

# NEW ZEALAND SEEN THROUGH GLASSES, DARKLY

22 April to 9 May



**Text: John Biggs**

**Images: John Biggs Catherine Tang**

**© 2019**

## NEW ZEALAND SEEN THROUGH GLASSES, DARKLY

Our 19-day bus trip around New Zealand did not get off to a good start. I had a stinker of a cold which I passed on to Catherine, I had a sore eye condition resulting from a cataract operation that lingered for months, which meant I saw New Zealand St Paul-wise: through glasses darkly. The special super-ultimate bus we had been promised by Grand Pacific had been pranged the day before we arrived and so we boarded a super-ordinary bus (however Grand Pacific did give us \$500 compensation for our second class bus). In keeping with the auguries, our Qantas flight from Melbourne was in an aged 20<sup>th</sup> century plane with poor food (but smiling service), as if Alan Joyce wasn't wasting money on quality flights on the New Zealand stretch. Either that, or he had to make cuts somewhere if his \$25 million salary is to be maintained.

We arrived a day before the tour begins, allowing us to see Auckland in the drizzling rain. I didn't



recognize the place from previous visits: a skyline of cranes telling us that serious infrastructure building was in process. An underground train is under construction, a tunnel linking the airport to the CBD recently opened: New Zealand is on a roll. And they need to be: nature is not kind in NZ as we discovered in Christchurch particularly, but storms and floods require NZers to be on the alert all the time, and when disaster strikes, they

deal with the damage promptly and efficiently.

Some contextual facts: the population of NZ is 4.7 million, 3.8 million in the North Island population of which 1.4 live in Auckland and 1.1 million in the South. Top tax rate is 33% which cuts in over \$70,000 pa which is lowish (not a flat tax as is sometimes asserted) whereas in Australia the top rate cuts in at \$180,000+ rising to 45%. NZ GST is 15% and it applies to everything, a regressive neoliberal ploy brought in surprisingly by Labour PM Helen Clark in the noughties. This is why prices seem high compared to Australia, particularly wine and dining out, and housing especially in Auckland. The minimum wage in NZ is AUD\$16.5 per hour, compared



\$19.49 in Australia, but the gap between low paid and high paid is narrower in NZ. Despite low income tax, the country has a generous welfare system – schooling is free to age 19, and university becoming so, and in NZ superannuation is not means tested, a couple getting \$40,000 a year. Infrastructure such as roads is much better than is Australia. My guess is that waste,



corruption and being nasty to asylum seekers are where too many Australian tax dollars go, leaving relatively less for infrastructure, health and education. Maybe this is why surveys tell us that NZ people are much happier with their lot, especially their political lot, than are Australians.

We took the indispensable HopOnHopOff bus to get the lie of the land, and a ferry trip to get the lie of the Harbour. And a trip up the 328 m. tall Sky Tower, bottom up as pictured and top down, with panoramic views over the city. We learned an interesting fact: Auckland is probably the most sea-obsessed major city: 1 in 5 own a boat, 1 in 3 have access to one. More than Hobart I think.

Day 2 took us to the Bay of Islands some 500 km due north of Auckland. On the way we visited a Kauri pine factory (not to be confused with WA karri which is a eucalypt). Kauri is a tall softwood, many over 1,000 years old and can grow up to 100 m. We see a kauri timber mill, which the owner turned into a museum, showing the glory days of the timber trade, steam driven machines, even with models of meetings, a boarding house and other nostalgia. The forestry industry was ruthless from early European settlement, much of the country, now pleasant rolling green meadows, had been covered with thick impenetrable forest. Cutting timber on public lands was forbidden in 2000. I won't make the comparative observations that leap out about Tasmanian's forestry industry.



We then move on to Waitangi, on the beautiful Bay of Islands. Here the famous Waitangi Treaty



was signed between the British and Maoris chiefs from the North Island on 6 February 1840. Later around 530 to 540 Māori, at least 13 of them women, signed the Treaty. It was intended that when the declaration of British sovereignty over New Zealand was made, the Māori people would not feel that their rights had been ignored, but the English text and the

Māori text, constructed out of spoken Maori, differed in meaning, particularly to do with ceding sovereignty. The British government was wangling to get the sole right to purchase land.

Many Maoris saw through this, which eventually led to the New Zealand wars (1845-1872). After the war, the New Zealand government mostly ignored the Treaty and a court case judgement in 1877 declared it to be "a simple nullity". Beginning in the 1950s, Māori increasingly sought to use the Treaty as a platform for claiming additional rights to sovereignty and to reclaim lost land. Not until 1975 did the Treaty of Waitangi Act settle matters more fairly. Despite the didgy beginnings, in the end the Treaty was regarded as having positive effects on race relations. There is a lesson here for relations with indigenous Australians. Not until 2017 was anything like this mooted when the Government asked the indigenous community how they would like to participate in Government. They produced the Uluru Statement of the Heart, which PM Turnbull deliberately misinterpreted as a third chamber in Parliament, derided activist Teela Reid on ABC's Q&A, and that was the end of that. Maybe Ken Wyatt will be able to ameliorate matters.

We are told the NZ story by a Maori chief. We visited an elaborate whareniui or village meeting house designed as a human body, arms outstretch, the spine featuring fearsome tikis and statues

to frighten away nasties. The chief showed us how the Maori arrived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century: in wakas or war canoes. These toone took about 300 men, 200 of them rowing at any one time, and were able to maintain 15 knots, as opposed to Cook's Endeavour which managed 8 knots or so if the winds were right. When the Maoris arrived there were already Polynesian tribes there, the Moriori, who had settled some 1,500 years earlier. The Maoris were not very nice to them, killing and enslaving them right up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Maoris were not very nice either to the giant moa and other wildlife, but what drove many native birds to extinction or near extinction were imported European mammals: rats, cats, ferrets, stoats and weasels. Until then New Zealand had no significant carnivores, and no spiders snakes and one or two species of nonvenomous spider.



On his first voyage to New Zealand in 1769, James Cook spent a week in the Bay of Islands, trying to make friends with the Maoris, but they were suspicious. He used the area as a base to explore the Pacific and especially Tahiti where he was ordered to clock the transit of Venus. Previously, in 1751, HMS Dolphin under Captain Wallis entered Tahitian waters with a view to trade. He was surprised at the terms of trade. Tahitian women paddled their canoes to the Dolphin, clambered aboard, and offered sex for iron, nails, hoops, tools, even weapons. The English seamen were surprised and delighted at the promiscuity of the women.



The facts were quite different, however. The Tahitians were concerned with birth defects and came to the correct conclusion that they needed to enlarge their gene pool and breed with quite different humans – like English seamen. The elders told the girls of the tribe to row out to the English boats, board, and have sex with the sailors. The only thing they required in return was iron. The sailors were delighted and happily drew nails from the neck, hoops from the barrels, tools and whatever other iron was portable. Wallis, and later James Cook, and their officers were not so happy, afraid that their ships would fall apart, so they banned the delightful practice. The Tahitian women were not promiscuous: they were only doing their genetic duty as ordered by the elders of the tribe. Not that this has much to do with the Bay of Islands, but it is a good story.

Day 3 we wander around Pauhia just south of Waitangi, which in summer is a crowded beach resort. Across the harbour is the notorious town of Russell, which dates back to earliest days of European settlement mainly by sealers, whalers, who fought, raped, drank and created general

mayhem, earning Russell the title "Hell Hole of the Pacific". Optimistic missionaries built NZ's



first church in Russell; its walls are still riddled with bullet holes testifying to the difficulty of spreading righteousness.

Russell's Maori name is korororeka, meaning "how sweet is the blue penguin", which I fear refers to its edibility rather than its sweet nature. In 1841-2, the French established the Pompallier Mission to print religious texts in Maori; the building exists today under the care of Heritage New Zealand. Russell today is a quiet seaside village, very

picturesque, with a French embassy overlooking Paihai just across the bay.

Day 4 gives us NZ's answer to Robert Pennicott. We stop for lunch at Urupukapuka, a large island for an hour: quick lunch, then the highly recommended hike. But no, there is only one café, two boats arrive at once creating a large queue. No sandwiches, all lunches are ordered and cooked, waiting time 45 mins. After queuing fruitlessly, we settle for a piece of carrot cake, the only ready-to-eat food available: our first example of genuine NZ stupidity. There was time for only a couple of photos before we had to head back to the boat. Our boat takes us close to the open sea where there is an old lighthouse, which had an uneasy entry by boat and rack and pinion elevator to haul boats and goods to the lighthouse. All is now automated. Then the Pennicott moment: we charge at speed through a hole in a large rock.



Day 5 sees us on the way to Rotorua of volcanic fame. On the way we see Hobbiton, Peter Jackson's creation for movie set for the Hobbit trilogies and the *Lord of the Rings*. I had read *The Hobbit* many years ago, and had not see the Jackson movies. I looked forward to this as much as

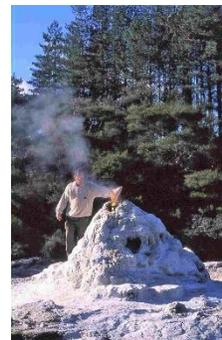


I would a trip to Disneyland but I was wrong. The set is extraordinarily detailed and as true to Tolkien as possible. Jackson first saw the Alexander Farm during an aerial search in 1998, and concluded that the area was "like a slice of ancient England." The owner, Mr Alexander, was not keen on letting so much of his land, but fortunately his son was a Tolkien fan, and persuaded his father to lease to Jackson, who wrote: "I knew Hobbiton needed to be warm, comfortable and feel lived in. By letting the weeds grow through the cracks and establishing hedges and little gardens a year before filming, we ended up with an incredibly real place, not just a film set". Bilbo Baggins is described as having a large oak tree growing on his hobbit hole. Technically not possible because of the spreading oak roots so Jackson

solved the problem by making an artificial tree mostly out of steel with fake leaves painted green. But the wrong sort of green, he decided. So Jackson got 30 art students from a local art college and to repaint all thousands of the leaves. Wrong colour again so they were required to repaint

until finally the anally retentive Jackson was satisfied. The amount of money spent was prodigious but the takings from the movies were even more prodigious.

Day 6: Rotorua. I had been here years before and it seemed much better then. There was a guy beside a geyser who made it spout by pouring soap powder into it and up it went within a few rumbling seconds. I hope that practice is no longer. You could get close to the bubbling mud and to the geysers, but now it is all cautiously fenced off. These shots are zoomed to avoid the fence. We have an enormous breakfast on a hill which has luge rides. Outside the Agrodome we see an exhibition of a dog expertly herding sheep. We enter the Agrodome where various breeds of sheep are herded on stage by a couple of dogs to be exhibited to us. A sheep was shorn and then the dogs herd a flock of geese on stage for a change. Finally, the dogs were ordered to run over the backs of all the sheep. I had thought that sheep were stupid but the way they stood quietly and did what they were told to do, suggested that they too were smart enough to have been well trained.



In the evening we visited a Maori-run site, an institution for training young Maoris to learn traditional crafts and dances. We then have a hangi, a feast cooked in an earth oven (modernized a bit to be sure) –oven baked chicken, beef, lamb, fish, but for religious considerations pork was cooked separately. Bursting, we went to concert hall where Maoris demonstrated songs and dances with audience participation: the women were invited to twirl the fluffy poi pois and men to do a Haka. This guy is actually doing a ritual greeting – in case we were not what we seemed to be. That fearsome display is actually meant to be in the interests of peace: if you do it fiercely and uglily enough your enemy will take fright and leave. However we were reassured and stayed. I was impressed more by the fact that this business was run by Maori, whereas rather than encouraging them to run their own activities autonomously our indigenous people have activities foisted upon them, army style, thank you John Howard and Mal Brough,. Maybe Ken Wyatt can now do something about that too.

Day 7 takes us to Napier, the city along with neighboring Hastings that was demolished by an earthquake in 1931. Almost all buildings were demolished, and the cheapest way to rebuild was by using artdeco, which was also artistically pleasing. The quake killed 161 people in Napier and 93 in Hastings, injuring thousands more, but in the end the two places ended up rather improved. The quake was so broad and huge that a whole plateau of land, 42 sq m, rose by over 2 m. greatly increasing the value of the land around the area. We saw the town of Napier in an amazing train built by a local historian who regaled us with these and many other facts.



On Day 9 to Wellington to tour the city. We only had time to shoot the Beehive from the bus as we passed. Whereas we have a checks and balances with our Senate, the Beehive is NZ's one house Parliament, constructed out of wood. I wouldn't do without the Senate in the ruthless egocentricity of Australian politics but NZ doesn't seem to need one. NZ parties are used to working together and apparently try hard to get legislation right first



time round – which mostly they seem to do. We explore Te Papa NZ's cultural museum, an elaborate building of five stories. There is a larger than life model of WW1 but the rest of the building is mainly about Maori history and culture. A Maori who designed traditional village houses was asked to design one for the museum. He did, a postmodern version which did not go down too well.

In the afternoon we catch the ferry to Picton on the South Island. We were warned that it could be very rough, which scared the pants off many who scoffed travel ginger and the like, but no worries: there was only a brief swell. A crew member said guides always say that, like lawyers telling a client they have a very poor case and when they win, the client thinks their lawyer has done a fantastic job. We bus a few kms from Picton to Blenheim where we stayed the night in a vineyard and winery. They gave us a tasting of two whites, a Riesling and pinot gris, both great, pinot, which is the fall back here as shiraz is in Australia, and a sticky botrytis. As we progressed through the S Island I found myself liking NZ pinots more and more: perhaps less fruity and more structured than Australian pinots.



Day 10: We are in Marlborough country. We drive down the picturesque Kaikoura East Coast to Christchurch, the scene of two major horrific events. The shooting in two Christchurch mosques



was hardly mentioned but we learned a lot about the earthquake. In September, 2010 a quake occurred but the greatest damage done was a series of aftershocks in June 2011, which caused 2,000 buildings to collapse largely due to liquefaction as the quake created a quicksand effect and buildings just sank. 185 people were killed, the Cathedral wrecked, a temporary one of cardboard built a few blocks away. After much infighting, a new Cathedral of similar design will be completed within 10 years. Otherwise, clearance and rebuilding was mostly swift and efficient. We pass a large building made of shipping containers that was in working order within a few weeks but nearby are tracts that once were office buildings. Opposite our hotel was a park in full autumn colours, the River Avon gurgling happily beside the road.

Day 11 we catch the Transalpine Train through tunnels viaducts and spectacular gorges to Arthur's Pass in the centre of the Southern Alps where we meet our bus, which takes us down to the West Coast and to Hokitakia the setting for the scene of the Man-Booker award winning *The Luminaries* by Eleanor Catton, a 800+ p. doorstep with a highly complex structure and plot. Hokitakia is the greenstone capital of NZ. Greenstone or nephrite looks just like jade, or jadite, but is semiprecious stone whereas jade is extremely precious. From there to Fox Glacier which is small town close to the Franz Joseph Glacier. The more cashed up of our group hire a helicopter to the glacier, but us poorer folk sip pinot in the sun, and later see the Glacier from a distance and in detail from YouTube.

Day 12 we continued to Queenstown through some rugged and beautiful country. A highlight was a ride on jet boat on the Haast River, powered by twin Chevy V8s delivering 700 hp between them. With one full forward and the other full reverse, the boat span like top giving us a 700 hp adrenalin rush. I dared not think of the environmental insult that that constituted in these most beautiful of surroundings. We arrived in Queenstown in the dusk, and had some difficulty in finding restaurants: plenty of pizza places, a few restaurants. We settle for one which is very good but \$40+ for just a main is, wine at \$14 a glass. That's par for the course with a 15% GST.



Morning of Day 13 is fine, and we begin to see why Queenstown is so popular. It is on the edge of large Lake Wakatipu and we find all those missing restaurants we didn't find last night. We



swallow principle and go up the cable car that has splendid views over the town with the Remarkables Range in the background. Up there I take a luge ride another touristic hit to the environment but such things seem to work ok in NZ if not in Tasmania. We walk around the town, passing the usual long queue outside FerstBurger, the best burger in NZ if not the world, so good people are said to queue into the small hours, a 2 hour wait the norm. Instead, we walk around the foreshore with markets and up a steep hill to our hotel, very fine views. It was good to get some exercise instead of sitting in that bus. In the afternoon we board the TSS Earnshaw, built in 1912, the same year as the Titanic – and as our very own Cartela. But whereas Earnshaw is still going strong on the original coal fired twin steam engines, the Cartela has been lying at Franklin undergoing a typical Australian refit: that is, it has been undergoing renovations for years with nothing much happening. The Earnshaw took us to Walter Peak Station, a sheep farm with a gourmet BBQ awaiting us, melting roast pork with the crackling the best I've tasted. The only sour note was struck when we were told by our waitress that our meal ticket was worth two complimentary drinks. We had them and then the maître d' arrived and demanded payment. There was some hard words said and finally it was agreed that we needn't pay. Not quite a

satisfactory ending because we later realized that our poor waitress was going to cop it hard for telling us the drinks were free.

Day 14 was to take us to Te Anau, at the gateway to Fjordland National Park. On the way we stopped at a small gold mining town of Arrowtown where Saint Mary McKillop worked for a few years. Then overnight at Te Anau. We walk beside Lake Anau, very deep at over 417m. and containing the largest volume of fresh water in Australasia. The day is overcast the waters very still, serene.



Day 15, we drive to Milford Sound (wrong, it was carved by glaciers not water and should be called Milford Fjord). Spectacular country. Mirror Lakes as serene as Lake Anau, a



heavy fog giving an eerie effect. We saw something unusual: a circus of Kea birds, a “circus” being the collective noun for more 3 or more of these birds. They are an alpine parrot, very mischievous with an appetite for anything – from lead to plastic to car tyres – which does little good for the keas or to property.

The sun broke out (sometimes) until we reached Milford Haven. We nearly didn’t: the previous day a huge land slip beside the ferry terminal swamped it with mud and feet deep water so we were planning to go to Doubtful Sound instead. But never fear, NZ efficiency had overnight cleared the slush and mud sufficiently for the ferry to operate. By the time we boarded it was overcast, and that coupled with the huge hype that Milford gets with brilliant photos, the reality was even a let down. Mitre Peak dominated but we went round the Sound to the open sea and back, stopping at waterfalls. The pictures tell much more than words. On the return we stop at a beautiful fern forest and rushing river.



Day 16 we head for Dunedin, which is the Scottish word for Edinburgh I was surprised to learn.



The early Scottish settlers started at Christchurch, didn’t like it, and headed further south to Dunedin. The NZ accent, no doubt tempered by old Scottish, is the loudest and most NZish we had struck. Christchurch is roughly the same latitude as Hobart at 43 degrees but Christchurch is colder with nearness to the Aps, while Dunedin is below Hobart at 45 and cold with the windchill from the southerlies. Dunedin has lots of old late Victorian and Edwardian buildings, the old railway station once the busiest in NZ. This all gives Dunedin the feeling that it has seen better days. We visit St Paul’s splendid Gothic Cathedral to see a Chinese bride being elaborately photographed by the groom: it is a common custom for Chinese couples to be photographed in exotic places, the images to be ooh and aahed over at the wedding reception back in China. The verger however wasn’t impressed: they hadn’t asked permission or offered to pay for the privilege. We passed Baldwin

Street which claims to be the world's steepest street, but that is being challenged by a Welsh town. I'd also challenge it with Mellifont and Molle streets, conceding that they are much shorter.

On Day 17 we headed along the very scenic Otago Peninsular to Lanark Castle, built by very rich businessman William Lanark. The site was cleared and levelled, allowing construction to begin in 1871. Approximately 200 workmen were used to complete the main structure, using imported materials from locally and around the world: Glasgow brick, Cornwall blackstone, Italian marble, Marseilles cobbles, and twenty tons of heavy glass from Venice to double glaze the verandahs against Dunedin winters. The final complex contained 43 rooms and a staff of 46 servants, 35 acres reserved for grounds, and a home farm of 300 acres. All this was lost in one generation, through the death of two wives, the will of the latest setting Lanark and his children at odds. It was used as mental asylum from 1900, a hospital in WW1, and it fell into ruin until the Barker family bought it in 1967 and slavishly restored it to its former glory.



From Lanark we went on through rugged alpine country to Mt Cook where we stayed at the marvelous Heritage hotel. Every room has a view of Mt Cook, but it is seen by only 28% of visitors, as visibility is usually poor and very rainy. And so it was on our visit, pictures would only show a fine white mist.

Day 18. Returning to Christchurch for the plane home we stop for some excellent views. Lake



Takepo where there is a little church built entirely of local materials, and close by a statue dedicated to the border collie, clever little sheep dogs that made fencing unnecessary. The dogs were on a long lead where the fence would normally run and kept the sheep inside. A boundary rider checked on them once a week. On one occasion the rider fell off his horse and broke a leg to be discovered a week later by the next boundary rider. The man was alive, having been fed by the dog who went hunting stoats, possums and rabbits on his behalf, keeping him warm by lying on his chest. Another rider was not so lucky, he broke his spine and died, his dog too lying on him to

keep him warm – but too late.

Back to Christchurch for the flight home. I was struck with the international airport, impressive for a city of 400,000. I asked if it was privately owned and run. No, 75% is financed by Christchurch City Council, 25% nationally. As we Hobartians know to our considerable cost and shame – especially if you are parked and the plane you are meeting is late – a privately owned airport runs for profit and maximum convenience for the owners not for travellers. No walking in the rain clambering up a flight of wet slippery steps, no slugging through the length of the whole airport to retrieve your baggage.

Summary of NZ, the North Island green and richly fertile, the South colder but more spectacular. Infrastructure is impressive. Major cities and country service stations have fast electric charge stations for the relatively high proportion of electric cars. And for those who just want to get around easily, lime green electric scooters are left around: use an app for \$17 an hour you could go where you wanted and leave the scooter there. Another aspect that separates our two countries is the respect given to Maoris as opposed to Australian first peoples. So many places are referred to by their Maori names, whereas we shyly call Mt Wellington kunanyi and think how culturally sensitive we are. On the other hand, I have to say that NZ TV is very commercialized, long commercial breaks, the choice of programmes limited. It showed me that Australian ABC and SBS are vastly superior, and what a tragedy it would be if the Coalition privatized both stations as they have voted to do.

