



Lake Matheson, near Fox Glacier



Dispelling the Myth

New Zealand is often seen as a 'once in a lifetime' destination, and perceived as easy to discover without much assistance. Felicity Goldsmith talks to some Audley clients about their personal experiences of the country and finds they gained a lot from our specialist knowledge – and why they are determined to go back.

Whenever I chat to people about New Zealand I find that almost everyone has some desire to visit, but the distances involved mean that such a long haul journey is often put on the back burner and saved for a special occasion. The assumption is that such a small country is only ever likely to merit one visit. As specialists in this region (and voted by Tourism New Zealand as the top UK operator to New Zealand), we would certainly argue the country deserves much more attention, but are increasingly finding that New Zealand is greatly exceeding our clients' expectations too, leaving them with a similar desire to return for a second or third time. I decided to pick up the phone and chat with a few clients who had recently returned and hear their views.

One of the greatest things about New Zealand is that almost everybody who has visited has nothing but good things to say about their experiences. New Zealand as a country frequently comes out top in surveys of most popular destinations, or future travel 'wish lists'. This positive view certainly came across in the conversations I had, and such anecdotal recommendations continue to promote a highly favourable image. However it often takes a particular event or a very specific reason to turn this from 'maybe one day' to a concrete plan to visit. Our clients' motives for travelling to New Zealand have included to attend family weddings, to trace family ancestry, or to revisit naval bases where they were stationed in the armed forces. ▶



Doubtful Sound, Fiordland

- Expectations are formed by a combination of personal recommendations and high profile exposure through media such as film and television. One common preconception is that it is like England used to be 30 years ago, but as one client pointed out, 'England was never as beautiful', nor was it ever as diverse. The overwhelming majority of clients feel that New Zealand not only lives up to their expectations but exceeds them in every aspect, an 'exceptional' destination packed with a 'remarkable' variety of experiences.

Naturally a major part of this is the scenery. When asked about highlights of their trips, most clients find it hard to shortlist one or two. Interestingly, what came across was that the highlights of many trips were often the time spent in lesser-known areas, where expectations were perhaps lower, and where our preference for steering people a little further off the beaten track proved highly rewarding. A constant favourite is Doubtful Sound, not as renowned as Milford, but infinitely more enjoyable as it is far less crowded. The same is true of Wanaka, a quieter, smaller but equally stunning rival to Queenstown. One client observed that New Zealand enjoys a landscape which is scarcely marked by industrial scarring, and there are vast untouched areas the like of which we simply no longer find in the UK. In contrast, they came to discover a level of sophistication in even the smallest of towns, and a fascinating multicultural mix in the larger cities. These unexpected extremes made their trip all the more exciting.

Experiences rated highly amongst everyone I spoke to. The Kiwis are excellent at getting visitors out and about, experiencing the fantastic landscapes from the air, the water or by land. Everyone gets caught up in the infectious craving for adventurous exploration, and we find that clients come home having taken trips which they might previously have left for the more adrenalin focused. Activities such as jet-boating, a true kiwi invention, combine a journey with a new experience, whilst accessing some of the most remarkable scenery in the country – clients often come home raving about days spent skimming across the pristine waters to explore hidden paradises. Scenic flights over some of the iconic natural features, such as the glaciers, are reported to be 'truly fantastic', with views that simply take your breath away.

An important element of a New Zealand trip for many is the potential to view wildlife, in particular birds and marine life. One client described a trip to New Zealand as being akin to a natural history lesson, taking you back thousands of years to when the native species were untouched by human presence. The interdependence of the various native flora and fauna is something which the Department of Conservation is working tremendously hard to preserve, and it is possible to visit island reserves which have been returned to their pristine state, free from introduced predators. Areas like these allow visitors in carefully restricted numbers to view rare flightless birds, many of which are on

the brink of extinction. The sight of a rare Stewart Island kiwi scurrying back into the bush is a moment which will linger long in the memory of one client, and hearing their calls in the quiet of the night-time forest is magical. In the surrounding waters sightings of whales, dolphins, penguins, seals and albatross are often a highlight, with the overriding memory being of how close these sightings have been. There are many ways careful planning can incorporate unique opportunities into your journey: for one client a memorable example included a pre-dawn walk with an experienced guide to see rare yellow eyed penguins.

Perhaps the most rewarding area clients chose to comment on was the interaction with the people they met, many of whom we work very closely with and consider as friends. The Kiwi attitude to life comes across to many as very refreshing, and the culture as a whole is far less concerned with class distinction, focusing much more on integration and equality. Our recommended accommodation is usually in hosted B&Bs, small hotels and lodges, where not only is the accommodation itself of an excellent standard, but the welcome and service you receive from the hosts is unrivalled. Many clients felt that the hospitality, advice and assistance they experienced truly enhanced their enjoyment of their trip, and added to their conviction that they would have to return again one day to spend more time at their favourite spots. One client chose to comment about a particular property: "When we arrived at



Dart River Wilderness Safari



Stewart Island Kaka



Kayaking with dolphins, Doubtful Sound, Fiordland



Seal pups, Dunedin



Prof J Lansdale, Routeburn Track

Greenhill [the Lodge, Napier] we thought we had arrived in heaven. When we met Helen, we knew we had". Another described his experience of Kiwi hospitality simply as "magnificent".

I was careful to ask our clients what initially encouraged them to plan their trip with Audley rather than travel independently, and whether, in retrospect, they felt they had benefited from talking with one of our specialists. With so much information widely available on the internet, what value can we add? Plenty, it seemed. The majority of our clients choose to self-drive around New Zealand, and often come to us with a host of ideas about what they would like to include in an itinerary. However, it is very easy to misinterpret distances on a map, and by adding descriptions, suggestions for stops, and ideas for side trips, we can put together realistic but interesting routings, resulting in much more relaxed, enjoyable trips. Having confidence in the choice of accommodation was also an important point. There are so many alternatives that it is almost impossible to know where to start. We know many of these options well and by getting a feel for the style that suits each individual client our specialists are able to select the most appropriate. We also scored highly over details such as ensuring every transfer, vehicle pick-up and tour run like clockwork. Confident the specific practical arrangements would work smoothly, our clients were able to focus solely on enjoying their time within New Zealand.

From the people and their hospitality to the scenery, the wildlife and the experiences, New Zealand never fails to impress. The only disappointment which people express is simply that they didn't have more time. Compact and diverse, it is a country in which you can certainly do a lot quickly, but there's no way you can see it all in one visit. Don't be tempted to put it off for too long as the lure of a second trip will be hard to ignore.

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Greenhill the Lodge, Napier & Hawkes Bay



Guests tasting Hawkes Bay wines, Greenhill the Lodge

FACT FILE

A three week self-drive trip to New Zealand staying in character accommodation including return flights starts from £3,995 per person. For further details please contact one of our country specialists on 01993 838 820.



Kiwi in the wild, Stewart Island