

New Zealand Travelogue 2004

Installment one: Getting acclimated

February 26-29, 2004

The adventure to Down Under has begun, and it's been wonderful, warm, and wet. I'm having a fabulous time, and I'm glad that I made so few specific plans, because they'd all be out the door by now anyway. The byword of backpacking in New Zealand is "flexibility," without which you are lost.

The journey to the south Pacific began uneventfully enough. The 4:30AM cab arrived 7 precious, caffeine-free minutes early, so any thoughts of last-minute preparations, whatever they might have been, were pretty much toast. (Toast. Hmm. Yes, breakfast would have been nice.) "Random" selection at the airport put my bags through an extra layer of security check that, I was warned, would fog my film, so a quick scrambled search resulted in the stuffing of pockets and a few extra curses at both George W. and Osama bin Laden both. And John Ashcroft, just because. You can never curse John Ashcroft too often.

One novel, two bad movies, a lot of really terrible food and several glasses of wine later, we touched down at Auckland. Lesson number one about traveling to New Zealand came minutes later in customs. Don't bring a tent; and if you do, read your customs form carefully. They want it declared, and god forbid you should have a stray twig, mound of dirt, or creepy crawly bug festering inside. Luckily I'm fastidious about cleaning apres-camp so mine made it through with the \$200 insta-fine. (And my Nike hike's got a free cleaning to boot. No pun intended. Sort of.) My only penalty was having to repack all of my gear and my entire oversized duffel bag on the floor of the customs waiting room before shoving it into a \$46 cab for the midnight ride to the hostel.

Lesson number two. Downtown Auckland hostels are not primarily sleep sites. They are party magnets. My room, situated directly over the in-house bar, benefited from the truly impressive sound system therein installed. Nothing to do but venture down there and join the gang for a quick brew or two, right? Oops. Just missed it. While everyone around me had a full pint or cocktail glass, they were fortunate enough to have made it to the bar before 1 AM.

Not I. Taps were closed, though the music played on. Hmm. Corrective action required. Fortunately, you can't spin around holding a yo-yo in Auckland without hitting another bar, and I found one that proffered two local brews - the acceptable but boring Tui's, an amber of sorts, and Monteith's black, a sweet stout with a crisp bite of roasted malt that satisfies. By the time I'd downed those, the hostel bar party was over, and sleep was on its way.

A lazy morning led up to a bus tour of Auckland on Stray Tours Ltd. This led to a rather rash snap decision. The long and short of it is, by the time I'd been in New Zealand oh, twelve hours, I'd already bungy jumped off a 40 meter bridge. And obtained my first souvenir - a video of this

lunacy. To be shown as part of the photo extravaganza when (if?) I return to Portland. I also met a bunch of really cool people, including a few I may travel with starting tomorrow.

Later, out in search of a beer, I ran across our tour leader, soaking up suds with his mates, and he invited me on the spot to a barbie. Free beer and food sounded good, so off I went. Ah, Lesson Three. Barbies in En Zed don't carry with them the same variety and quantity of vegetarian-ish side dishes that American ones do. Let's just say, I got my calories in liquid form Friday night.

The gang proceeded en masse to the Globe, a tres hip club off Victoria Street, for more alcohol and some chaotic body movements that passed for dancing. I ran into my bungy jump co-volunteer, Leo from Israel, and a half dozen others from the bus, and met tons of other friendly tourists and Kiwis before stumbling back to Base (by coincidence or otherwise, the name of my hostel).

Saturday was supposed to be a day at the beach. Supposed to be. It's not a good idea in a cyclone, which is the weather we're experiencing. It's just off the coast and the shoulder sits over the city like a bully demanding lunch money. It's warm - probably in the upper 60's at least - but the wind and rain have destroyed more umbrellas today than probably even exist in Portland. So Plan B was the Auckland Museum, a nice collection of Maori, colonial, and modern art and history, and an idea shared by half of this city's 1.2 million residents and 68 trillion tourists. Somehow, though, I met up with even more of my fellow Stray bus tourists. Lesson four: when you jump off a bridge, people tend to remember you and pick you out of a crowd. Even in New Zealand.

A quick nap and a nice Indian dinner refreshed me for a run at the blackjack table at the casino, conveniently located in the heart of town. \$100 went fast as the dealer was quite nice to herself for the first hour or so. Ah, but that was only half the gambling budget for this night. I reinvested and continued to enjoy the company at my table (you forget that this comraderie costs you money sometimes). A gal from Winnipeg my left traded jabs with Tex, a loud 30-something guy from Dallas to my right who felt it was his duty to teach everyone else how to play cards. Hilariously, all the rookies were winning and this seasoned pro was keeping the house in business. A few dealers later, Tex said something to our now Irish dealer Andrew that got him moved to a different table, and I explained to the table that not all of our ambassadors of goodwill were Texan.

Some Aucklanders filled up the table and we suddenly began winning. One gal in particular had a magic ability to call it when the dealer was going to bust, even in the most unlikely situations, and following her coattails I ended up \$40 ahead at 1 AM. Minus the \$12 for two Stella Artois. Lesson Five: no free drinks in NZ casinos.

Sunday AM and it's still raining. So much for sailing in the Bay of Islands today. Looks like a good day for caving.

More later. Good on yas, mates.

Gary