

Welcome to New Zealand

As the planet heats up environmentally and politically, it's good to know that New Zealand exists. This uncrowded, green, peaceful and accepting country is the ultimate escape.

Walk on the Wild Side

There are just 4.6 million New Zealanders, scattered across 268,021 sq km: bigger than the UK with one-fourteenth the population. Filling in the gaps are the sublime forests, mountains, lakes, beaches and fiords that have made NZ one of the best hiking (locals call it 'tramping') destinations on earth. Tackle one of nine epic 'Great Walks' – you've probably heard of the Heaphy and Milford Tracks – or just spend a few hours wandering along a beach, paddling a canoe or mountain biking through some easily accessible wilderness.

The Real 'Big Easy'

Forget New Orleans... NZ can rightly claim the 'Big Easy' crown for the sheer ease of travel here. This isn't a place where you encounter many on-the-road frustrations: buses and trains run on time; roads are in good nick; ATMs proliferate; pickpockets, scam merchants and bedbug-ridden hostels are few and far between; and the food is unlikely to send you running for the nearest public toilets (usually clean and stocked with the requisite paper). And there are no snakes, and only one poisonous spider – the rare katipo, sightings of which are considered lucky. This decent nation is a place where you can relax and enjoy (rather than endure) your holiday.

Māori Culture

If you're even remotely interested in rugby, you'll have heard of NZ's all-conquering All Blacks, who would never have become back-to-back world champions without their unstoppable Māori players. But this is just one example of how Māori culture impresses itself on contemporary Kiwi life: across NZ you can hear Māori language, watch Māori TV, see main-street *marae* (meeting houses), join in a *hangi* (Māori feast) or catch a cultural performance with traditional Māori song, dance and usually a blood-curdling *haka* (war dance). You might draw the line at contemplating *ta moko*, traditional Māori tattooing (often applied to the face).

Food, Wine & Beer

Kiwi food was once a bland echo of a boiled British Sunday roast – but these days NZ chefs find inspiration in new-world culinary oceans, especially the South Pacific with its abundant seafood and encircling cuisines. And don't go home without seeking out some local faves: paua (abalone), kina (sea urchin) and kumara (sweet potato). For picnic fodder, head to NZ's fab farmers markets. Thirsty? NZ's cool-climate wineries have been filling trophy cabinets for decades (sublime pinot noir and sauvignon blanc), and the country's craft-beer scene is exploding. Contemporary coffee culture is also firmly entrenched.



Why I Love New Zealand

By Charles Rawlings-Way, Writer

As an English-born Australian, every trip to New Zealand presents a mix of landscapes and cultures that's at once familiar to me, and yet quirkily different. The rolling hills and hedge-rows collude with the irreverent, easygoing locals to disarm, distract and delight. Māori culture is potent, the surf is world class, and the craft beer is awesome. NZ presents the best of old and new worlds with social and environmental sensibilities: a template for a new world order, perhaps? I love NZ!

For more about our writers, see page 672