

3 Weeks in New Zealand with New Year's Eve in Sydney



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Day 1 - Arrival in Auckland

I met Jason and Nicole in the evening of the 7th December at Heathrow's Terminal 4. We only had to wait a short while before check-in commenced for our Qantas flight. Once that was done we had dinner, hung around the departure lounge for a while then boarded our plane (a 747-400). After eleven and a half hours in the air we had a ninety minute stop in Bangkok. Everyone had to get off the aircraft whilst it was cleaned and refuelled. Still, it was a good opportunity to walk around the airport and stretch our legs. Jason bought what turned out to be the world's most expensive apples from a stall in the airport.

Back in the departure lounge they had a machine to check boarding passes. My card had got a bit crumpled in my pocket and became jammed in the mechanism. It disintegrated as they tried to extract it and I had to wait whilst I was issued with an emergency replacement. Once back on the plane we set off on a nine hour flight to Sydney. We must have caught a good following wind as we crossed the central Australian desert because our ground speed got up to 740mph!

En-route Sydney we realised that we hadn't been checked through to Auckland. The woman at Heathrow had missed it, probably because the ticket for that flight was on another page of the booklet. We were worried that we wouldn't have enough time to get our baggage off the carousel, clear customs and get ourselves onto the onward flight. Fortunately there was a Qantas chap at the exit of the plane so we asked him what we should do. He suggested that we go to the "transfer desk" and see if they could help. The woman there was very good; arranging for someone to rescue our baggage and getting us onto the flight to New Zealand.

That gave us a bit of spare time in Sydney airport. We found that there were free showers for transit passengers. A nice hot shower helped me feel a little bit more human – a good job I'd put shampoo and a towel in my hand luggage! The flight to Auckland was uneventful except for a fairly heavy landing. It was very windy though so I guess the pilot had an excuse! New Zealand has a very strict policy on bringing foodstuffs into the country. Their economy is still heavily dependant on agriculture and they don't want tourists bringing in foreign diseases. All incoming baggage is X-Rayed for banned items so it was safest to declare everything to customs. They didn't seem to care about my chewing gum though!

By now it was mid-afternoon on the 9th December. Jason's family met us at the airport and took us to our hotel. For the first couple of nights we were booked into the Regency Hyatt which is handily located on the edge of the city centre. My room was located in the older, 1970's wing of the hotel and was looking a bit tired and dated. This was the view looking out of my room towards the centre of the city.



The ivy clad building in the foreground is part of the University of Auckland. The flag shows how windy it was!

We unpacked before going out for a meal. After a quick wander through the city centre we had dinner at "The Patio" restaurant at 40 Queen Street. We were all feeling very tired after the flight so we didn't linger over the food and then headed straight back to the hotel.

Day 2 / December 10th – A day in Auckland

After breakfast Jason and Nicole went off to the wedding one of Jason's friends from university. This was fine, as I had arranged to meet Nici in the lobby of the hotel. At that time she lived in Auckland and had offered to give me a tour of the city. We started by driving to Mount Eden, a hill to the south-west of the city centre. The hill was formed by a volcanic eruption and is one of several around the city. The most recent eruption was only 600 years ago. It formed Rangitoto Island in the harbour. From the top of Mount Eden I got a good view despite it being a cloudy day.



Rangitoto Island showing the typical shield profile of a volcano.



Two more volcanic hills; Mount Hudson in the foreground and Mount Wellington in the distance to the right of it.



Perhaps the most famous of Auckland's volcanic hills - One Tree Hill. In the foreground is Alexandra Park, Auckland's horse & buggy racetrack.



A panorama of Auckland's central business district with the Harbour Bridge on the left and the Skytower to the right of centre.

After Mount Eden we took a scenic drive in a large circle through the city suburbs to Mission Bay. We had a leisurely lunch and chatted in the Riva Café by the waterside. Well, it was near the water; there was a car park and a fairly busy road between the café and the water! After lunch Nici dropped me off at Kelly Tarlton's aquarium and we said goodbye.

This aquarium was the first in the world to use curved perspex tunnels that you walk through, under the water with the fish swimming around and over you. Mum had visited here when she came to New Zealand years before. She'd been very impressed it and taken me to Southend's aquarium after it had been rebuilt in a similar way. I'd found it very good, especially the small sharks that rest on flat parts of the tunnel that you walk through. However, on visiting Kelly Tarlton's I found that one modern aquarium is pretty much like any other. It certainly didn't help that it was being refurbished so some parts were closed off when I visited.

Still, I found Kelly Tarlton's worth visiting. Their Antarctic display was great. There's a snowmobile on rails that takes you through a penguin colony with many King and Gentoo penguins in a mock-up of their natural habitat. The killer whale attacking a seal was a bit cheesy though. Much better was a replica of Captain Scott's base camp that he used in his ill-fated attempt to reach the south pole in 1911.



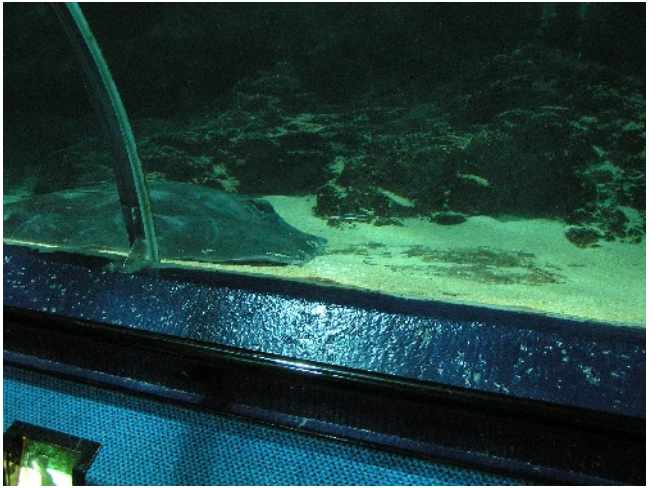
These penguins have a large area of snow to walk on and water to swim in.



A king penguin.



There was a tank full of these crustaceans, I'm not sure what they were.



My camera struggled to take good photos through the curved perspex. This snoozing ray is the best one.

When Nici dropped me at the aquarium she'd said there were usually taxis parked outside that would take me back to the city. I was a little worried when I couldn't find any! Fortunately I noticed a bus stop just up the road. The first bus along was an Auckland Explorer sightseeing bus. I hopped on and headed back towards the centre of Auckland. The bus takes a good route; past the cathedral and on to the Auckland museum. I had wanted to visit the museum but time was getting on so I stayed on the bus and travelled on into the city centre and down to the harbour area.

I got off the bus at the ferry building and walked to the Viaduct Harbour. This area was redeveloped when New Zealand hosted the America's Cup in 2003. Auckland is called "The City of Sails" and the marina was full of expensive boats! I headed to the Maritime museum.

In a building outside there's a short animated film on how the Maori sailed and navigated canoes to cross the Pacific and colonise New Zealand. Inside the main museum there's a good collection displaying the development of coastal shipping around New Zealand. Before the road network was built boats were the easiest form of transport. There is also a display on the America's Cup and the yachts that New Zealand has entered into the competition.



Auckland city centre from across the bay at Kelly Tarlton's



This is one of seven replicas produced in 1986 to raise funds for New Zealand's first America's Cup challenge.



I'm not sure why this ship's figurehead is clutching a hand grenade!



"Rapaki" - A huge steam crane moored outside the museum. Built in Scotland in 1925 she cost £42,000 (£1¼ million in today's prices). She was used around Auckland harbour until 1988.

After exploring the Maritime museum jet-lag was beginning to catch up with me again. I made my way back to the hotel via Albert Park. I'm glad that I decided to head back as it rained heavily just after I got to my room.



A two-masted yacht in Viaduct Basin.

Day 3 / December 11th - Auckland to Otorohanga

Jason's mother met us over breakfast and left us several boxes of goodies and essentials to take with us on our fortnight's camper van trip. The hotel called us a taxi which took us to the Maui rental depot out by the airport. The original plan was to pick up the camper van and go back into Auckland. I'd visit the Auckland Museum whilst Jason and Nicole had lunch with people from yesterday's wedding.

However, it took ages to get the camper van. The initial problem was that there were three vans reserved for us; a legacy of when Mike was coming on the trip. Instead of cancelling one of the two vans that had initially been booked, the tour company (Kuoni – enough said after me and Richard's experience in Egypt) had somehow managed to add a third van to the order. Sorting all that out took a while but, in the end, the rental for 14 days cost us just over £200. The chap inspecting the van for us had only just started working there and was very careful with his paperwork. By the time he'd noted down every mark and scratch on the bodywork of our camper van his form was covered in ink and we could have gotten away with driving the vehicle through several hedges.

By the time everything was sorted out and we were ready to go we decided to go directly to Otorohanga without going back into Auckland. All of us were still a bit jet-lagged and feeling sleepy in the afternoon so we didn't want to be driving into the evening. We stopped for provisions in the first supermarket that we came across before setting off south down State Highway 1. This road is a motorway through Auckland but soon becomes just one lane each way.

We paused for a cup of tea in a service station in the Bombay Hills and survived lighting the gas stove in the camper-van for the first time.

The roads in New Zealand aren't busy and we found driving on them fairly easy. Other than the rule about giving way to traffic turning right when you are turning left driving in New Zealand is very similar to England. The roads are well signposted with little heavy traffic. At Hamilton we turned onto SH39. Jason had driven from Auckland but on a quiet stretch of road we swapped over and I drove the rest of the way to Otorohanga.

Our accommodation plan was for us to find a camp site each night. My friends would sleep in the campervan whilst I would stay in an on-site cabin. This gave us all a bit of privacy.



SH1 passing through the village of Gordonton north of Hamilton.



Our campervan parked at the Otorohanga Holiday Park

We found a camp site near the Kiwi Dome that we planned to visit tomorrow. The site was a bit basic but it was run in aid of a local charity. Their only cabin was already occupied so we drove off in order to find me a motel. At the western end of the town we found a reasonable looking one but just as I was about to go in I spotted a sign to another camp site. We drove to see what the Otorohanga Holiday Park was like and I'm very glad that we did. With the benefit of hindsight it was probably the third best place that I stayed in on the camping part of our holiday. I stayed in their only en-suite cabin for \$55 (£20).



The three of us in front of the campervan at the Otorohanga Holiday Park



A Pukeko in the ditch behind where we parked the campervan



The en-suite cabin that I stayed in

Day 4 / December 12th – Waitomo, Otorohanga and Rotorua

We started the day by driving the short distance from the holiday park in Otorohanga to the Waitomo Caves. On route we passed an flock of ostriches in a field; you don't see many of those in UK fields! Jason had suggested that we should get to the caves early as he thought that it would probably get busy later on. He was right as when we left there were a number of buses with many people milling around. We just missed the 9 o'clock tour; the first of the day but they start every 30 minutes so we didn't have long to wait. We poked about in the gift shop; I bought some postcards to send back to England. I posted them later in Rotorua.

At the start of the tour the guide described how the caves were formed and how they were discovered in 1887 by the local Maori chief and an English surveyor called Fred Mace. Within a couple of years the local tribe had opened the caves for tourism.

From the entrance the tour descend through a pretty normal series of limestone caves. There's some good stalactites and stalagmites and a very large cave known as "The Cathedral". At that point the tour guide tried to organise some singing which was as embarrassing as ever. Apparently there is an annual Christmas carol concert in the caves which must sound better than we did.

The real point of the caves is in the partially flooded lower levels. Thousands of glow worms live on the roof of the caves. The caves had suffered from severe flooding during the winter before we visited. A lot of mud and debris washed in providing a good habitat for the insects that the glow worms feed on. Thus when we visited there were a large number of worms to look at. The glow worms live on the roof of the cave and exude a sticky string of mucus. This dangles beneath the worm allowing it to trap flying insects.

The tour continued in a large metal dinghy which our guide helped us into. She then turned out the lights and dragged the dinghy out further into the flooded part of the cave by pulling on an overhead wire. Once my eyes had adjusted to the dark the glow worms on the roof of the cave were an amazing sight. It was like being under a cloudless starry sky with thousands of specks of light. It was actually quite magical and nobody spoke to break the spell. The only sound was of the dinghy moving through the water. After all too short a time the guide navigated the boat out of the caves to a jetty where we got out.



Photography isn't allowed inside the caves (understandably, it upsets the glowworms). Jason and Nicole are standing on the jetty at the exit to the cave. Behind them you can just see the dingy used in the water borne part of the cave tour



An oystercatcher strutting his stuff

From the Waitomo Caves we drove back to Otorohanga to visit the Kiwi House. Although they are nocturnal birds the aviary is inside and unlit. Presumably it's illuminated during the night. Anyway, there were a number of kiwis shuffling around in the undergrowth. I was surprised by their size. I had assumed that they would be roughly as big as a partridge but they were larger; almost chicken sized.

There were lots more birds to see including several birds of prey. These were kept in fairly small cages and looked a bit sad. There were a large number of wildfowl in open ponds and marshes. A path took us around the water areas. There were a good number of signs allowing us to fairly easily identify the birds.



One of several geese wandering around outside



The main attraction (other than the kiwis!) is a massive wire mesh aviary containing forest birds in their natural habitat

I'm certainly not an ornithologist but I did enjoy wandering around the Kiwi House's bird collection. Obviously seeing kiwis for the first time was great, especially in such a good, natural setting. But the uncaged water birds were very interesting too. They were used to humans and didn't mind us getting close to them. The sheer size of the forest aviary was impressive as the birds inside had plenty of room to fly about in a natural environment.

We drove from Otorohanga to Rotorua, taking a fairly cross-country route. We came across a dam on the Arapuni river which was so spectacular that we had to stop to take a better look. The road actually crosses the river along the top of the dam. Built in 1924 the dam and power station are still in use today and can generate some 26MW of electricity. The dam isn't that big and the lake behind it isn't that large which is why the generating capacity is small. However, the river gorge up and downstream of the dam was very scenic.



Upstream of the dam is Lake Arapuni



The road across the top of the dam is a single lane so it was a good idea to look out for traffic



The dam is more than 75 years old



The Arapuni river downstream of the dam is rather overgrown

Further along the road we found a picnic area by a small waterfall. New Zealand roads seem very good in this respect. There are frequent parking bays along most roads, most have a table and bench to sit on and some even have toilet facilities.

After lunch we drove on to Rotorua, New Zealand's premier geothermal centre.



A nice place to have lunch

When we arrived in Rotorua we first stopped at Kuirau Park, a public geothermal area near the centre of town. This park had a number of warm water lakes that were giving off a fair bit of steam. We followed a

path that lead through the bushes between the lakes. Jason commented that he didn't think that place smelt so bad compared to when he used to visit as a child. He said that he always knew when they were getting close to town as the stench of rotten eggs could be smelt from miles away. When we were in Rotorua there was the occasional whiff of something bad but nothing unbearable.



Steamy



Behind the trees in the distance is Rotorua hospital. I wonder how many scalds they have to deal with each year

By now it was mid-afternoon and Rotorua was a busy place so we stopped at a holiday park and booked a room for me and a site for the camper van. Thus certain of somewhere to stay for the night we drove to Hell's Gate. This is another geothermal area but it is much more active with some bubbling mud pools. The clouds had cleared, the sun was out and it was a nice warm afternoon for a walk. The visitor's leaflet contained a map to follow and gave good descriptions of each of the thermal pools. The local Maori tribe had individual customs and legends for many of the pools.



The yellow tint to some of the rocks is deposited sulphur



Geothermal energy from 1km below the surface heats the rainwater that collects in these old eruption craters

There are three separate areas that make up Hell's Gate. Just beyond the entrance are some gently steaming water pools that a path leads around. A bridge crosses one of the pools allowing you to stand in the steam. Beyond the first set of craters is a short walk through some native bush which gave some nice shade.

There's a small waterfall here called the Kakahi Falls. The water here is 40°C and the local Maori tribe used this place as a shower! The sulphur in the water acted as a salve to wounds.



The Kakahi Falls

Beyond the Kakahi Falls is a large, flat area with a number of shallow steaming water pools. One has formed into a shape similar to a map of Australia.

The path leads to the “Steaming Cliffs”. The water pool here is quite violent. Its surface temperature can reach 120°C due to the minerals in the water elevating the boiling point. Bubbles can reach several metres in the air although it was a lot calmer when we were there.



Best to not walk on the sand – it’s probably rather hot



The Steaming Cliffs



Boiling nicely

From the Steaming Cliffs the path passed a cold water stream that fills the pools in this area before heading back through the bush. On the way to the exit we passed two boiling mud craters. George Bernard Shaw named them Sodom and Gomorrah when he visited in 1934. He’s reputed to have said *“Hell’s Gate, I think, is the most damnable I have ever visited, and I’d willingly have paid ten pounds not to have seen it.”* That’s a bit steep as I enjoyed my visit. OK, there’s a limit to how many bubbling puddles you ever need to see, but there is a nice collection here.



We first saw this peacock in the bush area. As we were leaving it came and hassled us in the car park

We drove back to the holiday park that we’d booked into earlier in the afternoon. This was the “Cosy Cottage”, located to the west of the city centre on the edge of Lake Rotorua. We’d booked two night’s stay as we planned a full day in and around Rotorua tomorrow. We were able to book tickets for a Maori “Cultural Evening” at the camp site office.

This holiday park was much busier than the one in Otorohanga. Two nights stay cost me \$98 (about £38). The room was a “kitchen chalet”, quite basic with a cooking area but the toilet facilities were in a shared block. With the large number of people around I had expected it to be noisy during the night but I slept soundly.

Day 5 / December 13th – Rotorua Gondala, The Buried Village and Whakarewarewa

As I still hadn't fully adjusted to New Zealand time I woke up quite early, just after dawn. I decided to go for a walk before breakfast. I headed out of the main entrance to the holiday park and walked up the road to Lake Rotorua. The road ended in a set of bollards and a pile of rocks at the water's edge. It was a beautiful calm morning and the lake was flat and still. I stood and took in the scene. A black swan saw me and started paddling in my direction. It came right up to me and hovered in the water just a few feet away. I guess it thought that I might have some bread for it.



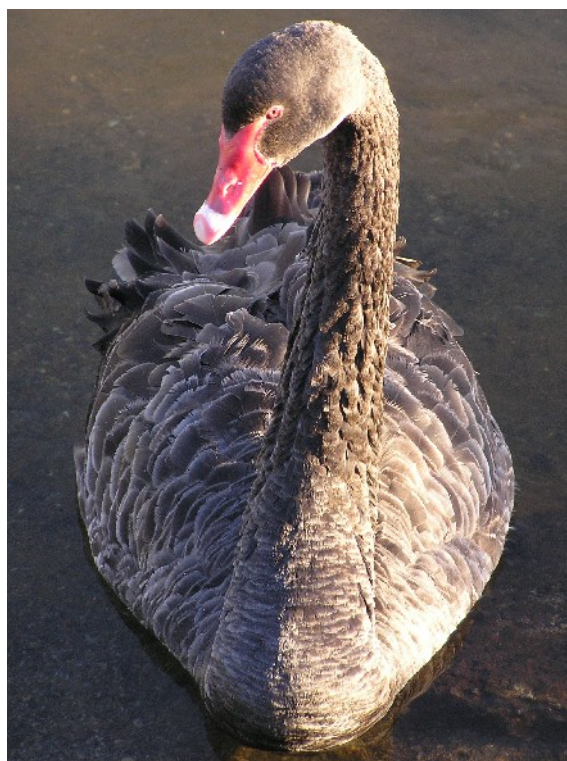
A flat calm on Lake Rotorua



This black swan headed towards me. The steam is from the geothermal heating system of a house. I like the bird peering at it!



The lake was so calm the swan created a great reflection



I remembered a brochure mentioning that the holiday park had a private beach so I went back to my cabin to read more about it. The entrance turned out to be quite close to my room. I tip-toed past some tents and through a gate. A gravel path led along a steaming drainage ditch (I chose to believe it was steaming because the water was hot!) and across a grassy area to a deserted sandy beach. I took my shoes and socks off and paddled in the water. It was quite cold at first but further along the beach the sand and water suddenly got much warmer. I didn't want to go any further in case I stepped in a boiling patch.

In places I could see bubbles of hydrogen sulphide gas rising through the water. This is the gas that gives Rotorua its smell of rotten eggs. I was still the only person on the beach and I sat down to fully take in the view. There were some shallow holes dug in the beach which I later realised were used for *hangi*, a form of Maori cooking. The food is buried and steamed until it is cooked. Usually this requires stones to have been heated in a fire but in parts of Rotorua the ground is naturally hot enough to cook with.

Two coxless paired sculls rowed past with their coach following on in a motor boat. He had a megaphone but fortunately he wasn't too shouty. The black swan came along before realising I was the chap without any bread. A couple of pukeko came out of the bushes and scratched about in the grass behind me. It was really superb sitting there by myself with the wildlife and the stillness of the lake. I was probably there for half an hour and only left when I realised it was time for breakfast.



Still mooching for free food



A harder working pukeko

Our first stop of the day was at the Rotorua Gondola to the west of the town. This cable car runs up a hill at the top of which is a good view of Lake Rotorua. At the top and bottom of the hill the cars slowed to a crawl and the doors automatically opened. It was easy to get on board. Despite my general distrust of heights the ride up was pleasant as the cars felt sturdy and didn't sway around too much.

The main attraction at the top of the hill is the luge. These can best be described as a gravity powered go-karts. The handlebars are used for steering and braking. For maximum speed you gently pull back on the handlebars releasing the brakes. Pulling forward more strongly or letting go stops the luge. Jason and I got tickets for five rides on the luge; Nicole stayed at the top and took photos as we passed.

There were three tracks running down the hills. After some brief instructions we both started on the easy, flat route that gave us time to look around and enjoy the views. The track is 2 kilometres from top to bottom which would have taken several minutes at top speed although I didn't go that quickly. From the bottom of the hill a ski-lift took us and our carts back up to the top. This was a much flimsier affair than the gondola and I was grateful that Jason waited at the bottom of the hill for me each time so that we rode up together.



The ride on the gondola is almost a kilometre long as it climbs 180 metres up a hill. The day had become more overcast

I had another go on the easy track for my second run but for the third I tried the intermediate route. This was steeper and only 1½ kilometres long from top to bottom. There was even a tunnel as the track passed under another route. The track split into two for part of the way so I tried this other route on my next ride.

For my final trip I braved the advanced route. This run reached the bottom of the hill in only a kilometre. There were some sharp hairpin turns and some very steep bits. One corner was signed “Slow” so I crept into it and only just made it up an incline that followed. An engine in the cart would have been useful at that point! After our last run we stopped in a café at the top of the hill for a coffee before riding down the gondola.



The “Slow” sign after the chicane on the left should be ignored



The nets catch things dropped from the chair lift and stop them from falling onto the track

We headed out into the countryside south of Rotorua. We stopped at a lookout that gave a glimpse of the Green and Blue Lakes. These two lakes have different colours due to different minerals dissolved in their waters. From the ground the lakes didn’t look that different. We went a bit further to Lake Tarawera and had lunch on the beach at its western tip. The sun had come out and we were able to use the chairs that we’d hired with the camper van.



Panorama of the Green and Blue lakes (The Green Lake is on the left)

After lunch we drove to The Buried Village. This Maori village was covered by the fallout from a volcanic eruption in 1886. Christian Missionaries established the village in 1848. By the 1870's it had become a staging post on the tourist route to the Pink and White terraces. These were created by successive volcanic outflows and formed steps down the side of a hill. They were an early tourist attraction, apparently an essential place to see for all European visitors. One of Jason's ancestors had painted a famous picture of the terraces.

The violent eruption of Mount Tarawera on the 10th June 1886 destroyed the terraces. The explosion was heard 800 Km to the south in Christchurch. The village of Te Wairoa was buried under up to 10 metres of ash. It remained abandoned until the 1930's when it was excavated before becoming a tourist attraction in its own right.

We followed a trail around the village which told the story of the eruption and its aftermath from the point of view of a visitor to the Pink and White terraces who was staying in the hotel on the night of the eruption. It's a bit like Pompeii but fewer buildings have survived as most were made of wood.



This Maori hut is a reconstruction. It was originally at ground level, the steps leading down show how much ash fell during the eruption



Rainbow Trout swim into the stream to feed. They weren't at all afraid of people walking past

To be honest, I didn't find the Buried Village particularly interesting but the scenery on the second half of the walk was nice. From the remains of the village the tourist trail passed through a valley. Steps lead down beside a nice waterfall. It was quite a steep climb out of the valley so the teashop at the top was a welcome sight.



The Te Wairoa waterfall has a 30 metre drop

Following an afternoon tea and cake we drove to Whakarewarewa Maori Institute, just south of Rotorua. At the holiday park we'd booked tickets for a tour and seats at a cultural evening. There was an initial bit of confusion as we arrived at the "Whakarewarewa Thermal Village" but the woman on the gate redirected us around the corner to the Maori Institute.

We had a short while to wait before a tour began so we had an ice cream and then wandered around their gift shop. The guide gathered the tour party together and explained the purpose of the Maori Institute. This was established to "preserve the heritage of Maori people, encourage Maori culture and perpetuate the skills of Maori arts and crafts". Their history was mostly oral with carved and woven artefacts. The skills necessary to create these objects were being lost so in 1963 the New Zealand government passed an Act of Parliament setting up the Institute. This teaches young Maori their heritage and traditional crafts.

The first stop on our tour was at the carpentry school where wood carving skills are taught. From there we headed to a *Marae* (a Maori meeting house) where we had a demonstration of flax weaving. The institute also had some kiwis in a nocturnal building but they were hard to see through small windows.



The master carpenter at work on a carving with some traditional designs behind him

It was at this point an Italian chap on the tour became incredibly annoying, in a funny kind of way. He'd already asked some weird questions during the flax weaving causing our guide to mutter something in Maori to one of her colleagues. I think the Italian man couldn't understand that kiwis are nocturnal and wanted the lights turned on so he could take a better photo. All the commotion had caused the birds to hide so we left him there and carried on with the tour.

The grounds of the Maori Institute adjoin the thermal village and the tour passed some bubbling mud pools. These were much more active than the ones at Hell's Gate. They looked like mud pools should; slightly evil with slow, bubbling menace.

There was a very impressive geyser called "*Pohutu*", meaning big splash or explosion. Next to it was a smaller geyser that the Victorians called "The Prince of Wales Feathers" as it has one main and two side jets. Unlike the geysers that I saw in Iceland, *Pohutu* seemed to erupt continuously, at least, it was going every time we looked at it. *Pohutu* can reach up to 30 metres in the air and apparently usually erupts for 5 to 10 minutes but it has been known to spout for up to 15 hours at a time. It all depends on the amount of underground water entering a geothermally heated chamber. As it had been raining in the past few days there was plenty of water to drive the eruptions.



Bubbling mud; a bulge slowly grows until the gas belches out, then the crater subsides back into the ooze



Pohutu with The Prince of Wales Feathers geyser to the left



After the tour we stayed for a “cultural evening”. I have to say that this was probably the worst thing that we did on the entire holiday. I’m not a great fan of anything “cultural” at the best of times and this presentation felt incredibly *ersatz*. The guide picked a volunteer to act as the chief of our “tour tribe”. We then headed to the *Marae* we visited earlier in the day where we were challenged in the traditional way by a warrior. After a lot of shouting and tongue-sticking-out we were accepted as being peaceful and invited inside. On stage there were some dancers and we were told to sit still and be respectful during the welcoming ceremonies. Some chap ignored this request and was wandering around taking photos the whole time. We realised that it was the weird Italian man from the earlier tour! Still, the dancers themselves didn’t seem to be taking things too seriously as there was a lot of giggling whenever they dropped their pom-poms.

Fortunately this didn’t go on for too long as afterwards was a *Hangi*, a Maori feast. We were seated on a table with other Brits and an Australian family, well away from the mad Italian. It was a help-yourself buffet with several courses starting with fish. The mussel chowder was excellent. The meat course followed with the chefs carving the joints for you. Desert was the obligatory pavlova along with several gateaux followed by coffee.

After the dinner the guide showed us out via a path that overlooked the geysers. He flipped a switch to illuminate them as they were erupting. They did look good with the spray fading into the darkness. We went back to the holiday park feeling very full.

Day 6 / December 14th – Rotorua to Bulls via the Huka Falls and Mount Ruapehu

This morning dawned quite cloudy so I didn't bother going to the beach again. We didn't have anything planned for the day other than generally heading south. After breakfast we drove towards Lake Taupo (probably on SH5 but it could have been SH30/SH1). We stopped at the Huka Falls, located on the Waikato River just to the north of the town of Taupo. I was driving the camper van so I was pleased to find the car park had a section with extra-wide bays.



The Huka Falls isn't a great drop; only 11 metres



More than 200 tons of water a second go over the falls making an impressive noise

A path lead from the car park down to where the Waikato River runs through a narrow gorge. From a width of over 100 metres the river is forced into a channel only 15 metres across. The falls were created as the river cut through softer rock at the exit of the gorge. A bridge crosses the gorge; we stood on it and watched the turquoise coloured water rushing below.

On the far side of the river there were some lookout platforms giving a view from below the falls. You can see where they are in the above left photo. There's nothing else to do at the Huka Falls other than look at the waterfall but it was a nice 20 minute stop.



This Mil-8 is parked by the road at the turn to the Huka Falls. Its flying days are over; it seems to be a bar. Jason even spotted that two of the rotors were on backwards

Opposite the turn to the Huka Falls were the Craters of the Moon. This was another geothermal area, although it only appeared in the 1950s, when a nearby power station lowered underground water levels. When we visited it wasn't particularly active. We wandered about a quarter of the way around their path before deciding that there was nothing new or exciting to look at. We headed back to the camper van.

We drove through the town of Taupo and along SH1 that follows the south-eastern side of Lake Taupo. At Turangi we picked up SH47 and went around the western side of the Tongariro National Park on SH4. This contains Mount Ngauruhoe that doubled as Mount Doom in the Lord of the Rings films. It also contains Mount Ruapehu, a 2700 metre high volcano that is still active. It erupted several times in the 1990's but has calmed down since then. The peak was covered in cloud while we were there so we couldn't tell if it was smoking or not.



Mount Ngauruhoe looking rather more scenic than Mount Doom



Mount Ruapehu as seen from the layby where we stopped for lunch

After lunch we drove up the access road to the skiing resort on Mount Ruapehu. There was much more snow around than normal for mid December which made the mountain much more scenic. We stopped in a car park just below the resort and got out for a breath of very fresh air.



A panorama of Mount Ruapehu. The skiing area can be seen on the left

From Mount Ruapehu we headed south down SH4 to Wanganui. This road headed through some mountainous county. I was sitting in the back of the camper van and after going round several sharp corners I began to feel quite icky. In places the road was down to a single lane as the other half of the tarmac had been washed down a ravine during the winter storms. I was glad the road was dry when we were driving on it! The terrain levelled out as we approached Wanganui and I began to feel better. Wanganui looked a nice place, especially the houses in Wanganui East by the river. We stopped and did some shopping in a Countdown supermarket before continuing south on SH3.

From Wanganui we continued south along SH3 to Bulls where we stayed the night at the Bridge Motor Home Park. The chap on the desk seemed a bit rural, maybe even “a sheep short of a flock” but he was quite friendly. They had little available accommodation as a funeral party was staying. He rented me a bed in one of their “Backpacker’s Rooms” for \$15 and for an extra \$3 I had the room to myself. It was very basic; I suspect that the bed was probably home-made. It was the only night where my room was cheaper than the camper van pitch.

Staying in the room next to me were a gang of builders. The motel owner had introduced them saying “Don’t worry, they’re harmless”. In the evening I met one in the laundry room where I was doing some washing and we chatted. He was planning to spend Christmas fishing in Kaitaia which was where I planned to stay on Boxing Day.



We followed this double-headed train for a while. In the foreground are particularly fine examples of New Zealand flax plants

Day 7 / December 15th – From the North to the South Island

We had to be in Wellington by early afternoon in order to catch the ferry to the South Island. There was enough time to visit the Royal New Zealand Air Force museum at Ohakea, just south of Bulls. We got there just before it opened but didn't have to wait long. It's a fairly small museum but it's packed with many displays and aerospace artefacts. The RNZAF was founded in 1923 after many New Zealanders flew in the RFC during World War One. World War Two saw the peak of the RNZAF with 13 squadrons in the Pacific and 7 in Europe. Their airmen won three Victoria Crosses, one posthumously based on a recommendation from the crew of a U-Boat that he sank!

Since then the size of the RNZAF has declined but they served in Malaya during the Emergency, in Vietnam and the first Gulf War. In 2001 the last strike aircraft squadron was disbanded and now the RNZAF serves in a maritime patrol and transport role.

The museum has displays on all of this along with a couple of aircraft parked outside. It was well worth the time spent visiting.



This A4 Skyhawk, one of New Zealand's last operational fighter aircraft, sits forlornly on the tarmac outside the museum

From Ohakea we headed down SH1 to Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand. We had a bit of time before we had to be at the ferry terminal so we drove through the city centre to look at the parliament buildings. From there we headed down to the harbour and the InterIslander ferry terminal. On arrival we were told that our sailing would be delayed by an hour due to "technical problems" at the harbour in the South Island. It wasn't worth heading back into the city centre for a bit more sightseeing so we waited in the car park. The ferry building didn't have many facilities but I grabbed a free local newspaper to read. The property section was interesting; New Zealand house prices had risen a lot and didn't seem particularly cheap compared to the UK.

After a while the ferry operators redirected all of the waiting cars to the faster catamaran service. We were left waiting with the other motor homes and some lorries. A lorry full of rather smelly sheep was parked next to us so we were pleased to see the ferry enter the harbour and dock.

The bow of the ferry is fixed and vehicular access is via the stern. It was quite a big ship as even articulated lorries could turn around on the vehicle deck. This allowed everyone to drive on and off without reversing. Beneath the vehicle deck is a railway deck where cargo wagons were shunted on and off as we boarded.



The water in Wellington Harbour is surprisingly clean. This mussel covered rock was by the side of the ferry terminal car park.



We travelled from the North to the South island on the ferry *Aratere*. Here she is entering Wellington harbour



The ferries make a sharp turn and reverse into the dock and loading bay. You can see the upper vehicle deck and the stern door to the lower railway deck. In the background on the right are the floodlights of the Westpac Stadium

As the car passengers had been transferred to a faster ferry our ship was fairly empty. We initially stood on the observation deck at the bow but there was a chill wind. After the ferry had left the dock we found some seats just inside, in front of the large bow windows. Nearby was a TV set linked to the ferry's navigation system giving the ship's current position on several scales of map.

The trip between the islands is notorious for often being a rough crossing and I was a bit worried when I saw the crew chaining down all the vehicles on the deck. Fortunately the trip was fairly calm for us although the girl behind the bar did regale us with a rather vivid description of the previous weekend's crossing! There was a small swell causing the boat to move a little but once we had entered the Tory Channel in the South Island the water was almost flat. This channel opens into Queen Charlotte Sound and the ferry took about an hour sailing down this inland waterway to the harbour at Picton.



The rocky entrance to the Tory Channel leading to the Queen Charlotte Sound and the harbour at Picton



Jason took this photo of a Lynx fast ferry overtaking our slower ship as we headed up Queen Charlotte Sound

It started to rain as we approached Picton. This drizzle continued for the rest of the day. After we had docked and disembarked we headed south down SH1 to Blenheim.

We stopped for the night in the Blenheim Bridge holiday park. I had a standard cabin costing \$40 (£14). It was quite modern but a herd of elephants seemed to be staying in the cabin next to mine - at least, that's what it sounded like! We had dinner from a Fish & Chip shop opposite the campsite. It was literally "fish & chips" as the fish is simply the catch of the day. A TV in the shop was showing Coronation Street and the chap behind the counter asked how far behind they were compared to England – I was unable to help him!

Day 8 / December 16th – Blenheim to Kaikoura

I was woken up during the night by a loud rumbling noise. At first I thought that it was an earthquake but I quickly realised that we'd managed to find another holiday park located next to a railway line! Fortunately I soon went back to sleep and that turned out to be the only train of the night.

Blenheim claims to be the sunniest town in New Zealand but it was still raining when I got up. We headed south down SH1 towards Kaikoura. At Lake Grassmere a signpost tempted us to turn up a side road towards a salt works. Their huge piles of salt were impressive but the place looked a bit dingy so we didn't bother to stop and look at their exhibition. South of Lake Grassmere the road reaches the east coast of the South Island. We parked the campervan to take our first look at the Pacific Ocean.



Looking back north. The railway seems too close to the sea; I wonder if storms stop the trains



Looking south towards Kaikoura

Further down the road we had lunch in a rest area by a stony beach. We got out of the campervan to look at a large flock of seagulls but then found a number of seals were resting on some large rocks by the water. They didn't seem to mind us although we thought that it probably wasn't a good idea to get too close.



Seagulls waiting for any free food they might scrounge



A tourist train rattling along the coast from Christchurch to Picton



Lazy seals



A sleeping seal



Close enough for the both of us

After lunch we carried on towards Kaikoura. Just to the north of the town we came across an “official” seal watching site. It was located on top of a cliff overlooking some seals sitting on rocks at the bottom. This was nowhere near as good as the first place we stopped at. We told the people there about our better location then headed on to Kaikoura.



The sea's a bit rough to be flipping around on the rocks



Another lazy seal photographed from the top of the cliffs.
Hurrah for a 10 times zoom lens!

We had a whale watching tour booked but on our arrival in Kaikoura we found that all of the trips that day had been cancelled as the Pacific was too rough. They hoped that they might be able start the tours in the afternoon so we had some lunch and hoped that the weather would clear. It didn't and when we went back we found that all tours had been abandoned for the day. They thought that the weather would be better in the morning. We had a quick rethink in the carpark; our original plan was to travel to and stay the night in Hamner Springs after the boat trip. We decided to remain in Kaikoura and cross our fingers.

We realised it would be a good idea to sort out our accommodation for the night before the nice places filled up. We settled upon the 69 Beach Road Holiday Park. At \$75 (£25) my en-suite cabin was the most expensive night of the tour but it was a good quality room that was quiet throughout the night.

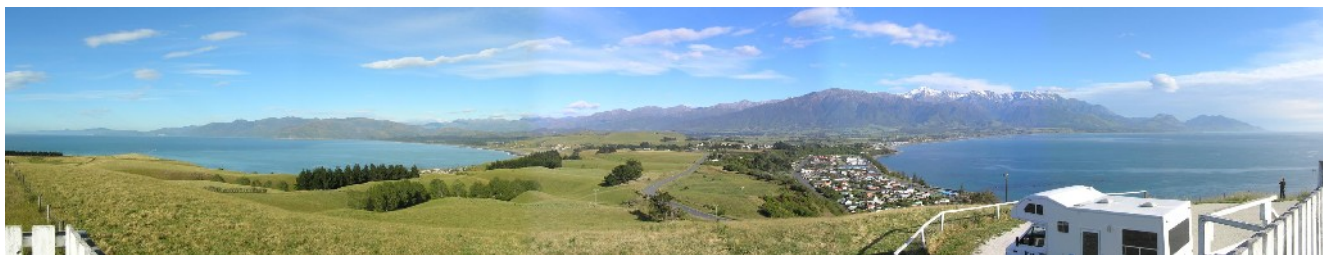
We wandered through the town centre which had a reasonable collection of shops. We stopped in a Mitre-10 DIY shop to buy some glue to repair a door in the campervan (it came apart in our hands, honest!). Whilst Jason and Nicole used an Internet café to check their email I went further up the road to a second hand bookshop. I'd taken a couple of books with me but I'd already finished reading them as I was still waking up so early in the mornings. I bought a copy of “Barbarians at the Gate” which I had wanted to read for a while.

After our shopping we drove south of Kaikoura to the Kaikoura Wine Company's vineyard. We enjoyed a cup of coffee and a cake in their restaurant although as it was raining we didn't go on their vineyard tour.

Before dinner we drove to the beach near the whale tour centre. The sun was going down and although the water was cold I grabbed the chance to struggle across the stones and wade in the Pacific. I found a couple of interesting pebbles that now sit next to my aquarium.

Day 9 / December 17th – Whale Watching

The day dawned bright and clear with only a gentle breeze, fully justifying our decision to stay the night in Kaikoura. We had a bit of spare time before our whale watching trip so we drove the short distance out along the Kaikoura Peninsula. This strip of land juts into the Pacific and from a scenic lookout we got a superb view up and down the coast.



To the left is south in the direction of Christchurch and to the right is north towards Blenheim. The town of Kaikoura lies mostly on the north coast of the peninsula.

The whale watching tours depart from the railway station located at the northern end of the town. The company is owned and run by the local Maori tribe, the *Ngai Tahu*. The decline of industry in the town had caused high unemployment, especially in the Maori youth. The Whale Watch company was started in 1985 and is now the single largest employer in Kaikoura. In the peak tourist season the company directly employs up to 70 mainly Maori people and supports many extended families.

We booked in and had few minutes to kill before our tour departed. We looked at a relief model of the area which makes it clear why large whales are attracted so close inshore. A deep underwater canyon lies just off the coast and the edge of the continental shelf is not far out to sea. This provides a good place for whales to dive deep for food whilst remaining in fairly sheltered coastal waters.

From the station a coach took our tour group to a small harbour on the southern side of the Kaikoura peninsula. When we arrived at the harbour our boat was sitting in a cradle out of the water. It had two viewing platforms and the crew advised those people who might feel queasy at sea would be better off on the lower deck. We boarded the boat up a flight of stairs before a tractor pushed the cradle into the water. Once out of the harbour there was quite a swell so I was glad that I hadn't gone to the upper deck.

The whale watching company owns a number of boats and there's usually one at sea at all times during the day. Although there's no guarantee that a whale will appear during a tour there are sufficient whales living off Kaikoura for the company to be willing to refund 80% of the cost of the cruise if nothing is seen.

After we left the harbour our captain used his radio to contact another boat that had sailed earlier. He found that it was already following a sperm whale. We rushed to join the other boat and the whale several miles out in the Pacific.

Sperm whales can be rather big. Adult males are typically 17 metres long and weigh 50 tons. They are the deepest-diving mammals on the planet as they can reach depths of 3 kilometres and stay submerged for up to 2 hours. However, a typical dive is to 400 metres taking half an hour. Sperm whales dive to catch food; their diet is squid, octopuses and some large fish.



The other boat circling the first whale that we saw

Between dives sperm whales come up to the surface to breathe. They swim idly for roughly 10 minutes before diving again. When we arrived the whale was still bobbing along on the surface. We joined the other tour boat and followed the whale from a safe distance. Our captain assured us that there has never been an instance of a whale hitting one of their boats!

We were close enough to hear the whale breathing out, sending a column of water into the air every time. The classic image of a whale's tail high in the air only happens when the whale dives underwater at the end of its breathing cycle. The whale that we were following dived not long after we arrived and we got a good view of it raising its back and then sliding beneath the waves.



There she blows!



And there she goes. I watched the whale dive but the pitching of the boat meant that I didn't get a good photo; Jason took these two

We cruised around for a while before the captain spotted a number of dolphins in the distance. He tried to catch up with them but they were able to outrun our boat. They were obviously amusing themselves as they kept jumping out of the water to show us where they were.



Shadows cast in the wake from the people on the upper deck



The bow wave surged past (and fortunately not through!) the open windows

Having given up chasing the dolphins we found a pod of pilot whales. These creatures are not whales but are actually dolphins. Adult pilot whales weight between 1 and 3 tons and are four to seven metres long. They usually live in pods of 10 to 30 whales. The pod that we saw was quite small. They swam alongside our boat for a while until we turned back to shore.



The pod of Pilot whales



My camera produced pictures noticeably less blue compared to Jason's

On the way back to the harbour we came across another sperm whale which we circled. When it dived we were side on to it so it wasn't as spectacular as the first one.



The whale and the mountains



Quite graceful for such a large creature

I really enjoyed the whale watching trip. I had assumed that it would be rather hippy-like, similar to a “tree-hugging” experience but it was much better than that. We were lucky to see two big sperm whales as well as the pilot whales and the dolphins. It was also a lovely sunny day to be out on the Pacific.

The cost of the boat trip was £42 which was reasonable considering we were at sea for nearly 3 hours.



The boat the we took our trip in, tied up in Kaikoura harbour after we got back

We left Kaikoura and headed south before joining SH7. We stopped for lunch in a layby overlooking the Waiau River before traversing the Southern Alps through the Lewis Pass. This crossing between the east and west coasts of the South Island was used by the Maori but first surveyed by Henry Lewis in the early 1860's. The road wound through the mountains for what seemed like ages, but the scenery certainly made up for it.



Looking west towards the Lewis Pass



Looking east back towards Kaikoura

On the western side of the Lewis pass the road followed the Grey river. Near the coast the road and river passed the Brunner mine. Here in 1848 the explorer Thomas Brunner discovered a large coal deposit. This energy supply helped make the New Zealand colony viable. Before then coal had to be expensively imported from Australia.

Commercial mining began on the site in 1864. New Zealand's worst mining disaster occurred here in 1896 when an explosion killed 65 miners. Production peaked in 1901 and ceased in 1942.

Today it is a museum to New Zealand's early industrial heritage. Perhaps if we had more time we would have visited it.

The Grey River reaches the Tasman Sea at the town of Greymouth. The town and river are named after Sir George Grey who was Governor of New Zealand from 1845 to 1853 and again from 1861 to 1868. In his second term as governor during the Maori Wars he launched the invasion of the Waikato to take control of the rich Maori agricultural region. At the height of the war more British troops were stationed in New Zealand than in any other part of the empire. After the war New Zealand was granted a degree of self-governance and Grey was nominated as Prime Minister, serving between 1877 and 1879.



The suspension bridge across the Grey River to the Brunner mine was built in 1876 and has recently been restored

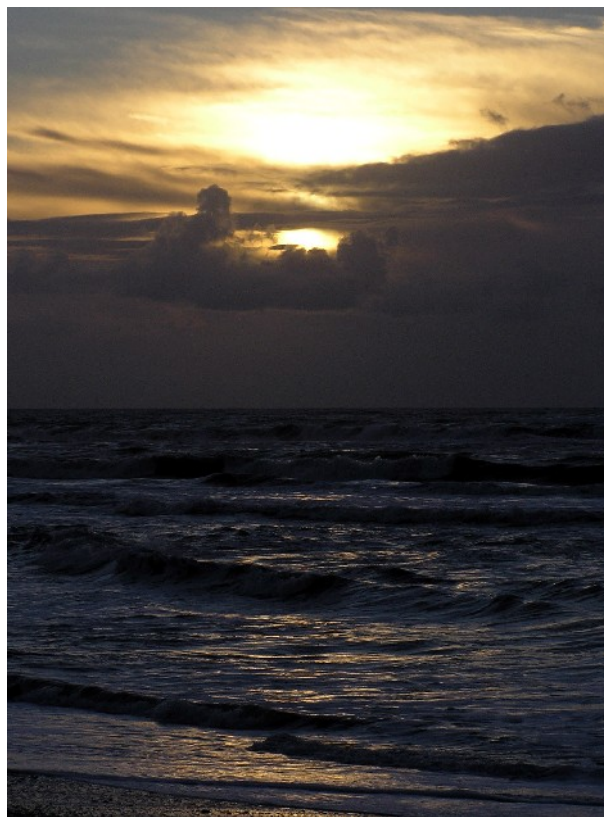
We stopped for the night at a campsite behind the South Beach Motel in Greymouth. The site backed onto a beach of large pebbles. It was good to sit on and watch the impressive sunset while the waves crashed ashore. I had a quick paddle just so that I could say that I had been in both the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea within a day. I sat on a tree trunk watching the sunset and reading a book for at least an hour until a swarm of mosquitoes drove me back to the campsite. My room was quite nice, just a chalet bedroom with no facilities, but a reasonable cost of \$40 (£15).



Quite desolate but the driftwood tree trunks made handy seats



At least it was sandy at the water's edge making paddling less painful that it might have been



The mosquitoes appeared soon after this

Day 10 / December 18th – Shantytown and the Franz Joseph and Fox Glaciers

After a quick bit of shopping in a supermarket on the outskirts of Greymouth we drove a short distance south to Shantytown. This is an open-air museum that houses a number of historic buildings constructed during the 1860's gold rush era. They have been moved from around the region to the Shantytown site and restored. The first thing that we saw was an impressively large water wheel. This is a replica of a wheel built by Chinese labourers to provide power to the gold extraction process.

At the peak of the 1860's gold rush over 5,000 prospectors had moved to the area. Europeans used high-pressure hydraulic sluicing to get at the gold but hundreds of Chinese labourers were prepared to pan the sluice tailings for any left-over gold.

The gold rush subsided in the 1870's although production continued well into the 20th century. The remaining population turned to harvesting timber from the dense forests and then farming of the cleared land.

The Shantytown museum started in the 1970's to preserve the region's early history.

We first visited the Chinatown area of the museum. This has a number of replica huts that the immigrant Chinese lived in during the gold rush years. It showed the terribly primitive conditions that they were prepared to live under for a little bit of gold.



The waterwheel is huge; the Chinatown arch on the right is tall enough to walk under so the wheel must be over 10 metres high



The boiler could do with another coat of paint

The traction engine on the left was parked near the entrance to Shantytown. She was built in Leeds in 1882. Weighing 11 tons, the 7HP engine was first used near Christchurch for threshing wheat. It was sold in around 1900 to a sawmill at Reefton, north-east of Greymouth. Subsequently sold to Consolidated Goldfields it was used to haul equipment around the Reefton area gold mines.

"The Maori" finished its working life around 1940 but survived until it was restored in 1979.

We wandered around the other buildings looking at the historical artefacts they contained. The hospital had some rather grim looking 19th and early 20th century equipment. Other buildings such as the bank and the printing works were also interesting. Another building held a huge collection of gems and minerals from around the world. The cross-section of a meteorite found locally was very interesting, it was almost pure metal.

Shantytown has a short stretch of railway built after the gold rush era to service a logging operation. Now it is used for tourism with a steam engine pulling a couple of passenger wagons. The trains run regularly throughout the day and we only had to wait a short while in the station before a locomotive came puffing out of the engine sheds.

Shantytown claims to run New Zealand's largest steam train passenger railway, even though they have just a mile and a half of track and three engines! For our ride the loco was L 508, built in Bristol in 1877. She was one of 10 ordered by New Zealand Railways. From 1901 she was used in the construction of new railway lines. After the second world war she was sold to a cement works in Whangarei and used there until 1964. From 1974 to 1988 she ran in a museum in the Bay of Plenty before being bought by Shantytown. After an extensive, multi-year restoration she returned to service in 2002.

We got aboard the passenger wagons but then had to wait a seeming age while the engine was coupled up.

Once the train finally got going it chuffed at a steady speed along the short stretch of track through a dense forest.

At the far end of the line the engine stopped for a few minutes to allow people to walk across the footplate.

On the way back to the main part of Shantytown there was another stop at a reconstructed sawmill. It didn't seem to be in action so we followed the crowd and walked to the gold panning area.



Approaching the station from the engine shed



Visiting the footplate at the far end of the line



The cab is kept clean - note the can of Brasso!

The gold panning seemed a little too well organised. We were given a pan that had already been filled with gravel. Then we were shown the technique for panning, separating the flakes of gold from the grit. The key to the process is that gold is five to ten times heavier than rock. By repeatedly shaking the pan then swilling off the top layer of gravel you are eventually left with flakes of gold sitting in the pan. What surprised me was just how viciously you can treat the pan. The gold stays at the bottom and you would have to be very clumsy to wash it away. Everyone who tried panning found some gold so we concluded that the gravel had been seeded with a few flakes to keep people happy. Maybe we were just too cynical!



I'm rich! 10p's worth of gold for 5 minutes work

I was a little hesitant about visiting a museum describing itself as "Living History" but I've very glad that I did. There were only a couple of people wandering about in period clothing and they seemed mostly harmless. The buildings were interesting and the train ride was excellent. The gold panning was great even if it was a little *faux*. The flakes of gold that I found in a small tube made an excellent souvenir. For an entrance fee of £6 Shantytown provided a good few hours of interest.

We headed south along SH6 and stopped briefly in Hokitika. This town was founded in 1864 during the gold rush. Within two years it was one of the country's most populous centres. The population has declined since that time and currently just over 4500 people live there. The town's major industry is now the carving of greenstone for the tourist trade. This mineral is a form of jade and was highly prized by the Maori. Jason and Nicole went for a wander around the shops and bought some greenstone jewellery.

From Hokitika we continued south to the township of Franz Joseph Glacier. We had booked a helicopter trip over the region but when we arrived at the flight centre we were told that it was too windy to fly. However, they said that the forecast for tomorrow was better so we decided to move the booking to first thing the next day and fly from Fox Glacier where we had planned to stay the night.

We had a quick mooch around the township and found that there's not much there other than sight-seeing flight offices, souvenir shops and cafés.



The icon of New Zealand, the silver fern, growing near the path to the glacier

also had time to book into a campsite down the road.

The tour was advertised as being "suitable for reasonably fit people of all ages" and it seemed that Jason and I were the youngest in the group of roughly twenty people. There was quite a delay as people fussed around getting the correct size of walking boots. I'd sensibly brought my own. For the cost of \$29 (£11) we were going to get a nice walk with a guide pointing out anything of significance along the way.

Once everyone was finally shod properly we got on board an ancient bus that took us the short distance to a carpark about a mile away from the glacier.

From the carpark we had a gentle stroll to the Fox Glacier which we got a good view of as we approached its terminal face. The path was fairly easy going. We had been given stout walking sticks but they were not really necessary, only being useful when going up or down an uneven step formed by a large rock. The weather had greatly improved into a lovely sunny evening. Quite bizarrely, despite the sun, at one point we had snow falling on us as it was blown from the tops of mountains beside the glacial valley.



The terminal face of the Franz Joseph glacier

We then headed to see the glacier. The area was first explored in 1865 by a German man called Julius von Haast. He named the glacier after the Austrian emperor, Franz Joseph I. (Haast got a town named after him which we drove through the next day).

After a walk up a fairly steep path we reached a viewing platform overlooking the glacier. We didn't bother getting closer as we had a walk to the face of the Fox Glacier planned for later in the afternoon. However, the huge size of the glacier was apparent even from a distance. The glacier is 12 kilometres long and is advancing down the hill at up to 70cm a day.

Once we had seen all that there was to see at the Franz Joseph Glacier we drove the short distance south to the Fox Glacier where we had booked a guided walk to the terminal face of glacier. On arriving in the village of Fox Glacier we had some time before the tour was due to start. We had a coffee and muffin in the little café outside the building where the tours depart. We



The Fox Glacier as it descends down the valley it has carved

Before we reached the glacier the guide gathered the group together and explained how glaciers form. They start in large flat areas in the high mountains, above the permanent snow line. Snow falling here is repeatedly thawed and frozen and forms a granular ice called *névé*. (Confusingly the high snow collection area is also called the *névé*). Over the years the *névé* ice fuses into a more solid ice called *firn* which then compacts to form blue-tinted glacial ice. The weight of the ice forces the lower layers to flow down the mountain. En route it picks up rocks and boulders which grind a deeper and deeper valley. Remembering back to my GCSE geography lessons I recalled that glacial valleys are 'U' shaped whereas valleys carved by rivers are 'V' shaped.



The glacier's terminal face. The pile of rocks and gravel pushed up in front of the ice shows that the glacier is currently growing



An ice cave in the terminal face from which the Fox River emerges. The water is amazingly clear

As we were part of a guided tour we were able to cross the safety fence and walk right up to the face of the glacier. The ground is unstable so unguided walkers are kept back at a distance. Our guide used his ice-axe to chop off a lump of the glacier for us to hold. A 900 year old lump of ice feels just as cold as modern ice! 900 years is the estimated time taken for snow falling at the top of the glacier to emerge at the bottom. Jason took a lump with him to give to Nicole; it survived the trip back to the campervan without melting too much.



A panorama of the glacier's terminal face



The Fox Glacier and the Fox River winding through the valley they created

Once we had fully appreciated the glacier the tour party headed back to the car park. From there we got the bus back to the tour centre where we met Nicole. She hadn't taken the tour but as we had found the walk so easy we drove the campervan back to the car park at the glacier. Jason and Nicole wandered part of the way along the path to get a better view.

I stayed in the car park and watched a flock of keas. These parrots are native to the alpine regions of New Zealand. They are semi-nocturnal and prefer the ground, nesting in crevices under rocks, in the roots of trees or hollow logs. Their diet consists of leaves, buds, fruits, insects, and carrion.

The kea is now a protected species but was once hunted for a bounty paid by farmers. Keas have been known to kill sickly or injured sheep. At one time a price of ten shillings was being offered per kea beak, roughly \$65 (£24) in today's money. An estimated 150,000 keas were killed during this period. In the 1970's the kea received partial protection after census counted only 5000 birds. They were not fully protected until 1986.

Keas are a playful bird and are notorious for stripping rubber from vehicles. It is thought that they do this simply to amuse themselves. I watched one peck at one of the tyres of our campervan. It was far too solid for it to cause any damage so I let it carry on. The kea then smashed open a nectarine pit showing off its powerful beak.



A kea in the glacier car-park



The upside-down moon was visible in the clear sky in the evening

We stayed the night in the Fox Glacier Holiday Park. My cabin was reasonable \$50 (£19) although it was nothing special.

Day 11 / December 19th – Glacier Heliflight and drive to Wanaka

The day dawned with a cloudless blue sky so with high hopes we drove the short distance from the holiday park to the helicopter flight office in the centre of the village. Disappointingly they said that it was still too windy at high altitude so we couldn't do the "Mountain Scenic Spectacular" flight that we had booked. However, New Zealand's normal weather pattern was back to front that day as the good weather was on the west coast with the winds blowing from the east. That meant that we could still do the "Twin Glacier" flight as this kept below the tops of the mountains. We decided to take the lesser flight and I'm very glad that we did as it was one of the best things that we did on the holiday.

The woman in the office radioed for a helicopter then she drove us to the landing site. It turned out to be close to the holiday park where we had stayed the night. We only had to wait for a few minutes before a helicopter came into view and touched down. There was a group of people on board who disembarked before the pilot pumped some fuel into the helicopter. Finally we were allowed to climb aboard. I got the front seat next to the pilot which had a great view forwards and down through the window by my feet.

Through the headset the pilot told us about the various features that we could see as we took off and headed to the Franz Joseph glacier. When we arrived over the glacier the pilot hovered and turned the helicopter through 360°, giving us a great view. We then flew all the way up the Franz Joseph glacier to the *névé*.



Our helicopter coming in to land. Possibly the best photo that I took on the entire trip



The Franz Joseph glacier as it begins to descend from its *névé*



The glacier meltwater forms the Waiho river which runs the short distance to the Tasman Sea

From the top of the Franz Joseph glacier we hopped over a mountain range to the *névé* of the Fox glacier. The pilot landed the helicopter near the southern edge of the snowfield and we got out to have a good look around. We were the first flight of the day to land there and overnight snow had covered any footprints from yesterday. Wherever we walked it was as if we were the first people ever there. The pilot rather spoilt the illusion by pulling a pole with a flag on it up from out of the snow near to where he landed! That was his landing marker and it showed how much snow had fallen in order to nearly bury it.



The upper reaches of the Fox glacier



Our helicopter on the Fox glacier *névé*



Mount Haast on the left and Mount Tasman on the right

Our landing site gave us an excellent view to the west out over the Tasman Sea. From where we stood it appeared that the snow went all the way to the sea as the land was much lower than the glacier. Looking inland we could see Mount Haast and Mount Tasman. The strong wind at the higher altitude was blowing snow off the sides of the mountains. That's why we couldn't fly to see Mount Cook beyond them. At 3754m Mount Cook is New Zealand's tallest mountain.

Because the *névé* of the Fox glacier is so large and smooth sightseeing planes can land on it. We watched a small aircraft make a touch-and-go pass before coming back in to land. Several passengers got out and wandered around.



Looking across the Fox glacier *névé* and out over the Tasman Sea



Landing on a glacier in a helicopter seems a better idea to me!

Standing on the snow was a really superb experience. It didn't feel cold as the sun was shining strongly. I guess that we were there for about five or ten minutes, taking photos and appreciating the views. On the way back I sat in the rear of the helicopter to let Jason have the front seat. After taking off we flew low over a rougher part of the *névé* with deep crevasses. We then flew down the glacial valley before landing back at Fox.

The flight cost \$245 (£93) each but I feel that it was certainly worth it. It was my first helicopter flight and it was a great location for it. Landing and walking about on the glacier was an excellent experience and we were lucky to have done it on a day with such superb visibility.



I wouldn't want to fall down any of these crevasses

We headed south down SH6, stopping for a quick break at Knights Point. The beach at the bottom of the cliffs was deserted and looked very inviting but the flock of seagulls mobbing anyone who moved in the carpark made us move on.

We drove through the town of Haast and didn't see anything interesting enough to make us stop. South of Haast is the Mount Aspiring National Park. We stopped several times to look at the various sights along the road.



A lovely sunny day at Knights Point



Roaring Billy, one of the many waterfalls cascading into the Haast River.
I tried panning for gold using a plate but didn't find anything

At one point the road crossed the Haast River on a rickety looking wooden bridge. A large coach had crossed in front of us so taking the campervan across didn't worry us. Just upstream of the bridge were the Gates of Haast, a large collection of boulders which the river roared over. We parked and walked back to the bridge to look at the rushing water. The boulders really were an impressive size. I guess they are moved when the spring thaw sends huge amounts of water down the river.



Taken from the bridge whilst trying not to fall off it!



The Fantail Falls, a bit further down the road

A bit further down the road we saw the coach stopped at an area called the Blue Pools. We decided to take a look. The coach was from an adventure tours company and the reason for them stopping soon became apparent. A path led to a rope bridge crossing fairly high above a shallow river. Although the bridge appeared to be substantial I chickened out and didn't go on it. Jason and Nicole crossed to the far side while I moped about on a pebbly area under the bridge. However, they were soon back and said the Blue Pools hadn't been too interesting. That made me feel better about not braving the bridge.



The rope bridge to the Blue Pools scenic area



South of the Mount Aspiring national park the road ran along the shore of Lake Hawea

Once we got to the town of Wanaka we stopped in a carpark on the southern shore of Lake Wanaka. We nipped into a tourist office where Nicole saw a leaflet and had a brilliant idea.

We had planned to drive to Milford Sound in the Fiordland national park but we found that we could take a sightseeing flight from Wakana. Flying would save us two days of driving round twisty mountain roads so we all thought that the flight was an excellent idea. Although the tourist office was about to close they helpfully phoned the flight office and booked us tickets for the morning.

After the long drive we decided to have a relaxing evening. We fed some ducks from a pier running out into the lake then found a nice little Thai restaurant for dinner. We stayed the night at the Pleasant Lodge holiday park. My unprepossessing cabin cost \$45 (£17).



Beware of the ducks!

Day 12 / December 20th – Sightseeing flight to Milford Sound, a cruise and back, then on to Cromwell and the Clyde Dam

It had obviously been a fairly cold night as I saw a slight ground frost when I stepped out of my cabin. I'm not sure how warm Jason and Nicole found the camper van! Although it had a heater we were trying to be sparing on the use of the gas cylinder.

After breakfast we drove the short distance to Wanaka airport which is situated to the east of the town. We easily found Wanaka Flightseeing's office and booked in. We were asked to take a seat and wait as our plane was out on another job. After only a few minutes a light aircraft taxied up and the pilot got out and introduced himself. The plane was a Cessna 206, a six seater in a 2x2x2 arrangement. On the way to Milford Sound I sat in the middle with Nicole and Jason sat up front with the pilot. There were two German tourists in the back seats who seemed happy to chat to themselves.

Before we got into the plane the pilot explained that because the approach into Milford Sound airport was over water the safety regulations meant we had to wear life jackets. Not exactly a vote of confidence! However, the aircraft was so cramped quickly putting the life jackets on in an emergency would have been impossible so I can understand the need for the regulation.

We took off and headed roughly north-east. The pilot was very good, giving us great running commentary about the various things to be seen en route. We didn't fly directly to Milford Sound as the sightseeing route took us to the north, past the peak of Mount Aspiring. The pilot tilted the wings so we all got a good view. Mount Aspiring has a height of 3033 metres and was first climbed in 1909. Sir Edmund Hilary trained for his ascent of Mount Everest by climbing Mount Aspiring. The Maori called the mountain *Tititea*, which translates as "Glistening Peak". It is the only New Zealand peak above 3000 metres outside the immediate Mount Cook region.



The town of Lake Hawea passed by our port wing shortly after takeoff

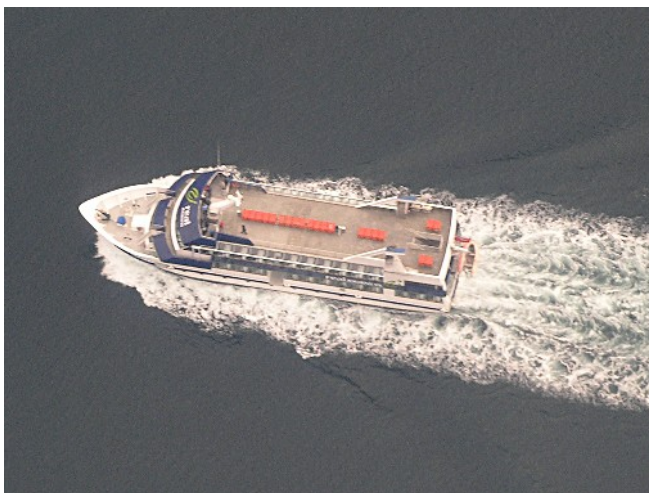


Mount Aspiring, looking like a mountain should!

Mountains surround the airport at Milford Sound so incoming aircraft have to fly in along the fiord. This approach gave us a sneak preview of the route that our cruise boat would later take.



Two cruise boats out already



This one's not too crowded

After we landed and taxied to an aircraft parking area the pilot escorted us to a coach. This took us the short way from the airport to the cruise ship terminal. It's a busy building as there are a fair number of companies running sightseeing cruises out of Milford Sound and sometimes even large cruise ships come in. We were booked with the Mitre Peak tour company on a cruise that departed not long after we arrived.



Our boat, the Mitre Peak II

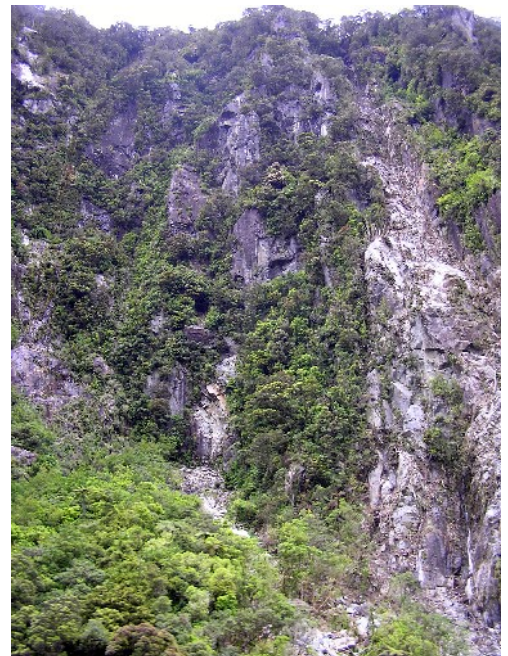


The real Mitre Peak, named for its resemblance of a bishop's hat

Milford Sound receives over 6 metres of precipitation a year and it rains on 2 out of 3 days! We were reasonably lucky as there was only a slight drizzle towards the end of the cruise although it was overcast the whole time. I stayed on the open top deck of the boat but Jason and Nicole decided that the warmth of the covered main deck was a better option. There was unlimited free coffee available and several cups of that helped me to stay outside and admire the spectacular views. The captain of the vessel did a good commentary, telling us the names of the major sights and pointing out the less obvious things that we might have missed.

As the captain said, Milford Sound is actually a fiord, rather than a sound. A sound is a valley formed by a river and then subsequently flooded by the sea. A fiord is formed by the erosive effects of a glacier.

The sides of Milford Sound are near vertical cliffs but trees grow wherever there's a ledge or a fissure. They are sustained despite little or no soil by the huge amount of rain that falls in the sound. The roots of the trees interlock, helping support them. When one dies and falls it usually drags some others with it, leaving bare patches in the greenery.



Trees clinging to the cliffs



The cliffs continue down under the water for another 200 metres



A dolphin swam alongside our boat for a while

Captain Cook sailed past Milford Sound in March 1770 but he didn't see the entrance to the sound as strong winds were forcing him well out to sea. It wasn't discovered by Europeans until the 1820's when a gale blew a Welsh whaling ship into the shore. They feared that they were going to be wrecked but were saved when the calm waters of the sound opened up before them. The captain of the whaler was born in Milford Haven in Wales, and both the Welsh and New Zealand Milford Havens have a number of names in common - Pembroke, St. Ann's Head and in each case a Cleddau River enters its head.



A valley in one side of the sound shows the mountains behind



Powering out to sea



The entrance curves round behind the mountain on the left



A number of seals watched us go by



The Stirling Falls drop 145m



This boat was smaller than ours and went right into the falls. We merely went close enough to feel the spray



The Bowen falls are near the start and end of the cruise, close to the town of Milford Sound

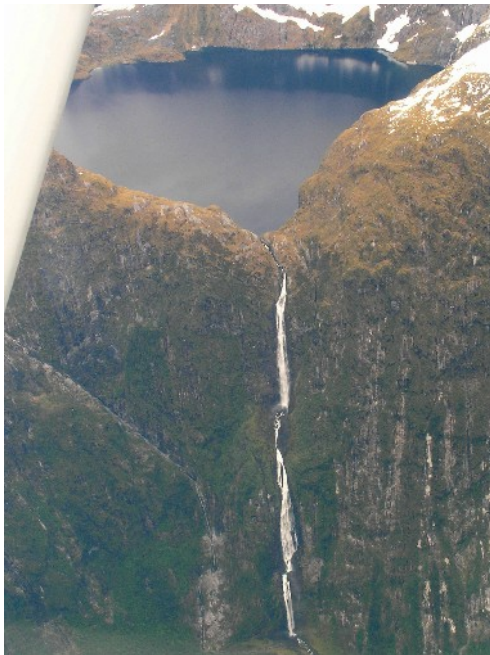
Halfway along Milford Sound the cruise stopped at an underwater observatory. This allows visitors to look out 10 metres below the surface. A curious feature of the sound is that a layer of fresh water floats above the salty seawater. Because fresh water is less dense and such a large quantity enters the head of the sound the two layers of water don't mix. Two separate ecosystems exist separated by the salinity of the water.

It's possible to visit the observatory and get back on a later cruise boat. In our original plan we were going to do this but because we flew in we were on a tight schedule so there wasn't enough time to tour the observatory. It was a bit of a shame but the flight was much better than two days driving so it balanced out.

From the underwater observatory our boat headed back to the town of Milford Sound where we found our pilot in the cruise terminal building. He'd been off on another flight but was back in time to meet us and take us on the bus back to the airport.



The observatory descends in a tube into the waters of the sound



The Sutherland Falls (and part of the wing strut!)



Our Cessna at Milford Sound with Mitre Peak in the background

For the flight back I got to sit up front next to the pilot. It was a cramped position and I had to be careful not to knock the throttle with my right knee. Rather than going directly to Wanaka we first flew south to the Sutherland Falls, New Zealand's highest waterfall with a drop of 580 metres in three stages. The falls aren't visible from the road to Milford Sound so seeing them and Mount Aspiring were the big bonuses of taking the plane. At \$380 (£144) the flight wasn't cheap but it was a great experience and definitely worth it.



Flying through the Southern Alps



The head of Lake Wakatipu and the village of Glenorchy. We cruised to here on the *Earnslaw* a few days later

Having got back to Wanaka we headed south along SH8 which runs along the east bank of Lake Dunstan. We stopped at the town of Cromwell. This began as a gold mining town and became an agricultural centre after the gold rush ended. The decision to build the Clyde hydro-electric dam and thus create Lake Dunstan meant that the older part of the town would be flooded. The more interesting of the older buildings were saved by moving them to higher ground. It had turned into a nice, warm, sunny afternoon so we enjoyed a cup of tea and a cake outside, then we found a corner shop selling ice-cream!



The building at the end, the seed & grain merchant, is now a café where we had afternoon tea



The marker buoy is above the old bridge crossing the Clutha river. Since Lake Dunstan filled the bridge is now 10 metres below the surface

From Cromwell we drove further south to the Clyde hydro-electric dam. This was a controversial construction project due to the large amount of land that it flooded. It was also a difficult engineering task as the hills that it is anchored to turned out to be less solid than the design expected. A lot of expensive stabilisation work had to be carried out to strengthen the hills before the dam could be filled. This caused the project to go massively over budget. At full output the power station can produce 432 MW but it didn't seem too busy when we were there.



A panorama of the Clyde dam, 100 metres tall and 490 metres across

It was rather disappointing that there wasn't a visitor's centre at the dam or at the nearby town of Clyde (at least, we didn't find one). We headed a bit further south to the town of Alexandra where we stayed the night in the Alexandra Holiday Park. This was certainly the best place that I stayed in, a cabin with bathroom and a kitchen. A great night's sleep for \$60 (£23)!



My cabin at the Alexandra Holiday Park

Day 13 / December 21st – Goldfields mining centre, Gibbston Valley winery and Queenstown

Yesterday's nice afternoon had given way to a drizzle this morning. We stopped briefly nearer the centre of Alexandra to grab a quick photo of the town's clock. This 11 metre high clock was built in 1968 and cost \$3,000. At night it is illuminated and can easily be read 5 miles away.

From Alexandra we headed back north to Cromwell then a few miles west to the Kawarau Gorge mining centre. We stopped here as it was another opportunity to try panning for gold. Access to the mining centre was across a narrow bridge spanning a deep gorge. Fortunately this bridge was sturdily made from iron and concrete so I didn't have much of a problem crossing it. There was a guided tour leaving a few minutes after our arrival so we hung around the visitors centre until it started.

Kawarau Gorge never yielded huge quantities of gold but it provided sufficient returns over a century starting in the 1860's.

It had begun to drizzle again so the guide took the tour group to a barn with some benches for us to sit on whilst he gave an introductory talk. He was very, very, good. Although not a natural speaker his knowledge of and enthusiasm for the subject came clearly through. He said that he'd been a prospector in Australia and South Africa as well as New Zealand. He explained where to pan for gold in a river (in the gravel that has deposited in an ox-bow). He handed round a good sized nugget of gold that he'd found and was rather keen to get it back after everyone had looked at it!

I believe the chap owned the Kawarau Gorge tourist centre. He implied that it provided a steady income while he worked some gold claims elsewhere.

He showed us a neat way to compare the weights of two objects. We were given two different sized stones and asked to guess which was the heavier. They felt roughly the same when I held them in the palms of my hands. The trick turned out to be to hold each one between the thumb and forefinger and dangle them. That way gravity was the only force acting on them and the difference in weights became obvious. When holding the stones in the palms of my hand their different weights were balanced out by their different sizes. They have roughly the same surface area and thus exert the same pressure.



Pretty accurate



You can clearly see the curved buckets of the Pelton water wheel

By now the drizzle had stopped so we set off on a guided tour of the gold mining area. We were first shown a Pelton water wheel that had been used to power various items of machinery on the site. I was amazed to learn that a Pelton water wheel was 90% efficient. When Lester Pelton developed his design the best water wheel at the time could only extract 75% of the energy from the water passing it.

The secret to the Pelton water wheel is the split curved buckets. This stops water splashing back and interfering with the oncoming flow. It works best in a high head/low volume environment which is exactly what was available at Kawarau Gorge. A small dam high in the hills behind the site supplied high pressure water down a narrow pipe.

A bit further along the trail was a hut occupied by a Chinese gentleman prospecting on the site in the early 1900's. This building was better than the Chinese huts at Shantytown but still rather rudimentary. Our guide told us a story of how the term "Chink" came into being. During the California gold rush Chinese labourers would sit in the evening rattling gold coins in a cloth. As these chinked together gold dust would be knocked off. With sufficient patience a small hoard could be gathered for free!

We then saw a Pelton wheel in action powering a rock crusher. This was an incredible machine, over 100 years old but still in good working order. It wasn't used at Kawarau Gorge but was moved to the site as part of the museum. Gold bearing quartz was fed into the device from the overhead trolleyway. A series of pistons crushed the rocks to fine gravel which was flushed through a sluice trap catching any passing gold.

The machine was driven by a surprisingly small Pelton wheel. Its water supply ran in a 6 inch pipe down a hill from the dam higher up. The wheel span at an incredible speed driving a series of belts and levers. These caused the five heavy pistons to rise and suddenly fall, smashing the quartz to a powder. This was then sluiced out of the front of the machine and over a metal tray. In its heyday the tray would be covered with velvet to catch the flakes of gold. At the end of each day the gold would be combed from the velvet and every month the velvet would be burnt to extract any trapped gold dust.

The crusher's water supply was on a valve which the guide opened to start the machine. He let it run for a minute and it was amazing to watch it thunder away. Seeing such a small amount of water do so much work was spectacular. It was also impressively noisy!



Gold bearing rock was fed into the crusher from the upper trolleyway



The pipe supplies water to a Pelton wheel. You can see its curved buckets in the rusty box



Gravel washed out from the bottom of the machine and the flakes of gold were trapped in the metal pan

From the rock crusher we went further up the hill to a high pressure water hose that was used in the 1930's to wash away the gold-bearing gravel from the side of the hill. The run-off was filtered through sluices to capture the gold. The guide fired up the hose for a few seconds but as there wasn't much of the hill left he couldn't run it for long. It was then when the heavens opened and heavy rain started. We sheltered for a while in an old assay hut where gold was weighed and graded. Apparently the floorboards were taken up each year and burnt to extract the gold dust trodden into them! Once the rain had eased off we splashed back to visitors centre for a coffee and cake in their café.

The rain soon stopped and we went back outside to their gold panning area. This was so much better than at Shantytown. We got a pan and a shovel and were able to help ourselves to gravel. First the tour guide gave us a demonstration. He got Jason to fetch a shovelful of gravel and put it in the pan. As he didn't know whether or not there was any gold in it he dropped a couple of lead shot into the pan to prove that heavy metal wouldn't get swilled out with the gravel. After a couple of minutes work he was left with the lead balls and some gold flakes in the bottom of the pan. He halved his find with Jason before telling us we were welcome to keep anything that we found.

Jason and Nicole set off to make their fortunes but I followed the guide as he was about to start another tour. He had implied that there was more to see when our earlier tour got rained off. A girl from the earlier tour joined me and we chatted. She lived in the North Island and was off on a walking holiday but had stopped at Kawarau for a break in her drive. We were both disappointed when the rain began again and the tour stopped in the same place as before. I went back to the panning area but sadly she didn't join me.

I spent about an hour panning several shovelfuls from various likely gold-bearing spots under boulders but I didn't find anything. Jason and Nicole didn't find much either. The guide had told us that on a good day tourists could move up to a ton of his rocks! It was hard, back-breaking work but fun and I'd like to try gold panning again sometime.

For \$14 (£5) Kawarau Gorge was a great place to visit. I'd highly recommend it, despite the rain!

The rain seemed to be coming on again and we'd all given up hope of striking it rich so we decided to drive on to the Gibbston Valley vineyard and Cheesery. This is on SH6 to the east of Queenstown. When we arrived there was an amusingly parked car in carpark. It was resting on a small ledge. A number of the vineyard employees stood around it wondering how to shift it.

Nicole wanted a rest and stayed in the campervan. Jason and I put our heads around the door of the dairy and were met with an overpowering smell of cheese. We decided to give it a miss and just take the vineyard tour instead. It was only a small group and the guide asked us where we were from. On our travels I'd taken to answering this question with "North of London" as that avoided a lot of explaining where Dunstable was. Our guide had obviously stayed in London as he asked where "North of London" was. He hadn't heard of Dunstable but had clearly been to Luton from the expression on his face when I said that Dunstable was to the west of it!



When tasting wine it is advisable to spit, not swallow



The well stocked wine cave

The wine tour was quite interesting. We started in the vineyard and the guide described the different grape varieties used for each wine and the harvesting and fermentation process. The winery has a cave where they store barrels of wine as they mature. This cave isn't natural but was mechanically dug 75 metres into the side of a hill. At the far end there's constant humidity and a steady temperature of 14°C. Here we tasted several wines which were all rather nice.

Then a child in our tour started kicking up a fuss; a 5 year old's screams are quite loud in a cave! We went to the shop but beat a hasty retreat after we saw the prices of the bottles. At least the tour was free.

As we were leaving the driver of a recovery truck was scratching his head trying to think how he was going to get the crashed car from off of the ledge.

We then headed in the direction of Queenstown with a quick stop en route in Arrowtown in order to book a place to stay the night. From there we drove into the centre of Queenstown (named in honour of Queen Victoria), one of the larger towns in the South Island. The place seemed to be one huge building site and even the most recent map that I looked at seemed to be missing a few roads. It was also very busy which was a bit of a shock as we hadn't been anywhere that crowded since leaving Auckland. We struggled to find somewhere to park the campervan but eventually managed to squeeze it into a short stay bay. We found the tourism office and grabbed some leaflets on local attractions.

On the way back to Arrowtown we drove to Coronet Peak, a ski resort. Some way up the mountainside we drove into the clouds which was pretty cool (both metaphorically and physically!). We had to carry on driving to the top in low visibility before we could turn round and head back to the campsite. We stayed at the Arrowtown Holiday Park which was rather charmless. My room cost \$20 (£8). The rain set in for the evening so I tried putting a glass outside. New Zealand rainwater tastes pretty normal!

Day 14 / December 22nd – Arrowtown and Queenstown

We started the day by driving the short distance from the campsite into the centre of Arrowtown.

This is another town founded during the 1860's gold rush. In 1862 a sheep shearer found gold in the Arrow river. People began to gather and within weeks 1,500 men were living in tents along the river bank. These were soon washed away in a spring flood and several people were drowned. The town was rebuilt more solidly above the river's flood plain. At the height of the gold rush Arrowtown's population grew to over 7,000. The town boasted several hotels, a bank, post office, gaol, school, and hospital.

The population is now a more modest 1,700. It has kept many of its historic buildings and is really a bit of a tourist trap. A number of scenes from the Lord of the Rings trilogy were filmed nearby.

I went into the town museum - the steam engine parked outside had attracted me! I looked at their displays of local natural history, the Maori and European settlements and the gold mining techniques used in the area. Whilst I was in the museum Jason and Nicole poked around the local shops. After we met up we had a coffee in a local café then drove on into Queenstown.

The Queenstown area was known to the Maori who found it a good source of greenstone. The initial European settlers arrived in the early 1860's and started farming. They set up "The Camp" near what was to become Queenstown Bay. The discovery of gold in 1862 in the Arrow river and the nearer Shotover river in 1863 boosted the population. At its peak the Shotover river was the highest gold producing river in the world. It provided an amazing 12 oz of gold for every cubic yard of gravel panned.

The government brought order to the chaos of the gold rush. It was stated that the town was now fit for Queen Victoria which is the reason "The Camp" became Queenstown.

We had looked at the leaflets that we picked up yesterday but found that apart for the things that we had already booked to do tomorrow there wasn't a lot else to do in Queenstown. There were plenty of "extreme-sports" activities but these didn't really appeal to us! We decided to make a relaxing day of it and just wander around the town.



The gondola didn't seem that steep on the way up!

The rectangular bay in the foreground of the picture on the right is Queenstown Bay, part of Lake Wakatipu. In the distance is the Remarkables mountain range which was permanently covered by clouds every time we visited Queenstown.

This time we found a good place to park the campervan in a free carpark just off the road from Arrowtown. We had a browse around the shops in the town centre and I nipped into an internet café and got the contents of my digital camera's memory burnt onto a CD-R. I was running out of room on the camera and this allowed me to free up plenty of space for the rest of the holiday. After that we had lunch sitting in the sun outside a restaurant.

In the afternoon we headed up to the gondola. This was just like the one in Rotorua, indeed, it was run by the same company. The building at the top of the gondola ride had a balcony giving a great view over the town.



Queenstown Bay

There was another luge run here but it was nowhere near as good as the one in Rotorua as the track was much shorter. We didn't bother having a go although we did sit and have a ice cream. People were doing tandem paragliding from the top of the hill. We gave that a miss, too!

We thought we'd be sneaky and book into a campsite in Queenstown and thus get free parking for the campervan tomorrow. The one that we tried was nearly full and only had very expensive studios left for me. We decided to head slightly out of town to the Arthurs Point holiday park. I'm very glad that we did as it was the second best place that I stayed in. The cabin was slightly smaller than the studio that I had in Alexendra, and more expensive at \$75 (£29) a night. It did have the same facilities, an en-suite, fully equipped kitchen and a TV. The only bad thing about it was the tin roof as a bird made a racket trying to peck through it at dawn.



My cabin at Arthurs Point holiday park.

Day 15 / December 23rd – Shotover Jet and the *Earnslaw*

We started by driving the very short distance from the Arthurs Point holiday park to the Shotover Jet. This is a centre where you can take a trip on a water-jet powered boat up and down the Shotover river. Jason had booked a ride but I decided to stay on the shore with Nicole and take photos.



The high concrete bridge over the Shotover River canyon. The bridge carries the road to Queenstown



Zooming through the canyon



Getting closer

They dressed Jason with a life jacket and a long waterproof coat that covered his knees when he sat down. After everyone was on board the boat the captain threw it round in a sharp 360° turn to show off its manoeuvrability. They then went zipping down the river canyon, missing large boulders by inches. The boat captains obviously know the safe route and other boats are banned from that stretch of the Shotover river so there's no risk of running into oncoming traffic.

Jason's boat went up and down the river a few times allowing me to take some good photos as they passed the landing stage. After seeing the fairly violent way that the boat was manoeuvred around the river canyon I feel that I made the right choice in staying onshore although Jason had a good time.



Flying past

After recovering from the jet-boat experience with a cup of tea from the café next to the Shotover Jet centre we headed into Queenstown. We didn't find a space in the carpark that we used yesterday but found that parking was easy on Lake Esplanade road on the shore of Lake Wakatipu. This was just a short walk back to the harbour from where our steamboat cruise was departing.

A cruise on the *TSS Earnslaw* seems to be one of the things that everybody does when they visit Queenstown. After some investigation I found that TSS stands for Twin Screw Ship, a rather strange designation. The *Earnslaw* has been operating on Lake Wakatipu since 1912. She was built in Dunedin at a cost of £20,860 (roughly £1 million in today's prices) and transported in pieces by rail to the land-locked lake before being reassembled and launched.

Until the building of a road after the second world war boats like the *Earnslaw* were the only form of communication for the sheep farming communities at the northern end of the lake. Once that commercial era was over for her she became a passenger cruise ship. Still steam powered the *Earnslaw* can do 11 knots flat out but at that speed she burns a ton of coal an hour!



The *Earnslaw* steamed past us as we walked to the harbour



The radar wasn't part of the 1912 equipment!

At the north end of the lake the *Earnslaw* stopped at the village of Glenorchy and the Walter Peak high country farm. As the weather was so poor we didn't bother getting off for the barbecue lunch and the sheepdog exhibition. After a brief stop we set off back in the direction of Queenstown. I caught the tail end of a guided walk of the boat which was really interesting and I wish I'd taken the full tour. It finished at the bridge where the captain was happy to answer questions whilst steering the boat.

By the time we'd walked to the harbour the *Earnslaw* had docked at the end of its previous cruise. We waited for the crew to load some more coal then claimed some seats in the main cabin. As part of its conversion to a tourist cruise boat some large holes were cut in the main deck to allow passengers to watch the crew stoke the engines. The problem is that this makes the room rather hot and stuffy. I wandered around the ship from the bow through the engine room to the rather interesting steering arrangement at the stern. Two large chains were attached to the rudder and ran forward, one each side of the ship. Jason and I were speculating what they were for when they suddenly started moving. Modern Health & Safety would have kittens!



A rather overcast view of Queenstown as we headed up the lake.
Good luck to the paragliders!

After docking back at Queenstown harbour we walked into the town centre and had a late lunch at a Thai restaurant. From there we went back to the campervan and drove it to the "Caddyshack City" mini golf course. Me and Jason played a close fought round. We were level on strokes going into the last hole. I pared it and Jason double-bogeyed so I won the game!

From there we headed back to the campsite at Arthurs Point. It was the last night of this part of the holiday so we had a relaxing evening.

Day 16 / Christmas Eve - Back to Auckland

I was awoken during the night by my first ever earthquake! I initially thought that the noise and vibration was being caused by a train like in Blenheim. I quickly realised it was a real earthquake as there were no train lines nearby and there was more vibration than noise. The shaking seemed to get stronger and I was about to get out of bed and stand in a doorway when it started to die away.

The TV news in the morning confirmed that it had been a magnitude 8 earthquake although as I was 500 miles away from the epicentre it felt a lot less strong. The epicentre was well to the south of New Zealand out in the Pacific so no damage was caused on land. Back in England I looked up the details of the quake on the United States Geological Survey's excellent website. It estimated that in Queenstown the quake would have felt like a magnitude 3 event. In the morning when I asked Jason and Nicole about it they said that they hadn't felt a thing! Presumably the campervan's suspension had dampened the vibrations.

We gave the campervan a thorough spring cleaning before returning it to the depot at Queenstown airport. Actually, we couldn't find the depot and eventually parked in a lay-by while Jason ran into the airport building to try to find Maui's desk. He quickly returned saying that the chap there had told him to bring our campervan right up to the airport and leave it there. We offloaded all our stuff and waited while the man quickly looked the van over. We then checked into our flight back up to Auckland leaving us a couple of hours to kill.

Queenstown airport isn't large and thus doesn't have the bustle of Heathrow or even Auckland. I bought the Christmas and New Year's edition of The Economist and sat and read it in a comfy chair. We had a coffee in a café overlooking the runway before our flight was called. It was an uneventful flight up to Auckland. The aircraft was a 737 operated by JetConnect, a subsidiary of Qantas.

After landing we headed to the car hire desk but it was unattended so we joined the scrum around the luggage carousel. Of course, by the time we had got our bags the desk was still unattended but now there was a queue in front of it. Eventually a chap turned up and we finally got our car.

We headed to the Takapuna Motor Lodge in Auckland's northern suburbs where we had booked a two bedroom apartment. This was a nice place to stay and our apartment was quiet as it was set well back from the busy road the lodge is on, not far from SH1. The room cost the three of us \$185 (£71) a night.

After unpacking we drove to Jason's sister's house to see what the plans were for Christmas Day. Unfortunately she and her family were out so we left a note and headed back to Takapuna. We stopped and got dinner at a Chinese takeaway as we didn't feel like cooking. A word of warning, New Zealand takeaway portions are large! We couldn't finish them and the leftovers looked rather unappetizing for breakfast.

Day 17 / Christmas Day with Jason's Family

We spent the day with Jason's family. We started by driving to his sister's house again and fortunately this time Keri and her family were in. Chelsea (Jason's niece) and Kent (his nephew) were of course keen to show us their presents.

Having arranged the plans for the rest of the day we headed to Jason's father's house. This was close to Silverdale where Jason grew up. We had some mid morning nibbles but stayed off the champagne.

For lunch we headed further north to Waiwera and Jason's mother's new apartment.



Waiwera Beach on Christmas Day. Chelsea and Kent are in the foreground



A Pohutukawa tree



Blooming lovely

We sat around the pool while Jason, Keri, Kent and Chelsea had a swim. After lunch we went for a walk on the beach near to Jason's mother's apartment. It was surprisingly empty but it was an overcast day.

I saw some Pohutukawa trees in bloom. These have been described as New Zealand's Christmas tree as they come into flower at the end of December. My mum wanted me to take some photos of these trees as she had always been in New Zealand at the wrong time to see them in their full glory.

I had seen a few at Milford Sound but this was a good opportunity to take some close-up photos of the blooms.



The red needles drop off and cover the ground



Looking south from Waiwera beach

Jason and Nicole borrowed his mother's car because I was going to take the hire car off on my own little tour of Northland. Thus I drove by myself back from Waiwera to Keri's house although I followed Jason and Nicole in their car so I didn't get lost. This was the first time that I had driven own my own in a foreign country but I already knew from driving the campervan that New Zealand's roads are very like those in England. Jason made a slight detour to look at the buy-to-let house that he had owned in Orewa.

At Keri's house we had a huge barbecue dinner (yes, there were prawns on the barbie!). His whole family had gathered and it was an entertaining evening. I was made very welcome; they had even got some presents for me so I didn't feel left out.

Keri had a good party game. We all drew a number from a hat. The person with number 1 got to choose and unwrap a small present from a sack. The person with number two had a choice; either take number one's present or get another. If they took number one's then that person got another from the sack. Number three could then take a present from either of the other two or pick a new one. If someone had a present taken from them they could either take a present from someone with a lower number or take another from the sack. This went on until everyone had a present and the sack was empty. Obviously the first person was a bit of a tail-end Charlie but everyone else got a choice of presents. It was quite a tactical yet amusing game.

Eventually we headed back to Takapuna for the night. I drove the hire car whilst Jason and Nicole took Jason's mother's car.

Day 18 / Boxing Day - Kauri Museum, Tokatoka Peak, the Waipoua Forest, the Hokianga ferry and north to Kaitaia

I set off by myself in the hire car quite early as I had a full day with a lot of travelling ahead of me. I drove north from Takapuna up SH1 through Warkworth and Wellsford before turning west onto SH12 at Brynderwyn. I stopped at the Kauri Museum in Matakohe. This museum covers how the early settlers exploited the Kauri forests of northern New Zealand. These trees grow tall, straight and massively thick. Their timber is hard with a nice grain pattern. As the trees grow high before branching the wood from mature trees is free of knots making it ideal for many applications.

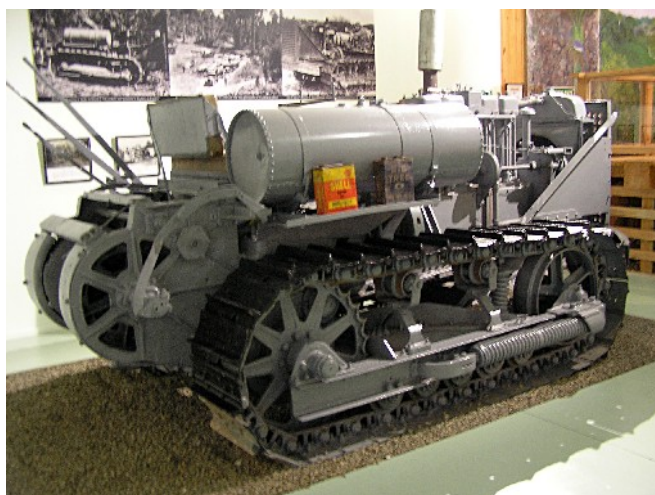


An early petrol driven saw. It was used for processing tree trunks felled by axes



A steam engine from Colchester used to power a sawmill

At the entrance to the museum the staff advised me to head to the far end of the building and walk back looking at the exhibits. That way made more chronological sense. The displays start with some of the early steam-powered machinery used in processing Kauri wood.



This was one of the first caterpillar tractors imported into New Zealand in the late 1920's. It replaced teams of cattle that were used for hauling Kauri tree trunks out of the forests to the sawmills



A vertical slice through a Kauri tree trunk shows the diameters of the trunks of several famous Kauri trees. The wooden disc on the far wall is from the base of the tree. The concentric rings show the diameters of the trunks of several famous Kauri trees. The largest Kauri alive today is the third ring from the outside.

Another room displays a large collection of Kauri tree gum. This is a resin which seeps out and seals any damage to the bark, preventing rotting of the wood. The gum can build up into a lump which then falls from the tree. Prospectors used to collect the chunks of solid gum from around the bases of the trees. Kauri gum was used by the Maori people for cooking and lighting because it burnt very easily. Europeans used it in a number of chemical processes, thinning paints and as a base for polishes. At the height of the gum trade in 1886 nearly 5,000 tons were exported at a price of roughly 5p kilo (£3 a kilo in today's prices). Prospecting must have been hard work for little reward although there was always the chance of finding a valuable chunk of gum amongst the normal small pickings.

The main hall (seen in the photograph on the left) holds a 22 metre long slice through a Kauri tree trunk. The wooden disc on the far wall is from the base of the tree. The concentric rings show the diameters of the trunks of several famous Kauri trees. The largest Kauri alive today is the third ring from the outside.

From the Kauri Museum I continued along SH12 to Tokatoka Peak. This is a 180 metre high core of an ancient and now extinct volcano.

The peak was formed by magma forcing its way up from underground through a weak point in the Earth's crust. It cooled and solidified to form lava. The soil displaced by the upheaval slowly eroded away leaving the rocky peak.

In the pioneer days a river pilot lived at the base of Tokatoka and would climb the peak to watch for sailing ships approaching the harbour to the south.

Although it was a hard slog to the summit there was a fantastic view from the top. I sat and rested up there for about a quarter of an hour before a swarm of flying insects drove me down.



It's a lot steeper than it looks



Almost a 360° panorama looking roughly north from the top of Tokatoka Peak. The Wairoa river stretches away to the south to Kaipara Harbour, a large sheltered bay on the west coast

I drove further north to Dargaville where I bought some things for lunch in a Woolworths. They seem to be more of a food supermarket chain in New Zealand. I also nipped into the tourist office which was open despite it being Boxing Day. I picked up some leaflets on the Waipoua Forest which was my next destination. Then I drove a bit further north and ate my lunch at a scenic lookout at the southern end of the forest. The Waipoua Forest is one of the few remaining areas of dense Kauri trees. These days logging is banned and the forest is maintained in its natural state with just a few roads and hiking paths running through it.



The lush forest path to the Four Sisters

After lunch I drove a couple of miles north into the forest to see the "Four Sisters". This is a clump of four Kauri trees growing up from a shared base.

I parked in the carpark and was a little disturbed to see a park warden sitting in a 4x4 watching over the cars to stop thieves. Fortunately the hire car was still there when I got back.

From the carpark a well maintained track lead through the forest. It took 10 minutes to walk to the Kauri clump. The path ran right around the Four Sisters allowing me to wander about them staring up into the forest canopy.

From the Four Sisters I drove a short distance further north to *Tane Mahuta* ("Lord of the Forest"). This tree is the largest living Kauri in New Zealand. The girth of its trunk is nearly 14 metres and it is over 50 metres tall. The area around the tree was much busier and it was harder to get a good view of the tree. It was also impossible to stand far enough back to get a decent photo. I soon continued my journey north to Kaitiaia.



The Four Sisters trunks aren't really this curved; it's an optical illusion from my camera

I followed State Highway 12 north through the rest of the Waipoua forest. The road turned east when it reached the inlet which forms the entrance to the natural Hokianga Harbour.

On the north shore of the harbour was a huge hill of sand. If the weather had been sunny I'm sure that it would have been a great view but it started to spit with rain as I got out of the car to get a better view.



Probably would have looked better if it wasn't overcast



The ferry on the northern shore of Hokianga Harbour near the village of Kohukohu

I took a ferry across Hokianga Harbour from the village of Rawene. I'd have liked some extra time for a look around the village but the ferry was about to depart when I arrived so I drove straight on to it.

Taking the ferry avoided a long drive inland to get around Hokianga Harbour. There was only one sailing each hour and if I'd missed that crossing I'd have been late in getting to my hotel in Kaitaia.

The ferry took quite a while in sailing between the two shores, the trip was about 15 minutes long. It isn't a straight crossing between Rawene and Kohukohu as the latter is a bit to the east.

From the ferry I still had quite a distance to drive further north to Kaitaia. I was starting to be concerned about the fuel level of the hire car. I'd thought about filling it in Dargaville but I still had half a tank then and had decided not to bother. I passed one petrol station north of the ferry but it looked so hick and backwoods that I didn't want to stop there.

I rejoined SH 1 before it twisted through the Raetia Forest. I was starting to feel tired from the long drive and was feeling that I'd eaten one too many cream cakes for lunch. I was happy to reach Kaitaia with a bit of petrol left as I didn't see a single filling station en route.

In Kaitaia I easily found the Northerner Motor Inn which Anne had recommended to me as a good place to stay. I had another busy day ahead of me tomorrow so I had an early night. I was so full from lunch and yesterday's Christmas dinner that I couldn't face the hotel's all-you-can-eat buffet.

Day 19 / December 27th - Cape Reinga and Ninety Mile Beach

I had booked a full day coach tour of the far northern tip of New Zealand. This allowed me to have a more relaxing day as I would be able to sightsee whilst someone else with local knowledge drove. The bus picked me and a few others up from the front of the motel just after 9 o'clock. Although the coach was quite full I managed to grab a double seat for myself near the front so I could hear the driver. He was a great tour guide having grown up in the area and seemingly knowing everyone that we met. He explained that because it was high tide in the morning we would head north to Cape Reinga along SH1 and come back down Ninety Mile beach.

We first stopped at the Ancient Kauri Kingdom, the only unashamedly commercial stop of the day. This woodworking factory creates furniture and trinkets from tree trunks recovered from swamps. Kauri wood is so hard it is still good after being submerged for hundreds if not thousands of years. I was tempted by some of the smaller items but in the end I didn't buy anything.

Inside the shop they have a hollowed out tree trunk that forms a staircase to an upper balcony. It was certainly a bit weird walking up inside a tree!

We didn't stop long at the Kauri Kingdom. I felt that it was more of a opportunity for the coach drivers to have an early morning chat with each other as there were about 10 coaches in the carpark. Still, it was an interesting place to briefly visit.



This is a great looking sofa but they wanted £15,000 for it and I suspect that it's rather uncomfortable

From the Kauri Kingdom we headed further north. It was quite a warm day although it was overcast. We stopped for a break outside a shop in a village on SH1. The driver was quite honest, he said that his sister ran the shop but they sold the biggest ice-creams in New Zealand. He wasn't wrong! The chap in the queue in front of me had the "large" which was insanely huge, so I had the "regular". This was two big, fist-sized, scoops of ice-cream teetering in a cornet, all for about 70p! A group of us happily stood in the carpark licking our ice-creams until they were small enough to not be in danger of dripping. Only then did the driver let us back onto his coach!

The curved east coast of the northern tip of New Zealand is called Great Exhibition Bay. We stopped at Rarawa Beach on this bay which was accessed down a rutted sandy track. The driver assured us that the coach was four wheel drive. It was certainly somewhere I wouldn't have dared bring the hire car.

The sand on the east coast beaches of Northern New Zealand is white in colour whilst the west coast beaches are yellow. It was a shame that the sky was overcast as I'm sure that it would have been a really nice place if it was sunny. We went for a short walk along the beach where I found some nice-looking sea shells.

We then drove the rest of the way up to Cape Reinga which is located at the top of the north-west coast. This isn't quite the most northerly point of New Zealand but it is more easily accessible than the Surville Cliffs on the north-east coast.

In Maori folklore the spirits of the dead travelled north and departed New Zealand from Cape Reinga. It's also the place where the waters of the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean meet. The water is always choppy, even on a still day. Opposing currents mix the darker blue waters of the Pacific with the lighter blue waters of the Tasman Sea.

By now it was just past midday. The sky was clearing and it was turning into a nice afternoon. It was a short walk from the coach park to the lighthouse at Cape Reinga and there were some fantastic views to be had along the way.



The Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean churning together



From the coach park looking north out over the Pacific Ocean



It's not a tall light house but it is on top of 300 metre high cliffs so its light can be seen for over 30 miles



The lighthouse has been modernised so it's now unmanned and even solar powered. By batteries, I guess!

Cape Reinga was great place to visit even if it was a little crowded. The view from the cliffs was spectacular and the churning of the Pacific Ocean and Tasman Sea was quite interesting. I'm glad that I didn't drive myself as I would have felt that travelling all that way just for the view possibly wasn't worth it.

Once everyone was back on the coach (one Korean family in particular took a bit of rounding up) we drove the short distance to Tapotupotu Bay on the east coast of Cape Reinga. Away from the crowds at the cape this was a nice place to have the simple packed lunch that the tour company had provided.



Pohutukawa trees beside the bay



This chap was enjoying what surf there was

Lunch was a couple of ham rolls, a muffin and a banana with a glass of orange juice. Quite reasonable as it was included in the cheap cost of the day trip. I then wandered around the beach and watched a couple of people trying to surf in the small waves coming in.

After lunch we drove to the sand dunes on the west coast of Cape Reinga, through the village of Te Paki and along a stream with the same name. The bed of the stream was hard packed sand and our bus easily drove along it. People seem to use it as an access road to the north end of Ninety Mile Beach. We stopped at some high sand dunes in order to try the local sport of tobogganing down their steep sides. Our coach had a number of sleds which most people on the tour dragged up the sand then zoomed down on. I chose the safer option of standing at the bottom of the hill and watched other people career down.



Coming down on a toboggan was much easier than scrambling up



An overshoot into the Ta Paki stream



These girls were from a different coach tour

From the sand dunes we drove along the stream to Ninety Mile Beach. Rental vehicles are not allowed on the beach so a coach trip is the best way for tourists to see it. We stopped and got off the coach to walk down to the water's edge. By now the sun was shining strongly and it was a glorious afternoon, possibly the nicest of my entire stay in New Zealand.



Looking south down Ninety Mile Beach



This rock with a hole isn't the famous Hole in the Rock. I was to visit that tomorrow



A girl from our tour enjoying the walk on the beach

We drove a bit further to The Bluff, a rocky outcrop jutting into the Tasman Sea. There were a number of locals fishing from the rocks. They obviously knew our driver well as they gave him some of their catch. I walked over the rocks to stand at the edge of the water.



Panorama from looking back to land from The Bluff with Cape Reinga to the left and Ninety Mile Beach continuing to the right.

Driving further south along the beach we came across the carcass of a dead whale. Our driver seemed interested in it as he drove round it several times!

We exited the beach near its southern end before stopping at the Ninety Mile Beach holiday park. This was a useful loo break and gave the driver the opportunity to hose the sand off the sides of the coach.

The Holiday Park has obviously installed the coach washing facilities as it gives them some captive customers for about twenty minutes. Their shop did a good trade in cold drinks on such a warm afternoon. However, I wouldn't have liked to be staying in the holiday park with so many people wandering aimlessly around waiting for their coach to be cleaned.



Jets of water come up to wash the underside of the vehicles

From the holiday park we drove back to Kaitia. The coach dropped me off in the carpark of the Northern Motel. It had been an excellent day out, especially it cost only \$40 (£15). I'd thoroughly recommend it. I felt that the way that we did the tour was certainly the best way round as doing Ninety Mile beach first would make the rest of the day a bit of an anti-climax. In addition, the beach was much better in the glorious sunshine in the afternoon.

After a shower in my room I was ready for dinner. The motel was doing an "all you can eat" Christmas buffet and I took full advantage of it.

Day 20 / December 28th - Kerikeri, Waitangi and the Bay of Islands

After breakfast I checked out of the motel. Before leaving Kaitaia I had to fill up the hire car with petrol as it was nearly empty after the drive up from Auckland. I had the good idea to work out how to open the filler cap while I was still at the motel so I didn't have to fumble at the petrol station. When I pulled up at the Caltex filling station I was surprised as a nice girl came out to fill the tank for me. Apparently in the smaller towns this is still common although the big cities have moved to self service.

I headed east out of Kaitaia along SH10 towards Kerikeri. It was cloudy and there were a couple of rain showers as I drove. At one point the sun came out and shone so strongly the water on the damp road started to evaporate creating a thin mist. I got stuck behind a slow car so I stopped for a quick break at Coopers Beach. A few seagulls were wandering dispiritedly along the sand. There wasn't much to see so I soon resumed my journey.

Fortunately the sun came out just as I got to Kerikeri. I wanted to see the stone store in the town as Anne and Mike had given me a print of the store after their first visit back to the UK in the early 1980's. The artist had the same name as me and they had even managed to get him to sign the print "From Peter Arnold to Peter Arnold". The store was built by English missionaries in the mid-1830's and is the oldest surviving stone building in New Zealand. I came into Kerikeri from the north and found a well signposted carpark near the store. From there the road crossed a river. Halfway across the bridge there was a good view of the stone store, similar to the aspect in my print.



My print from 1982



The trees have grown up a bit in the past 20 years

There was a museum in the store but it was still a few minutes to opening time when I arrived. I wandered across to the *Kororipo Pa*, a Maori earthen fort. It was from here that the local chief gave permission for the missionaries to build their outpost. The *pa* is just a grassy hill now but from there you get another good view of the stone store.

By the time I got back to the store the museum had opened. I found it a little disappointing, it didn't take long to look around their collection and I felt that \$7.50 (£2.80) was a bit steep compared to the cost of other things in New Zealand. In addition they were worried about their wooden floors being worn away so visitors had to take their shoes off to walk around the building. Very strange!

To me the most interesting item was a chaff cutter that had been manufactured by Bentalls in Maldon. I remembered passing the derelict factory on the way to Goldhanger during junior school trips. The cutter has 1879 stamped on it but a sign explained that this was a part number. It was actually manufactured in the 1890's.



A long way from home

I drove through the centre of Kerikeri and headed south to Waitangi. I stopped for a look at the Haruru Falls, a crescent shaped waterfall. The falls were one of the few attractions in New Zealand that were badly signposted. I found the Haruru Falls holiday park easily enough and I eventually found the falls themselves up a side-road.

According to Maori legend a water monster lives behind the falls. There was an intrepid group of canoeists paddling around in the splashing water. They all survived; I guess the monster was asleep!

From the Haruru Falls I drove to Waitangi. This is the location of the original residence of the British governor and is where the treaty between the United Kingdom and the Maori tribes was signed. Waitangi was reached by quite a lengthy single lane bridge that has a number of wider lay-bys to allow cars to pass each other. It must be amusing to watch when two coaches try to cross at the same time. The car park at the treaty museum was woefully small and packed with people circling around trying to find an empty space. In the end I left my car down near the river by a boat club.



The Haruru Falls – not much of a fall but it looks nice



The Treaty House, the original governor's house, greatly extended over the years since the original was built in 1833

Although the UK had claimed New Zealand as its own territory we did not have enough manpower to control the area. With the French and even the United States navies sniffing around in 1840 the governor signed the Treaty of Waitangi with the Maori chiefs. This gave Britain sovereignty but the Maori retained rights to land, forests and fisheries. I watched a good short film about the treaty in the visitors centre then I walked around the grounds by myself instead of taking the guided tour.

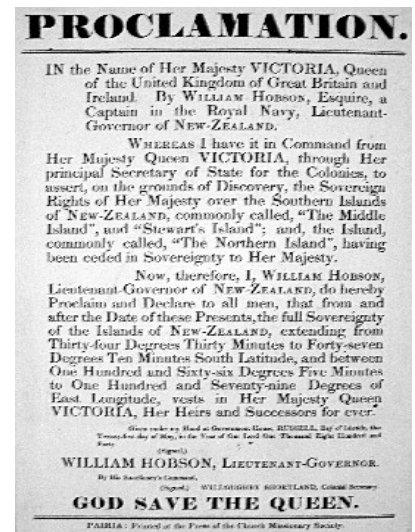
Some of the inside walls of the treaty house have been stripped back to the original brickwork. Although the framing timbers for the house were cut in Sydney and shipped across from Australia the bricks were baked on site. Whoever built the house clearly didn't know much about bricklaying. They stacked the bricks on top of one another with vertical cement columns instead of each row being offset from the row beneath. It's probably the strength of the timbers that has kept the building standing!



First stop was the canoe store. This 76-seater was built for the 1940 centenary celebrations from 3 Kauri tree trunks



A lemon tree growing outside the treaty house. It shows the mild climate of northern New Zealand



We're in charge now

I found Waitangi to be an interesting place to visit. Not terribly exciting but worthwhile.

Once again, despite the poor start to the day it had turned into a nice afternoon. Quite handy, as I had a boat cruise of the Bay of Islands booked! From Waitangi I drove the couple of miles south to Paihia, a small town on the coast of the Bay. Paihia was very busy and I was despairing of finding somewhere to park, especially as all of the free spaces were limited to 1 hour parking. Fortunately at the far southern end of the beach I found an empty 4 hour bay which gave me just enough time for lunch and the boat trip. Over the road from where I parked was a nice little café where I had a salad and ice-cream.

I wandered up to the town centre for a quick bit of souvenir shopping before returning to the maritime centre from where the tour boats depart. Rather than a leisurely cruise I had opted for a 90 minute, 50 knot thrash around the Bay of Islands.

We started with a safety briefing then we were all kitted out with waterproofs and lifejackets before boarding the boat. I managed to get a seat near the bow so I had a good view forward. Travelling at 50 knots it was hard to take steady photographs but the captain often slowed the boat for us. It would probably have been hard to hear his commentary over the engine noise at full speed.



Whilst waiting for the tour to start this Maori canoe paddled past. My cruise of the Bay of Islands was to be much faster



Looking out from the waterfront at Paihia



The fast cruise boat with the previous tour disembarking

The first stop on the cruise was to pick up more passengers in the town of Russell across the Waikare Inlet from Paihia. Russell was the capital of New Zealand until it was moved down to Wellington in 1865.



We zoomed past the Paihia-Russell ferry



Further out were many yachts anchored off the numerous islands in the bay

The tour headed out to Cape Brett which is situated at the eastern end of the Bay of Islands. We stopped at the cliffs below the Cape Brett lighthouse. The captain said something about the history of the lighthouse. We were all far more interested in a sunken boat, beached on the rocky shore. Despite it being from a different tour company our captain never mentioned it.

I later found out that the accident had happened a few days before. The boat's engines failed and it drifted into the cliffs. A rock holed the hull and the boat started to sink. All of the passengers managed to scramble ashore and were soon rescued.



I'm not sure how the people on the right got there!

The highlight of most tours of the Bay of Islands is a trip through the "Hole in the Rock". Wind and wave action has carved a large hole in an island off of Cape Brett. When the wind and tide is right boats can travel right through the hole.



The hole in the rock from afar



As we approached the hole a dinghy appeared from the other side, forcing us to wait as it chugged through



We went through the hole but sailed round the island to return to Paihia

From the Hole in the Rock we thrashed back to Paihia, stopping briefly in Russell to drop off the passengers who had boarded there. It was a good trip around the Bay of Islands, not particularly cheap at \$68 (£26) but as it was a full tour of the bay in just 90 minutes it allowed me to do the other things earlier in the day.

From Paihia I drove south to Whangarei and Anne and Mike's house. I located it fairly easily; I recognised one of the street names from my map and turned off SH1. I found the correct road but had to drive up and down it a few times to find the right house.

When I arrived Anne was out but Mike made me welcome with a cup of tea and Anne soon returned. We chatted until Tracy and Darren arrived with their children, Georgia and Cole. He was interested in my GPS set and my camera. He wanted to take lots of photos; fortunately as it was a digital camera I was able to surreptitiously delete them afterwards!

After dinner I chatted some more until it was time for bed. Anne and Mike had very kindly offered me their spare room for the night which saved the cost of a hotel.

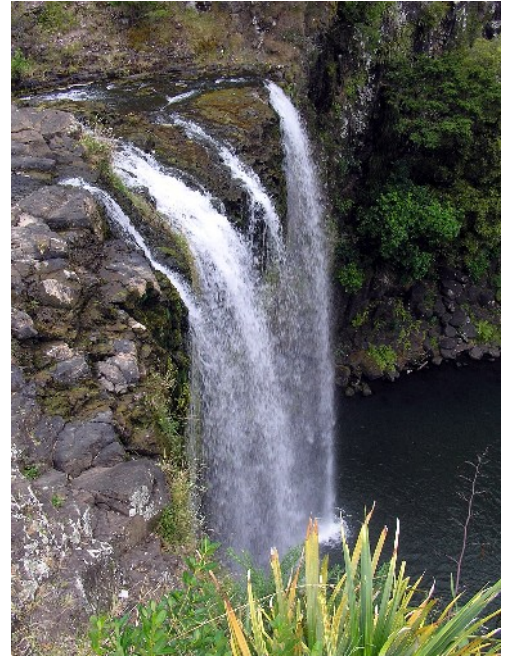
Day 21 / December 29th - Whangarei and back to Auckland

Anne and Mike kindly offered to take me on a tour of the city of Whangarei. We first drove to the Whangarei Falls. This waterfall had a bigger drop than the Haruru Falls that I saw yesterday. I thought it looked more interesting even though it wasn't as wide and had less water falling over it.

Mike wasn't feeling too good so Anne dropped him off back at their house then drove me up Mount Parahaki that overlooks the city. On the summit of this 240 metre hill is a tall obelisk in memorial to those killed in World War Two.

In 1946 a local newspaper suggested the idea of a monument. Various ideas were submitted ranging from an Olympic pool, an athletic stadium, community halls and even kindergartens. An obelisk on Mt Parahaki was selected by a public vote in 1948.

The local council hired the architect who designed the obelisk on One Tree Hill in Auckland. He submitted a design constructed mainly of natural stone but the council preferred the much less expensive option of a pre-fabricated metal column. Finally the memorial was unveiled on ANZAC Day, 25 April 1957.



The more water falling, the more picturesque



Another cloudy morning. The Hatea river runs through the town and out into the natural Whangarei Harbour on the Pacific coast.

We had a coffee break in a shopping mall in the city centre before moving on to the Clock Museum in the Town Basin. The museum had a really interesting array of hundreds of clocks. The collection was assembled by a resident of Whangarei who bequeathed it to form a public museum.

The clocks range from old clockwork and pendulum timepieces right up to modern novelty items. A guide took us on a tour of the collection. She started up some of the more delicate clocks and showed us how they worked. We were still in the museum at midday when many of them started chiming in unison. It was an amazing cacophony!

Mike, Tracy and Cole joined us for lunch in a restaurant on the quayside of the Town Basin. We initially sat outside but a cold wind was blowing so we moved indoors when a table became available.

After lunch I had to head back to Auckland to meet up with Jason and Nicole for our last night in New Zealand.

As I drove down SH1 I heard a traffic news report on the radio saying that the road was closed because of an accident. Unfortunately the place names meant nothing to me! However, when I got to Kaiwaka, north of Wellsford, there was a diversion sending the traffic out to the coast at Mangawhai Heads and back to re-join SH1 at Te Hana. I tucked in behind a lorry who seemed to know where he was going and trailed behind him for the 20 mile diversion. The traffic going the other way was terrible but it wasn't too bad southbound, it just added a bit of time to my journey.



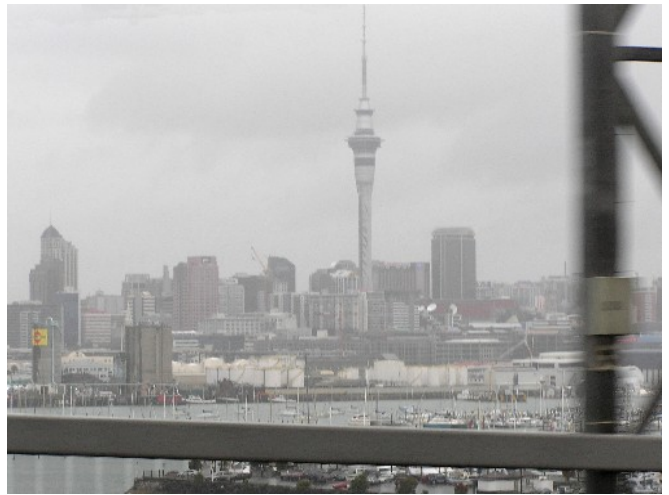
Tick-tock a lot

I met Jason and Nicole at the Takapuna Motor Lodge where we had stayed before; we even got the same room.

We went into the centre of Auckland and parked in the carpark under the Skytower. As it was raining and overcast we didn't bother going up the tower as there wouldn't have been much of a view.

Half an hour in the casino failed to impress us. I'd have liked to have tried the poker and the roulette but we were short on time and it didn't seem the place to experiment.

We met some of Jason's friends from his university days. We had dinner in a enjoyable but noisy Mexican restaurant on Victoria Street before heading back to Takapuna for the night.



An overcast Auckland seen as we crossed the Harbour Bridge

Day 22 / December 30th - Auckland to Sydney

Jason's sister and her family came to see us off from Takapuna (and to collect her mother's car!). We packed all of our bags and headed out to the airport. After returning the hire car and checking into our flight to Sydney we met Jason's father.

We poked about in some duty free shops and changed our New Zealand currency into Australian dollars. We had lunch in an airport restaurant before saying goodbye to Jason's father and going through to the departure lounge.

The Qantas flight to Sydney was uneventful although on arrival there was the same customs rigmarole as in Auckland. I had bought Mum a packet of New Zealand flax seeds. The Food & Agriculture chap checked the Latin name on the packet to make sure it wasn't on his prohibited list. The seeds were fine and we were soon on our way to the hotel in a taxi. There is toll expressway that runs from the airport right into Sydney, passing under the city centre in a tunnel which emerged not far from our hotel.

We were staying in the Menzies Hotel, really conveniently located in the middle of Sydney city centre. Booking in was a lengthy process as their paper reservation system had two rooms for us but their computer disagreed. The hotel was completely full over the New Year so they had to make sure that we were given the correct ones.



Auckland was as windy as when we arrived.
This huge flag was at the entrance to the airport



The Sydney Cenotaph in Martin Place, outside the Commonwealth Bank

East of Sydney's Hyde Park is Saint Mary's Cathedral. I walked along its west wall and admired its impressive south face. I was slightly surprised that it seemed to be closed as I wanted to see the inside of the building. It's on the site of the first Sydney cathedral which was built early in the 19th Century but it burnt down in 1865. The new cathedral's foundation stone was laid by Archbishop Bede Polding in 1868.

The two towers had remained without spires since the church's construction until May 1999. Tubular steel frames were flown by helicopter to the tower tops, forming steel spires to be fully clad in stone. The work was completed on June 25, 2000. I'm glad the building was finally finished before our visit!



St Mary's Cathedral



The ANZAC Memorial and Pool of Reflection

I walked through Hyde Park, past a statue of Captain Cook. At the southern end of the park was the ANZAC Memorial and Pool of Reflection. The ANZAC Memorial was built to commemorate all the men and women who served in World War I (not just those who were killed). By the time it was opened in 1934 Australia was in the depths of the Great Depression. As a make-work task the city council funded the Pool of Reflection. This was dug by the unemployed in front of the memorial.

I headed back to the hotel to rejoin Jason and Nicole. We set out to find somewhere for dinner. We ambled north to the Circular Quay. This is the site where Sydney was founded in May 1787 from a fleet of 11 ships carrying convicts. It's now a busy area with a railway station and ferry terminus. We headed round to the eastern side of the Quay and on towards the Opera House. From near that building we a great view of the harbour bridge.



The Sydney Harbour Bridge



We sat and watched the sun go down behind the office towers of the central business district

We wandered around to the western side of Circular Quay from where we could appreciate the shapes of the Opera House across the water.



The Opera House seen from the western bank of Circular Quay with a Sydney Harbour ferry coming in to dock



The Circular Quay railway station and ferry terminus

We had dinner in a Chinese restaurant in The Rocks area of Sydney to the west of Circular Quay. As we had had a big day and a long night ahead of us tomorrow we had an early night.

Day 23 / New Year's Eve – Sydney Walk and Harbour Cruise

After breakfast I set off to see the sights. As Jason and Nicole had already visited Sydney we agreed that I'd go and see what I wanted to whilst they mooched about together. I started by retracing in reverse the walk that I took through Hyde Park yesterday. The sun was in a different part of the sky so I wanted to retake some better lit photos of the things that I had seen the previous day.

My first stop was at the statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park. In 1766 the Royal Society hired Cook (then a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy) to travel to the Pacific Ocean to observe and record a transit of Venus across the Sun. In command of the barque HMS *Endeavour* he sailed from England in 1768, rounding Cape Horn and continuing westward across the Pacific. He arrived at Tahiti on April 13 1769.

The primary purpose of the observation was to obtain measurements which could be used to calculate more accurately the distance of Venus from the Sun. From this the distances of the other planets could be worked out based on their relative orbits. Disappointingly, the separate measurements of the three astronomers on the voyage varied by more than the anticipated margin of error. The results were inconclusive.

Cook then departed to search the South Pacific for the postulated southern continent of *Terra Australis*. He reached New Zealand with the help of a Tahitian named Tupaia, becoming only the second European in history to do so, a century after Abel Tasman. Cook mapped the entire coastline of New Zealand and discovered the Cook Strait which Tasman had missed.

He then set course westwards, heading for Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania which had been sighted by Tasman). However, he was forced to maintain a more northerly course owing to prevailing gales and sailed onwards until land was sighted. His expedition became the first recorded Europeans to have encountered mainland Australia.

Cook sailed the *Endeavour* northwards along the coastline, charting and naming prominent positions as he went. A little over a week later he came across an inlet which eventually became known as Botany Bay. It was here on April 29 1770 that Cook and crew made their first landfall.

This first landing site was promoted as a suitable location for a colony. However, when the First Fleet arrived in early 1788 they instead chose a harbour to the north. It was in this harbour that the settlement of Sydney was established.



The Sydney Tower



The Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park

Cook returned home to Britain in 1771 having lost no men to scurvy – a first in 18th century long-distance sea-faring. He had forced his men to eat foods such as citrus fruits and sauerkraut although no one yet understood why these foods prevented disease. Unfortunately, he put in for repairs at Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies. Many in Cook's crew succumbed to malaria caught during this stop.

The Space Shuttle *Endeavour* was named after Cook's ship on this first voyage. The shuttle *Discovery* was named after a ship that Cook commanded on his third voyage which discovered the Hawaiian Islands and mapped the west coast of America from California to the Bering Strait.

North of Hyde Park was the Sydney Tower, opened in 1982 but looking surprisingly dated to me, almost as if the design was from the 1950's. The tower is 305 metres tall, a bit shorter than the Auckland Skytower's 328 metres.

The cathedral still seemed to be closed which I found a bit strange and annoying.

I walked the short distance north to the Hyde Park Barracks, the destination for thousands of convicts transported from Britain. Transportation to Australia began in 1787 when the First Fleet departed but not everyone received a life sentence.

When a convict reached the end of their period of punishment they were released but most were not allowed to return to England. Even those free to go back had to pay for their voyage. A functioning economy soon sprang up.

By 1818 the free population of Sydney had grown than the number of convicts. The freemen demanded protection from the criminals (!) so the authorities used the prisoners as labourers to build the barracks to act as an overnight gaol. By day they went to assigned jobs around Sydney.

By the time transportation ceased in 1848 over 15,000 men had passed through the barracks. After that date the building was used variously as an immigration depot, a poorhouse, government offices and finally a museum. The displays inside were really good, showing what conditions were like for the many occupants of the barracks throughout its life.

I was quite interested in the database of convicts. Nobody from Dunstable had been transported and only one person from Romford. A display showed the population of the barracks on a particular day. The eldest was well into his 40's, a printer who had been convicted of forgery. I guess he was lucky not to have been hung.

I was surprised by the amazingly good condition of the external brickwork of the barracks, especially considering it was built 200 years ago by convict labour. It must have been repointed at some time. I found the barracks interesting, well worth a visit.



Hyde Park Barracks



The front of the mint buildings faces the modern central bank on Macquarie Street

Just north of the Hyde Park Barracks was the Sydney Mint. These buildings were constructed between 1811 and 1816 as the Sydney Hospital. In an early Private Finance Initiative deal it was built by contractors in exchange for a monopoly on the importation of rum.

A branch of the Royal Mint was established on the site following the discovery of gold in New South Wales in 1854. The Mint operated until 1926 when it was moved to Canberra.

I was a little disappointed with this museum even though it was free to enter. The buildings were interesting enough but I felt that there could have been more artefacts from the building's past. The Bank of England has a nice little museum in its basement. There's nothing like that in the Sydney

Mint. I even asked the guide if there was one in the Reserve Bank of Australia across the road. She wasn't aware of it but having got back to England I discovered that the Reserve Bank does have a museum. I'll have to visit it if I ever return to Sydney.

In the grounds of the Sydney Mint a chap came up to me and asked if I was enjoying my stay. His accent was quite hard to place; I think he was originally Scottish but had lived in Australia for quite a while. He was surprised that the cathedral wasn't open and went off to look for himself.

From the Mint I walked into the Botanical Gardens. It was just after midday but the preparations for the New Year's Eve celebrations were well underway. All but one of the park's entrances and exits were already closed. Still, the gardens were a nice place for a sit down and a rest on a rather sunny and hot day. I had planned to visit the Opera House but it was already closed off for a New Year's Eve party. Only ticket holders could get near. Instead I walked across to the Sydney Observatory located just to the west of the harbour bridge. On the way I had an ice-cream from an ice-cream van identical to those in England.

I reached the park surrounding the observatory at around 2 o'clock. Some families were already claiming good places for watching the fireworks later in the evening. Whilst it was a great place to view from I wouldn't have wanted to hang around for ten hours!

The observatory is on a hill overlooking both of Sydney's harbours. It was placed here to give a time signal to ships, vital for accurate navigation. The observatory could determine the precise moment of noon by observing the passage of the sun. Like at Greenwich the event was marked by dropping a ball down a mast. You can see the top of the yellow ball above the tower on the right.



The Sydney Observatory on a lovely sunny afternoon

Other astronomical observations were also carried out on the site until the 1970's when light and air pollution forced the observatory to close. It was then converted into a museum.

There were many interesting displays and visitors can go right up inside the dome that still houses a large telescope. There was a nice exhibition about Captain Cook's observations of the Transit of Venus. The displays showed how the observations of the 1874 & 1882 transits finally allowed astronomers to get an accurate idea of the orbits of the planets.

I found observatory a really great place to visit. With the benefit of hindsight I wish I'd waited and joined the guided tour instead of wandering around by myself. The tour party passed me and I saw that they were allowed to look through the large telescope in the dome.

From the observatory I walked back to the hotel to rejoin Jason & Nicole. Our original plan had been to find somewhere on the shore to watch the fireworks. In October Nicole had a brainwave and suggested that we might be able to do a New Year's Eve harbour cruise. I was amazed that there were still seats available and we quickly booked our places.

We chose a cruise on the catamaran "*Aussie One*" owned by the Matilda Cruises company. This was supposed to be "one of the largest sailing cats in the southern hemisphere" but it motored everywhere during the night as sails would have spoiled the views of the fireworks.

We walked down to Darling Harbour and sat across the water from the Maritime Museum as we waited for our boarding time. A number of women tottered past in high heels – not the most ideal footwear for a pier! The more sensible ones took their shoes off.

We cast off just after 7pm and cruised north up Darling Harbour. Turning to the east we passed under the harbour bridge getting a great view of its underside and construction. There were incredible crowds by the bridge and I was so glad that we'd decided to take a boat cruise. We would never had got a good view of the fireworks from the shore and we would have had to stand around for hours.

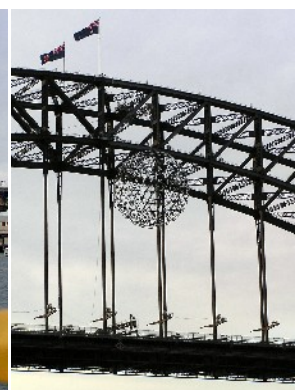
Hanging from the harbour bridge was a huge wire ball with what seemed like large beach toy windmills all around it. It was described as a glitter ball. I later found out that it was supposed to send reflected laser light across the harbour during the fireworks display.



Aussie One coming into the Matilda Cruises berth the next day while we were at the Maritime Museum



Approaching the harbour bridge from the west. Note the "glitter ball" suspended from the bridge



The ball was to reflect laser light across the harbour

We passed by the Opera House and circled Fort Denison where a luxury party was underway. This island in Sydney Harbour has an interesting history. Initially it was used as a place of confinement and punishment for recalcitrant convicts during the early settlement.

The fortress occupying the entire island was constructed in the mid 19th century and contains the last Martello-style fortification built in the British Empire. It was designed as a defence against a feared Russian invasion during the Crimean War. It surprised me that this would have been a worry.



The Opera House with a replica of HMS *Bounty*



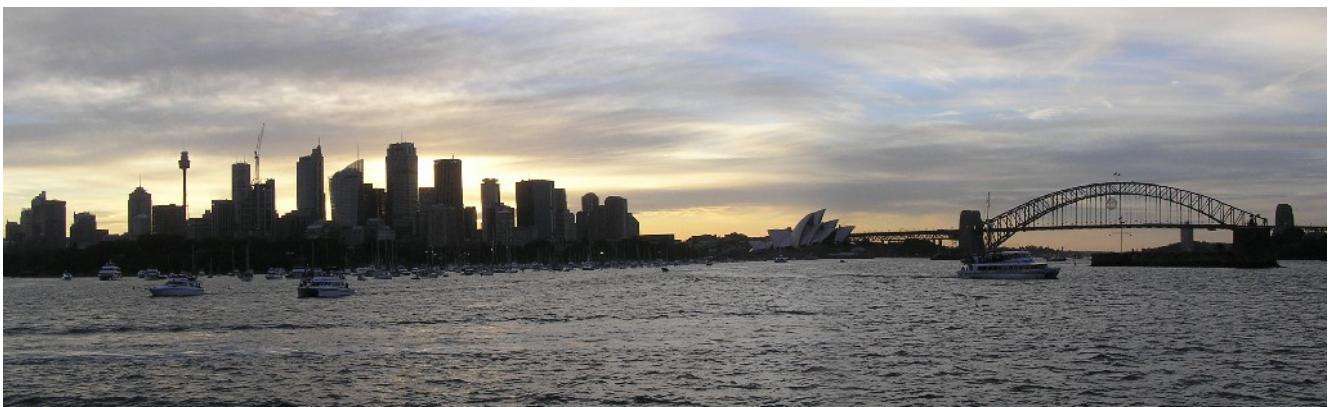
The *James Craig*, also out from the National Maritime Museum on a New Year's Eve cruise



Fort Denison



Three water taxis. In the background is Woolloomooloo Bay naval base where Gar's aircraft carrier docked in 1945



From the outer harbour we got a superb view of the sun setting over the city

As the sun went down we were invited into the dining area of the ship for dinner. Sensibly they had preallocated the seating so there wasn't a mad scramble. It was a nice meal with a buffet dessert and cheese course. What surprised me was that unlimited alcoholic drinks were available. I stuck to the soft drinks and coffee as I don't think that booze and boats mix well. I'm sure that some people managed to drink the cost of their ticket!

After sunset the cruise boats took part in a Light Parade. All had been lit up to some extent, with a few having very artful creations.



Some of the 9 o'clock fireworks



The ships in the Light Parade looked great but my camera struggled to take good, steady pictures in the low light

There are actually two firework displays in Sydney, one at nine o'clock and the famous one at midnight. There's a certain amount of jockeying for position between the cruise boat captains and I felt that we lost out to an extent on the first one. We were just to the west of the harbour bridge so that and the ships rigging blocked the view a bit.

After the nine o'clock display we again cruised up and down the harbour. I'd not thought to bring a jacket with me and there was a bit of a chill in the air although it was bearable. I stayed on deck for most of the time between the two firework displays as the harbour was well lit up and the views were great.

Apparently at one point during the evening there was a minute's silence held on the shore for the victims of the Boxing Day tsunami. The wave from this had reached Australia but it was only two metres high by then and was just half a metre when it got to New Zealand. Unfortunately no-one had told the cruise boats which continued to sail around the harbour blaring out music.

The captain got the boat into a great position for the midnight display, east of the harbour bridge near Fort Denison island. The display was a fantastic quarter of an hour extravaganza of many thousands of fireworks. I put my camera into auto mode and just pointed it at the sky while I watched the display. There were four firework barges along the harbour, all launching at the same time so with the right angle you could see four displays at once.



The Harbour Bridge silhouetted by distant fireworks



Three of the four simultaneous displays



The finale launched from the bridge

At the end of the display the smoke from the finale fireworks obscured any view of the glitter ball. That part of the display wasn't very well thought out!

There was a bit of a race between the cruise boats to get back to their berths in Darling Harbour. After disembarking we returned to our hotel through the crowds that had watched the fireworks from the shore. At the hotel the doormen were checking people in using a list, I guess they didn't want any non-paying guests staying!

The evening had cost roughly £130 each and I felt that it was worth every penny. The view was far better than on shore and there were no crowds. If you're ever in Sydney for New Year's Eve do yourself a favour and book a harbour cruise!

Day 24 / January 1st - Sydney's National Maritime Museum

I began the day by walking back to the Opera House. Tours of the building were supposed to start at 10:00 but the guides still hadn't shown up by quarter past. A crowd who had prebooked tickets had formed and were starting to get restless. I shuffled away and had a coffee in a café in the parade of eateries in the approach to the Opera House. I went back to the tour centre but the guides still hadn't arrived and there was a huge bunch of people waiting. As I had other things planned for the day I gave up on the idea of touring the building and walked back to the hotel.

Nicole was going have lunch with a friend of hers who now lives in Sydney. Jason and I set off to visit the National Maritime Museum which we had seen opposite our cruise departure point last night. Jason had never been on board a submarine before and the museum was a good opportunity to do so.

The indoor displays were interesting with more of a military aspect than the Auckland maritime museum. There was a submarine periscope to look through and a Bofors gun to man. A naval helicopter was suspended from the roof.

We got a guided tour of *Blackmore's First Lady*, the yacht in which Australian Kay Cottee circumnavigated the globe in during 1988, becoming the first woman to sail solo, non-stop around the world. The yacht was so small to have completed the journey; the cabin was cramped with five people sitting in it. The tour guide was enthusiastic to the point of weirdness, making me feel a little uncomfortable. Fortunately the small size of the boat meant that the tour was soon over. There was just the cockpit and cabin to visit. The museum was concerned about maintaining the yacht so people coming aboard her (if you can board a boat that's sitting in a cradle in a museum!) had to take their shoes off. It was to be my third and final unexpected sock inspection of the holiday.

Attached to a wall was the *Spirit of Australia*, the world's fastest boat. This jet engine powered craft set the record at 317 miles per hour in 1978. Since then two people have been killed trying to beat the record.



The Spirit of Australia

It's a shame that the *Spirit of Australia* was on a wall, it would have been nice to walk around her and see into the cockpit.

It was the ships moored outside that really interested me and Jason. HMAS *Vampire* was the last large, "all-guns" destroyer built for the Royal Australian Navy (subsequent designs were smaller ships armed with guns and missiles). She was launched in 1956 and modernised in 1970. *Vampire* escorted the Royal yacht *Britannia* when the Queen visited Australia in 1977. In 1980 *Vampire* was downgraded to a training ship and was paid-off and gifted to the maritime museum in 1986.

Visitors have got full access to most of the upper parts of the ship but disappointingly not down to the engine room. I found the bridge and the operations room the most interesting. It was possible to peer inside the gun turrets but not enter them. Most worrying were the warnings painted around the surface and air search radar dishes – "Don't stand here for more than 20 seconds when the radar is operating"! I guess they acted as gigantic microwave ovens.

It was an incredibly warm afternoon. The sun was beating down on the deck and the metalwork of the ship was hot to touch. There were a few air conditioners spread throughout the boat but they were struggling to have any effect.



The sterns of HMAS Vampire and HMAS Onslow



Side by side

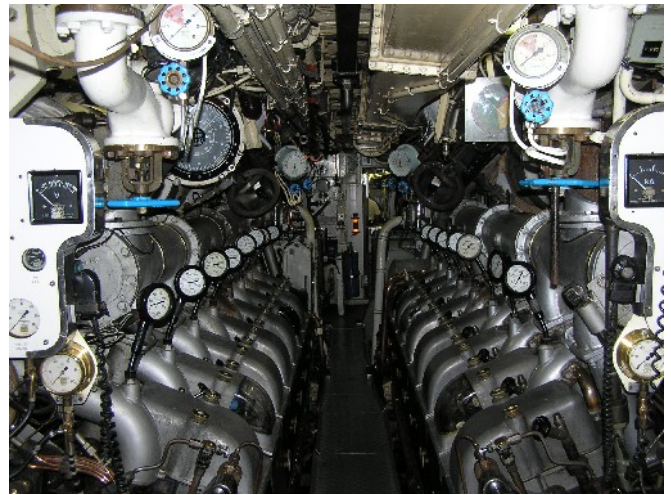


The forward 4½ inch turrets

Tied up alongside HMAS *Vampire* was HMAS *Onslow*, a submarine built in England in 1968 for the Royal Australian Navy. She left service only a few years ago and still looks quite modern inside.

It might be surprising that the Australian Navy has submarines but it's equally surprising that less than 100 miles separates Australia from its nearest neighbour, Papua New Guinea. Submarines are useful in patrolling the shallow Timor and Arfura Seas.

We entered the submarine via a flight of steps leading down the loading hatch to the forward torpedo room. There was a guide positioned in each compartment to explain its function and equipment. We walked through the boat to its stern. The guides were counting the visitors on and off the submarine in order to try to reduce the crowding and heat. They had a few fans but they weren't up to the job. It was a shame that it was so stiflingly hot inside the hull as I would have liked to have spent a bit more time looking about.



HMAS *Onslow*'s twin diesel engines



The lightship *Carpentaria*, quite a dumpy looking craft

We recovered from the heat of the inside of HMAS *Onslow* with an ice-cream. Then we climbed up the preserved Cape Bowling Green lighthouse. Despite the dire warnings posted at the bottom of the steps the 15 metre climb up the vertical access ladder wasn't too difficult. From the balcony we got a good view of Darling Harbour and the museum's ships. We also saw our cruise boat from last night coming back in after another tour.



Cape Bowling Green lighthouse



In the foreground are HMAS *Advance* and the tug *Bareki*

HMAS *Advance* was launched in 1967 as coastal surveillance and patrol craft. She's now used by the museum as a fast tour boat for cruises up and down the coast from Sydney.

The diesel tugboat *Bareki* was built in Sydney in the 1960's to a WWII design. I felt the design looked much older than that. She's still in use as the museum's workboat.

Another of the museum's ships was the iron-hulled barque *James Craig*. She was built by Bartram, Haswell & Co. in Sunderland in 1874. Originally named *Clan Macleod* she began her working life with a maiden voyage to Peru.

For 26 years she plied the trade routes of the world carrying general cargoes. In this time she rounded Cape Horn 23 times. In 1900 she was purchased by a Mr J Craig of Auckland who used her as a general cargo carrier on several routes between New Zealand and Australia.

In 1905 she was re-named *James Craig* but in 1911 she was laid up after increasing competition from steam ships made sailing vessels uneconomical. She was stripped of equipment and used as a copra store in New Guinea.

Following the First World War there was an acute shortage of cargo ships. *James Craig* was given a new lease of life after being towed to Sydney and re-fitted. Her return to service was brief, by 1925 she was reduced to a coal hulk at Recherche Bay, Tasmania. In 1932 she was abandoned and became beached after breaking her moorings in a storm.

She remained there until 1972 when volunteers from the Sydney Heritage Fleet re-floated her. After temporary repairs in Hobart she was towed to Sydney in 1981 for restoration work. The *James Craig*'s restored hull was re-launched in February 1997. Four years later she hoisted all her 21 sails for the first time in nearly 80 years and is now fully operational. We'd seen the *James Craig* out in the harbour last night but she was using her engines.

When we walked past her a sign said "Welcome Aboard" so we wandered around the ship. After a couple of minutes a guide came up to us and said that visitors should be part of a guided tour and not wandering around unescorted. We decided that we'd already seen enough so we went back ashore.



The *James Craig*



The replica of HMS *Bounty*

Moored on the same wharf as the *James Craig* was the replica of HMS *Bounty* that we'd also seen on the harbour cruise last night.

They were charging for a walk around the ship so we didn't bother. The sign was quite interesting though. The replica had (coincidentally) been built in Whangarei in 1984 for the movie "Mutiny on the Bounty" starring Mel Gibson and Anthony Hopkins.

She's now used as a pleasure sailing craft but early in 2005 she recreated the final leg of the original *Bounty*'s voyage.

Starting at New Zealand she sailed to Tonga and Tofua, scene of the mutiny. From there she went on to Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, discovered by Fletcher Christian as he cruised looking for somewhere to hide after the mutiny.

Next stop was Tubuai in French Polynesia, site of the first settlement of the mutineers. The ship then visited Tahiti where Captain Bligh and his crew had spent 9 months cultivating breadfruit plants before the mutiny. The last stop was Pitcairn Island, the final destination of *Bounty*'s mutineers and their

Tahitian companions. It was here in 1790 that Fletcher Christian burnt the original ship.

From the maritime museum Jason went to meet Nicole but I hopped onto the Sydney Monorail for a sightseeing circuit. The train ticket was a flat fee irrespective of distance travelled and as it was so wonderfully air-conditioned I stayed on for several circuits!

I got off at the city centre stop and headed back to the hotel. For the last night of our holiday we returned to Darling Harbour and had dinner at the "Baia" Italian restaurant.

Day 25 / January 2nd – Sydney Opera House and Back to England

We weren't due at the airport until mid-afternoon so I had enough time to go back to the Opera House for a final attempt to catch a tour around it. It was a case of third time lucky and I bought a ticket for a walk of the buildings that set off soon after I arrived. I had a brief bit of time to kill so I sat on the quayside and watched a large tanker pass under the harbour bridge. A couple of tugs shepherded it on its way.

The Sydney Opera House was one of Australia's most controversial buildings due to its design as well as serious time and cost overruns. The idea for a large arts venue for Sydney was conceived in the late 1940's. A design competition in 1955 was won by the Danish architect Jørn Utzon. He moved to Sydney in 1957 to help supervise the project.

Construction of the Opera House began in March 1959. By January 1961 work was already running 47 weeks behind schedule and the foundations weren't completed until August 1962.



The tanker *Alam Budi*



The roof "sails" are covered with many thousands of ceramic tiles

ballooned to \$102 million. The Opera House was formally opened by the Queen on October 20, 1973.

The tours can only enter parts of the building that are unused. I was fortunate enough to come at a time when nothing was in use so we got to sit in both the opera and larger concert halls. Our tour guide was a funny chap, remonstrating with one woman who wandered off by herself but he knew a great deal about the building. He was also careful to police the No Photography rule during certain parts of the tour.

I'm glad that I finally got to look around the Opera House as the striking design continues inside. No visit to Sydney can be complete without a trip around this building.

The roof shells were originally designed as a series of parabolas but construction was proving impossible. In mid 1961 Utzon realized that if the shells were hemispheres they would have constant radius which would make fabrication much easier. Construction of the roof began with an estimated completion date of 1965 but further problems meant the work wasn't finished until 1968.

There was a change of state government in 1965 and the project moved from the Ministry of Arts to the more sceptical Ministry of Public Works. Utzon was forced from the project in February 1966. By then the estimated cost of the project was \$23 million, up from an original \$7 million. The interior of the Opera House was redesigned by committee and the final cost of the complex



The Governor General's Sydney residence which the Opera House overlooks. The flag wasn't flying so he must have been elsewhere



The consistent design of the Opera House continues inside on this supporting strut

I walked back to the hotel through the Botanical Gardens which were now fully reopened after New Year's Eve.



The sails of the Opera House gleaming in the sun



Part of the ever growing Central Business District



One of a flock of *Australian White Ibis* poking around in the grass



I'm not sure what this plant was but it's certainly impressive

After packing our bags at the hotel we got a taxi out to the airport. Although there was a big queue for check-in for our flight they opened another couple of desks and redirected us to them, a nice bit of queue jumping! From there we had a late lunch and did some shopping. I bought myself a duty-free watch but because we hadn't yet cleared customs they warned me not to open the sealed box until I was in the air-side part of the terminal. Even then I was a bit stymied; the solar powered watch had to be charged for 24 hours!

After take-off the crew struggled to get the in-flight entertainment system to work. It was threatening to be a very mind-numbing trip but after using the radio to consult with technical support back on the ground they got it going after two tedious hours. There was a short refuelling stop in Bangkok. We flew over the Netherlands which were very well illuminated and came into Heathrow up the Thames. I had a port side window seat and saw the Medway towns; if I had been on the starboard side I might have seen the island.

All told; a fantastic holiday that I'd like to repeat some day.