

New Zealand Travelogue 2004

Installment three: "Remember to breathe!"

March 3-5, 2004

Tena Koutou!

It's no accident that New Zealand is the adrenaline capital of the world. And I think Taupo is the adrenal gland of the country. (We'll see. Queenstown has quite the reputation too.) There is so much to do and so much of it quickens the heart rate that it's hard to imagine going back to a "normal" life at times.

Tuesday morning was partly cloudy, a little cool (but warmer than Monday), and not too windy. Perfect conditions for jumping out of an airplane strapped to a perfect stranger. At 9:30 the limo picked five of us up from our backpacker hostels and whisked us off to the airfield. We had very little time for second thoughts as we exited the car, for as we entered the hangar, we were immediately issued blue overalls and a harness to put on. Our jump partners explained how to connect everything, helped us tighten all the straps, snapped a few photos, and packed three of us (and our jump partners) into a small plane with no seats and a clear plastic "door" that looked more like a venetian blind. I flew with Molly and Gareth from Wales, both probably in their early 20's. Molly grinned and laughed the whole way while Gareth got whiter and whiter every second. Poor Gareth, however, became the subject of the documentary video as his jump partner had a tiny digital camcorder strapped to his wrist.

When we reached 11,900 feet, our jump partners buckled themselves onto our backs, then gave us last minute (and our only) instructions on how to jump. At 12,000 feet the door slid upwards and the cold wind whipped our faces. Molly was by the door, so she went first. She cheerfully swung her feet out of the plane, wrapped them underneath, leaned back, and let her coach push her into the wild blue yonder. At this point, Gareth nearly got sick, and definitely approached panic. "Let's go," his coach urged. "No F***ing way!" he shouted back over and over. "Let's go," his coach repeated and didn't brook any further opposition. Eyes closed, Gareth allowed his feet to hang out of the plane. Moments later his screams - a mix of joy and terror - could be briefly heard as he too disappeared out of sight.

I was last. "OK, Gary," Rob (my coach) said, "slide over to the door." Sure. You bet. Right. For some reason, my body did as it was told. My feet gripped the bottom of the plane for dear life. "Lean back," Rob instructed. I arched my back into his chest. "OK, let's go!" he laughed, and we leaned into nothingness. The wind teared my eyes, but when they cleared, all I could see was a big, fluffy cloud racing closer and closer. I whooped, I cheered, I mentally photographed every microsecond. After 45 seconds that felt like 10, we entered the cloud, white and wet, and suddenly the wind stopped. The chute was open! My body shifted from face-down to seated in the harness, and for a heart-stopping moment Rob made an adjustment to the harness that suddenly loosened me from him. "I'm just adjusting this so you can sit more comfortably," he reassured me, as he began circling and swooping easily through the firmament. The clouds

disappeared and I could see the green hills and blue lake below. As he continued circling I got dizzy and nearly asked him to stop, but he managed to read my mind and paused in his airborne gymnastics. He showed me how to steer and then we watched Molly land in the field below. We followed her in, sliding in quickly on our butts on the damp grass. Gareth followed moments later - apparently they opened his chute sooner, lengthening his hang time.

They popped beers for each of us (it had to be after noon somewhere) as we watched the video of Gareth and they prepared our photo CD's. Meanwhile the other couple was airborne. We watched them land, and waiting for them to decompress, I felt the adrenaline slowing down. I couldn't have that! I sipped on a cup of coffee while chatting with the woman who packs the chutes. I don't know about anyone else, but I think I'd want to pack my own. "They're too lazy," she laughed.

Soon it was time to head back to Taupo. I needed more thrills. On the recommendation of the hostel staff, I dashed off to Rock'n Ropes, a rope course north of town. This time I could use my own cameras, and I met Garaint from Wales and Cat from Leeds who were already on the course. I joined them on the trapeze jump. First, strapped to a safety line, I climbed a 30-foot pole on iron steps pounded deeply into the rough wood. At the top, I stood on the top of the 18-in diameter post. (Getting onto that from the steps was the hard part.) The challenge is to jump from this post and grab onto a trapeze 6 feet away. On the count of three, I made the leap, and thankfully swung to and fro, clinging desperately to the trapeze. Yes, there was a safety line, so mentally you know you wouldn't die. But there were people watching. Death by humiliation would have been worse than the crash landing.

Then to the rope swing. After another 30-foot climb, I stood on a platform as a rope was clipped to my harness. I inched right to the edge of the platform and stepped off. I had expected to begin swinging immediately, but to my surprise, I was instead greeted by more freefall for the first few seconds. The ground rushed closer as I hurtled downward, wondering if the rope was adjusted properly... then it swung me outwards, now at an arching angle toward the ground (and my digicam, being operated by Garaint), and up again swiftly. 10-12 swings later, Garaint caught my legs and I climbed down on a painter's ladder to the muddy ground.

The afternoon was spent in a spa after my attempt to go jet boating was foiled as there were no other customers for the afternoon run and they wouldn't go out with just one passenger. The closest thing to an adrenaline rush was the hot water slide into the cold pool, which I did about 6-8 times. Otherwise it was hot water and bubble jets for almost 2 hours. I made a quick dinner back at the hostel and then joined Cat and Garaint for way, way too many beers at Mulligan's. Suddenly it was 2 AM and my alarm was set for 6. Ouch.

6 AM? What was I thinking? At 6:20, the bus arrived and about a dozen of us clambered sleepily aboard for a shuttle ride to Tangariro National Park. The bus made several more stops and soon it was full. Sitting next to me was a sleepy 18-year old from Norwich named Laura who, it turned out, was deathly afraid of heights. This became important later. Did it ever. We arrived at nearly 9 AM at the beginning of the Tangariro crossing, with cold wind whipping our jackets and numbing our shutter-happy fingers. I was wearing four layers and was still cold. But the scenery was magnificent. First we crossed what looked like the battle scene at Rohan in LOTR (we

couldn't verify this though). To our right, the entire day, was Mt Ngauruhoe, better known to most Rings fans as Mt Doom.

Up, up, up we climbed, first on a nice path, then on rocky and sandy soil and over bubbling streams, and on up an icy slope. It was at this point that Laura panicked. Clinging to the mountainside and crying, she insisted that she could not go further, that it was too dangerous, they really should warn people about this. What had been a sort of cheerful sardonic critique of an otherwise amazing walk now turned serious as she refused to budge. 'I want a helicopter,' she wailed. You are not getting a helicopter, I insisted. Besides, how would we even call one? Get up. I'll help you go forward, but not backward. I can't, she cried. You can. You will.

She did. She literally crawled on her hands and knees over the top of that mountain, a good mile at least, with me tagging along and giving her the occasional push up onto the next rock or ledge, and more frequently, taking the opportunity to use up a lot of film and digital memory. At the top we stopped for lunch, then crossed the amazingly gorgeous Red Crater and Blue Lakes. On the descent, Laura's panic completely subsided and she cheerfully crossed sections twice as dangerous as on the ascent, as she suddenly realized she was over her fear of heights. It was hot here, and I peeled off layer after layer until we reached the cooler forested area. We made it back just minutes before the appointed time for the bus to leave, so we did not delay the group in spite of the slow progress over the top due to her crawling and my incessant photography.

From this day, in addition to the memories, I got one great souvenir - a sunburn. I love it. I always wanted a sunburn in winter.

Upon returning to the hostel, I had to move from my room into my tent, as they were fully booked. I fell asleep on the couch in the lounge in front of a droning TV and woke up who knows when to drag myself off to the tent. It was a chilly night and I did not sleep nearly as much as I needed to. At 7:30 I went straight to the office and booked a room for Friday night. After a huge breakfast, I spent an easy morning making some further bookings. Then I drove 2 hours across the island back to Waitomo, this time successfully booking an excursion into the glow-worm caves - "Black Water Rafting" as it is called. A group of about 10 of us changed into our swimsuits, then pulled on wetsuits and helmets. Grabbing a tire tube, we sloshed into the cave opening with Sarah and James, our guides. The water was cold - about 45 degrees - and the air was little warmer, but we barely felt it. We alternately walked, floated, and splashed downstream, sometimes with our helmet lanterns on, other times off in the pitch black, as the blue light of the glow worms (actually larvae of an indigenous insect) lit the path. In some places we had to turn our backs to the stream, hang onto the tube, and splash backwards over waterfalls, usually going underwater for a moment at the bottom. At the end, we floated down a brownwater stream in daylight to the reconnoiter point, showered, changed back into street clothes, and warmed ourselves with hot bagels in the cafe.

My drive back to Taupo was faster as the traffic was lighter. I had a light dinner with my new roommates, Andreeanne and Miree from Quebec, who are traveling with me today to Wellington. In the evening I went back to Mulligan's with Catriona from Glasgow and Rebecca from (coincidentally) Norwich, where we swapped travel stories and eventually our beliefs about the afterlife and the occult.

Shortly, Miree and Andreeanne will be jumping out of a plane. My job is to videotape. That's fine for today.

Tomorrow I head to the south island where the scenery is even more spectacular, I am told. I can't wait.

Ka kite ano,

Gary