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October 24, 2025 · The Journal / Travel Inspiration

Insider's Guide to New Zealand

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Image courtesy of Wharekauhau Luxury Country Estate

New Zealand feels both wild and welcoming, with landscapes that shift from geothermal valleys to jagged peaks and deep fjords. On the North Island, Wellington's compact cultural

scene and Auckland's yacht-filled harbor give way to Rotorua's geothermal activity and Māori heritage. The South Island is focused on adventure, with Queenstown as a hub for adrenaline sports, Milford Sound for dramatic cruises, and glacial hikes. Wildlife encounters are a highlight, from whales off Kaikōura to rare birdlife in remote reserves.

This bucket list trip is for adventure seekers, nature lovers, and anyone wanting big scenery paired with cultural richness. Read on to find out where to stay, what to do, and how to experience the best of New Zealand.

Need to know



Image courtesy of The George Christchurch

Navigating shifting weather, regional travel logistics, and local customs is easier with a few well-chosen tips, ensuring a smooth and rewarding experience.

Currency: The New Zealand Dollar (NZD) is the national currency, with credit cards widely accepted. ATMs are easy to find in towns and cities to help keep cash on-hand for rural cafés,

markets, and remote adventure stops. Tipping is not expected but appreciated for great service.

Languages: New Zealand has three official languages, including Māori and New Zealand Sign Language, but English is the most widely spoken. Learning some Maori phrases is a respectful and welcome way to interact with the indigenous communities of New Zealand.

- **Key phrases:** *kia ora* (hello), *tēnā koe* (please and you're welcome), *poroporoaki* (goodbye), *whakawhetai koe* (thank you), *āe/kahore* (yes/no).

Airports: Auckland (AKL), on the North Island, is the country's biggest hub, with year-round direct flights to Los Angeles, Vancouver, New York City, and more. Christchurch (CHC) is the South Island's biggest airport, with seasonal flights from San Francisco. Both are also well connected to cities across New Zealand, Oceania, and Asia. Wellington (WLG) and Queenstown (ZQN) also offer intra-New Zealand and Oceania flights for more connectivity.

Transportation: Renting a car is one of the best ways to see New Zealand, with flexibility for scenic routes and remote regions. Private car transfers, Uber, and public transport are available in major cities, while buses link to towns. Trains provide memorable journeys through mountains and plains but are limited, and ferries connect the North and South Islands.

Best time to visit: New Zealand is a year-round destination, but a lot of activities are seasonal. Fall (March–May) and spring (September–November) offer great outdoor weather for seasonal landscapes, hiking, and fewer tourists. Summer (December–February) brings warm weather for beaches and festivals, but expect larger crowds and higher prices. Winter (June–August) is best for skiing and snowboarding.

Ideal length of stay: Plan at least eight to 10 days to make the long journey worthwhile. The extra time lets you balance South Island adventure with North Island culture, from fjords and alpine trails to vibrant cities and Māori heritage sites.

Signature dishes and drinks:

- **Pavlova:** A crisp meringue dessert topped with whipped cream and fresh fruit.

- **Green-lipped mussels:** Plump, jade-hued mussels unique to New Zealand waters, best steamed with garlic or white wine.
- **Hāngī:** A traditional Māori feast of meat and root vegetables slow-cooked in an earth oven, bringing smoky, tender flavors.
- **Lamb:** Renowned for its tenderness, roasted or grilled and paired with seasonal veggies.
- **Venison:** Farm-raised and mild, tender cuts are often roasted or pan-seared.
- **Crayfish (*kōura*):** A South Island delicacy, grilled, and served with lemon and butter.
- **Fish and chips:** Fresh-caught snapper or hoki wrapped in paper with a side of fries.
- **Feijoas:** A tart-sweet tropical fruit from South America that's become New Zealand's unofficial national fruit, eaten fresh, blended into smoothies, or baked into cakes.
- **Flat white:** Silky espresso with velvety milk, said to have been perfected in New Zealand's café culture.
- **Wine:** Best known for Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough, and, more recently, Pinot Noir from Marlborough, Martinborough, and Central Otago.

What to wear: New Zealand weather can feel like experiencing four seasons in a single day, with sun, wind, and rain all before lunch. Pack versatile layers like a light jacket, breathable tops, and a waterproof shell. On the South Island, even summer evenings turn crisp, so a warm sweater is essential. Cities like Auckland and Wellington blend laid-back style with urban polish, and sturdy, comfortable walking shoes are a must.

Travel tips:

- **Respect Māori culture:** Take time to learn a few words of Te Reo Māori, and respect *marae* (meeting grounds) and cultural traditions.
- **Shopping:** Major cities showcase design-focused fashion, contemporary Māori art, and natural skincare with native ingredients such as kawakawa and mānuka honey. In smaller towns, seek out hand-carved *pounamu* (greenstone), merino wool garments, and artisanal treats like honey and craft chocolate.
- **Driving:** Remember to drive on the left side of the road. Watch for winding routes and the occasional sheep crossing. Speed limits are strict.
- **Medications:** Bring prescriptions in original packaging. Pharmacies are well-stocked, but some US over-the-counter meds may need a prescription here.

North Island



Image courtesy of Hotel Britomart

The North Island weaves together Māori traditions, geothermal wonders, and cinematic landscapes. Visit Hobbiton for a taste of movie magic, drift through glowworm-lit caves, or explore Rotorua's bubbling hot pools. In Wellington, coffee shops, galleries, and a vibrant waterfront add an urban edge to the island's natural beauty.

Where to stay

Wharekauhau Luxury Country Estate (Wellington): An elegant country retreat set on a working sheep station. Suites and cottages pair vintage charm with modern comfort, while farm-to-table dining and wilderness activities immerse guests in the coastal landscape.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Landing NZ (Bay of Islands): A secluded coastal sanctuary set across rolling vineyards, native bush, and private beaches. Four architectural residences offer refined comfort and panoramic sea views. Enjoy estate wine, explore walking trails, and cruise the islands.

Rosewood Cape Kidnappers (Te Awanga): Set above the dramatic Hawke's Bay cliffs, this lodge blends rustic-luxe interiors with panoramic vineyard and ocean views. Enjoy farm-to-table cuisine, world-class golf, and guided walks across a vast coastal property.

- **Fora's Rosewood Elite** partner perks include a \$100 hotel credit, and an upgrade and extended check-in whenever possible.

The Hotel Britomart (Auckland): A sustainably designed boutique hotel in Auckland's vibrant waterfront district. Warm timber interiors, curated art, and easy access to the city's dining and shopping define its urban charm.

Huka Lodge (Taupō): A retreat on the banks of the Waikato River combining natural serenity with timeless elegance across suites and cottages. Enjoy nearby outdoor activities like fly-fishing, excursions on Lake Taupō, and nearby Tongariro National Park.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

South Island



Image courtesy of Rosewood Matakauri

Wild and spectacular, the South Island is New Zealand's outdoor stage, filled with glaciers, fjords, and alpine lakes. Milford Sound is the crown jewel, though fickle weather makes a backup plan essential. Legendary hikes like the Routeburn and Milford Track reveal rugged terrain and sweeping vistas. Coastal detours reward travelers with wildlife sightings like dolphins and penguins.

Where to stay

Rosewood Matakauri (Queenstown): A lakeside retreat with sophisticated suites and two- to four-bedroom villas with floor-to-ceiling views of Lake Wakatipu and the Remarkables. Fine dining and an intimate spa make it a comfortable, luxe haven near Queenstown's lively center.

- Fora's Rosewood Elite partner perks include a \$100 hotel credit, and an upgrade and extended check-in whenever possible.

The George Christchurch (Christchurch): Modern luxury and understated elegance in the city's premier boutique hotel. Contemporary decor, private terraces, and a central location

make it ideal for exploring Christchurch's vibrant arts scene, botanic gardens, and waterfront.

- **Fora's withIN by SLH** partner perks include a \$50-\$100 food & beverage or spa credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Lindis Lodge (Ahuriri Valley): A striking architectural lodge in a remote high-country valley. Floor to ceiling windows and minimalist design across suites and glass pods. Immersive activities like fly fishing and horseback treks highlight the surrounding wilderness.

The Rees Hotel and Luxury Apartments (Queenstown): A refined lakeside retreat with contemporary rooms and apartments featuring balconies, fireplaces, and panoramic views. Savor award-winning cuisine, explore nearby vineyards, or embark on adventurous excursions.

ROKI Collection (Queenstown): A set of stylish villas, from studio to seven-bedrooms, blending modern design with mountain serenity. Private terraces, concierge service, and easy access to Queenstown's outdoor pursuits offer a flexible luxury base.

The Great Glenorchy Alpine Base Camp (Glenorchy): A rustic-chic mountain escape surrounded by alpine peaks and glacier-fed rivers. Handcrafted cabins, communal fire pits, and locally sourced meals create a sense of connection with nature.

Blanket Bay (Glenorchy): A lakeside lodge that captures the essence of New Zealand's high-country luxury with stone and timber architecture. Guests can enjoy heli-skiing, horseback riding, and guided hikes before returning to fireside dining and an on-site spa.

- **Fora Perks** include daily breakfast, a complimentary lunch or dinner, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Cruising to and around New Zealand



Image courtesy of Celebrity Cruises

Cruising to New Zealand offers the opportunity to weave through fjords, trace coastlines, and explore vibrant port cities. Dedicated New Zealand-only routes offer a deep dive, but most sailings often link Australia and New Zealand, departing from Sydney or Melbourne and finishing in Auckland, or the reverse. Standout sites include Fiordland National Park, home to Milford Sound and Doubtful Sound's sheer cliffs, thundering waterfalls, and untouched wilderness. Many itineraries linger overnight in the fjords, giving travelers the chance to experience day turn to night.

Notable cruise lines

Scenic Luxury Cruises: All-inclusive ultra-luxury cruising with sleek ships, spacious suites, and personalized butler service. Enrichment programs, fine dining, and immersive excursions elevate every sailing for effortless luxury and curated cultural access.

Azamara: Boutique-style ships offer destination-packed itineraries, longer port calls, and culturally rich shore experiences. A relaxed atmosphere and locally inspired dining let guests experience each location in depth while enjoying warm, attentive service.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$200 shipboard credit per stateroom on select voyages. Virtuoso Voyages Hosted Benefits also available on select sailings.

Celebrity Cruises: Contemporary ships blending modern design with elevated comfort. Expect a wide choice of dining venues, stylish staterooms, and a relaxed yet polished atmosphere. Creative itineraries span classic ports and off-the-beaten-path stops.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$200 Onboard Credit per stateroom.

History and culture



New Zealand's story stretches back to the arrival of Polynesians, who settled the islands around the 13th century. The rich Māori culture they developed is still central to the country's identity today. They hold a deep spiritual connection to the land and sea, and cultural traditions are reflected in practices like the *haka* (ceremonial dances) and *pōwhiri* (welcome ceremonies).

Dutch explorer Abel Tasman sighted the islands in 1642, leading to European interest. British Captain James Cook later mapped them in the 18th century, leading to British settlement. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between many Māori chiefs and the British Crown, became a cornerstone of New Zealand's governance and an ongoing symbol of partnership and dialogue between Māori and Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealanders).

Today, travelers can experience this layered history in landmarks and cultural sites across the islands. Rotorua's geothermal valleys are where traditional Māori carving and weaving thrive. Wellington's Te Papa Tongarewa museum thoughtfully presents stories of Aotearoa's past and present. Dramatic landscapes like the Southern Alps, Cape Reinga, and ancient kauri forests are intertwined with legends and traditions. The Ngātoroirangi Mine Bay Māori Rock Carvings on Lake Taupō showcases contemporary Maori artwork. Visitors get a chance to connect not only with breathtaking scenery but also with the living culture that shapes the entire nation.

Cultural celebrations & events

- **Waitangi Day (February 6, nationwide)**: National day commemorating the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi with ceremonies, cultural performances, and community events.
- **New Zealand Festival (February–March, Wellington)**: A multi-disciplinary arts festival featuring theater, dance, music, and visual arts.
- **Queenstown Winter Festival (June, Queenstown)**: A lively celebration of the start of winter, with live music, street performances, fireworks, and adventure-themed events.
- **Matariki (Late June–July, nationwide)**: The Māori New Year, marked by star gazing, cultural performances, feasts, and community celebrations.
- **New Zealand Cup & Show Week (November, Christchurch)**: Multi-day event featuring horse racing, equestrian competitions, and gala events.

What to do in New Zealand



From cinematic landscapes to cultural treasures, New Zealand is packed with experiences that feel both epic and personal.

North Island

- **Auckland:** Explore the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, where contemporary Māori and Pacific works are displayed alongside international collections.
- **Bay of Islands:** Cruise by private yacht with gourmet catering and stops at hidden coves and beaches only accessible by water.
- **Wharekauhau Country Estate:** Savor a farm-to-table feast, where seasonal produce is sourced directly from the surrounding working sheep station.
- **Te Papa Tongarewa (Wellington):** Take a VIP curator-led tour through New Zealand's national museum, gaining access to treasures not on public display.
- **Hawke's Bay vineyards:** Sip small-batch wines at boutique estates, with private tastings led by winemakers specializing in premium Syrah and Chardonnay.
- **Rotorua:** Indulge in treatments inspired by geothermal waters, blending mineral-rich mud therapies with serene forest surroundings.

- **Waiheke Island:** Spend the day wine hopping across boutique vineyards, where world-class Syrah meets ocean views and chef-led pairings in a relaxed island setting.
- **Rotorua Treewalk:** Walk the series of suspended bridges and platforms high among century-old redwood trees, illuminated at night with sculptural lanterns.
- **National Kiwi Hatchery:** Visit conservationists working to protect New Zealand's national bird and see kiwi chicks up close in an intimate, guided experience.
- **Wai-o-Tapu Geothermal Wonderland:** Explore technicolor hot springs and bubbling geysers on a curated guided walk that avoids the crowds.
- **Hobbiton movie set:** Step into Middle-earth on a private tour before ending with a festive feast at The Green Dragon Inn or a drink at The Shire's Rest.

South Island

- **Earnslaw Burn heli-hike:** Take a heli-hike into Earnslaw Burn, where cascading waterfalls and untouched alpine wilderness set the stage.
- **Dart River:** Race through the Dart River, carving through braided rivers and narrow canyons, framed by towering peaks and dense native forest.
- **Bob's Cove Nature Walk:** Hike this serene lakeside loop, where reflective waters, native bush, and hidden picnic spots offer the perfect reset.
- **Queenstown:** Ascend the Skyline Gondola, race down on the luge, then board the vintage TSS Earnslaw for a lakeside BBQ dinner at Walter Peak Station.
- **4WD safari:** Trace historic mining trails on a 4WD adventure, where rugged alpine backdrops meet stories of fortune seekers from another era.
- **Adrenaline seekers:** Take an off-road ride, head to the world's first Bungy Bridge for a leap of faith, or opt for a swing and zipline thrills over the canopy.
- **Kinross Winery tasting:** Settle into Central Otago's boutique wine scene at Kinross, sipping pinots paired with local cheeses and charcuterie in a relaxed vineyard setting.
- **Milford Sound:** Take a Zodiac or kayak through Milford Sound, where sheer cliffs and waterfalls frame an intimate fiord adventure complete with drinks and dinner.
- **Mount Cook/Aoraki:** Explore glacial lakes and alpine tracks, from a boat tour across Tasman Glacier's terminal lake to the Hooker Valley Track day hike.
- **Glaciers:** Hike the Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers or nearby valley walks. For the ambitious, the Rob Roy Glacier Track delivers a striking hanging glacier.

Where to eat in New Zealand



Image courtesy of Rooftop at QT Auckland

New Zealand's dining scene blends bold flavors with a strong sense of place. From coastal seafood feasts to farm-to-table countryside escapes, here are some standout spots.

North Island

- **Rooftop at QT (Auckland):** A design-forward rooftop bar offering inventive cocktails and small plates with panoramic sunset views over the city.
- **Cocoro (Auckland):** Chef-driven Japanese tasting menus highlight New Zealand seafood and produce in a minimalist, intimate space.
- **Onslow (Auckland):** A contemporary bistro serving regional specialties and seasonal vegetable tarts in a stylish, modern setting.
- **Te Pā Tū (Rotorua):** A four-hour immersive Māori cultural and dining experience featuring traditional cooking, storytelling, song, and dance.
- **Te Puia (Rotorua):** Traditional hāngi dining, with meats and root vegetables cooked in Rotorua's natural geothermal steam vents.
- **The Mains at On The Point (Lake Rotorua):** Lakeside dining serving locally sourced foods, complemented by Hawke's Bay wines and sweeping views over Lake Rotorua.

- **Hiakai (Wellington):** Innovative tasting menus showcasing indigenous Māori ingredients from award-winning chef Monique Fiso.
- **Pacifica (Hawke's Bay):** Pacific Rim-inspired tasting menus feature local seafood, heirloom vegetables, and Hawke's Bay wines.
- **Craggy Range Winery (Hawke's Bay):** Enjoy seasonal, farm-to-table dishes with dramatic views of Te Mata Peak and the surrounding vineyards.

South Island

- **Essence at ROKI (Queenstown):** A contemporary dining experience featuring locally sourced Central Otago produce and inventive seasonal tasting menus.
- **True South (Queenstown):** Modern New Zealand cuisine with a focus on fresh, regional ingredients served in a minimalist, elegant lakeside setting.
- **Walter Peak Station (Queenstown):** A classic gourmet BBQ dinner after cruising aboard the TSS Earnslaw.
- **Nest at Kamana Lakehouse (Queenstown):** Lakeside elegance meets refined, contemporary plates complemented by sweeping views over Lake Wakatipu.
- **Panorama Restaurant at Hermitage Hotel (Mount Cook):** High-altitude fine dining with dramatic alpine vistas and regional dishes.
- **Roca (Christchurch):** Trendy, design-forward bistro serving modern New Zealand dishes with a sustainable focus in a sleek, intimate space.
- **Cookie Time Cookie Bar (Christchurch):** A playful, indulgent stop for sweet treats making it a fun, Instagram-worthy pit stop.

Trips to add on



For travelers heading to New Zealand, these destinations make ideal add-ons as nearby adventures or stopovers to ease the long flight from US gateways:

Australia: Pair New Zealand's mountains and lakes with Australia's diverse landscapes. Sydney's harbor and beaches, Queensland's Great Barrier Reef, and Melbourne's dining scene offer a lively contrast, while the Outback delivers wide-open horizons.

Fiji: Break up the long flight with a resort stay on white-sand beaches and turquoise lagoons. Fijian hospitality, island-hopping, and diving or snorkeling among coral gardens make for an easy tropical escape.

French Polynesia: Bora Bora delivers overwater bungalows, clear lagoons, and a slower rhythm. Moorea's adventure-filled island with easier access to the international airport in Papeete. It's a chance to unwind amid South Pacific beauty before or after exploring New Zealand.

Los Angeles or San Francisco, California: Most US travelers will connect through a West Coast gateway city. In Los Angeles, visit Malibu's beaches or shop on Abbot Kinney. In San Francisco, walk the Golden Gate Bridge or explore the Ferry Building.

New York City: NYC to Auckland is one of the longest flights in the world, making New York a popular stopover for East Coasters and flight enthusiasts. See a Broadway show, walk through Central Park, and grab a slice of pizza.

If not New Zealand...



For a similar sense of New Zealand's mix of epic scenery, outdoor adventure, and rich cultural layers, these destinations offer their own distinctive experience.

Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Finland): Cruise through Norway's fjords, chase the northern lights in Finland, or explore Sweden's forests and archipelagos. Iceland adds steaming hot springs and volcanic peaks, all framed by timeless Nordic traditions and crisp air.

Chilean Patagonia: Remote and untamed, Patagonia delivers towering granite spires, shimmering glaciers, and endless hiking trails. Wildlife encounters and boutique eco-lodges make it an unforgettable outpost at the edge of the world.

Ireland: Rolling green hills, dramatic coastlines, and music-filled villages create a warm invitation. From Dublin's vibrant pubs to the raw beauty of the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland pairs natural charm with heartfelt hospitality.

Lake District, England: Storybook valleys, glassy lakes, and historic stone cottages shape this peaceful escape. Walkers and cyclists can meander through fells and waterside paths before unwinding in cozy inns or classic tea rooms.

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