

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

New Zealand: leaning back and rediscovering



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Aotearoa, as New Zealand is called in the Māori language, stands for “the land of the long white cloud”. Coming in from some tiny Pacific island nations and territories, New Zealand felt like a continent! However, strictly defined, also New Zealand, situated ~1,500 km east of Australia, and 1,000 km south of New Caledonia, is just another remote South Pacific archipelago.

For the sake of convenience, the white settlers called the two main islands, separated by the 23-km wide Cook Strait, North Island (Māori: Te Ika-a-Māui, 113,729 km²) and South Island (Māori: Te Waipounamu, 151,215 km²). Lesser known, there are more than 600 additional islands belonging to Kiwi Land, most of them within 50 kilometres of the two main islands.

The realm of New Zealand also includes the islands of Tokelau (a dependent



territory), plus the Cook Islands and Niue (self-governing states in free association with New Zealand) and finally, the Ross Dependency, which is a territorial claim in Antarctica.

New Zealand’s main islands are situated exactly where the Australian and the Pacific tectonic plates meet. The North Island lies at the brink of the Australian plate, the South Island partly on the Australian, partly on the Pacific plate. That’s why the country is prone to regular earthquakes.

New Zealand became fully independent from the UK in 1947, but is still a member of the British Commonwealth. The country is a constitutional monarchy with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. Some 4.8 million people live in New Zealand. However, the true number of residents is hard to guess. The census system registers everybody present in the country on declaration day: tourists, language students and business people, just the same as New Zealand residents – only Kiwi’s abroad, are not counted. Ironically, the census is always held during peak tourist season, probably to impress with higher numbers... Therefore, between 2005 and 2013, the two of us were also considered part of New Zealand’s population, though our 2005 NZ-trip ended shortly after we’d filled in the forms in Blenheim! Some 75% of Kiwis, how New Zealanders call themselves, are of European decent, ~15% Maori, ~12% Asians, and ~7,5% Pacific Islanders. Of those questioned, 48% call themselves Christians, including 6% who don’t belong to a church, and 42% don’t confess to a religion at all.

On previous visits, we’ve explored the land of the long white cloud by buying a car, and selling it after 6 to 9 months, while staying at Backpackers places along our way. This is certainly the best way to visit this extremely beautiful country. However, this time, we used New Zealand predominantly as a convenient base from which to fly to some other South Pacific islands, and to digest what we’ve experienced on those remote, breath taking and culturally highly interesting island nations.

Sure enough, we wouldn't be the roving spirits, if we wouldn't take the opportunity, to revisit some of New Zealand's sights. So, apart from digesting our south pacific experience and lingering in the sun, we re-visited parts of the North Island with a rental car.

Auckland: getting ever more cosmopolitan

Between the southern spring (Sept.) and summer (Febr.), we have been visiting Auckland, "the city of sails" several times. At first, we had a 10-day's stopover beginning of September 2017, interrupting our tour through the Pacific islands. Despite the weather still being rather cool, we had enjoyed the change of culture and the cosmopolitan town. In parts of the city centre, it feels like in Asia, whereas in some outer-suburbs like

Henderson, you're surrounded by Polynesians. In fact, Auckland boasts the biggest Polynesian population of any city in the world. Not only the Maoris, the original settlers, but also many Pacific Islanders live here.



It was September 8th 2017, when New Zealand's flag carrier airlifted us from Tonga to Auckland. With 1.5 million inhabitants it's by far the country's largest town. We stayed in a Youth Hostel (yes, we're forever young!) near upper Queen Street, a quarter we love because of its Asian flair. This area is packed with language schools aiming at Asians. As they are used to having their meals at hawker stalls, many eateries offering a big variety of exotic, healthy and affordable food, have popped up. Korean, Malaysian, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Indian, Mexican, Mediterranean and Arabic eateries are complemented by countless coffee- and sweets shops. We were delighted to eat our way through, and more so that proper coffee has finally arrived in New Zealand. We were enamoured of this multicultural atmosphere – something we often miss in Europe. Auckland's multi-ethnic population adds also lots of festivals to the town. During our stage, immigrants from Taiwan held a big festival at Aotea Square. Mid October, unfortunately during our trip to Polynesia, the Indian Population's annual Auckland Diwali was held; not only at Aotea Square, but along all of Queens Street...

We explored this bustling city's various Quarters again; Parnell, Ponsby and Newmarket with their boutiques and their café culture. One day, we walked up to the viewpoint on Mt. Eden, a volcano extinct long ago. Very pleasant is also the harbour front with its ports for leisure- and commercial boats. Auckland's geographic location on a narrow, volcano dotted isthmus, with natural harbours to the Pacific-Ocean to the east, and to the Tasman sea to the west, is an attraction in itself.

Upon returning from our trip to French Polynesia and Chile on December 23rd 2017, we experienced how Auckland prepares for Christmas-Eve. Knowing that half of New Zealand's population doesn't belong to a church, we were wondering, how much of this Christian holiday we'd notice. There were not many X-Mas decorations, but soon it became obvious that Kiwis worship the NZ \$. Around downtown, shops normally close between 17h and 18h, but on Saturday, December 23rd, some department stores remained open until MIDNIGHT, and even on December 24th, some stayed open until 21h! Only on December 25th, most shops remained closed.



AONC–Auckland Outdoor Naturist Club: a green oasis to relax

After more than six months of intense travelling, we looked for a suitable place to complete our travel diary and to take a break from everyday travel. After mingling for half a year with the extraordinarily friendly, but due to the influence of missionaries meanwhile extremely prudish Pacific Islanders, we looked for a place, where we could bare it all again!



We remembered Oranui, a naturist club in West-Auckland, where we had already stayed 12 years ago. Meanwhile, it rebranded itself to AONC – Auckland Outdoor Naturist Club. However, the club is still situated in the suburb of Ranui, the Oranui games are still held annually, one of the highest points within AONC is still called Oranui Hights and the club's largest rental cottages is also still called Oranui. Oranui is a Maori word, meaning the top of a sunny hill. It was December 28th, when we arrived at Auckland Outdoors. It wasn't sunny all the times during our 4 weeks in the middle of the southern summer, though it was always warm enough to roam around naked.

The club's location in the suburb of Ranui is just far enough from the city's hustle and bustle to relax, but close enough to be visited by public transport. The nearest bus stop is 300 meters away, or the metro train station 750 meters (Ranui). If we walked half an hour, we reached Henderson. This suburb boosts another metro station, a good choice of restaurants and a huge shopping-centre, where we found much more than we needed. If we realized that we shopped too enthusiastically, we took a taxi, if not, we were sometimes lucky that a club-member picked us up on our way back, just before we collapsed under the weight of our lavishly filled shopping bags...

Once we were picked up by a member with a car plate, many European naturists would pay extra money to get it: FKK..., the German abbreviation for naturism. Here in New Zealand, it's just a meaningless, computer generated number, sticking on the cars of about 1,000 Kiwis, most of whom would never dare to visit "such a place".

AONC is a very well-equipped club, it is a green oasis in the middle of an urbanized area. Sure enough, when the club was established, it was in the middle of nowhere. However, as Auckland grew quite fast, new housing developments and even a school yard were built just behind the club's planted bamboo fence. That's New-Zealand; most Kiwis wouldn't bare it all, but they don't have a problem, if others do, and certainly not, to have a naturist club as neighbours. During our first stage twelve years ago, we've noticed some Asian immigrants from the neighbourhood sneaking into the club; not to gawk, but to harvest the bamboo-shots from the fence!

AONC's members and visitors alike, can take advantage of the club's superb facilities and spotless clean washrooms. There is a swimming- and a paddling pool, a large sauna and two Jacuzzis. Furthermore, a large covered BBQ area, sports-fields, playgrounds and a generous club-house with library, pool- and ping pong tables, living room suites, communal kitchen and more can be enjoyed by everyone. We loved also the nice bush-walk, setup through the woods belonging to the club. There are lots of fern trees growing on the nicely landscaped grounds. More than once, fantails were flying around us and even sitting on our arms. Unfortunately, they didn't have patience to wait, until we took a picture!

Only at AONC: firework and naturists from around the world!

Around the turn of the year, as most New Zealanders, also most club members were on holiday. Therefore, AONC was dominated by pensioners, some staying at the club all summer, a few even year around. This doesn't mean, nothing happened. Members come from all walks of life, and some bring special talents along. As one member occupationally handles fireworks, the club celebrates New Year annually with a big, lavish display of pyrotechnics. It was also very interesting to watch, how the fireworks were setup on the lawn, and fired from a switchboard at midnight.



We were not the only overseas tourists staying at Auckland Outdoors. At times, there was almost a small traveller's community creating a hostel like atmosphere. Most visitors overnighed in a small camping bus they rented to tour the country, others pitched up a tent. We stayed at one of four rental cabins. All come with a sofa and a small kitchen. Furthermore, ours was equipped with a baking oven, so we could enjoy freshly baked up bread, instead of toast.



After the end of the holiday season, more and more of the “younger” club members visited, especially during lunch time, after work, and on weekends. We never ever stayed at such a multicultural naturist club as is AONC. It might be a bit exaggerated to say, the club's few Maori members were almost the only purebred New-Zealanders, but Kiwi born members were certainly a minority. During our stage at AONC, we've met not only immigrants from countries like Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, or the UK, but also from Iceland, Russia, the US, China, India, Sri Lanka, South-Africa, Fiji, French Polynesia and so on. To us roving spirits, it was just great to mingle with such an international crowd.

Auckland Outdoors Naturist Club offered us just the perfect environment to complete some self-imposed work, shape our onward travels and to recharge our batteries after an intense period of travelling. In short: AONC is a well-appointed, year around open club-ground. It lies near the city centre of Auckland, but still worlds apart; just what na-tourists look for.

The North Island: where prices and thermal areas boil over

On January 26th 2018, we've returned to “our” youth hostel in the city centre of Auckland. From there, we dived once more into the bustling multicultural downtown area and spoiled ourselves again with authentic specialities from all around Asia. By January 31st, it was definitely time to re-discover parts of New-Zealand's beautiful North-Island. So, we fetched the rental-car we've arranged beforehand.

Northlands: Kauri trees, sand dunes and island-dotted bays

Generally, Kiwis are well educated and know how to behave. However, if it comes to driving, they strangely all drive on the wrong, not on the right side of the road. We were even forced to adopt this peculiarity. As Swiss, we are used to driving lots of winding roads. Never the less, we were once more surprised, how many bends and hills there are in New Zealand, when we headed up to the Northlands.

On the first night, we ended up in Paparoa, a little countryside village, where people either drink, or sleep with someone they shouldn't – as our Landlady stated. At least, the local pub doubled as gastro-pub, pleasing us with some great local culinary delights. The green mussels were giant and tender; no comparison to the “bonsai mussels” we're used from Europe!



Shortly after stopping at the pleasant town of Dargaville, we reached the area with the last of the imposing Kauri trees. Due to them being so giant, most of the Kauri forests have been cleared out to extract timber and gum. The few old Kauri trees still left, are very impressive to look at. The fattest living Kauri has a girth of more than 16m and stands some 60m tall. Nobody knows how old those giants of the forest are, assumptions range from 1,250 to 2,000 years. Never the less, they are extremely vulnerable. Therefore, the New Zealand forestry department provides equipment and liquid to clean and sterilize boots of fungus at any entry point to forest paths, or board walks.

After overnighing at a Backpacker's hostel in Omapere, and a good look at the sand dunes around there, we crossed Hokianga harbour (an inlet) with a car ferry. En route to Kaitaia, we passed quite a few sections where the road was flooded. Never the less, up here, we were lucky to get "a bit" of rain only! Further south, state of emergency had been declared on many regions, due to heavy rain. We however, reached Cape Reinga, New Zealand's northernmost tip in the best of light. The view from the lighthouse was ever so great. We don't recall having seen this fantastic scenery, from the golden sand dunes to the cliffs, and the visibly meeting of the Tasman Sea with the Pacific Ocean, ever before in such a great evening sun.



After a night in a motel in Kaitaia, we drove again a bit northwards, this time, to see the famous 90-mile beach. Later, we continued to the east coast, with often incredible viewpoints over gold- to pinkish sand beaches to rocky, forested islets, dotted in the greenish blue sea of the Bay of Islands.

We found our next lodging at a Backpacker's place in Kerikeri and visited the highly popular coastal village of Paihia from there. Located only 2km from the village centre, is New Zealand's most important historic site; the Waitangy Treaty Grounds, where Maori chiefs and representatives of the British Crown had signed the document that became the founding stone of New Zealand's constitution in 1840. During our previous visits, everybody was welcome to roam around the grounds for free. However, meanwhile everything has become more commercial. The old marae (Polynesian meeting house) and the ceremonial canoe had been elevated to be "breathtaking examples" of ancient architecture and boat construction skills. To justify the \$ 25 entrance fee for New Zealand residents, and \$ 50 for foreigners, there is now also a museum, a guided tour and a Maori cultural show! As we had seen the lawn with the flag-pole before, we found other ways to spend \$ 100.



On our way southwards, we marvelled at more impressive seascapes and at the various buildings designed by Friedensreich Hundertwasser in Kawakawa. The Austrian artist used to live here and nowadays, visitors and locals alike are welcome to pee into a Hundertwasser building; the village's public toilet! Our visit to the Northlands was terminated by an evening with an excellent meal and a nice motel room in Wellsford.

Coromandel: a peninsula with amazing coastlines



After traversing Auckland on the motorway, and a nice drive along the Firth of Thames, we reached the Coromandel Peninsula. Our discovery started in the charming town of Thames, on February 6th 2018. During the following drive along the west-coast northwards, not only the scenery made the journey breath-taking, but also the bad state of the road. Due to a severe thunderstorm a couple of months ago, in many sections, half of the road had been underwashed or even been swept into the sea! New Zealand's summer 2018 was a summer of contrasts; it was one of the warmest recorded summers ever, but also one with many severe storms and a lot of rain.

It was the end of a long weekend and therefore, traffic towards Auckland was quite heavy. Luckily, in our direction, there were no traffic jams. As the Coromandel Peninsula is very popular for fishing, many Kiwis were queuing; first at the boat ramps to get their boat out of the water and onto the trailer, and thereafter even longer on the road.

We found nice lodging at the same Backpacker's Lodge, in Coromandel Town, where we had already stayed 12 years ago. From there, we explored the northern half of the Peninsula, while driving on many small roads, up and down and across uncountable hills and bends. We also took Road Nr. 309, an adventurous gravel road, if you believe the tourist brochures. We didn't find it that adventurous, but it was worthwhile anyway. The best lookouts were often found on the hilltops along the coastal road. From many, we had fabulous views out to the sea dotted with rocky islands.

More spectacular seascapes awaited, after we reached the Coromandel's east coast and continued southwards. Often, we ventured out to some small bays that could be found at the end of some small side roads. Mostly, we came across beautiful shorelines and beaches with only few people enjoying them. This changed abruptly, when we reached the carpark of famous Cathedral Cove. Due to the sheer number of visitors, it isn't possible anymore, to drive right up to the giant hole in the rock on the beach. Nowadays, visitors have the choice of a one-hour loop-walk, as we did, or a shuttle bus from the carpark to a viewpoint (NZ\$ 5). Presently, the water level was exceptionally high due to a king-tide. Instead of going down to the now very narrow beach and walking up to the "remaining hole", we took the chance and walked to a viewpoint above the cliffs, where we hadn't been before.



As during our last trips, Backpacker's Hostels in New Zealand are still very popular with tourists of any age. Of course, there are lots of young travellers staying there, but as backslide genuine travellers tend to come back to hostels, the average age is increasing. At the Backpacker's Hostel in Tairua, our last stop in the Coromandel, we found ourselves being the youngest guests, at 56 and 58. No wonder, the Landlady said; "nowadays, we predominantly need private rooms and we might go away from dorms".

Rising living standard

Living standards and along with it; prices, have increased a lot since we last visited New-Zealand in 2006. This was most obvious, when we shopped in supermarkets. We got the impression that grocery prices are meanwhile at par,



if not even higher than in Switzerland. Eating out, on the other hand, is nowadays more attractive than ever.



Despite most Kiwis (still) feeding predominantly on fast-food, restaurants offering high quality, creative dishes can now be found everywhere tourists pass through. Meal prices in restaurants are still quite moderate, considering the quality.

Also prices for real estate reached almost the level of Switzerland. Around Auckland, an average family home trades for well above one million New Zealand Dollars (€ 600,000)! We talked to somebody who bought a house some 10 years ago for NZ\$ 200,000 and could sell it for a whole 2 million end of 2017.

The rise of property prices didn't come along with better building quality of. Thin walled wooden structures with single-glazed windows still dominate even new buildings. It's only the price of the plots that rose.

We don't believe, salaries have risen all that much. Though, it seemed to us Kiwis spend a lot of money to travel. Therefore, many roads are jammed on weekends. If we showed up without reservation at motels or hostels, they were fully booked. More than once, we had a hard time finding accommodation – only midweek it was easy. Nowadays, with everyone booking by internet, also Backpacker's places get reserved well ahead.

Thermal wonderlands: steaming water and mineral deposits

On Friday, Febr. 9th 2018, the day we left the Coromandel Peninsula, Rotorua and the surrounding villages were totally booked out. After a long search, we ended up in Whakatane on the Bay of Plenty. We couldn't stay a second night at the motel we finally found shelter, as it was booked for Saturday. At least, we took time to wander around this pleasant town, before we continued to Taupo.



Again, most accommodation was booked out, yet a nice lady arranged us an unofficially let over-flow room. Here we stayed until the next rainy period was over. Just when the sun reigned again, we started to explore the thermal wonders on the way north to Rotorua.

Our first stop at the Craters of the Moon gave us insight into steaming mud-pools and bubbling craters. After a pleasant stroll on the well set up board walk, we continued north.

Generally, New Zealand is very tourist friendly. Apart from city centres, you hardly ever pay for parking and access to many natural attractions with well set up boardwalks and other infrastructure like rest rooms, is often for free. However, where admission is levied, it's normally not cheap at all. At the thermal wonderland Wai-O-Tapu, we paid NZD 32.50 each. Despite having been here before, we really loved it again! We spent more than 2 hours walking along the exciting sites on the 3km circuit. There is such a variety of artwork of mother nature. Around every turn, you see something different. Only steam and sulphur are omnipresent. The colours of the natural artist's palette in the so-called Champagne pool are really impressive, as are the craters in their different shades of green, orange, brown and grey. The Primrose terraces impress with their blinding white, and are the biggest sinter-terraces in New Zealand. There are brown and grey boiling mud pools, steam holes, various sulphur craters, a small lake shining in the deepest possible green and more. All is enhanced with colourful names like: inferno crater, devil's bath or rainbow crater. The surrounding forest is covered in thick moss and often in the algae Trentepohlia that appears bright orange though it's actually green.



Spending the next two nights at a Backpacker's place in touristy Rotorua, we took the opportunity to marvel at the many steaming ponds of the thermal town park Kuirau.



The pleasant city of Tauranga was the next stop on our itinerary. It's New Zealand's fastest growing town and one of very few that took advantage of its great waterfront location. "The Strand" is lined with uncountable cafés and restaurants.

On a sunny day, an excursion from Katikati, where we stayed next, led us from the Bay of Plenty again towards the Coromandel Peninsula. We had passed this section before in pouring rain. Now, in this glorious weather, we took every possible sideroad leading to the sea. The lookouts above Bowentown, south of Waihi Beach, were absolutely breath-taking. The deeply cut in arm of the sea

with its sandbars got pretty dry at low tide, and thus offered a beautiful picture. Similar scenery was to be admired at Whangamata, Onemana and Oputere. To spice the picture, there were always some offshore rock islets with a few trees. Following a tip, we had an excellent lunch at the German Bakery in Waihi, where we also stocked up with real bread.

Katikati Naturist Park: a perfect farewell from New-Zealand

After a good fortnight of touring around the North Island, we had still 11 days left, until we were due to leave New Zealand. This gave us enough time for another holiday within our holidays, before we continued to new adventures. Some 30 kilometres west of Tauranga, and only 2 ½ hours south-east of Auckland Airport, we've found a perfect retreat: Katikati, a nice naturist ground outside the namesake village.

As several of our friends put it, already the name Katikati promises joy, and our stage was very joyfully indeed, as during our first visit twelve years ago. After the founding couple sold it for reasons of old age, the resort is now under new management. It was sold to a Chinese couple who realized this naturist ground's potential as investment opportunity, and leased it with a thirty years contract to a genuine naturist couple. Ami and Tom, a Swedish/Kiwi couple, run the place with devotion, just the way that all holiday makers are happy.



Katikati Naturist-Park is a very well equipped, year around open naturist oasis amid kiwi orchards. The Uretara Stream links it to the namesake township, some 4 kilometres away. Katikati boasts an excellent choice of dining and shopping opportunities, including a large Countdown Supermarket.



At Katikati naturist-park, we've enjoyed the many facilities that can be used around the clock: swimming-pool, sauna, two jacuzzies, covered open-air ping pong tables and even a "Place de la Petanque". A clubhouse provides living room suites, billiard tables, a library with books, movies and a TV.

We hired a nice kitchen-equipped cabin, but as on most campgrounds in Kiwi-Land, there is also a generous communal kitchen where we regularly used the baking oven. Everything is kept spotlessly clean and well-tended. As pets are banned from Katikati there is neither dog poo.

The grounds are nicely landscaped, with big lawns and many shady trees. There is a very inviting mini-golf course which gave us a daily challenge. Despite our improving skills, hole number four remained a tough nut to crack! However, with the sun kissing our bums, it was pure joy, to try it again and again. Less challenging, but just beautiful was to sit on the shore of Uretara Stream that magnificently flows along the naturist retreat. It's stony and rocky shores look very picturesque and in one section, you will see eels, if you feed them...

The atmosphere at Katikati is very pleasant. It has a few permanents, but the place is predominantly popular among holiday makers, Kiwis and overseas visitors, singles, couples and families alike. Many spend a few days or rather weeks here, and thanks to the variety of playgrounds, no child gets bored.

The cabins and onsite-vans filled up daily, so we were lucky that we had booked ahead. The pitches however, were predominantly packed over the weekends. Our stage at Katikati naturist retreat was a perfect and sunny farewell from Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud.



Final thoughts: a very diverse and very beautiful country



If listening to the news, or reading the papers, New Zealand felt like a remote Pacific Island. The same impression we got already 12 years ago. Living standard, salaries and prices however, have risen dramatically since our last visit – costs of living are now at par with Switzerland! New Zealand is still a clean and green country with a big diversity of natural sights: from stunning coastlines to fern-tree- and kauri-forests, volcanoes and mystical thermal wonderlands. New Zealand remains a very attractive destination indeed, drawing a great number of nature lovers from all over the world.

PS: If this short story did whet your appetite to learn as well, how we've experienced New-Zealand 2006, you're welcome to read our comprehensive Kiwi travel-story from back then when we visited the North- & South-Island for 8 months. It's available either as pure text:

http://roving-spirits.de/en/Tgb/Reisetagebuch_Teil_12.html

or as .pdf document, enhanced with photos:

http://roving-spirits.de/en/Tgb/Pdf/PDF_Travelogue_B+H_chapter_12.pdf

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