

NEW ZEALAND

Aotearoa: Land of the Long White Cloud

15 days

Created on: 12 Dec, 2025

Day 1 Arrival in Auckland

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Located in the northern part of New Zealand, the cosmopolitan city of Auckland is the largest metropolitan area in the country. The geographical location of Auckland is such that it lies between the Hauraki Gulf of the Pacific Ocean to the east, the low Hunua Ranges to the southeast, the Manukau Harbour to the southwest, and the Waitakere Ranges and smaller ranges to the west and northwest. The region is also the site of Auckland Volcanic Field, comprising of around 50 volcanoes. This is perhaps the most vibrant and bustling city in New Zealand. Auckland is also the biggest Polynesian city in the world, a cultural influence reflected in many different aspects of city life.

Overnight in Auckland.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Auckland: City Tour

This morning we embark on a tour of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city.

Our adventure begins with a scenic drive through the University Grounds, where you'll be surrounded by lush greenery and historic buildings. As we continue, we'll make a photo stop at the picturesque Parnell Rose Garden, a vibrant oasis of colourful blooms.

Next, we'll venture into the charming Parnell Village, a historic neighbourhood known for its boutique shops, cafes, and heritage buildings. Take a leisurely stroll through the quaint streets and soak up the local atmosphere.

We'll continue our journey through the central business district and along Queen Street, Auckland's 'Golden Mile,' before heading out along the scenic Mission Bay and Tamaki Drive. This coastal route offers stunning views of the Auckland Harbour as we pass Kohimarama Beach and St-Heliers, where you may spot some local wildlife enjoying the shoreline.

For a breathtaking panoramic view of the city, we'll head to Achilles Point, a popular viewpoint that offers stunning vistas of the harbour and surrounding landscape.

Our tour then takes us to the crest of Mt Eden, where we'll enjoy a spectacular panoramic view of Auckland. This dormant volcano, complete with crater, allows us to clearly view Auckland's setting between two harbours – a perspective that reveals why this is called the 'City of Sails.' We'll also drive up and around One Tree Hill, another of Auckland's iconic volcanic peaks, offering yet another magnificent viewpoint over the city and its environs.

Our tour will culminate at the Auckland Museum, where you'll have the opportunity to explore the fascinating history of New Zealand through its extensive collection of artifacts and exhibits.

Overnight in Auckland.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Auckland - Waitomo Caves - Rotorua

Today marks the beginning of our journey south, and we have a full day of travel and sightseeing ahead as we leave Auckland behind and venture into the heart of the North Island.

Our route takes us through the rich farmland of the Waikato region, New Zealand's agricultural heartland. This is dairy country par excellence, where verdant pastures stretch to the horizon. The landscape is a patchwork of green fields separated by hedgerows and shelter belts, a scene of pastoral plenty that has made this region the economic powerhouse of New Zealand's agricultural sector.

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We arrive at the world-famous Waitomo Caves, where we'll experience a guided tour of the underground limestone caverns and glowworm grottos. As we venture deep beneath the surface, we'll discover a hidden world sculpted over millions of years. The limestone formations are spectacular, but the true magic reveals itself when we encounter thousands of tiny glowworms illuminating the cave ceilings like a subterranean night sky. These bioluminescent larvae create an otherworldly spectacle that never fails to captivate.

After this unique underground experience, we continue to Rotorua, an area of abundant geothermal activity. Rotorua sits in the middle of the Taupo Volcanic Zone, which runs from northeast to southwest across the North Island. The locals make ingenious use of the hot steam that rises to the surface for heating their homes, cooking, and building their own private hot pools.

This afternoon we'll visit the Te Puia Thermal Reserve and Maori Arts and Crafts Centre. Here we will discover boiling pools of mud that plop and bubble, and geysers that spout up to 30 metres (100 feet) into the air. The reserve is also home to the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute, where we'll gain insight into traditional carving and weaving techniques.

Overnight in Rotorua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Rotorua - Wellington

Today we follow the 'Thermal Explorer Highway' to the heart of the North Island. This highway takes us through some of the most stunning scenery in New Zealand, along a path well-known for its geological wonders -- from huge limestone caves, to bubbling geothermal areas and volcanic plateaus.

We will view the Wairakei Steam Valley where the thermal energy is harnessed in the world's second largest geothermal power plant. We will see spectacular Huka Falls, located on the rushing Waikato River. We will also visit Lake Taupo, the water-filled crater of an ancient volcano. Surrounded by stunning volcanoes, bush clad mountains and a spectacular landscape; this is the largest freshwater lake in New Zealand and the Southern Hemisphere.

We then continue to travel south to Wellington. Our journey south takes us on the spectacular desert road along the edge of the World Heritage Site at Tongariro National Park. Established in 1887, Tongariro was the first national park in New Zealand and the fourth in the world. This is also a dual World Heritage area, a status that recognizes the park's important Maori cultural and spiritual associations as well as its outstanding volcanic features.

Overnight in Wellington.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Wellington: City Tour - Cook Strait Crossing - Picton

Called the world's 'coolest little capital' Wellington is known for its vibrant arts scene, world class café and restaurant culture, and active outdoor lifestyle. Set around an attractive waterfront, you'll be hard pressed to find a city in the world that's easier to get around. A creative, cosmopolitan city, Wellington combines the sophistication of a capital with the warmth and personality of a village.

This morning we enjoy a city sightseeing tour, including Te Papa, New Zealand's fantastic 'National Museum'. Here we will have a guided tour of the highlights from New Zealand's natural environment, art, and history.

We'll then take the 3.5-hour ferry journey across Cook Strait to the South Island. This journey is considered be one of the most beautiful ferry rides in the world. Named after James Cook, the Cook Strait connects the Tasman Sea on the west with the South Pacific Ocean on the east.

Overnight in Picton (we sometimes overnight just down the road in Blenheim).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Blenheim - Kaikoura - Christchurch

Today we will enjoy a spectacular scenic journey between the mountains and the sea as we travel through the Marlborough region. This geographic region has a growing international reputation for its white wine production. We'll visit a winery en route to the thriving seaside settlement of Kaikoura, an area offering unique whale and dolphin watching experiences. Several different species of whale can be seen off Kaikoura at different times of the year, but almost always the huge Sperm Whales. There is also a large and readily observed colony of Southern Fur Seals at the eastern edge of the town that we will visit.

¶ We continue between the Pacific Ocean and rugged Kaikoura Ranges to Christchurch, the 'Garden City'. Christchurch promises an eclectic mix of historic elegance and contemporary culture. The city is the focal point of what is called the Canterbury Region, which is that portion of the South Island that ¶ generally lies east of the Southern Al. The city's population is a manageable 300,000 or so, and dates from around 1850. It began as a Church of England settlement (hence the name) and was supposed to be a haven for landed gentry and "good Christian souls of lesser caste."

Overnight in Christchurch.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Christchurch - TranzAlpine Train - Franz Josef

This morning we will board the award-winning TranzAlpine Train, one of the world's most scenic rail journeys. Our route will take us across the vast patchwork farmlands of the Canterbury Plains and we will enjoy stunning scenery as we journey through spectacular gorges, river valleys and across the country's greatest mountain range, the magnificent Southern Alps.

After approximately 2.5 hours we will disembark at Arthurs Pass and continue to Hokitika by coach, a journey along the west coast and bringing us to the World Heritage-listed area of South West New Zealand (Te Wahipounamu). Shaped by millions of years of glacial movement, the fiords and coasts of South West New Zealand are outstandingly beautiful.

Hokitika was a gold rush town in the 1860s, and the countryside around Hokitika is dotted with historic sites related to its mining past. Today Hokitika is known for its arts and crafts produced by local artisans. After a break for lunch, we continue to Franz Josef. The magnificent Franz Josef Glacier is widely regarded as the gem of New Zealand's West Coast Glaciers.

PLEASE NOTE: In the unlikely event that we are unable to take this trip by train, we will travel by bus along The Great Alpine Highway. While the TranzAlpine Train will always be our first choice of transport, travelling by road is equally as scenic.

Overnight at Franz Josef (or nearby Fox Glacier).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Franz Josef - Haast River Valley - Queenstown

Today we embark on a scenic journey along the rugged west coast, where towering mountains, lush rainforests, and pristine rivers create a breathtaking landscape. Our destination is the charming town of Haast, a gateway to the stunning Haast River Valley.

Upon arrival, we'll experience a unique river safari, cruising through the mighty Haast River. As we navigate through this awe-inspiring valley, we'll be surrounded by towering peaks, cascading waterfalls, and dense temperate rainforest. The river valley, shaped by the powerful forces of nature, is a testament to the raw beauty of the South West World Heritage Area.

After our exhilarating river safari, we'll rejoin our coach and continue our journey to Queenstown, a vibrant town nestled on the shores of Lake Wakatipu. As we travel, we'll be treated to stunning views of the Southern Alps, with their snow-capped peaks glistening in the distance.

Tonight, we'll spend the night in Queenstown, a popular destination for adventure seekers and nature lovers alike.

Overnight in Queenstown.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Queenstown: Skyline Gondola & Leisure Time

This morning we include a scenic gondola ride up Queenstown Hill on the Skyline Gondola, offering breathtaking panoramic views of the town, Lake Wakatipu, and the surrounding mountains. After taking in the views, you are free to enjoy well-deserved balance of the day at leisure, exploring Queenstown's charming shops, cafes, and waterfront restaurants.

Queenstown has a compact and sophisticated downtown area tucked into a picturesque bay on the shores of the lake. Dwarfed by the surrounding mountains, there are amazing views from everywhere. You may choose just to relax, wander the streets, and soak up the atmosphere of the region. Or you may wish to join one of the optional excursions available (booked locally), such as a lake cruise, wine tour, jet boating, or a local garden tour. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your day.

Overnight in Queenstown.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Queenstown - Doubtful Sound Cruise - Te Anau

We will depart Queenstown this morning and head toward beautiful Lake Manapouri. We cruise across the lake and then travel by road over Wilmot Pass, stopping along the way to experience some of Fiordland's densest rainforest and to view the colourful alpine moss gardens.

In Doubtful Sound, we will board the spacious, purpose-built catamaran 'Patea Explorer' for a cruise through this pristine fiord. During the cruise knowledgeable and friendly nature guides will share with you their passion for the region through their commentary. They will answer questions, point out landmarks and provide you with information about the varied wildlife you may encounter like dolphins, fur seals and the rare Fiordland crested penguin.

After our cruise we disembark and transfer to our hotel located in the charming lakeside town of Te Anau.

Overnight in Te Anau.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Te Anau - Nugget Point - Dunedin

Our journey continues across the South Island to the East Coast and the city of Dunedin, renowned as the 'Edinburgh of the South'.

En route we make a stop at Nugget Point, an iconic panoramic platform on the Catlins Coast with one of the country's oldest lighthouses perched above the famous rocks named by Captain Cook because they looked like pieces of gold. It's a short stroll to the Tokata lighthouse, with sensational views of the big blue beyond. If you look down onto the rocks below the lighthouse, you may see a colony of fur seals frolicking in the surf. It is also home to some of the world's rarest penguins and one of the only places you might see seals, sea lions and elephant seals in the same area. There are also, sooty shearwaters, spoonbills, and a breeding colony of gannets.

We'll have a lunch stop en route and expect to arrive in Dunedin in mid-late afternoon. Known as the Wildlife Capital of New Zealand, Dunedin prides itself on its beautiful built heritage, stunning scenery, and unique biodiversity. Surrounded by dramatic hills and at the foot of a long, picturesque harbour, Dunedin is one of the best-preserved Victorian and Edwardian cities in the Southern Hemisphere.

Before checking in to our hotel, we'll stop at Baldwin Street, one of the city's claim to fame as the world's "steepest street." This 350-metre stretch of road is recognised by the Guinness World Records with an official maximum gradient is 19 degrees (though there are little bits that are 21 degrees); in other words, the ground rises a metre for every 2.86 metres you cover horizontally. The concrete upper section adds to the wall-like appearance; asphalt is avoided for safety reasons -- in hot summers, it would melt and slide right off, while in winter it would get too slippery.

Overnight in Dunedin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Dunedin & Otago Peninsula

Today we will journey to the nearby Otago Peninsula. The peninsula, together with its 20 km long Otago Harbour, is the home of an abundance of magnificent and world famous wildlife. The peninsula is predominantly of volcanic origin, steep and, on the Pacific Ocean side, very rugged. The harbour side is relatively warm, sunny, and sheltered.

Our scenic drive will take us past lush green pastures, small bays and inlets, sandy beaches, rugged hills, and volcanic landforms. Our first stop is Larnach Castle, a house was built by the prominent entrepreneur and politician, William Larnach. Since 1967, the castle has been privately owned by the Barker family, and opened as a tourist attraction, as "New Zealand's only castle." Significant restoration work has since been carried out by the Barker family, along with retrieval of original furniture to refurnish the house. The gardens were not an original feature of William Larnach's home, and have since been awarded "Garden of International Significance" status by the New Zealand Gardens Trust.

After a break for lunch, we continue with a very special wildlife adventure, travelling on the "Penguin Express" coach. We'll witness spectacular coastal views as we cross the Reid family farm to the breeding habitat of yellow-eyed penguins, blue penguins, and New Zealand fur seals.

Our final activity for the day is a one-hour cruise on board the Albatross Express on the spectacular Otago Harbour taking in the views of the surrounding area. We will have an opportunity to experience ocean wildlife up close and personal -- royal albatross, mollymawks, petrels, terns, cormorants, shearwaters, royal spoonbills, red-billed gulls and many more species. The Albatross Express is a purpose-built twin-engine catamaran with two viewing decks; the open top deck and enclosed lower deck (toilets on board).

We return to Dunedin for dinner and overnight.

Overnight in Dunedin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Dunedin - Aoraki/Mount Cook

Today we journey north along the coast to view the unique Moeraki Beach boulders before turning inland and traveling towards New Zealand's highlands and the UNESCO World Heritage listed Mt. Cook National Park. Along the way we'll stop at Oamaru, famous for its impressive streetscapes with many buildings constructed of local limestone.

Mount Cook Village is at the base of Aoraki/Mount Cook, probably the most spectacular national park in the country and one that rivals most scenery you'll see in the European Alps. The park, 680 sq km (270 square miles), contains more than 20 peaks over 3000 m (10,000 feet), including Aoraki/Mount Cook, the tallest mountain in Australasia; indeed the Maori word Aoraki means 'the Cloud Piercer.' It also features the world's longest temperate-zone glacier, the Tasman.

After some time for some exploration we continue to our hotel.

Overnight in the vicinity of Aoraki/Mount Cook or Lake Tekapo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Aoraki/Mount Cook - Christchurch

This morning we enjoy (weather-permitting) a scenic flight-of-a-lifetime -- the "Grand Traverse" -- a spectacular scenic flight-seeing experience allowing you to explore the Mount Cook and Westland National Parks. This 'flight-seeing' experience encompasses two World Heritage National Parks and 200 sq km of New Zealand's most memorable and spectacular scenery: Beautiful turquoise glacial lakes, golden tussock lands and braided river systems of the Mackenzie basin; remote High Country sheep stations, glacial valleys and landforms; the

Aoraki Mount Cook National Park -- a magical world of permanent ice and snow.

The fixed wing aircraft ensures that every passenger has a window seat and all aircraft have wings-above to ensure optimum viewing below. Pilots provide a full and informative commentary.

We continue with a visit to Lake Tekapo, and then we leave the 'High Country' and cross the Rakaia River towards Christchurch.

Overnight in Christchurch.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Christchurch.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast