

New Zealand Travelogue 2004

Installment four: Heading South

March 6-11, 2004

6 March 04

The trip south from Taupo to Wellington was uneventful but definitely lightened by the company of Andreeanne and Mareille from Montreal. Even when they lapsed into fits of French, 10% of which I could understand (i.e. practically none), it was better having company than driving alone. Andreeanne was the more talkative of the two, but all three of us shared the experience of Taupo, and in particular, skydiving there. We each had reservations at different hostels that night, but they weren't far from each other, so we met up for dinner and drinks later, with Mareille effectively blowing off her “boyfriend” - a guy she'd met on the road, who traveled to Wellington just to meet up with her – to hang out with us. I didn't understand but then, she's basically French, and I rarely understand the French way of thinking anyway.

Wellington provided two unique experiences for me in New Zealand – first, the six-person hostel dorm room. Dragon boat races had occurred that day and everything was booked up, so I shared “sleep” with five perfect strangers. Thankfully, none were loud snorers, but as it turns out, Wildlife hostel is located in the heart of street party En Zed. Some locals provided “entertainment” until the wee hours, as the gal with the loud voice finally convinced Gerald to go somewhere else. The before and after of that watershed event is not particularly absorbing.

07 March 04

Two old pals from Taupo greeted me at the ferry the next morning – Becky and Laura. Laura was the one who'd panicked on Mt Tongariro; Becky was another of the seemingly limitless 23-year-old (or so) British women who seem to have taken over the buyer's side of kiwi tourism. Once again, what would have been a rather boring 3-hour ride across the water was lightened by the presence of travel buddies. Ironically, both had been in the same hostel as me the night before too.

Once across the water and in my rental car, I drove to Blenheim, heart of NZ wine country, for a taste of Marlborough's best. That's right, it's Marlborough country. The winery I selected, partly by reputation and partly by convenience, was Montana winery, primarily a Sauvignon Blanc house but recently a major player in the pinot world as well. The tasting at the end (yes, let's cut right to the good part, shall we?) included the very nice sauv blanc, an insipid and too-sweet chardonnay, a cab-merlot, and a dessert wine. One of the other tourists also asked for a pinot reserve sample, which we were blessed with shortly thereafter. I bought a bottle of the cab-sauv reserve (the label for this particular wine was called Corban, so I had to!) and their top-label pinot; I enjoyed the cab-sauv over the next 3 nights, but haven't yet cracked the pinot. Waiting for the right moment.

The next stop was a Cork and Keg brewpub in Renwick, some 30K away. After sampling the pilsener, “ale” (essentially an English Ordinary Bitter), and “dark” (brown ale), I surprised myself by opting for a 12-oz of the pils. It was, unlike the others, malty and flavorful, with a bit of a hop kick, particularly in the nose and finish – nicely done. The other two were fairly bland replicas of each other, the darker one just a titch sharper due to the apparent small amount of extra roasted malts in the grist. I also learned here that “chilis” does not mean jalapeno or other hot peppers, but chili with meat. As a result, half of my nachos, purchased to soak up alcohol, were left behind.

Not to worry. Nelson, my destination, was not far, and on the way I gained some more company – Daniel from Saskatoon and Fedena from Cork, Ireland, hitchhikers who had been on the road nearly 4 months together and had another couple of months to go. Like many young folks who come here, they were working their way across this beautiful country, typically on farms or the like, earning enough money to move on to the next beautiful spot they'd heard good things about. They were on a mission to take all of the Great Walks in New Zealand, and like me had just come to the South Island. There are 4 or 5 Great Walks, including a longer version of my Tongariro trek, and the one they were heading to now – the Abel Tasman tramp, a four-day walk along a very gorgeous albeit bug-infested coastline. We traded stories of New Zealand and elsewhere, and the time passed very quickly before I dropped them off in Nelson central.

Soon I was checked in to what is probably the nicest hostel of my stay so far. Clean, well arranged, with friendly and helpful staff and a well-laid-out kitchen. I took advantage almost right away. I had given my perishables away to one of my cute Wellington bunk-mates (and, unfortunately, my flashlight as well... I'm going to have to pack more rationally and carefully in the future) so it was time for a run to New World Market. It yielded ingredients for a very nice stir-fry that got me sleepy enough to get to bed at a reasonable hour. For my rising time was, once again, not reasonable.

08 March 04

By 7 AM I was fed, showered, and packed, as the hostel needed to move me to a different room while I was away today. The Kiwi Kayakers bus swung by 10 minutes later, and I found Martina, a Swiss woman staying at my hostel, already on the bus, with Jeff, an Englishman, on their way to a kayak trip of their own. Theirs was shorter and cheaper than mine, as the one I booked started with a water taxi ride to Anchorage Point, and ended many hours later on one of the most northernmost reaches of the south island. My kayak-mate was Rory, another Brit, this one from Yorkshire. Joining us were a fifty-ish German couple and a young English couple, Simon and – I forget her name. Our leader, Marty, a Kiwi from the Northlands, led us out to the Tasman Sea, and Rory and I learned how to work together very quickly. He was navigator, I was driver, which gave me access to the dry bag bungied to the top of the kayak – very key, as it held all four of my cameras. (I couldn't decide which to leave behind, so all came.)

We paddled about 1.5 hours past wonderful scenery, most of which I captured on film or memory of some sort (the digicamcorder got a lot of use), and Rory was most patient with me at this meant I took frequent paddling breaks. Still, we were the strongest kayakers in the group, managing to stay ahead of or alongside the others even with Peter Jackson Jr. in the back

chewing up film (and not paddling at the time). Then we stopped for a break, and Marty, bless him, set up a stove and spread out morning tea. Very civilized. Scones, biscuits, jam, the works. I had worked up quite a sweat from all this paddling (ha!), partly due to the many layers of everything I was wearing, including the impermeable rain gear. I stripped down to just the swimsuit and, while Marty was slicing scones and the others relaxed on beach towels, I jumped into the Tasman Sea for a very brief swim. Very brief. That water was COLD. As I returned to the group, toweling off, Marty smirked and commented, "I wondered if anyone was going to go for a swim today." Leave it to me, I'll figure out the next nutty thing to do.

We pushed off after a refreshing snack and Marty led us to some offshore islands populated by cormorants and seals. We were treated to the sight of mama seals nursing her young, the young pups taking feeding breaks to scamper across the rocks, and mama barking in dismay at her lack of privacy. Cormorants by the dozen sunned and occasionally pecked at something, either to entertain us or grab a quick snack of sandfly and seaweed. Then we crossed some open sea and landed at our lunch site, a nice stretch of beach along a lagoon, where Marty barbecued beef and veggie bento, the latter for me and the English gal. Marty sure knows how to throw a kayak lunch party. We also had pasta, salad, bread, juice, and fruit, and plenty of it. After lunch, some of the others decided to take a swim too, led by the German woman. Simon waded in only above his knees, unfortunately revealing for the great mirth of both women the startling effect of cold water on manhood through his swimsuit. Another reason to just jump in and stay under water.

After lunch we paddled out to a much larger island with incredible rock formations that an equally incredible pack of seals had discovered before us. Dozens of seals and pups lay and played on the deep red, bright yellow, black, and silver rocks along the shore. Oyster-catchers with bright-orange beaks scavenged among them, and the ever-present black-and-white cormorants filled in any available gaps. From there we paddled to our final destination, our pick-up point back on the mainland, which included a brief photo break, as if I hadn't done enough of that already.

My ride back to Nelson was on the Abel Tasman coach, as I was the only Nelson tourist on the full-day kayak tour; Martina and Jeff's tours had ended an hour or so earlier. At the hostel, Martina invited me to join her and Jeff for a beer later, which I did, after a befuddled hour of trip bookings. I had gotten very confused about dates and thought I'd double-booked the 11th – one room in Franz Josef and one in Queenstown. So I canceled the Queenstown one, then minutes later – while checking email, in fact – discovered that I now had NO room for the 11th. After a bit of a scramble all goodness was restored. Shows you what an active day of kayaking can do to the mind. I met them at a nearby pool hall where my usual luck prevailed. That is, after sinking 6 or 7 balls (partly due to my own efforts) to my opponent's one or two, I then would scratch on the 8-ball, forfeiting the game. Martina won the first 4 or 5 games before our male egos righted itself and Jeff won the next two. (Did I say "our"?) We played far too late into the evening and stumbled on home for some shut-eye.

09 March 04

Another day of transit. I left Nelson about 9 AM and drove south, around the Abel Tasman Park (there are no roads in the park) through deep valleys among steep mountains, with lush rainforest

growth of dark evergreens and bright ferns crowding the narrow highways, amidst a mix of sunshine and misty fog. I made it to Greymouth by 1:00 and had a quick lunch, then popped over to the coast to read and smell the salt air. At 2:00 I was in Monteith's brewery for a fun tour and a taster. Monteith's is a fairly significant microbrewery, perhaps the largest micro in NZ, and they produce some very fine beers, including their "Black," or stout, that I most frequently choose. The brewery's uniqueness is that all of their hot water is heated in a single coal-fired burner. The resulting hot water and steam is used for all boiling, cleaning, etc. in the entire operation. The beer samples themselves included a fairly nice pale ale ("Original"), although not hoppy by Portland standards; a decent "pilsener" (made with the same ale yeast and "aged" 3 weeks, just like their ales), a bland golden billed as a North German lager (?), a very interesting "Frank Zappa Summer Ale" made with a lot of ginger, closely resembling a ginger beer; a malty, nutty Celtic ale; and the Black. I could only take small sips as I needed to drive on. But Erin, a young Canadian sitting at the tasting table with me, reminded me that Punikaiki, or "Pancake Rocks", was just 40K away. A must-see.

So back north I went, this time up the spectacular rocky coast, with steep cliffs (45-60 degrees at times) and offshore rock formations diverting my attention from an already challenging task - driving, nearly sober, on the left side of the road. I made it in one piece, some 45 minutes and several frames of photos later, for the short stroll around the viewing walkway. The rocks themselves are thin jags of eroded limestone hundreds of feet high and perhaps a dozen or two feet wide at the base, sharp like razors at the top, and etched by wind and water with various crevices and patterns all the way up and down. Reds, yellows, tans, and black again graced nature's palette, framed in the greenery of seaside rainforest plants, the blue-green and white spray foam of the sea, and the pale blues, greys, and whites of a cloudy summer sky.

It was a two-hour drive to Franz Josef where my instant meal-in-a-bag (chili) greatly amused a couple of young guys from Liverpool. After preparing for Wednesday's hike, I returned to the lounge for some reading and a quick email check. Two 20-something Canadian women, Maxine and Melissa, invited me to join them and Sandy, the late-20's Scottish guy who checked me in to the hostel, to some nachos and cards. I passed on the "nachos" (instant everything on corn chips, nuked to soggy perfection) but enjoyed the competition. Sandy broke out a decent cheap Sauv Blanc and Maxine convinced him to put on some music, then unlock the pool table (we were well after hours by this point). We played a bazillion bad games of pool on a mini-table with miniature billiard balls and cue sticks that looked like they were salvaged from the Titanic while we knocked off the rest of the wine. At 1 AM I left the party for my bed.

10 March 04

I woke to the sound of splashing water and I hoped against hope that it was the shower, but I knew that the shower was nowhere near me, and a glance out the window revealed a rainstorm that would do the Deep South proud. It was still dumping when I walked to the Alpine Centre to join a group for a glacier climb. And when we trudged out onto the path to the glacier's face, while we traded our soaked hiking boots for The Guiding Company's ice-ready models (complete with cramp-ons), and up onto the blue ice. On our right as we walked, nearly straight-down cliffs spewed dozens of impressive waterfalls into the canyon where the day before there was only one. From time to time the mountain would erupt with a crash like thunder as the rain

would wash stone and silt down a new path, abruptly creating dramatic "black waterfalls" before our very eyes.

We trudged through ice-cold streams, leaped over crevices, stomped up makeshift ice steps cut by Bernie, our cheerful Kiwi glacier guide, and Gavin, his more pragmatic Scottish partner. There were twelve tourists with them: five Americans, the other four being a couple from LA and one from Colorado; two Japanese girls, college students learning English; and five Brits, three of them 20-something guys in a group, plus bookish redhead Danny and young punky Kirsty. The latter two and I formed our own little group as we needed to commiserate. At the half-way point, the LA couple turned back, saying, "It doesn't rain in LA. And we're not having any fun." No fun? Walking in the pouring rain on 700 meters of extremely slippery ice in heavy waterproof clothes and not-waterproof boots, wondering if the glacier would slide under our feet or the mountain would collapse upon us at any minute? How could anyone say that's not fun?

Well, believe it or not, it was. Sort of. Well, it was interesting, and anyway, it was warm. Oddly, a warm breeze blew across the face of the glacier (no doubt contributing to its rapid melt) which warmed us as we walked. The only really cold part was when we went down and through an "ice cave," really a crevasse with a tiny bridge of a roof, and the melting glacier water dripped everywhere - including, ouch, down my neck and back. But deep walls of blue ice surrounded us and chilled the frigid water flowing at our feet, temporarily numbing them until we could get the heck out of there.

We had to turn back shortly thereafter as Gavin and Bernie noticed that the waterfalls were turning brown, meaning that the silt was washing away and posing the danger of the rocks "blowing", or blasting down the mountain and clogging the river. If the river flooded, we'd not be able to get back across. With relief we trudged slowly back down the glacier, eventually breaking for a quick lunch and hot chocolate before loading onto the bus, soaked and tired and ready for a dry pair of socks.

Kirsty was staying at the hostel next door, which boasted a hot tub, and I snuck over there for a quick (1-hour) soak as the various international cohorts lazed through. A sauna at my hostel followed - I wanted DRY warmth! After dinner I joined Kirsty for several beers at apparently the only pub in town. Another good friend made in a single day of travels. Cool.

11 March 04

This day was mostly one of traversing further south. I had left my jacket in the Internet "bus" the night before (where most of this was written), so I had to wait until 9 AM to retrieve it before I could leave Franz Josef. It was a much clearer day, so I drove first to the glacier for some blue-sky shots from the viewing deck. I had no desire to get back on that ice.

I made my way to Haast, where I checked at the Info Centre for road conditions - always a good idea when it rains around here. The highway ahead was closed until 1 PM, but there were some nice waterfalls to visit, so I opted for that to kill time rather than waiting with all the other tourists in line at the gate. Two German women, Julia and Silke, got the same advice at the same time, so we sojourned more or less together to the Roaring Billy Falls, where we chatted about

New Zealand, life, and why we shouldn't have to work, as we skipped rocks and soaked up the very welcome sun. I drove on to Queenstown, where I am now, "The Adrenaline Capital of the World," through some incredible scenery. They don't call these mountains The Remarkables for nothing. Very steep, covered toe to shoulder with tightly packed ferns and deciduous trees of various stripes, and topped by brown jagged rocks and occasionally snow, with bright blue lakes and rivers at their feet, it was a sensational ride, frequently interrupted by expressions of "Oh my god I just HAVE to have a picture of this," which my car somehow complied with. You'd think I was in charge of where it goes, or something.

I SOOOO look forward to Queenstown. In fact... it's time. Until later,

Good on yas, mates!

Gary