

New Zealand The North Island

Well it's been 2 week already! And we have driven all over the north Island. Well we did what we could in the time we had. There was so much to do and see that we resigned ourselves to the fact that we were going to have to make pragmatic choices of what we could realistically fit in.

We started in Auckland ("The City of Sails" as they like to call it). This is the capital of New Zealand. Auckland struck me as a little too laid back for a capital city, a good omen, I thought for the rest of the journey.

The kids were very excited about getting the campervan. During the 2 extremely boring 12 Hr long haul flights we had explained to Jazz and Blue that after Hong Kong we would get on a second plane to New Zealand then we would have a sleep in an hotel then we would reach our goal / our reason for all this boredom and discomfort the CAMPERVAN.

Before we ventured in to Auckland city we decided to take the campervan for a spin. The roads in Auckland were pretty good but the road signs were a little difficult to understand just where they were going. As we were to find out this would only get worse as we ventured further from the capital. The road signs, instead of stating that this junction would lead to highway 1, would say something like 'MohaBora Rd'! I guess you just had to know where 'MohaBora Rd' would lead to. The maps we were given were also 'pretty ropy', as you can imagine this lead to us driving up and down / round and round / back and forth until by the virtue that we had driven up every other road we eventually arrived at a campsite in Puriri beach park in Orewa. After letting the kids loose on the park playground (they went bonckers for the trampoline!) We settled down for our first night in our new home for the month. It was at this point we discovered that we had only been given 2 single duvets, 1 for the little ones 1 to share between Rach and I. Considering that we're in the middle of winter in New Zealand I foresaw our first problem. I'm all up for cuddling Rach for warmth but somehow I thought we needed an alternative strategy.

After a night of freezing my nuts off, we headed straight back to Kea Campers to demand warmth (after a very pleasant stroll on Puriri beach). They were very obliging and gave us 4 duvets 2 sleeping bags and a stack of blankets. Sorted!

With our new found warmth we decided to setup camp close to Auckland so we could investigate the city. We were advised by Kea Campers that "Takapuna Bay Beach Holiday Park" was the best of the bunch. They were spot on, the campsite was situated a bus and a ferry ride from the city centre. I backed the van into our home for the next two days. On climbing out of the driver seat to look through the rear window I could see that we were practically parked on the beach



(About 1.5 meters from the sand) and the view was of a great big volcano “Rangitoto”, I was greatly reassured there was no smoke! That evening I walked up the shore line with Jazz with the sun setting, while dipping out feet in a pool that was bubbling hot water (I didn’t like to think of where the heat was coming from too much). For the first time I realised that I had started to relax. A full on trousers rolled up, no suppressing of life’s ongoing pressures, type of relax. I slept warm and comfortably that night with as smile on my face.

Next day we were on an adventure to discover Auckland. After a short bus ride to the ferry port, we jumped on the fast ferry to the city. As with all the various modes of transport we had taken the children were a little nervous at first but soon found their feet. While hanging off the top deck of the bow, Jazz spotted the Sky Tower. For what ever reason, she thought it was Count Duckula’s castle. Blues ears picked up at the mention of Duckular, and that’s all we heard for the rest of the trip.

I find City’s very samey and Auckland was no different, all big corporates and no sole, until we headed for Duckula’s Castle. On arriving at the base of this huge needle pointing at the sky (I think it’s about 350m), I looked up to see some idiot jumping off the top. All his mates were on a platform above my me cheering him on. I couldn’t believe that they had a bungy jump (type of thing) right in the city centre. ‘The City of Sails’ went right up in my estimation right there and then. For our part, we caught the turbo lift to Sky City, an observation deck at the top of the tower. This made the trip! The view was fantastic. We could see 360° looking out on, what has become my favourite aspect of New Zealand; the landscape! It amazes me that all the densely populated areas are centred around areas of volcanic activity. The only conclusion I could draw was that vegetation thrived in such areas, attracting animals, and hence the first tribes that would form the start of villages and towns. Not the barren areas of charcoal and magma I had imagined. Having come from the rolling valleys of Wales where all hills look like the contours of a woman’s breasts (or is that just my imagination). The jagged pointy lines on the horizon were strangely alien, despite the fact that the green landscape are in many ways very similar to Wales, just more tropical.

Back on the road we headed north again, this time our destination was “Goat Island Reserve”. But I was in the mood for adventure and persuaded Rach that we should push on a little further. After all we were in a campervan we could free-camp anywhere all we needed to do was pull over and make the bed; no worries!

It was during this leg of the journey that came to find the worst thing about New Zealand. 1 minute you’re on Highway 1 bombing along at 100 Km per hour. The next your desperately clinging to the steering wheel trying to navigate down a twisting dirt track, winding down the side of some massive mounting with a sheer drop on your left that would give Sylvester Stallone (star of cliff-hanger) vertigo. You might be forgiven for thinking that the reward of this white knuckle ride would be a hidden paradise, but alas no: Cwmaman by the sea! When we pulled up at the beach car park I looked over to see a gang of locals standing by their cars. The best description I could give would be of Deliverance meets the Pogues with dirty, mated ZZ Top beards. Not one to judge by appearance I gave a friendly nod and a smile. Their response helped me decide that free-camping at Cwmaman Beach was not the

best idea. So we promptly headed for the nearest campsite where there would be someone to hear any screams.

The next day after the obligatory play in the park we started the ascent back up Mount Kilimanjaro. A drive I wasn't particularly looking forward to but it was a little less hairy going up. Rach wanted to head back to Goat Island because there was a glass bottom boat that would take you out to an island, the kids would love that. When we arrived we were informed that the boat only runs on Sundays. It was Monday, if I hadn't insisted on our adventure to Cwmaman Beach we would have caught it.. Opps.. We agreed that the lesson to be learned from this was "There is no return journey", do it there and then never rely on coming back to something. Undeterred we headed on to get some tucker. We stopped at a place called RD6, a very nice waitress there informed us that there was not a lot going on further north at that time of year, and advised that we headed south.

So we took her advice and started to traverse southward, destination: Rotorua. After free-camping in a side street in Hamilton we grabbed some brecky at a logger's café / mini farm with a pot belly pig some chickens and what looked like a lama. With the children fed and suitably amused we arrived at Rotorua.

The thing that immediately struck us as we opened the campervan door at Rotorua was the smell. The place stunk of rotten eggs! Being very thermally active I guess I should have expected the smell of sulphur. Jazz aptly named the place stinky city, strange but after an hour or so we no longer noticed. The campsite was cool it had loads of thermal facilities a thermal pool and a hole of bubbling mud that had some kind of cooking device located next to it. Apparently you could lower a pot of veg and meat into this contraption and leave it for the day. When you arrive home, presto, hot broth! Unfortunately we weren't organised enough to brew a batch of volcanic cawl, probably for the best. We had been very lucky with the weather considering it



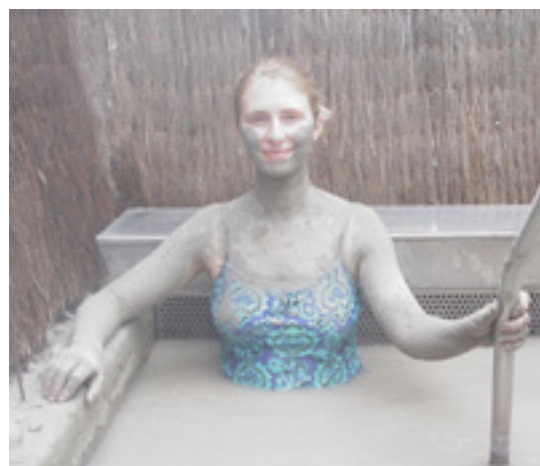
is mid winter here, but on this day it bucketed down. Faced with either entertaining a 2 and 3 year old in a space the size of the toilet at home or venturing out in the rain we opted for the latter. Our spirits were dampened at first as we tried to keep ourselves and the children dry. We didn't really perk up until we resigned ourselves to getting soaking wet. On our walk we discovered a thermal park with wooden bridges over steaming thermal pools. This maze of paths interlinking in what was obviously a very volcanically active section of this region turned out to be the saviour of the day. Quite how the locals manage to rationalise living in this area of the world amazes me. I suppose the free hot water and heating must be an attractive fringe benefit. With the little ones in bed I striped off my cold wet

clothes and indulged in a soak in the camp's thermal pool. A little stinky but very welcome after the day's events.

After yet another trip to the local park, and a spot of lunch in a very good restaurant, we decided that we would be a little more adventurous. That afternoon we chartered a float plane to fly us over Mount Tarawera and the surrounding lakes. The plane looked a little small and a little old but I think that just added to the fun. As the engines started both Jazz and Blue cuddled up to their Mam in the back, I had the passenger seat in the front. The plane turned up wind, and the pilot cranked up the engines. As the plane bumped across the water I wondered how we were ever going to take off when suddenly there was calm, we were airborne! Being used to flying in big planes this flight was very different. When turning the plane would roll considerably, as I looked out of my side window I wondered how we don't simply fall out of the sky. Our pilot, a very nice young lady, helped relax us with her very laid back manner. Obviously this was an every day event for her. Once in the sky the lay of the land revealed itself to us. The landscape was entirely different to the picture my mind's eye had painted from my blinkered view on the ground. The landscape was very bumpy small hills covered the landscape with areas of steam dotted here and there. Across the lake was the volcano itself its peak obscured by clouds. Pilot informed us that the lake had collapsed 5 years ago expanding in size, this was happened at the same time volcano had a minor eruption spewing rocks into the hospital car park many miles away. Suddenly paying for hot water didn't seem so bad. What amazed me most were the differing colours of the various lakes surrounding the volcano. Blues, greens, oranges, yellows, some very dark and some coloured white by the sulphur. The lake that most fascinated me was coloured bright, bright turquoise it was practically fluorescent, coloured by the large quantities of silicone in the water. What a great experience Rach and I loved every minute of it, and the children! They slept through the entire thing. The day wasn't over yet, that night we would sleep to hell's gate. Oooaaa!!!

One of the big attractions for Rach to come to New Zealand was sitting in a mud bath covering herself in mud???. Don't ask me it's probably a woman thing, thought to be fair, I haven't spoke to too many females about it so it could be a Rach thing.

Apparently the best place in New Zealand to experience this is Hells Gate. Hells Gate is the most thermally active area in Rotorua, with steam and boiling mud everywhere. We arrived at 7:30pm, they were due to close at 8pm so I asked permission to park in the car-park for the night. They agreed but warned me that they locked the gates until they returned at 8am in the morning. At first I couldn't see the problem with this; after all I wasn't going anywhere.



As I settled down for a beer that evening, I sat looking out of the window at the steam rising from Hells Gate. The lights from the compound illuminated the plumes of steam as they billowed into the sunset. I could see why the early European travellers

had given the place its satanic name; it really did look like the stereotypical biblical depiction of hell. If it wasn't for the horrific smell of rotten eggs that moment would have been quite pleasant. As the staff left the compound that evening, leaving us for the next 12 Hrs, I suddenly realised; we're locked in! What if we NEED to get out? It also dawned on me that we were in the middle of nowhere, in a white van that lit up like a light house every time a car rumbled down the main road we were parked next to. I thought to myself I may as well get out and spray TARGET on the side of the van, just in case any passing psychotic lunatics failed to recognise the obvious. All of a sudden a night at hells gate didn't seem so quaint. That night I didn't sleep very well I was too busy keeping a listen out for passing psychotic lunatics planning a strategy for escaping from danger when lock in a compound. I concluded that the best course of action would be to drive around the car park, leaving the psychotic lunatic no other recourse but to chase us like a sketch from Benny Hill until the staff opened the gate in the morning when I could make my escape.

In the light of day Hells Gate was an amazing place but a little commercial. At the entrance there was an area for happy tourists to stick their head in a picture of a cartoon devil or a European in a boiling pot with a great big Maori seasoning the cauldron. As we passed the tat we turned



the corner to a barren landscape of steam. Although I had become blasé about yet another hole of boiling mud and steam, this place still had an awe factor. In the other areas in Rotorua, the thermal attractions were situated in everyday locations. In fact many of the main roads were constantly foggy with thermal areas scattered along the roadside. The thermals at hells gate were a lot larger and densely

situated consequently no vegetation could survive. On our right was a sign inviting us to soak our feet in one of the thermal mud pools where the temperature was monitored. So the whole family rolled up their trousers and added yet another batch of skin and foot sweat to the festering pool. It was actually quite pleasant, so pleasant in fact that the children played holly hell (if you excuse the pun) screaming and crying to get their feet back in the warmth of the mud. Later, when Rachel was submerging her whole body in mud I amused the children by returning to submerge or feet again in this brown sludge – lovely ;-)

The thermal walk was also pleasant leading away from the desolate area of rocks and torrid pools to a green forest laden with tropical looking foliage. As we ascended the forest we came to the hot waterfall. The temperature of the water averaged 40° C, the plaque at the side of the lookout point informed us that the ancient Maori warriors would come here after war to cleanse themselves of the effects of war, and that Maori priests would bring the young here to perform a blessing (type of thing).

Back on the road again we travelled late at night when we were tired we found a campsite at Wairaki, near Taupo. I decided that night that I would make it a rule to source a place to stay in the light of day. Somehow all the campsites looked like something out of Friday the 13th when you rolled in after dark. This rule was set in stone when the next day we were charged 40\$ for the privilege of parking our van in

some lumpy old field with a toilet block that made Glastonbury's legendary portaloos look like the Hilton. Because the office was closed we were unable to get a price first, consequently they could ask what they wanted (within reason) we couldn't very well undo using their place for the night. I don't mind a little thrill from camping at dark, it adds to the excitement, but paying an extra 20 bucks for non-existent facilities that got my blood boiling. Before I got the bill I thought the place was great, not like those commercial "Top 10" campsites I'd stated. The owner was a friendly joker who played a trick on Rach that made her scream and jump a mile then proceeded to catch me as well (in case your wondering, no I didn't scream). Bloody tarantella eggs! (it's a long story) it was just a little early for me ;-). There were also an ensemble of animals, Jazz and Blue loved feeding the ducks and the apackers (a lama like thing). Then it was all ruined by greed and cold showers!

The next day we booked in to a "Top 10" at Taupo; yes it was a sell-out but we knew what we were being charged! It turned out that this was the best campsite we had visited so good in fact that I insisted on spending two nights there. Not least because we had been full on since we started we had used all the clean clothes and the campervan toilet smelt like a Glastonbury toilet. First things first though I booked myself in to do a sky dive. On arriving they asked me to weigh 238 pounds; there was a 100 Kilogram limit. I was over by 18 pounds! Sorry mate you're too heavy the guy said; what to fat to jump out of a plane! Disappointed I returned to the van vowing to return a lean leaping machine determined to fulfil my inner lemming.

To console that Dad the family took me sailing on Barbary (once won in a card game by Errol Flynn); a great big 4 sail boat much larger than the Wayfarer I'm used to. The boat's captain was a guy called Bill a retired gent that has a personality the size of his boat. One night the Barbary broke loose in a storm and was smashed to pieces. Bill has her rebuilt; reading between the lines I think it cost more than Bill had initially envisioned. He started his business taking out tourists who wanted to experience travelling on a sail boat on the great lake of Taupo. He told of how once business was slow; then one day while sitting in the harbour he noticed how the replica steamboat (the competition) was doing brisk business. The steamboat was advertising trips to see the ancient Maori rock carvings at lake Taupo. The fact that the carvings were done by some post-grad art students in 1978 didn't matter. The tourists were lapping it up; so Bill had a change of tack (pun intended). He laughed as we said "now I'm a little richer, rich enough to continue doing something I love. After a career on the treadmill dedicating my life to money; a dedication that ruined my marriage. I now understand how important that is". This struck a chord with me because my trip is about just that. After dedicating my



existence for 5 years to MAWR (My web development business), I raised my head above the water one day, only to realise that I have 2 beautiful children and a dedicated wife who whose life I was missing. What price do you charge for estranging your family? For me, the amount on offer wasn't enough. So now I'm spending every waking minute with them. The 4 of us crammed in a campervan for an entire month and I'm discovering things about their personalities that I'm shocked that I was unaware of. I'm just glad I made the discovery quicker Bill; while they are still part of my life!

Back to top 10 we discover that there is a 20 meter bouncy air pillow suitable for adults as well as children. It wasn't a bouncy castle type of thing it was much better the consistency was more like a huge elongated football. It was right there and then that I booked a second night. The children and I went crazy. I was doing summersaults and back flips; all 238 pounds of me. The kid's favourite was when I would bounce as high as I could and bomb them by bouncing on my bum. Everyone went flying within a 15 meter radius as the shock waves cascaded along the length of the pillow. A few of the mothers who were sitting on the end chatting had a shock as I more or less catapulted them off, their children were shouting "do it again mister". So they resigned to continue their gossip on the sidelines letting the big kid in the middle entertain their offspring.

After using all that energy the entire family retired to a thermally heated hot pool. Unlike the other thermal pools this was an ordinary chlorine pool that was connected to a system that used the thermal activity to heat it. There were two pools the smaller pool was hotter than an ordinary bath and I didn't stink of eggs. Great! We met a family from Wales had a chat (The children in Welsh) the whole experience was thoroughly relaxing.

The order for the morning was a serious round of bouncing followed by a hot pool just as the night before. After a spot of shopping we headed for the BBQ's unfortunately they were being repaired undeterred we settled for fried sausages. The entire day was easygoing; we spent time catching up on the cleaning I mentioned that the van was so desperately in need of. That night my muscles ached; every movement in bed was laden with pain. The next morning I awoke and rigourmortis had set-in.

With the ache of the dead in my bones we travelled on Sunday to Wellington. This was a big travelling day, with many miles of crappy New Zealand road to cover. Thank god for my MP3 player (an 40 Gb iRiver – about 5000 songs)! In Auckland I purchased an FM Modulator that I could plug-in to this jukebox to enable it to broadcast on the FM frequency range. I could then tune the van's radio to 88.1 to listen to my music collection. I'd had the foresight to download a load of child friendly music: Lalo Schifrin's Enter the Dragon, Queen's Flash Gordon, the theme tune to Spiderman, Batman, The Hulk, Starsky and Hutch, Thursday Night Music Club's Captain Chin and an assortment of other tunes that I knew the children would love. The best thing about travelling was the scenery. We passed through some great landscapes (but there was better waiting down south island) and ate in a café in a crummy looking backwater. About 5 minutes after eating we passed an aeroplane painted to look like it was covered in cookies, suspended above the floor next to a petrol station, being used as a café. We couldn't resist so we pulled over for another Coffee, it was only a simple thing, but stops like this make the journey.

That night we stopped in Waitarere , the campsite was simple but clean and cheep. There was a trampoline for the kids to have a bounce; they had now learned to land on their bums and bounce back up and continue bouncing. Maybe all that pain I was experiencing was worth it. Before bed we went for a walk on the beach the Tasman Sea was choppy and cold. I didn't expect the sea that New Zealand shared with Australia to be like that but Rachel informed me that it was known for being that way.

On our last day on the north island we arrived at Wellington. A busy city that I thought had more life than Auckland. After a spot of lunch and a play in a park with the biggest slide Jazz had ever seen, we headed for the ferry port.

The north island has been a lot of fun and we are firmly settled with the routine of life in our little campervan. I'm thoroughly enjoying both Jazz and Blues company, and enjoyed spending this time with Rachel. We've always done everything together college, university and the business, it's good to do it again.

Ill try and write up the South Island tour when I'm in Fiji and our Fiji experience when I'm in Los Angelis.

So buy for now!

Court

PS – 10 Things different in New Zealand:

- They don't do beans with a full English breakfast (We've had a few strange looks over this one)
- They don't have vinegar with chips
- They have funny pull tops on their bottled beers
- There's at least 4 different types of Ginger beer in soft drinks fridges
- Many here suffer with AQI (Australian Question Inflection) – Everything they say sounds like a question? like Californian valley girls. – raising the pitch at the end of phrases
- There's no terraced houses
- They have funny looking electrical sockets
- The men's urinals have flushes
- Every other vehicle on the road is a campervan (well it felt that way)
- You sometimes there are train tracks in the road, on single lane bridges (Very very scary –but that a tale from the south island)