

# New Zealand



## Big SI Meeting in 2015 in "Hobbiton" NZ

This item was taken from the latest Servas International Newsletter:

Aotearoa New Zealand is hosting the next Servas International General Assembly in October, 2015. The conference location is a 2-hour drive south of Auckland a few kilometres from the country town of Matamata. It is near the hot pools at Totara Springs <http://www.totarasprings.org.nz/> and the town gained some fame for being the home of Hobbiton – the little village made for the Lord of the Rings film trilogy. Registrations will be available in early 2015. Questions regarding the GA 2015: please contact: SICOGA2015@servas.org



## New Zealand: Tale of Two Islands

by Michael Johnson,  
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*Some of the most welcoming hosts in the world are in New Zealand, AND you have amazing scenery and uncrowded roads. If you are on a limited budget, the price guides here will help you plan a longer trip so you can visit more wonderful hosts. Prices are in NZ dollars, when I travelled in February 2014. Bon voyage.*

"It's more beautiful in South Island." I heard from travellers. But is it?

This article should give you a better idea.

Kiwis, as New Zealanders call themselves, include folks originating from Europe and other continents, and the Maori, not to be confused with Pacific Islanders – people who have arrived recently from places like

Samoa and Cook Islands. There are a few Maori villages set up for paid visits in the North Island for the purpose of visitors understanding how Maori people lived. When you visit such a Maori village, you will get more smiles by greeting them with "Kia ora" (hello) pronounced kee-oara. Over 20% of Kiwis speak Maori. In Maori all those with white skin (mostly of European origin) are *Pakeha* (pak-kee-ha).

Michael (one on the the left)



## Traveling in New Zealand:

### Hotels/Hostels:

The basic hotel/motel rooms and Bed & Breakfast start about NZ\$100/night/room. A backpacker dorm room bunk bed might be \$20-35 a night. Breakfast is not normally included in motels. In popular area like Queenstown, book rooms well in advance. Everything reasonably priced may be sold out. Shop around, book early, and ask about discounts even if they say there are none.

Hotel vacancies do not mean there are *affordable* rooms. For example, accommodation at a lodge in Lake Taupo was \$2,000 a night.

## Wi-Fi:

Unlike North America, finding free Wi-Fi to check your email is not as common. Tourist info areas and your hotel *may* give you 30 minutes free. Restaurants may charge a few dollars for an hour. Some town centres give you free Wi-Fi for up to an hour. Ask your Servas host before using theirs.

## Coffee:

You'll learn a "long black" is a large black coffee, and a short white is what you'd expect, a small coffee with milk.



All coffee is made fresh and is good quality, which may explain why it's around \$4 everywhere.

## Drinks:

At a grocery store I couldn't find a bottle of water under \$2. Bottled drinks are \$3 and up.

## Restaurants:

Outside the cities, some cafes are open for lunch – period. Most restaurants are open for lunch and supper, but many close from 2:30 to 5:30. We usually ate lunch out and dined with our Servas hosts in the evening. However when not being hosted we found filling evening meals (called "mains") from \$20 to \$30. As in France and Quebec, an entrée means an "appetizer" or starting

plate. These can easily be up to \$20 in an average establishment, but a "main" will fill you. Lunches often cost from \$17 to \$19. This very limited range was normal country-wide, whether you ordered ham and eggs or a chicken dinner.

Thai restaurants served consistently good, if not award-winning, lunches for under \$15. Great for vegetarians or those needing gluten-free. In Queenstown we had dinner (Pad Thai: \$17) one evening at the restaurant *@Thai*, a popular spot.

A melt-in-your-mouth NZ seasonal specialty "white bait" (tiny fish the width of a shoe lace) was \$30.

In NZ if the menu says \$19.50 you can put down a \$20 note and walk out. Tipping is mostly reserved for outstanding service.

## Early Closing:

In the town of Te Kuiti (population: 5000) a loud siren sounded at 5 pm. I first looked up to see if any missiles were heading my way. Then watched as the stores closed – and I mean ALL the stores. Even grocery stores in small towns can close at 5 pm, some closed at 1 pm on Saturday. Few stores open on Sunday. The touristy Arrowtown near Queenstown closed up tight at 4 pm on Saturday March 1st, except one art shop, run by a lovely German lady, open until 5. In Queenstown and Auckland we found shops open longer. Tourism in Queenstown – which is called *iSite* everywhere – closed at 7 pm. This is a great place to get maps, plan your travel, hotels, book trips and attractions.



## AA, a partner of AAA & CAA (3 companies assisting drivers when travelling)

AA often has free maps even if you're not a member. They can help CAA or AAA members book hotels.

## Taxis/Shuttles/Buses:

At the Christchurch Airport, officials suggested that we wait 20 minutes for the shuttle bus [cheaper than a taxi]. These shuttles take you to any address in the city for \$14.50/person. When I went to pay [\$29 for two persons], the driver handed me a \$1 coin before he took my \$30 in notes.

If taking a taxi, ask about traffic delays, which can easily double the "normal" taxi fare, as we found weeks earlier in Sydney, Australia.

## Cars:

Regular octane gasoline, called petrol outside of North America, is "91." It was about \$2.20 throughout NZ. Diesel is also available.

## GPS:

If you don't have a GPS, you may not need one. Outside of Auckland most routes are fairly simple. You could buy one online as many people are selling GPSs and their cars/campers when they leave. I found a GPS comforting; no need to consult maps while getting used to driving on the left side of the road. Because instruments are reversed you'll see drivers (including me) turning on their windshield (windscreen in NZ) wipers to signal a turn. For a long trip a GPS is useful, not just for reaching destinations but to find fuel or restaurants/cafes. Buy a basic one and leave it with your last Servas host.

## **BUY or RENT:**

If you are staying months instead of weeks, consider buying a car, a common practice here. Often people convert a hatchback car to a *camper*, adding a bed at the back on a raised board.

## **Rental Cars:**

We booked with A2B rental. A 2014 Toyota Corolla hatchback was \$35/day because we rented for over 19 days. [My credit card covered insurance extras.] You can find lower rates, even with this company, but your car may be 10 years old – i.e. no USB plug to play your favourite tunes, no cruise control, poorer fuel economy and it leaves one wondering if it may break down.

## **CAMPERVAN or CAR?:**

1. Camper rental prices are ~\$100/day compared to ~\$40 for a car.
2. Driving on the left side of the road is tending (at least for a while) with a SMALL car. Imagine driving in some rural areas on narrow, very winding roads with a wide, long campervan. (Note: JUCY JUICY Rental has some very compact campervans for two persons that drive much like a normal car.)
3. Don't forget to add the cost of extra fuel, campsites, parking problems, longer driving time with a slower vehicle that can't overtake slow trucks easily.

## **Rental cars, continued:**

Especially if you are planning to rent a campervan, consider starting as far south as you plan to be and head north. Almost every tourist lands in Auckland and drives their campervan south and flies back to Auckland, so rental companies often give BIG discounts to drive the campervans back north. This can work to a lesser extent for rental cars also.

Online, I found one site offering 3

days free rental of a campervan WITH a free full tank of gasoline (petrol) from Queenstown to Christchurch and another rental from Christchurch to Auckland with the same conditions including the cost of the expensive ferry fees from South to North Island. That gave someone 6 free days of travel with free built-in accommodation. That pace is way too fast for site-seeing, but one could rent a normal car to drive south, then exchange it and drive north with a campervan. Expect a drop-off fee for leaving the car.

## **Drive in circles:**

Another efficient way to see New Zealand is driving in circles – let me explain. We picked up our car in Auckland, circled around from Coromandel to Rotorua, Lake Taupo and the Waitomo Caves and back to the Auckland airport with one rental car (called “hire car” there). We then flew to Christchurch and drove south to Dunedin and Queenstown, coming back to Christchurch via roads near the mountains, passing beautiful lakes with a view of the Southern Alps.

## **Bus/Train:**

In 1995 I toured NZ for a month, often using buses and trains, but didn't this trip. Backpacker buses, such as Nakedbus and Kiwi Experience, are popular and some train routes are reasonable, depending on your travel preferences. Check sites like lonelyplanet.com for details.

## **Must-see sites:**

### **Coromandel Peninsula:**

The quiet towns here are a pleasure to tour – you'll think you're back in the 1950s, especially due to the friendly manner, so typical throughout the country.

The “Hot Water Beach” is famous, with hundreds of people looking for just the right spot – digging madly

**Coromandel Peninsula**



with shovels to find sand that was not too hot and not too cold. The “just the right place” was a VERY narrow strip down to the sea and only a few found it. Because of the crowds it was not so magical for me. If you go, don't miss the intricate lines in the stone hills by the beach.



**Hot Water Beach**

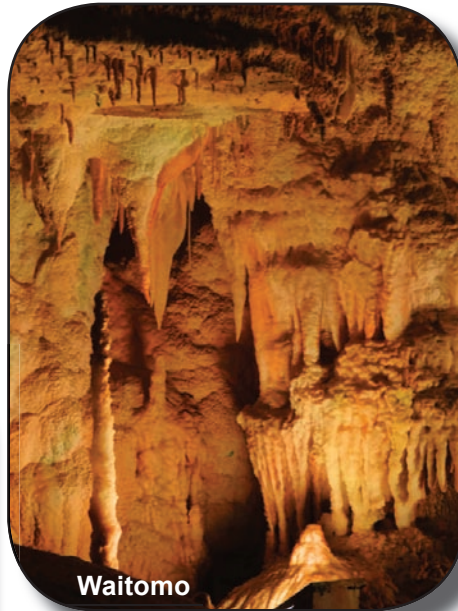
## Rotorua area:

Geysers and bubbling mud. The Maori village nearby showed everyday life – perhaps just for the tourists they tossed a chunk of raw meat on a rope into 130 C hot springs to cook it. The coloured ponds and lakes, many steaming all day, were very attractive.



## Picturesque Lake Taupo:

This lake looks like a perfect post-card scene. You can just stare at the blue or go for adventure. (Write the author for details on superb sailing and jetboat trips there.)



## The Glow Worm Caves

These caves in Waitomo are a magical, unique, serene experience, definitely worth the price of admission. You are led down stairs and paths through a stalactite- and stalagmite-filled cave. Your guide points out interesting formations with a flashlight in the somewhat dimly lit cavern. This is to prepare your eyes for the climax. You are boarded on a simple metal boat, holding about 20. The guide asks for silence and pulls on an overhead rope as you glide silently into the dark. One can barely see anything until you enter the glow worm section. Suddenly hundreds of blue-white radiant creatures appear on the cave ceiling resembling a brilliant starry sky. The experience is so satisfying, inspiring and relaxing, making me wonder how anyone can ever be bored when there is nature. Afterward, you can walk by yourself to nearby shallow caves and beautiful waterways and falls. Don't miss it.

## South Island, from south to north:

Milford Sound and Doubtful Sound are wonderful experiences, loved by devoted hikers.

Queenstown: The energy of adventurous young people is enough reason to go. Here you can do almost any bungee jumping, jet boating and death-defying activity. We chose the calmer gondola ride.

Arrowtown nearby is touristy, but quaint. There are many trips in the area that I'm sure you'll love.

Otago Peninsula: is an hour's drive east of Dunedin— extremely beautiful, but keep your eyes on the twisting narrow road if you get away from the coast where the road is just winding. You'll be rewarded at the end with a visit to see nesting yellow-eyed penguins in that you view from sheltered "blinds". You may also find a few blue penguins waddling ashore.

Christchurch: This city is a monument to the power of nature and the resiliency and determination of people to overcome disaster [the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes].

On the Avon River in Christchurch, gondolas are "punted" with poles.



I contacted the punting company and explained I was doing a story on New Zealand highlights. A very friendly employee, Alistair, offered to take us punting the next day for free. Alistair explained highlights of the Avon River. After a half an hour of silently gliding along the water listening to the high-pitched cicadas and slipping under low-hung branches, I told our pole-pushing guide I didn't want to keep him from his paying customers. He assured me he had all day, because this was his day off! He said, "I can't believe they pay me to do something I enjoy so much."

We learned more about this generous chap, Alistair, when we took him out to lunch. This kind of uncommon hospitality is quite common in New Zealand.

**unforgettable smiling faces**

From hosts who picked us up at the airport, to one who gave us an antique pharmacy bottle, the generosity and camaraderie never stopped. Many of our hosts in their 60s and 70s were quite fit, hiking and biking more than younger Canadians I know.

Come for the amazing places, stay for the unforgettable smiling faces.

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