



Hikers descend from the ridge overlooking the dramatic South Crater on the Tongariro Crossing hike. PHOTO: SUSANNA ORESKOVIC

## New Zealand an extraordinary bucket list tick

BY SUSANNA ORESKOVIC

I can't see the road ahead, it's raining, it's dark. The road turns sharply, going upward, upward toward Fox Glacier town site. I glance at my GPS, mapping the road ahead for me. The rain lets up, finally, but not before thick fog blankets across the road. It would be beautiful for my camera to capture had it not been so late already, had I not been so tired. Safe and sound at Fox Glacier town site, we slump into bed at our cosy backpacker inn.

My husband and I travel. Even when we started our family, we'd just pack up the kids and go. As any parent knows, however, the pace of family travel is quite different. So every few years we manage to go on our own, sans the kids. On my husband's bucket list was a long-time wish to travel to New Zealand. That, and with his milestone birthday around the corner, it was quickly decided. Work projects were put on hold, caretakers for our three young kids were enlisted and all the

logistics that go into running a household, their school and activities were thought out. Now, the idea of driving throughout the country, 3,800 kilometres in all, after jet-setting more than 19,000 kilometres to get there seems like a very long way to go over a two-week period. In truth, it is. But then, we all know it usually takes some effort to get to the really extraordinary places in this world. New Zealand is such a place.

The highlight was to visit Franz Josef Glacier, which is about half an hour's drive from the laid back Fox Glacier town site on the west coast of the South Island. The glacier is renowned for its pristine ice formations and spectacular ice caves, but the weather thwarted our plans. Low cloud ceiling grounded the helicopters. Back at Fox Glacier they were still flying, so we managed to join the Fox Glacier tour along with a dozen other tourists. Still the low cloud cover impeded us and we ended up walking down to the

lower helipad without any ice caves in sight. Disappointed, we returned to the town site for lunch and watched Japanese tourists spill out of the tour buses to take photos.

A trip to New Zealand must in some way include a taste of Middle Earth. Being fans of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy we decided to forgo the theme park setting of the movie site at Hobbiton and instead walk to Mount Doom, more properly known as Mount Ngauruhoe by way of the Tongariro Crossing on the North Island. It's a 19.4-kilometre hike—or should I say tramp—with nearly 800 metres of elevation across valleys, craters and past the lovely Emerald Lakes. While the trek is listed as challenging, that didn't stop hordes of tourists, some with their shorts, tank-tops and iPhones walking the full-day trek. We were, however, particularly impressed with the school group of 10 year-olds doing the trek fully prepared with backpacks, boots, snacks and water.

It starts off easy enough from the Mangatepopo car park to Soda Springs before elevation begins. Up the devil's staircase toward the vast South Crater it's an otherworldly place. Positioning the camera to take in the expanse and avoid the other hikers was challenging. There are *that* many people, especially on a nice sunny day.

From there, it's another short climb following an exposed ridge around the Red Crater. It's truly spectacular with views over the Oturere Valley, Rangipo Desert, Kaimanawa Ranges and down towards the Emerald Lakes. Descending to the lakes involves walking on black scree-like lava rock. A short break for lunch and then we continue on toward the Ketetahi Shelter though the rolling

Walter Tom and Susanna Oreskovic appreciate the spectacular Red Crater at the high point of the Tongariro Crossing hike. PHOTO: A FELLOW HIKER



open tussocks that switch back and forth. A couple of park rangers were working on the trail. One greets me with a traditional Maori greeting, “*Kia ora*”. A puzzled look on my face shows I don’t understand. Ah, he means hello. I smile.

A quick check on the time and we decide we’d better speed up to catch our bus transport back. In the last half hour on a relatively flat trail through groves of trees and waterfalls we decide to take it to a running pace. We pass the school group again and hear them tell the kids “runner coming through, step right”. Apparently we aren’t the only ones sprinting through the woods. We arrive well before pick-up time at the Ketetahi car park.

Our adventures also took us to the rainforests of Fjordlands. With 200 days of rainfall through the year, Milford Sound is the wettest place on Earth. That didn’t really matter since we were to enjoy the majestic Milford Sound by sea kayak. Located in southwest part of the South Island, Milford sits within Fiordland National Park, part of Te Wahipounamu World Heritage Site. Yes, it was raining, but to experience the grandeur of the ancient rainforest clinging to the cliffs and the cascading waterfalls so close you could almost touch them, was magical.

There is so much to see and do that we barely scratched the surface. The famous glow worms at Charleston on South Island that blanket the cave ceilings so that it seems as if you are looking at the night sky are unbelievable. The day spent canyoning, abseiling, cliff jumping and zip-lining in Abel Tasman National Park felt like a pool party. Even the mundane quiet moments were just as picturesque. Woolly sheep in the green fields, the awesome coffee everywhere we went and food so exquisite even if it was from a food truck. We may have checked New Zealand from the bucket list but by no means is it checked off from future trips. There’s a friendly and pleasant lifestyle that fits in with us outdoorsy types. And a bit of sanity where not everything is open all hours. People have a life and things to do. Maybe they too are tramping around.

*Susanna Oreskovic and Walter Tom are members of the ACC’s Montreal Section.*

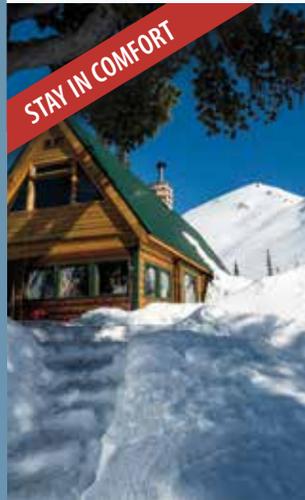


Emerald Lakes are just that as seen from the highest point on a ridge on the Tongariro Crossing hike. PHOTO: SUSANNA ORESKOVIC



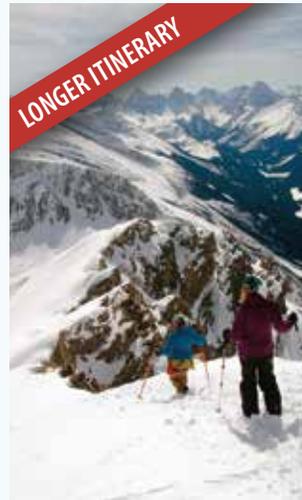
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