it grows on the North Island and is delicious and refreshing as a hard cider).



### **Turangi to Auckland**

We drove north along beautiful Lake Taupo and headed towards the city of Rotorua which is nestled in the center of an active geothermal area. It is also an area of significant Moari history and culture. More recently, in the late 1800's and early 1900's it boasted the fabled "Polynesian Spa" where visitors from around the world came for treatment of such diseases as arthritis. While we didn't take a dip in the thermal waters, we did stroll around the Government Gardens and Rotorua Museum.



Rotorua Museum

The remainder of the drive to Auckland was through lovely green rolling hills including an area known for its thoroughbred horse farms. We stopped in the charming village of Cambridge for lunch.

Under sunny skies and warm temperatures we drove straight into the heart of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Given the many one-way streets and bustling traffic, we were glad it was a Sunday afternoon and more than happy to safely drop off the rental car and explore the city on foot. Living up to one of its nicknames, the "City of Sails," the main harbor was indeed awash in sails belonging to boats of all sizes, including a former America's Cup sloop. Ferries between the city center and various outlying areas & bays were also abundant.



Part of Auckland's skyline



The city is an interesting mix of historical building and modern sky scrapers. We strolled along the waterfront as well as some of the major shopping & business streets and did lots of people watching and window shopping. Prices for goods are generally quite high compared to the U.S., thus the mostly window shopping. Here's a quick comparison between Auckland and Denver:



Historic Auckland building

- Consumer Prices in Auckland are 36.06% higher than in Denver
- Restaurant Prices in Auckland are 34.43% higher than in Denver
- Groceries Prices in Auckland are 21.48% higher than in Denver
- Local Purchasing Power in Auckland is 33.14% lower than in Denver



Some old and some new

After enjoying dinner in Auckland, with hard cider of course, we decided to take in the Auckland Sky Tower on a clear summer's evening instead of doing it the next day with forecasted rain and clouds. The Sky Tower stands over 1,076 ft tall making it the tallest structure in the Southern Hemisphere. A glass elevator ascends to the main observation deck at 610 ft high -- just below the 636 ft high SkyWalk platform that Andrea and friends bravely conquered in 2012. We enjoyed the 360 degree views from the tower without the need to adorn ourselves in orange jumpsuits and lean out from the tower while tethered by only thin cables!



Looking between my feet to the street below from the Observation Deck – glass I'm standing on is 1.5 inches thick



Looking up at the Sky Tower

The following morning the forecasted rain and clouds arrived on schedule. We headed to the *Auckland Art Gallery* for a tour, gallery browsing, and lunch. The structure won a "Building of the Year" award last year and its use of wood from the local Kauri tree for its roof is stunning. By mid-afternoon we were headed to the airport for our evening flight to Los Angeles and then on to Denver.



Our twenty days in New Zealand were a fantastic combination of nature, people, and culture. Air New Zealand's "Smaug" painted plane and Hobbit-influenced flight safety video on our Los Angeles to Auckland leg started things off with just the right mix of the fanciful and the real. The Maori portraits at the Auckland Art Gallery were a wonderful reminder of the influence of NZ's native people on the New Zealand of today.



Dragon Smaug 777

Despite covering significant areas of the South and North Islands, there were vast areas of both that we did not have the time to visit. While no return visit is currently in our travel plans, I wouldn't bet against it!

*Tata and Cheers from New Zealand!*

