

Friday 9th December 2016 Auckland Day 7

A busy day for everyone as Trish and Graham were off to visit friends in Auckland, Marg was getting ready for this evening's Christmas meal, and Trev dropped John and me at the ferry terminal in Half Moon Bay for our day out. We took the ferry to downtown Auckland (35 minutes), and then connected to a ferry across to Devonport which is just 15 minutes. In 2002, John lived in Devonport and worked in Auckland, so everyday took the ferry to work. This is such a great way to travel around here, and many people commute either from the islands or from the many bays north and south. You can easily work on the ferries, or just enjoy the fabulous views.

I think Auckland has taken over from Istanbul as my favourite city. The water everywhere, the gardens and walkways and the low rise nature is hard to beat, as well as the casual attire and way of life. Devonport has all the old houses with fretwork on the verandas, balconies and eaves, and lovely old pohutakawa trees just all coming into Christmas blossom. There are lots of nice gardens, and we actually walked to three beaches around the headland.



First we stopped for a coffee and picked up a heritage walking trail booklet in the coffee shop which we then followed for a couple of hours. We started at Torpedo Bay, and walked over to Cheltenham Beach, along the beach, then around the Fort Takapuna Historic Reserve, where we discovered that the whole of Auckland harbour had a boom across to stop torpedoes and submarines during World War 2. We then descended to Narrow Neck Beach and walked along the Waitemata Golf Course to Tainui Corner where there were a few shops for lunch. We had fish and chips before heading back to the ferry.



The weather defied all forecasts and turned out to be glorious all day, so after a dull start, we had wall to wall sunshine which shows Auckland off at its best. We connected on the ferries well, so landed back at Half Moon Bay with time to shop, and then with the help of Maps.me on John's tablet managed find our way back to Trev and Margs' for around 4:30. It was hot, so I had a welcome shower. Marg and Trish were out shopping, and Trev had been working with his bonsai, so I looked at what he had been doing. It could be quite addictive, but you need an expert like Trev around to advise. He studied for years with a Taiwanese expert in Taipei, and is now treasurer of the local group in Auckland.



Marg had cooked a delicious Christmas dinner for the six of us, so we gathered round for roast lamb, roast sweet- and ordinary-potatoes, broccoli, peas and

beans, gravy and mint sauce, followed by pavlova and then mince pie and custard. What an enjoyable feast!

Saturday 10th December 2016 New Zealand Day 8

Trev took Trish and Graham to the airport at 3 am as they were on their way to Thailand where they used to live. At 7 am Marg and I went to exercise and feed Gus, Nette's 7 year old labrador, as she and Bill are in Australia for a few days. We took him to the park and threw balls until he did not want to pick them up anymore. Back to feed him, and then home for breakfast. A final pack, then and at 10 am Trev and Marg drove us out to the domestic airport for our flight to Christchurch.

We were on the local equivalent of Ryan Air, so it was fairly chaotic, but a fine flight. The New Zealander next to us was very helpful and full of South Island suggestions. In Christchurch we telephoned the car rental company and they had a shuttle which picked us up to go to their office. It was all very straightforward and we were soon in our Nissan car heading out of Christchurch towards the western hills. I drove and John navigated.



There was so little traffic, the driving was easy through very rural communities. Tall hedges obviously were there to break the wind, and we headed closer and closer to the mountains. We stopped to get groceries on the way and reached our destination at Springfield just after 4 pm. It is a mixture of youth hostel and motel, run by a New Zealand-Japanese couple, and John had stayed here before. We dropped our bags and went for an explore around the one horse town, which is on the Midland Railway through the mountains to Arthur's Pass and Greymouth. There is one passenger train a day in each direction, and we did catch a glimpse of the late-running Christchurch train on our walk - as well as some llamas (I might add)! It is all very quiet, rural and low key.

The accommodation was perfectly adequate and we sat outside 'til supper

which was not really Japanese; salad, followed by a curry then ice cream and fresh fruit! The other people eating were interesting as they were miners working here drilling core samples for an open cast coal mine nearby doing ten days on and four days off, and staying with Colin and Keiko. They had another group staying who are *paeonia* pickers - so seasonal workers. The peonies are sent to Europe the hostel was full of glorious peonies, must have been the rejects already open too much.

Sunday 11th December 2016 South Island Day 2

We made our own breakfast in the well equipped kitchen, and had a hot shower before leaving around 8:30. It was absolutely pouring with rain in Springfield, and had been doing so for most of the night, but Colin assured us it was clear at the top of Arthur's pass 83 kms away. Indeed it was not long as we began to climb in the mist through the foothills of the Alps that we ran completely out of rain and indeed mist. We had great views of Alpine scenery with snow on the high peaks ahead. Lots of open hills, sheep, gorse, cattle and a very Scottish feel to it all.



We kept stopping when there were pull offs just to admire the scenery. There were very few cars in either direction, and the general feel is of a very empty country with probably more tourists than locals out and about - mainly from Asian countries! We had a longer stop at Castle Hill Conservation Area, which was an area of grey limestone outcrops up to 30 meters high, with all sorts of different shaped boulders. It was fascinating, and we followed a trail and walked through and amongst them. In Maori, it is called Kura Tawhiti, and it has become famous with rock climbers, though we were too early in the day to see any activity. Onward and upward, there was a high valley area after Cass with a very wide river valley absolutely covered in wild lupins. What a fantastic sight. I have only ever seen them growing like this before in the Czech Republic.



Arthur's Pass Village is very small, though the only significant place in the whole national park, which was established in 1929. It is one of the only three routes from East to West through the southern Alps. We went to the Visitors Centre and picked up information about the hiking trails and a map, and decided to do the Arthur's Pass Walking Track to the west of the village. It was a fantastic trail, (almost brand new?) so very well maintained with wooden bridges and steps (quite a few ups and downs) but we are used to that. It is such pristine forest, lots of moss and streams and waterfalls, it was a great introduction to the area. I had not anticipated how cold it would be up here, but we are at more than 3000 feet, and there is a lot of snow above us feeding all those streams and waterfalls.



On our return from the hike we checked into the Mountain House, Arthur's Pass YHA, which like the place yesterday has a range of accommodations from bunk rooms to cottages. All have shared kitchens and bathrooms, so we have

a very pleasant room looking out onto the mountainside. We settled in and had a coffee before we heard the Kea, and had to go out and see this amazing parrot. It is only found in the mountains of South Island, New Zealand, and is a real forager. It is quite large, and when it flies it has bright orange on its back and the underside of its wings. It has learned that there may be food around where there are people, so is quite clever and inquisitive around people, their belongings and their cars.

There is one cafe open in the evenings until 8 pm, so we will not starve. We have discovered that everyone here eats early anyway.

There are many [more photos of South Island in the Flickr Album](#).

Stephanie & John