

KIA ORA, AOTEAROA

new zealand 2023

This trip was literally years in the making. I started making plans to go to New Zealand in 2019. In the fall of that year I booked the flights and hotels for a trip that would happen the following year. Then in 2020 the COVID-19 hit. Jacinda Ardern, the young woman who was then New Zealand's prime minister, took a much more forceful approach to the pandemic than President Trump did. She almost immediately closed the country to all outsiders, and it stayed closed to all but essential travel for more than two full years. Much as I wanted to make my trip, it definitely didn't qualify as essential travel.

The disease did eventually reach Kiwi shores, but the government kept up the fight to keep infections to a minimum. As soon as tests were available, they were universally distributed. The few New Zealanders who did contract the disease were placed in special quarantine facilities (a couple of which were hotels I'd originally booked). While the whole country was on lockdown briefly, attacking things early meant that through most of the pandemic life in New Zealand was comparatively normal. The biggest change was a system of contact tracing that used cell phone location data to notify people if they had been near someone who had tested positive. Once COVID vaccinations were available, more than 90% of Kiwis got the jab. After that the contact tracing system was removed and other restrictions were relaxed.

New Zealand's fight against COVID was deemed a success worldwide. While about 1,800 people died from the coronavirus in New Zealand, that was one of the lowest death rates anywhere in the developed world. By comparison, South Carolina (a place with essentially the same population—5 million—as New Zealand) has had 19,900 COVID deaths, more than eleven times the rate in New Zealand.

In mid-2022 New Zealand gradually started loosening its travel restrictions. First tourists were welcome if they'd submit to a week-long quarantine. Then the quarantine was dropped, but proof of vaccination was required. Finally in early 2023 the rules were more or less back to what they had been before COVID.

I spent an entire afternoon and evening in May of 2020 dealing with Air New Zealand's customer service representatives. Mostly I was on hold, but when I did eventually speak to a person, I was able to get the money I'd spent on my plane ticket put in a credit account. Originally that credit was due to expire in October, 2022, but as the restrictions kept going the credit was extended again and again. At the time I booked the status was that it had to be redeemed before July 1, 2022, for travel that would happen by June 30, 2023. It would eventually be extended yet again, but at that point I'd already decided on "take 2" of the trip. There were tons of other things that had to be cancelled, and there were some expenses (like getting a new passport and a visa associated with the new passport number) that had to be paid. I actually rebooked at a good time, right before the current round of inflation caused prices to skyrocket. It certainly wouldn't be a cheap trip, but the money I'd already paid would mean that I didn't have to come up with a huge amount of money at the last minute.

I will try to write much of this travelogue as the trip goes along. Because of that there's a good chance I'll switch between past and present tense (and even future, as in this sentence) at times. Please forgive me as I do my best to summarize this journey as efficiently as possible.

SATURDAY, MAY 20

algona, iowa to princeton, illinois

I was up about 6:30 this morning. I felt like I dawdled quite a bit getting thing done, but I ended up leaving home right at 7:30. I made a couple of stops on the way out of town—one at the post office and another to recycle some bottles. Then I headed southward on highway 169.

My first stop of the day was at Hardees in Humboldt. I was reminded of just how much prices have skyrocketed recently when a biscuit and coffee came to \$7.79. I was pleased I had eight one-dollar bills in my pocket that would cover the breakfast.

I drove south to Ft. Dodge and then headed east on U.S. 20. I hadn't left Algona in more than a month, and it was weird to see what had been bare ground planted and starting to get patches of green. It was a beautiful day, cool and clear. Traffic was light, and I made good time this morning.

I stopped briefly to use the restroom at a truckstop in Parkersburg. A team of girls from Waukon was stopped there, apparently on their way back from the state track meet. Apparently they hadn't made finals in any of their running events, or they still would have been down in Des Moines.

There was major construction in Cedar Falls. They're apparently completely rebuilding the interchange with Avenue of the Saints. The exit is entirely closed, and traffic is down to one lane through that area. They really need to re-route Avenue of the Saints to avoid a series of traffic lights in Cedar Falls, but I don't think that's on anyone's agenda.

Traffic continued to be surprisingly light when I turned onto I-380. It seemed like I made it down to Cedar Rapids in no time. While it was busy on the stretch south of there (as it always is), I got down to I-80 without issue. They've completely re-done the interchange between 380 and 80 for I think the third time in a decade. The latest iteration is really quite nice, offering much more room to merge. I actually didn't use that today, since I took the Coral Ridge exit at the west edge of Coralville.

I had lunch at the Coralville Steak 'n' Shake. It seemed surprisingly empty, which I suppose was because the university was between terms. Ever since COVID, Steak 'n' Shake has done away with waiters. Instead you order at a kiosk, pick up your food at a side counter, and bus your own table. The kiosk asked if I wanted to leave a tip, with suggested amounts ranging as high as 25%. I don't see a reason to tip for no service, though. The bill (just over \$10) used up the last of a gift card I'd gotten for tutoring a girl in a college class this spring.

I made a brief stop at a Walgreen's in Coralville. While I got a pack of toothbrushes and some snacks, I paid almost nothing. That's because I redeemed points to cover most of the bill.

There was more construction at the east end of Iowa City. It appears they're extending the six-lane section of I-80 over to West Branch. They could really use six lanes all the way to Davenport, but again I don't think anyone at the D.O.T. has that in their plans.

While I noted that they could use more lanes, traffic was actually not too bad on I-80 today. There were fewer trucks than usual, and only a few RV's that went slower than the flow of traffic. It was way better than the last trip I made on this stretch, which was right after Christmas.

I stopped across from the big I-80 truckstop by Walcott to get gas. The place I stopped was both easier to get in and out of and also cheaper than its competition. Gas was \$3.26⁹, a bit higher than in Algona, but way cheaper than it would be in Illinois.

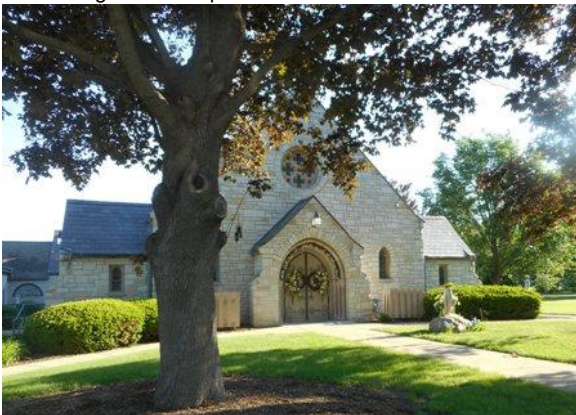
I went around the Quad Cities on I-280. They've been working on the 280 Mississippi River bridge for over a year. The work appears to be done, but they still have things limited to one-lane on the bridge. It appears they're also doing long-needed resurfacing on I-280 in Rock Island. It will probably be nice when they finish, but I'll definitely take the opposite way around on my way back home.

I thought of my nephew Tim and his family as I headed through the Quad Cities. Like a lot of Iowans, they'd pretty much had it with our incredibly right-wing state legislature, so when his company offered a transfer to Illinois, they decided to relocate to Rock Island. They seem to like things there so far. Hopefully that will continue long term.

My next stop was at a rest area just west of Princeton. While I used the restroom and picked up a map, mostly I was killing a few minutes so I'd be after the official check-in time at my hotel. I got to the Econolodge in Princeton right after 2pm, and an elderly South Asian woman checked me in about as slowly as is humanly possible. I was assigned a room I've been in several times before, a smaller than standard room with one double bed and a view of the Tractor Supply Company store next door. There's nothing nice about the room or the hotel in general, but at \$59 it's about as cheap as anything is these days. The main issue today is that the internet doesn't seem to work right. Fortunately an easy solution is to connect to the Tractor Supply Company customer wi-fi.

I had a bit of a scare shortly after checking in. I was searching through my bags and couldn't find the injector pens of insulin that I take for diabetes. I knew I'd packed enough for the trip; indeed I'd been sort of rationing the doses to be sure I'd have enough. While I pictured a ten-hour round-trip to get something I'd forgotten, fortunately I just found that the pens were deeper in the bag than I expected.

Since I'd gotten to Princeton rather early, I decided to go to Saturday mass at the local Catholic church. To get there I had to drive through much of Princeton. It's always seemed strange to me that Princeton essentially has two downtowns, neither of which is terribly vital. There's one business area about a mile south of the interstate, near the Amtrak station. Then there's a mostly residential area for about a half a mile (though many of the homes have been redeveloped with professional offices) and a second business area surrounding the Bureau County Courthouse. There are also business strips in three directions from the city center, though only the northern one (toward I-80) is particularly prosperous. I'd love to know what caused the place to develop the way it did, but I really have no clue. Aside from a convenient train station, about all I know about Princeton is that it's where the awards from the Iowa High School Speech Association are made.



St. Louis Church is on a pretentious boulevard that starts at a Casey's on highway 34 near the west end of Princeton. The church is a very simple stone building with a light wood interior. Their website says the church was dedicated Christmas Eve of 1950. It's a surprisingly small building for a fairly large county seat town—much smaller than St. Cecelia's in Algona and also smaller than St. John's up in Bancroft. About 100 people were there for Saturday mass, representing a variety of ages. Most were Anglo whites, but there were also a fair number of Hispanic people and a couple of blacks.

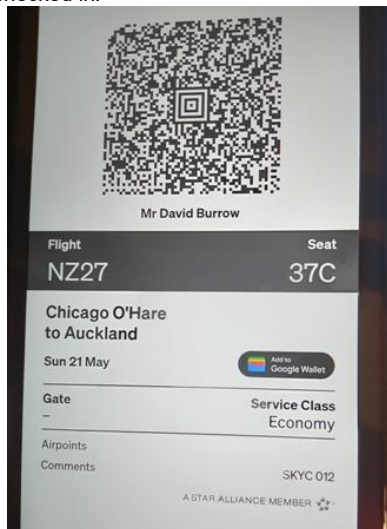
The church has an odd set-up with a huge chancel area that is at a lower level than the main sanctuary, the opposite of what you'd see in most churches. While the priest does face forward to say mass, the altar is very far back in the chancel, with just a couple feet between there and the wall. The huge space in front of the altar was filled with flowers, mostly yellow and orange tulips. It really was quite beautiful.

The service was nice as well. This was the Ascension, a holy day that always used to be celebrated on Thursday. (Many years we'd have our baccalaureate of Garrigan on that day.) It was a more formal mass than usual, with all the parts that are optional included. The homily directed those present to go out and do Christ's work—which is what I think the message should be every Sunday. The music was not particularly memorable (or rather it was memorable for the wrong reasons), but otherwise the service really was quite nice.

After church I got supper at Wendy's and then settled in for the night. After a while my brother Paul called my cell phone. There were some connection problems, but I eventually called him back from the travel phone I'd bought to use overseas, which seemed to have better service than the regular phone. We had a nice visit.

Shortly after I got off the phone with Paul I got a notification that I could check in for my flight. When I tried to do that on the Air New Zealand app, though, it told me I had to check in at the airport. That actually makes sense, since they need to verify that my passport and visa are in order. It's kind of strange that they send out a notification to check in, though. Even stranger, about half an hour later I got another notification, this time with a check-

in link that worked. It asked me to confirm my passport details (which I'd already entered months ago), and in less than a minute it said I was officially checked in.



Boarding pass on travel phone

omelet was \$8.25, including toast and hash browns. I've seen places charge as much as \$15.95 for the same thing, and \$11 - \$12 is pretty typical. Their coffee was \$1.50, and even with tip and the steep Illinois sales tax, it was a pretty affordable breakfast.

I checked the status of my train to Chicago and found it was about 15 minutes late. That's pretty close to on time for Amtrak, and it's also typical for this particular train. The Illinois Zephyr originates in Quincy, so it doesn't have thousands of miles of freight train interference like the long-distance trains do. There's also padding built into the end of the schedule, so there's a good chance we'll reach Chicago on schedule.

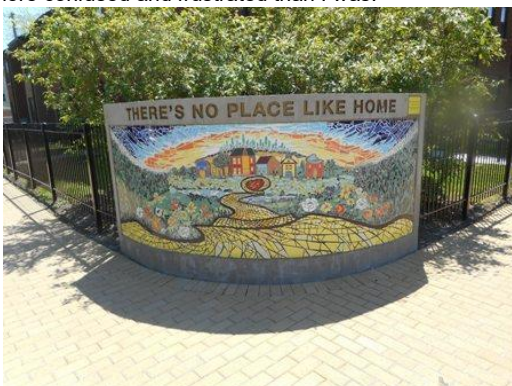
The train actually got to Chicago at 8:49am. The stop at Princeton was very quick, though. Almost immediately after I boarded we were on our way again. This particular train was extremely short: an engine, two brand new coaches, and an extremely old combination café and business class car. I've seen the Illinois Zephyr that short a couple of times before. Usually there are three or four coaches, though, and I've seen as many as six on holidays.

I was seated in the business class car. When bought early this costs about \$10 more than coach, and it includes free beverages. What I really like though, is that the business section has a 2 x 1 configuration, so I don't have to share a pair of seats with someone I don't know. There are people who love meeting new people when they travel, but I've just never been that outgoing. While this businesses car is extremely old, it's still clean and comfortable.

The trip to Chicago was mostly uneventful. We were delayed slightly by track construction in the west suburbs, but we passed up a stop in LaGrange because nobody needed to detrain there. We ended up arriving in Chicago at 1:43, about ten minutes late. I did a double-take when I looked at the digital clock on the platform, though. It said the time was 11:57am, and when I looked closer it also said the day was Tuesday, May 16. I'm not sure what got screwed up there.

I made my way to the Metropolitan Lounge, which was quite a bit more crowded than it was the last few times I took the train. While the woman at the desk found it odd that I'd be leaving bags there when I wasn't transferring to a later train, it was perfectly fine to do so—the other main perk of business class. Getting out of the station was awkward. Normally the exit that leads to the 'L' is through the Great Hall that used to be the main part of the station. There was a Hindu wedding going on in the Great Hall, though (the second time I've seen that type of an event at Union Station), and they'd blocked off that whole area entirely. I had to take a side exit and make my way back to Clinton Street and down to the blue line station.

Once I got to Clinton station I discovered that there were issues on the CTA today. (That's often the case on weekends. I really should have checked before leaving for Chicago, but I didn't.) What affected me most was that they were doing track work on a fairly long stretch between downtown and O'Hare, which meant there was a shuttle bus running between Western and Addison stations. In addition, for no reason I could figure out, trains on either side of the gap were running less often than usual. They weren't particularly good at communicating the problem, and a lot of passengers were far more confused and frustrated than I was.



Frank Baum Memorial

SUNDAY, MAY 21 princeton & chicago, illinois and air new zealand flight 27

I was up at 6:00 this morning, after a surprisingly good night's sleep. The shower took forever to warm up, but once it finally did, I managed to get ready for the day. I watched a bit of the news on Channel 8 from Moline and then set out.

My first stop was at Wal-Mart. I'd packed a separate bag that included clothes to wear today, but somehow I'd forgotten to include socks. I had a ton of socks in my main bag, but I really didn't want to pawing through that to find them. I can always use socks, and Wal-Mart has just about the cheapest ones around.

For more than three years the Econolodge has displayed a sign that says "Due to the coronavirus there will be no breakfast served for the next few weeks." Their breakfast wasn't anything to rave about back before 2020, but it appears they've used COVID as an excuse to cut it completely. Because of that my next stop was at the Coffee Cup Diner, a vintage place across the tracks from the Amtrak station.

Unlike a lot of similar places, the prices at the Coffee Cup are also vintage. A ham and cheese omelet was \$8.25, including toast and hash browns. I've seen places charge as much as \$15.95 for the same thing, and \$11 - \$12 is pretty typical. Their coffee was \$1.50, and even with tip and the steep Illinois sales tax, it was a pretty affordable breakfast.

While my original plan had been to go further west than Western for lunch, but I decided to change my plans a bit. I got off with the mob at Western, but instead of heading toward the shuttle bus, I walked on the Bloomingdale Trail, a converted freight trail that runs across the north side of the city. I took the trail about a mile west and got off at Humboldt Boulevard. A block south of the trail is a fascinating little place to see, a memorial to L. Frank Baum (the author of the book on which *The Wizard of Oz* was based), who lived at that corner a century ago. They've paved the sidewalk with yellow bricks, and there's a lovely mosaic with a "no place like home" theme. It's certainly not one of the must see attractions in Chicago, but I was glad to have checked it out.

I walked south on Humboldt to North Avenue. There's a large city park there, and they were holding a Cuban festival today. Sadly there are also a lot of tents housing homeless people in Humboldt Park—not as many as I saw out in the Pacific Northwest, but really any is too many.

I'd just missed a bus when I got to North Avenue, so I just continued walking east

about a mile and a half. Near the Damen station is a Beard Papa bakery. Beard Papa is a Japanese company with a Hemingway-like logo that sells cream puffs. I've eaten them in multiple places before, and they really are quite tasty. Today I had a small assortment of mini cream puffs, the equivalent of doughnut holes. They made a very tasty snack.

I had a long wait for an inbound blue line train. Once one came I rode south to Clark and Lake station, but I took a different exit than I usually do. I went to another minor point of interest, the Eastland Memorial. Located right on the LaSalles Street Bridge over the Chicago River, this commemorates one of the worst maritime disasters in American history. In 1915 the Western Electric Company had chartered the S.S. Eastland to take their employees on a cruise to the Indiana Dunes. Because of an unbalanced load (all the passengers wanting to look out the side of the ship away from the dock), the ship capsized before setting out on its journey, killing 844 people.

After quickly gawking at the Eastland Memorial I made my way back to Clark & Lake station, where I had another long wait, this time for a green line train. I rode west to Morgan Station and walked a couple blocks from there. I had a late lunch at one of the most unique fast food places in the world. A couple years ago McDonalds moved its corporate headquarters and the famous Hamburger University from suburb to a restored warehouse in the West Loop. When they did, they opened the McDonalds Global Restaurant, which serves unique McDonalds offerings from all over the world. I had a McArabia, which is a pita filled with patties of ground chicken accompanied by tomato, lettuce, onion, and a mild white sauce. It wasn't bad, but I wouldn't go to the Middle East to have another. I also had onion rings that were supposedly on McD's menu in Australia. They were covered with a tempura batter, which made them better than most fast food onion rings. Finally I had a Japanese banana tart flurry. That's exactly what it sounds like, basically ice cream with banana cream pie (crust and all) stirred in. It probably put me over my carb limit, but it was good. I didn't order a drink, but the guy who brought the order to my table included a glass of water without my asking for it. That was a nice touch on a hot day. The meal as a whole wasn't bad, and it is interesting what selections are available in other countries.



McArabia

I walked back to Union Station, passing the hotel I'll be staying in at the end of the trip. The wedding was still going on, and they'd blocked off even more entrances than were closed this morning. I ended up circling three sides of the station and crossing to the far side of the street before I found an entrance I could use.

I reclaimed my bags and shifted around a couple of things so they were better balanced. Then I walked up to the corner of Madison and Clinton, in front of the Ogilvie Metra terminal. I had decided to take a bus instead of the blue line for the first part of my trip to O'Hare. While it might take a bit longer, it would avoid two problems: lugging my bags down the steps in Clinton station (one of the few CTA stations that hasn't been made accessible) and doing a double transfer with the shuttle bus.

When I got to the bus stop I checked the CTA app, and it said there would be a 27-minute wait for the bus I wanted. I settled in for a long wait getting as far away as I could from an elderly gentleman who was both smoking and drinking alcohol at the actual bus stop. Fortunately after I'd waited about five minutes the app updated and said that bus 56 would arrive in 2 minutes. That turned out to be accurate, though when the bus did arrive an Uber driver was blocking the bus stop. That meant I and a few other passengers had to walk out into the traffic lane to board.

Bus 56 mostly runs along Milwaukee Avenue, an old business strip that runs diagonally through a mix of destitute and gentrifying neighborhoods on the northwest side. It's a very slow ride. I have a phone app that records the speed you are moving. On the Amtrak train it topped out at 82mph, and the 'L' alternated between 45 and 55. The bus, though, runs at the speed of traffic, and that's very slow. It took an hour and ten minutes to get from downtown to the Jefferson Park blue line station (four stops from O'Hare in the middle of I-90). On a normal day that same trip would take half the time on the 'L'.

Today was not a normal day, though. After I transferred to the 'L' I visited with a woman who was also headed to O'Hare. With the bus substitution, she had been on transit for two hours by the time she got to the airport, and there was a good chance she was going to miss her flight. (She had apparently had this same problem in the past, so I'd think she would have planned for issues.)

The blue line train I boarded had all new cars. It looked nice, but apparently there were some technical problems. There is a video screen in the car that's supposed to show the next few stops. It was lit up, but for the whole trip it showed the far south end of the line rather than the part out by O'Hare. They also didn't have any of the electronic announcements that were supposed to happen.

It's took about twenty minutes to get from Jefferson Park to the airport. The 'L' station is beneath the Hilton Hotel by Terminal 2. International flights on every airline but United use Terminal 5, so I had to get there. It was not at all easy to find the people mover station. The signage at O'Hare is not well done, and there were signs with arrows pointing in opposite directions for the station. I had to go into the terminal up three levels, over a skywalk, and then down a long escalator. I did eventually get there, and then I boarded a very crowded people mover train.

I rode over to Terminal 5 but then had to fight my way off the train because people who were going to the rental car center had camped out in the doorways. The train seems a bit more connected to Terminal 5, so there wasn't quite as long of a walk to get to the check-in area.

There was a sign saying Air New Zealand would be at check-in station F, and I made my way to that area. Unfortunately that station was occupied by West Jet (a Canadian airline that codeshares with Delta), and no one from the airline I wanted was anywhere nearby. There was a single Air New Zealand sign near that area, and a single other passenger was standing by the sign. She was an education professor at a university in Auckland, and she had been speaking at a conference at the University of Illinois. She had flown in from Champaign at 7:00 this morning and had been waiting at the airport ever since then.

Eventually West Jet finished up with the desk, and a couple of Air New Zealand employees took over. It seemed to take them forever to log on to their computers and get the electronic signage switched over to the new airline. After a wait of another twenty-five minutes or so they finally opened the line. The clerk I spoke with checked my passport, double-checked that I had gotten the electronic visa that you need to purchase ahead of time, tagged

my checked bag with “AKL” and issued a new boarding pass. They only accept passes issued on site to board international flights, since that’s what guarantees that your passport was checked.

I asked if I’d check my bag to Wellington right after going through customs or if I had to do that in the domestic terminal. They had no clue and told me that they while they’d love to visit New Zealand someday they’re just Chicagoans employed by the airline.

There was a security entrance right by the Air New Zealand check-in area, but the line for that seemed to stretch on forever. I and the woman from Auckland went to another line. I’m pretty sure it was equally long, but most of it was hidden. Making it take even longer was the fact that they merged three lines into one before the actual security station. That worked about as well as it would in a highway construction zone. It took a full hour from the start of the line until I reached the X-ray conveyor.

Once I got to the front, security itself was pretty minimal. They seemed to look pretty thoroughly at the X-ray, and the woman looked closely at my liquids bag (which was overpacked, but all in miniature containers that did indeed fit inside a zipper bag. All the passengers walked through metal detectors rather than full-body scanners. They must have been at a pretty weak setting, too. I’d forgotten to take off my belt, but its metal buckle didn’t set anything off.

I walked through a duty-free area and almost immediately came upon Gate M-14. I’m pretty sure it was nearer to this security line than the other one. This gate area (which includes all the mid teens) was apparently added onto Terminal M fairly recently. Like most of O’Hare, though, it’s crowded, dark, and dumpy. The newest United area is the only thing that’s really nice at O’Hare.

I still had a long wait before the flight would board. I spent most of it working on this travelogue. I was also entertained by the gate agents and the various people they attempted to help. They made announcement after announcement for people who were ticketed on other airlines or who had gotten electronic boarding passes to come to the desk and have their passports checked to get new boarding passes. The announcements were badly garbled, and I think most people tuned them out. Eventually they went through the waiting area checking that everyone had paper boarding passes with the Air New Zealand logo.

The most interesting problem the gate agents dealt with was a man from Japan whose ticket had been issued by United Airlines. He came up to have his passport checked, and at that point they realized that his ticket had his name backwards; his surname and given name were interchanged. That’s a surprisingly serious problem, and it took calls to United ticketing, Air New Zealand ticketing, and Immigration New Zealand to get permission to re-issue a ticket that matched his passport.

The gate agents were also Chicagoans—an African-American woman, a Hispanic woman, a white woman (who had been working at check-in earlier), and an man who appeared to be an African immigrant. They were clearly coached to follow the Air New Zealand script. Every announcement began with the generic Maori greeting “Kia ora”, which I’ve read is ubiquitous among Kiwis of all races. It literally means “have breath” and is essentially the same as “aloha” is in Hawaii.

They began boarding around 8pm. There was some confusion, since flights to Istanbul and Dubai were boarding from neighboring gates at the same time. The Hispanic woman was very good at scolding people who were in the wrong lines and at keeping the Air New Zealand line moving. Air New Zealand boards from back to front, like Northwest used to. That strikes me as the most efficient method, since it keeps people out of the aisles people are trying to pass through. Our plane was nowhere near full, so it really boarded very quickly.

I encountered something new while boarding this plane. When you board international flights at O’Hare, they use a facial recognition system to match your face with the coded data on your passport. You stand in front of a sort of mirror camera. It takes your picture, and if things match correctly a big green check mark appears on the screen. Fortunately I matched, and so did everyone else I saw board. I have no idea what happens if you don’t get the green check.

On this flight I would be travelling in what they call an economy skycouch. This is a row of three seats that the buyers have to themselves. That of course allows for more privacy, and they also let you pull up the leg rests and convert the three seats unto a horizontal lie-flat bed. Obviously this costs more than a standard economy seat, but it’s quite a bit less than either of the two luxury classes they have on Air New Zealand. The reason I was able to afford this was that on my original trip I’d planned to stop in the Cook Islands (a place that is more or less New Zealand’s version of Puerto Rico), and I’d booked a “business premier” seat on a flight from there to Los Angeles. (What made it affordable was that it was an awkward redeye schedule. The flight from the Cook Islands to L.A. died with COVID, and the economy prices to Auckland were actually lower when I rebooked than they were originally. That meant I had some money to splurge a bit.

The reason the skycouches actually exist is to let Air New Zealand make more money on less than full flights. Chicago to New Zealand is scheduled at 16½ hours, and the actual flying time is 15 hours, 41 minutes. It’s only in the past ten years that airplanes have been able to fly that long without refueling, and even today there are weight restrictions to make sure they don’t run out of fuel over the middle of the ocean. On a shorter flight (like trans-Atlantic) a 787 typically flies full, but it’s not allowed to on a flight from the eastern half of North America across the Pacific. About a third of the seats are required to be empty, and skycouches allow them to make money by essentially selling empty seats.

They closed the cabin doors at 8:50, about 15 minutes before we were scheduled to depart. After that they played the safety video. Air New Zealand is known for these videos; they’re produced by the same studio that made films like *Lord of the Rings*. This one combined Maori history with sweeping views of New Zealand—and, of course, they got the safety message in there as well. On a flight of this length I definitely paid attention to the safety video, though I’m not sure there would be a lot of hope if we actually did have a “water landing”.

We got pushed back almost immediately after the video finished. Then we taxied ... and taxied ... and taxied. The captain warned us this would be the case. It took a full twenty-five minutes before we were actually in the air. We took off to the east and turned out over the lake, providing a nice view of the city lights in the process.

The captain also said our flight path would be more northerly than usual. Typically this flight angles down from Chicago El Paso and then cuts over Baja California. Apparently there were storms west of Mexico, so we were instead flying over Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming. Then we’d cross over the Pacific west of San Francisco. It’s basically night for the whole flight, so it doesn’t much matter what we’re flying over.

The flight and cabin crew are all New Zealanders, and so are the bulk of the passengers. The lingua franca is definitely Kiwi English. While people sometimes say it sounds Australian, to me it sounds more like a mix between British and American. The biggest feature by far is the New Zealand vowel shift. Almost every vowel is pronounced differently than it is in most other English-speaking countries. "Zealand", for instance, is pronounced more like ZILL-und, and "Auckland" sounds like the city across the bay from San Francisco—Oakland, though almost with a German umlaut on it. Everything is understandable, but I do have to listen more closely than usual.

They began the flight with a water service, just cups of ice water. I was parched, so I downed two glasses. The main meal on the flight is dinner, which was served at 10pm Chicago time. My dinner included a strange salad that was basically navy beans over lettuce. The main course was chunks of chicken with maple sauce, with green beans and "a mash of potatoes and courgette" on the side. (The French word "courgette" is what Britons and apparently also New Zealanders call eggplant. There was also a dinner roll, crackers and cheese, a caramel mousse, and a Kit-Kat bar. It was all served with wooden flatware. I'd never eaten with that before, but it served the purpose fine. They offered New Zealand wines as well as soft drinks served in tall, narrow cans—definitely not catered from Chicago.

The wooden flatware reminded me of an article I read that noted Air New Zealand had won an award for being "the world's least unsustainable airline". They have a lot of ecological pushes. They're big on recycling, and they've in the process of switching to renewable fuels on their domestic flights. Air travel is really the only viable option for going to and from New Zealand, so it's good they try to make it as green as possible.

TUESDAY, MAY 23

air new zealand flight 27, and auckland & wellington

If you follow the dates closely, you'll notice that there was no Monday, May 22. Technically a couple hours of that day did exist, but only in darkness over the Pacific. As I write this I'm in Seat 37-A looking at the map on the entertainment screen. We're flying over Samoa, which means we've crossed the International Dateline. No announcement was made of that, but it's definitely a first for me. It's currently 9:45am on Monday in Chicago, but the wee hours of Wednesday in the western Pacific.

I spent much of the night (on U.S. time) sprawled across the skycouch. With the leg rests lifted, the width is similar to a single bed. If anything it's wider than the upper bunks on an Amtrak roomette. It's not as long as a standard bed. I generally sleep with my knees bent, though, so that wasn't an issue. Something nice was that I got to use the pillows and blankets they'd supplied for the entire row. The individual pillows are quit chintzy, but together they and the blankets provided some nice padding. They put a huge mattress pad in the underseat storage for the middle seat. I didn't use that, and looking around the plane, it appears very few of the other skycouch passengers did either. The seats are quite well padded, probably the best economy seats I've had on any airline, and it as really quite comfortable to line on them. They pass out special belts. One end of those hooks onto a mount by the middle seat, while the other can attach to any of the regular seat belts. It held me in place decently without feeling uncomfortable.

I actually got quite a bit of sleep on the skycouch. Honestly it was probably more than I get most nights at home—certainly eight hours, and very likely more. I woke up numerous times and I also got up to go to the bathroom, but overall it's easily the best sleep I've had on a plane. A couple of things helped with that. First this has been an extremely quiet flight. There are no children aboard, and after dinner they made no announcements at all. I'm sitting right by an engine, but that is also surprisingly quiet. It's almost like white noise in the background. I also bought a high-quality eye mask before the trip, one that fits comfortably and blocks all surrounding light. That made it easy to tune out everything else.

I'll probably regret this evening that my sleep was toward the start of this flight rather than the end. It's still totally dark out as I write this, and we're down to less than three hours left in the flight. I'm sure I'll be very tired once the new day has passed and nightfall comes to New Zealand.

A feature of this plane is that you can order food and drink through the in-flight entertainment system. While I was between naps I ordered a diet Coke (which this time came in an American can, complete with deposit information that included Iowa) and Mexicano corn chips. The chips (a New Zealand brand) came in a tiny bag and were extremely lightly salted, tasting rather like hard taco shells. They might have been nice with salsa, but they weren't something I'll likely order again. During the night I also had a glass of ice water from a station they'd set up by the toilets.

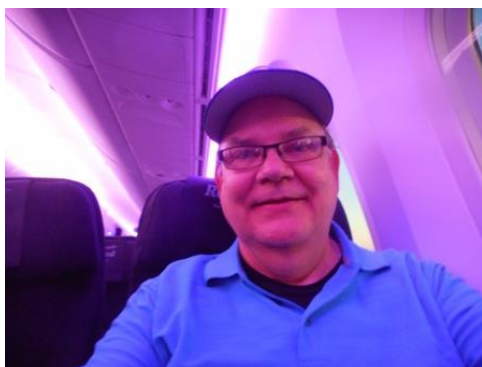
While the ticket says the meals on this flight are dinner and breakfast, they just served a hot snack, a panini (or I suppose panino is more proper) stuffed with vegetables and cheese. The flight attendant (an Asian male) served it in complete silence. He just went down the aisle and held a tray with napkins and packaged paninis out to each row.

After I finished the snack I took some time to fill out the passenger arrival card. This is a longer document than its equivalent in most countries, and everything I've read says they treat it very seriously. They're particularly concerned about biosecurity risks, and basically all food and all plant and animal product must be declared on the card. I'd thought about keeping the wooden flatware as a souvenir, but I'll wait until the flight home to avoid any problem entering New Zealand. To the best of my knowledge I was able to check "no" to everything. Hopefully that's correct.

I mentioned earlier that I used the toilet a couple of times (certainly expected in a sixteen-hour flight), so I suppose I should mention the loo. The one I used was larger than most airplane toilets, similar in size to the facilities they have on Amtrak trains. The most noteworthy thing was that the entire room was wallpapered to look like bookshelves. I suppose one could euphemistically say he was going to the library on this flight.

We just passed Tonga, which means now there's basically nothing left to pass before Auckland. About all I know about Tonga is that my brother Steve collected oddly shaped stamps from there. The place is significant to New Zealander, because it's the place the Maori came from. They sailed there in canoes around the year 1300, which makes New Zealand the last place on earth (besides Antarctica) to be settled.

The cabin lighting appears to be on a timer, and it's gradually been brightening as we approach New Zealand. They do the overhead lighting in various shades of purple. (This appears to be Air New Zealand's color; their uniforms are also purple.) Through the night it was a deep indigo, but now it's nearly pink. It's still dark outside (it has been the entire flight), but the lighting trick is making it seem like morning.



**Assertively purple cabin light
Air New Zealand 787**

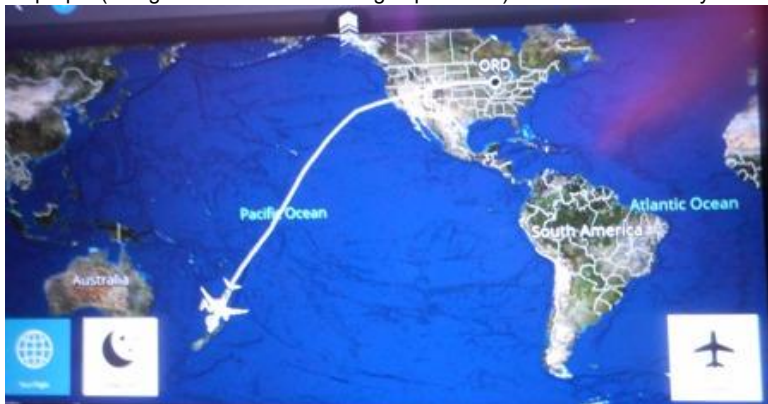
The lights were raised in preparation for the breakfast service, and it was quite a spread. We were told the choice was between a cheese omelet and waffles, but there were many side dishes accompanying both of those. I had the omelet, which was placed on top of a hash brown pattie with a tube of rather disgusting sausage (the one thing I didn't eat) on the side. Probably in honor of their British heritage, there was a slice of grilled tomato atop the hot food. Breakfast also included what I thought at first was yogurt, but I think was actually a strange cold porridge with berries and kiwifruit mixed in it—not bad, but quite weird. There was also a nice selection of melon and grapes, plus a raisin roll with butter. I'd taken my blood sugar reading shortly before breakfast, and it was already high (likely thanks to the panini). I'm sure it skyrocketed after this breakfast. On the positive side, though, I can probably skip either lunch or dinner.

A plump young blonde woman just did a follow-up coffee service. There were other drinks available, but it appeared that everyone on the plane got either coffee or tea. I may have been the only one who had my coffee black (pronounced more like "bleck"), though. Most had as much cream as coffee in their cups, and often lots of sugar as well.

All in all, I've been extremely impressed with the service on Air New Zealand. I'm sure it helps that with a half-full flight there's a higher than usual ratio of cabin crew to passengers. All the flight attendants seem genuinely friendly and helpful, and they provide good service without being intrusive.

While I'm sure conditions can change from time to time, this has been an extremely smooth flight, one of the smoothest I've ever been on. At one point they turned on the seatbelt sign, but even then it wasn't rough at all. The 787 is supposed to give a smooth ride, and it certainly appears that's the case.

The last service in the flight was distributing a hard candy to each passenger. Apparently this is traditional, and of course the color of the candy was purple (though the flavor was nothing in particular). Almost immediately after that they sounded two beeps and the flight attendants were seated.



The route of our flight

We circled over the city of Auckland to approach from the west. That stood out because on the map I was following on the entertainment screen it showed that we headed over the town of Warkworth. One of my former students used to own a funeral home there. He actually moved during COVID and now lives in Tauranga, a major city east of Auckland. That town stood out, though. By the way, the lights of Auckland look nearly identical to those in Chicago, though Auckland is clearly hillier.

We officially landed at 6:09am New Zealand Standard Time (1:09pm on Monday Central Daylight Time). There was a brief wait while customs officers cleared the plane itself for entry into New Zealand. Then we made our way through the skybridge and into the transit lounge. It always seems like you have to walk together to get to customs at international airports. Auckland is certainly no exception, though it is at least set up so things move efficiently.

The first stage on arrival is immigration. For the vast majority of visitors, this involves scanning one's passport at an "e-gate". The computer confirms that the visitor has applied for and paid for their electronic travel authority. It asks a few questions, like the purpose of the visit and whether the visitor has ever been convicted of a crime and presumably compares those responses with data on file. Then a facial recognition system snaps a picture and compares it with the passport data (the exact same thing we did on leaving O'Hare). Assuming everything checks out, the gate opens, and the visitor is officially in New Zealand. A woman at the gate next to mine didn't match correctly, so the person in charge had to send her for manual inspection.

Next up is luggage claim, and fortunately our bags came fairly quickly. Beyond there they divide into "yes" or "no" lines for those who do or don't have things to declare on arrival. I was in the "nothing to declare line", which was very long but also fast-moving. There were about a dozen officers who gave the luggage a quick once-over, read through the arrival card carefully, and repeated some of the questions that were asked on it—I think looking for the manner of responses as well as the actual answers. For about two-thirds of the people (myself included), the officer stamped the arrival card, and we were sent to a woman at the exit. While she checked to make sure the card had been stamped, a dog gave everyone's bags a quick sniff. Those who didn't get stamped by the officer had to have their bags either x-rayed or hand inspected, and a few others were sent to the extra inspection line because the dog indicated on them.

At the exit to customs they had a huge stack of boxes of COVID tests. For nearly a year after they reopened the border it was mandatory that visitor take COVID tests weekly while they were in the country. That's no longer true, and pretty much no one took the boxes of tests.

A recording told us there was a re-check desk just beyond the customs and biosecurity area, but I found no such desk. So I had to haul my luggage over to the domestic terminal. They have a green stripe painted on the ground that weaves through a series of parking lots and out buildings. It's a fairly long walk. They claim it takes ten minutes (pronounced "tin man-uts" here), but it took me closer to fifteen—and I don't walk slowly. There's quite a lot of foot traffic on the path, and I quickly learned the lesson that in New Zealand all traffic (including pedestrians) keeps left.

I had a lot of time to kill, and I did a couple of errands. First I activated a travel SIM card for my cell phone that I'd bought before I left. I was pleased that it worked fine right from the start. A few years back I likely wouldn't have worried about having phone access, but it's nice to have that option and to be able to use cell data to access the internet.

Then I got some money at an ATM from ANZ Bank (as in Australia and New Zealand). It appears this machine dispensed only \$50 bills, and the maximum it would let me get was NZ\$200. My account should allow me to get as much as NZ\$300 at a time, but \$200 wasn't a problem.

Like Canada, New Zealand's money is made of plastic. The fifties are purple and picture the first Maori member of parliament on them (with a name that's difficult to read on the engraving). The \$5 bill features mountain climber Sir Edmund Hillary, the \$10 features suffragette Kate Sheppard (a reference to the fact that New Zealand was the first place on earth to grant women the vote), the \$20 shows Queen Elizabeth (at least for now), and the \$100 shows physicist Ernest Rutherford. There are no pennies or nickels in New Zealand, so all prices are rounded to the nearest 10¢. There are also 20¢, 50¢, \$1, and \$2 coins. They feature birds and Her Majesty.

After getting some money I spent some of it buying a pass for the public transit in Auckland (an AT HOP card) that I'll be using toward the end of this trip. I first tried to buy one from a vending machine, but the machine wouldn't work. It kept saying "make another selection", no matter what selection I made. Fortunately I was able to find "Air-Go Convenience" and buy a card there. I'll actually be buying at least three (and possibly four) different transit cards to use in different places on this trip. They're in the process of switching to a nationwide card (which is one of the cards I'll be buying), but Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington haven't made the switch yet.

I was rather thirsty, so I found a vending machine and bought a bottle of L&P, which is essentially the national soft drink of New Zealand. The name stands for "lemon and Paeroa". It was originally made with spring water from the town of Paeroa. Today, though, it's made by Coca-Cola at various bottling plants. The stuff is more or less the same as the "limón" beverages I had in Spain and Mexico, basically fizzy lemonade. If I weren't diabetic, I'd probably have quite a bit more of the stuff.

I checked my bag and made my way to security. It's interesting that at domestic security in Auckland they never asked for identification or a boarding pass. The security line moved quickly, and I got through with no problem.

I found the gate for my connecting flight, though there would still be a rather long wait until my flight boarded. I e-mailed my brothers to let them know I'd arrived and then did some writing on this. I also watched people board an earlier flight to Wellington, including a dozen who boarded at the last minute. This was the flight Air New Zealand wanted to put me on, and it appears I'd have made it with no problem. I'm fine with taking the later flight, though.

Air New Zealand's domestic flights reminded me of Hawaiian Airlines. They turn around their planes almost impossibly fast. All day long flights from Wellington arrive at 25 past the hour. They begin boarding at 25 to the next hour and officially leave on the hour. The same planes just shuttle back and forth all day long, and there are similar set-ups with New Zealand's other main cities.

The flights to Wellington (and apparently also those to Christchurch) board at gates in the corner of the terminal. They attach a jetbridge to the front of the plane which they use to board the front half of the plane. People seated in the back half need to go down steps, walk a short distance across the tarmac, and then walk up the plane's steps to the rear door. That lets them board multiple rows at a time, and it also means people have to travel shorter distances to their seats.

The exception to the front/back system are "Golden Koru members", who can board when and where they want. The Koru is Air New Zealand's symbol and the logo of many other entities in Kiwi-land. The traditional Maori design is based on the shape of a bud that unfurls to become a fern. Ferns are everywhere in New Zealand, even around the border of the airport, so it really is a fitting symbol for the country.



This was a very full flight, and it was a good introduction into just how different Air New Zealand's domestic service is to their international flights. ANZ's primary owner is the New Zealand government, and domestic flights are heavily subsidized and operated as a public service. There are no skycouches on the domestic flights. Indeed every seat is economy, and they're "pre-reclined" so passengers can't change the seat position. Instead of individual video screens at every seat, there are screens that pop down from the ceiling every few rows. This was an A-320, an Airbus plane roughly equivalent to a Boeing 737. It was old and loud, but serviceable.

The cabin door closed precisely at 10:00, and they immediately played the same safety video we saw on the long-haul flight. Once it was finished we pushed back and had a short taxi to the end of Auckland's single runway. After taking off we circled around the south end of the city and mostly followed the west coast of the North Island down to Wellington.

While they schedule an hour and ten minutes, the actual flight time to Wellington is about 55 minutes. They did a coffee service and gave everyone a CokieTime chocolate chip cookie in that time. As in Britain, the item we call cookies are normally called biscuits in New Zealand. However, an exception is made for this Christchurch-based brand, which is apparently a New Zealand favorite. The also passed out the same hard candies (called "lollies" here) we'd gotten on the international flight.

An interesting feature on this flight was that they played quiz questions on the video screens while we flew. I alternated between watching the scenery and answering the questions in my head. I even got a couple of ideas for our quiz bowl next fall. They also played a feature that showed how to do the words "airplane", "take off", and "land" in New Zealand Sign Language.

While it was cloudy and even a bit drizzly in Auckland, the weather cleared up as we flew south. I had a window seat on the right side of the plane, and I had beautiful views of the Tasman Sea and later of Mt. Taranaki, a perfectly conical volcano that stood in for Mt. Fuji in *The Last Samurai*. As we started our descent, there were gorgeous views of the Kapiti Coast and the islands northwest of Wellington. Then we flew right over the city (which is extremely hilly and really quite beautiful) to reach the airport south of the city proper. Travel writers caution that landings at Wellington can be rough, because brisk winds blow in across the Cook Strait that separates the North and South Islands. There was almost no wind today, though, and the landing was perfectly smooth.

When I got into the airport terminal, the first thing I did was buy another transit card. Wellington uses the Snapper card, a red card with a fish logo on it. It's completely incompatible with the Auckland card and with the Bee card that's supposed to be the new national standard. I bought a card at a coffee shop that I'd read sold them and then had to add money to the card at a vending machine. At least this machine worked better than the one in Auckland.

I then went to baggage claim, where I discovered that my suitcase had been damaged. It was a fairly cheaply made hard plastic suitcase, and the plastic had cracked around the wheels. I was able to get around with it today, but I'd have to get a new one to finish out the trip.

Metlink Wellington runs a very efficient bus they call the Airport Express. It leaves from a parking ramp across from the terminal, and signs lead the way very easily. The bus runs every ten minutes, and while the route it takes is complicated, it's about as direct a route as there is from the airport to downtown. With a Snapper card, the bus costs NZ\$4 (US\$2.50), but the fare is \$10 if you don't have the card.

The bus was very standing room only. An elderly woman ended up sitting next to me. She had driven to Wellington from the central North Island and flown to visit a relative in Christchurch. She had parked her car at the ferry terminal because it was cheaper than at the airport and also right off the motorway. She initially thought I was from Wellington because I was using the Snapper card. It turns out she has a daughter who lives in going to college in the States (in Arizona) and a son who lives in Kelowna, British Columbia. She's going to visit the son next month.

The bus ride took us through about half a dozen of what New Zealanders would call "suburbs". That word is used differently down under than it is in the U.S. and Canada. In Australia and New Zealand it basically means "neighborhood", and using that definition even "Wellington City Centre" is called a suburb. I quickly saw that residential areas were almost universally lovely, while the business and industrial areas were extremely ratty. Real estate costs a fortune in Wellington (houses start around a million New Zealand dollars), so I suppose it makes sense that they do look nice. The businesses, on the other hand, are cinder block and corrugated metal boxes that look like cheap copies of a tacky American strip.

After about 20 minutes the bus reached Lambton Quay and Cable Car Lane in downtown Wellington. While my hotel was two blocks straight east of the bus stop, I made a wrong turn and spent about ten minutes getting there. It was just after noon when I finally checked into the Ibis Hotel—Wellington Central. Ibis is the budget chain owned by Accor, a French company that owns snootier chains like Novotel and Mercure. Their Wellington property is a nine-story modern building a few blocks from the train station and ferry terminal downtown. While the rate varied from night to night, it averaged US\$100 a night, which isn't bad for a downtown hotel.

The desk clerk confirmed my details and gave me a wooden key card (wood seems very popular in New Zealand) for room 821. This is a corner room, and it provides nice views all over downtown. It's their cheapest room type, with one bed, but everything seems quite well appointed. It took a while to figure out how to get the room's electricity to work. Like a lot of hotels I've seen in Europe, you have to put your key card in a holder by the door to turn on the electricity. In this room you really have to push down the card to get it to register, though. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be a card from this hotel; any card of the same size and shape will do. I left my Ventra card (the card for Chicago transit) in the holder so my computer and phone could charge while I was out.

On that same topic, I should mention the electric plugs in New Zealand. Like in Britain, every plug is protected with an on/off switch, though there doesn't seem to be a clear pattern as to whether up or down is on. The plugs themselves look really alien, with slanted prongs that kind of look like a face. Three years ago I bought an international power converter (since New Zealand also uses 220 volts), and it came with adaptors for various countries. The New Zealand design is apparently the standard throughout the Pacific islands, but it does look strange to an American eye.



After settling into the room I walked over to the train station. Wellington has regular trains on three different lines. I bought a day pass and almost immediately caught a train on the Kapiti Line. I mostly rode through a bunch of tunnels under the mountains north of the city, getting off at the first stop, Takapu Road. While this is a pretty irrelevant station, there was a reason for my going here. When I planned the original trip three years ago, my plan was to stay at a motel right next to this station which at that time would have been much cheaper than anything downtown. While that place (the Bucket Tree Inn) didn't seem bad, I think the Ibis is a better choice.

There is a nice park right next to the station, and north of there is the business area of the suburb of Tawa. While technically part of the city of Wellington, Tawa really is a suburb in the American sense. It's over the mountain and completely separate from the rest of the city. Among New Zealanders Tawa has sort of a "New Jersey" poor white trash reputation. Like New Jersey, it really isn't that at all, though. Like the other places I saw in Wellington, it has pleasant homes and tacky businesses and industries. It seems like a pleasant enough place, and it's definitely more diverse than its reputation.



Outlet City in Tawa

(Typical pole building construction found in New Zealand businesses)

New Zealand hotels, for that matter) and a couple of snacks. I also got a 1.5-liter bottle of Pepsi from New Zealand to add to my collection.

New World is a short walk from Tawa station, which is two stops north of Takapu Road. In just a couple of minutes a southbound train showed up. It was crowded with high school girls all dressed in school uniforms. I gather they live in the city but go to school somewhere out in the 'burbs. They were pretty generic teenagers. Except for their accents, they could have been in my classes at Garrigan.

The most prominent business in Tawa is an outlet mall. I took a quick look around there, mostly trying to see if they had cheap luggage for sale. Even if they did, I probably wouldn't have wanted to buy it there. Outlet City sells name brand goods at prices they claim are discounted. If they are, I'd hate to see the full prices. The same socks I'd gotten for eight bucks at Wal-Mart would have cost NZ\$20 (US\$12.50) in Tawa.

I bought nothing at Outlet City, but I continued northward to Tawa's main supermarket. New Zealand has about six supermarket chains, but all of them are run by two companies. The one I went to in Tawa was New World, which has a snooty reputation. While it was a bit on the pricey side, it actually seemed like a pretty generic grocery store. I picked up a few things I'll have for breakfasts (something not included at the Ibis—or at most

As I was leaving the Wellington station I happened to notice a shop that mostly sold leather goods but also happened to deal in luggage. They had a display of clearance items out front, and I was able to find a suitable replacement for the broken bag. While ninety bucks sounds like a lot, that's about US\$55, which is what luggage costs these days. It seems decently made, so hopefully it will hold up all right.

Something I should mention about New Zealand prices is that tax is always included in them. Like much Europe, New Zealand has value added tax. The rate is about 15%, but you don't need to worry about it being tacked on to an advertised price. Another nice thing (though it didn't really affect me today) is that there's generally no tipping in New Zealand. Waitstaff is paid a living wage, and while they won't say no to a tip, extra money isn't really expected.

Something I noticed pretty quickly in my walks today was that New Zealanders appear to smoke pretty heavily. I'm pretty sure indoor smoking is banned entirely. It's also banned in some public places. (At Auckland airport, for instance, they had little smoking sheds scattered around outdoors, but people weren't supposed to smoke on the pathway between the terminals or outside the terminal doors.) In most of Wellington, though, people still walk down the sidewalk with cigarettes (or just as often vape pens) in their hands. It's pretty much impossible to avoid smoke in downtown Wellington. It's been quite a while since I've seen so much smoking. Indeed it reminded me of Spain back in the '80s.

I dropped off the groceries and the new bag in my hotel room and then set out again. I walked over to Cable Car Lane where the bus had let me off earlier. The street (more an alley) takes its name from the Wellington Cable Car, a historic mode of transportation that moves tourists and a few residents up a very steep hill west of downtown. It's a lot like the inclines in Pittsburgh or the Fenelon Place elevator in Dubuque. What makes it different from those is that there are intermediate stops between the top and bottom.



Lush foliage – Wellington Botanical Garden

ferns, though, and I had fun hiking around the garden.



Wellington cable car coming out of tunnel into downtown station

I rode up to the top. They have a cable car museum there that traces the history of what used to be a network of cable cars in Wellington. Also at the top is an entrance to the Wellington Botanic Garden. It's of course winter fall in the southern hemisphere now, so there's not a lot of flowers to see. There are lots of trees and

I took the cable car back down and stopped at another supermarket. Countdown is New World's main competitor. It's owned by an Australian company, while New World was established by a farmers' cooperative in New Zealand. The price seem pretty comparable at the two stores. At Countdown I mostly bought typical New Zealand snacks. The most famous of these was probably pineapple lumps, a strange concoction that is basically pineapple flavored gummy candy with a cheap chocolate coating. Almost everything I read before coming here said they were the snack I had to try, so I did. They're strange, but actually not that bad. I also picked up some Whittaker's chocolate. This is a company based in Wellington that is known for high-quality chocolate. After trying some, I can say their reputation is well deserved. Finally I bought a salty snack made in Malaysia called Cornitos. These are basically knock-off Cheetos, and the main reason I bought them was that they were just NZ\$1.50.

Something I did not buy at either grocery store was eggs. I'm pretty sure I've never purchased eggs while traveling, but even if I lived here I'd think twice before buying them. They sell in packs of ten rather than dozens. Prices varied, but the cheapest were NZ\$10.39 per pack, or 65 U.S. cents per individual egg. Only free-range eggs are available, which makes me think factory farming must have been prohibited here. It does make \$3 or \$4 a dozen seem cheap by comparison.

Walking around today was hot, even though I was not dressed particularly warmly. I had a polo shirt and a lightweight jacket, the same sort of thing I was wearing when I walked to school in spring weather a couple weeks ago. Everything I'd read implied that New Zealand was a chilly place in fall, and the weather report (which said the high was 14 degrees Celsius, or 57 Fahrenheit) certainly didn't sound that warm. It's very humid, though, and with the sun shining brightly I was sweating.

My last stop before returning to the hotel was to get some real food for dinner. I stopped at the Pita Pit, a Canadian chain that seems to have locations all over New Zealand. You choose a protein and then select what to fill the pita with—much as you might do at Subway. I got chicken teriyaki on a whole grain pita with just about every vegetable you might imagine, plus a spicy sauce. It was delicious and made a nice combination of lunch and dinner.

Back at the hotel I watched a bit of TV. Most of what I saw were American shows. In New Zealand they do all their ads for a show together at the end, though, and it's weird to see the obvious ad breaks in American shows but then just see them go on. The other thing I did was watch a YouTube replay of Garrigan's first conference baseball game of the summer. It was a laugh that we won 20 – 0. I must say it was kind of weird to watch high school baseball from the land of rugby and cricket.

I'm purposely staying up fairly late tonight in hopes that I can get on the schedule of the new time zone tomorrow. So far I'm not overly tired, and I'm crossing my fingers that will stay.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 24

Wellington area

I slept pretty well last night, though I'm still not really on local time. I got up to use the restroom at 4:30am, and I couldn't get back to sleep after that. Around 5:00 I decided there was no reason to keep tossing and turning, so I turned on the lights and TV. At 5am the main thing on SkyTV (a satellite provider that's one of Rupert Murdoch's companies) was infomercials. At 5:30 I finally found a program I liked. It was a documentary that followed an elderly, handicapped Australian woman who went around meeting Australians of all classes and interests—everything from elite gentry who owned race horses to "blokes" who did auto repair. She followed all of them around on her motorized scooter and asked good questions that helped the viewer really get to know them.

Eventually I watched *AMNZ*, which seems a bit more news oriented than most American morning shows, and it's a bit refreshing that there's not a lot of truly important news happening here. They did go on and on about reaction to an incident where a zoo in Miami was providing visitors with the opportunity to pet kiwi birds for \$40 a pop. There's a big animal rights presence in New Zealand, and they were not happy about what they perceived as abuse of the national bird.

By the way, the "Z" at the end of *AMNZ* has the British pronunciation of "zed". Indeed New Zealanders often call their country "en-zed", in the same way Americans would refer to the U.S. You'll even hear citizens of the country refer to themselves as "en-ZED-urs".

An ad I saw on TV reminded me of something I noticed while walking around in Tawa yesterday. Most of the roofs on New Zealand homes seem to be metal. I also saw some tile and wooden plank roofs, but they don't seem to use asphalt shingles like we do in America. The ad was for a treatment to prevent corrosion on roofing, which I suppose is a problem with metal overhead.

I can tell from the sun that it's a different season here. It's 7:30 as I write this, and it's only just starting to get light. Similarly, it was dark before 6:00 last night. May is of course the southern hemisphere equivalent of November, so it makes sense that the days are comparatively short.

Most of my breakfast this morning was cheese and crackers I'd bought at the supermarkets yesterday. I've got enough of that to last most of the rest of my time in Wellington. I also had a Chinese bun that was essentially a raspberry danish. They have instant coffee in the room (with the classic British electric kettle), so I had some of that as well.



The Beehive – Wellington



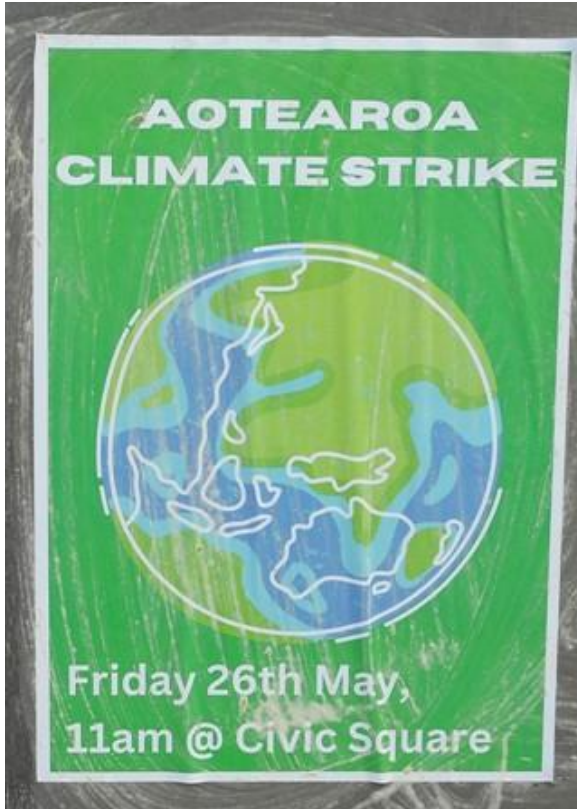
St. Paul's Cathedral – Wellington

of it walking around central Wellington. My first destination was the main government area. (Wellington is, of course, the southernmost capital city in the world.) The national government is housed in an unfortunate-looking neighborhood that could be used as a lesson in architectural history. There are buildings from Victorian days and from the 1960s right next door to each other. The most famous building is called the Beehive because of its unique design. It's where parliament meets and also houses the prime minister's offices. Across the street is a much nicer building from the Depression era: St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral.

I passed a hotel that I had considered staying at. The Hotel Waterloo is an art deco building across the street from Wellington Railway Station. In addition to being handsome on the outside, the place had at least one very famous guest. The new Queen Elizabeth and her entourage stayed here during her grand tour of the Commonwealth back in the early 1950s. It was considered an elegant hotel then, and apparently the public areas are still quite nice. The rooms are apparently of another era, though. Half the place is used as a youth hostel, and the other half has had scathing reviews on TripAdvisor. It might have been fun to stay there, but the Ibis is probably a better choice.



Hotel Waterloo



monument on the waterfront honoring U.S. Marines who were stationed in Wellington during World War II.) It's the war in Turkey that the country still sees as an accomplishment, though. They explore every detail of the Gallipoli battles. While it's covering a different war and is from an entirely different perspective, the exhibit reminded me a lot of the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

The next exhibit I saw (and "exhibit" in every case means numerous rooms) was on New Zealand's changing natural environment. It's interesting that the story they told was strikingly similar to Iceland. A thousand years ago both countries were heavily forested, and the early settlers of both places (be they Vikings or Maori) largely deforested the islands. Today in New Zealand the mountains do still have forest, but the majority of the land is covered in grass—most of it varieties of grass that are native to the British Isles. The same gallery points out the many animals that used to live in New Zealand, but are no longer around. Most notable among these was the moa, a giant bird that the early Maori hunted to extinction. Before the Maori there were basically no mammals in New Zealand, which is why birds were able to grow to such tremendous size. Not only did the Maori hunt them, but they were also attacked by diseases brought in by rats on those early canoes. Lest the Maori get all the blame, though, there are other species that went extinct thanks to British settlers.

I stopped into the train station and bought a 7-zone day pass. There are actually 14 zones in greater Wellington, but seven covers pretty much everywhere most people would want to go. (The city proper, including places like Tawa, extends to zone 4.) The day pass costs NZ\$8 (US\$5), and I paid with two \$2 coins, three \$1 coins, and two 50¢ coins. While New Zealand is no different than most countries in that regard, I hate how quickly change adds up when you have high-value coins.

Next I followed Wellington's waterfront path. That's definitely not as picturesque as its name implies, since this is a working industrial waterfront. Central Wellington as a whole is not particularly attractive. Its tall buildings are rather generic glass boxes, and at street level the businesses look as tacky as they do on the highway strips. The setting of the place is beautiful, but the city itself kind of spoils the scenery. The most interesting part of the walkway is a rather brutalist concrete public space with Maori gates called Civic Plaza. The place was plastered with posters advertising a "climate strike" that's supposed to be taking place this Friday. What such a strike will accomplish, I have no clue, but it is refreshing to hear some concern for climate change.

I stopped at one of numerous locations of a chain called Night 'n Day. (The name has just one apostrophe in "n", by the way.) You can probably figure out this is New Zealand's answer to 7-Eleven or Casey's. The Kiwi word for "convenience store" is "dairy", which is interesting since in Australia they call them "milk bars". I bought a tiny can of Pepsi for my collection and also a Cookie Time apple crumble and custard flavored cookie. The cookie was more amusing than tasty. Basically it tasted like artificial flavor.

My next stop was at another ATM. While I've given a number of price conversions already in this travelogue, I don't think I have mentioned the exchange rate. As of today it's NZ\$1.62 to US\$1, or about 62 U.S. cents per New Zealand dollar. That's surprisingly easy for me to remember for two reasons. First it's essentially the same as converting between miles and kilometers, something I've done whenever I've driven in Canada. Second, when I visited Spain almost forty years ago the exchange rate was 162 pesetas to the dollar, which is essentially the same thing. The New Zealand ATMs charge a NZ\$3 fee per transaction. That's only US\$1.85, though, which is less than a lot of American ATMs charge. Neither Shazam nor my local bank charge anything more on top of that. Cash is definitely the best deal for foreigners to spend in New Zealand, because it's standard here to add a 2 or 3% surcharge for using a credit card. Locals almost never use cash, though. Instead they have a debit system called EFTPOS that doesn't incur that surcharge, and they'll use those debit cards for even the smallest transaction.

I got to the main attraction of the day right when it opened at 10:00. This is the national museum of New Zealand, which goes by the Maori name Te Papa. "Te" is just the definite article in Maori, and it appears in all kinds of names. "Papa" doesn't mean "father", but rather "storehouse" or "treasure chest". It's an absolutely immense treasure chest of knowledge that explores history, culture, science, and anthropology.

I began with the museum's Gallipoli exhibit. This could be a museum in itself, and the World War I campaign was considered the "coming of age" rite for both Australia and New Zealand. Both countries have fought since then. (Indeed there's a



Moa skeletons

Another gallery shows off the unique flora and fauna that are still around in New Zealand. Even though settlement made it a different place than it once was, New Zealand is still one of the most isolated places on earth, and that isolation makes for a very unique environment. Yet another gallery looks at earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and coastal erosion, which are the biggest disasters New Zealand faces. The entire country lies along the ring of fire, and earthquakes and volcanoes have both killed people here in the last decade. With most of its population living right on the coast, higher sea levels are a huge threat that they take quite seriously.



Traditional Maori house and canoe



An entire floor is devoted to the interaction between Western and Maori culture. This is a bit one-sided, with the history almost entirely given through Maori eyes. It's interesting that downstairs they were blaming the Maori for deforestation and extinction, but on the upper floors the British were to blame for everything. That said, it was fascinating to learn more about the country's history. They have a traditional Maori house (which looks much like the dwellings the woodland Indians lived in), various carvings, and models of the canoes that the first settlers sailed in. There was also a traditional Maori meeting house, though there were signs everywhere saying it was disrespectful to photograph that. Another interesting artifact was a canon from the ship Captain Cook was on when he sailed around the coast of New Zealand.



Captain Cook's canon

There's also an exhibit that talks about the changing culture of people of the Pacific. In addition to the Maori, there are a

lot of Pacific Islander immigrants in New Zealand. There are actually more Samoans living in New Zealand than in Samoa itself, and there are also plenty of Tongans, Fijians, Cook Islanders, Tahitians, Marquesans, and people from elsewhere in the Pacific. Just walking around Wellington and its environs I saw branches of the national churches of numerous Pacific Islands, so it makes sense that the museum should have a large display on Pacific Island culture.

The people they don't really mention at Te Papa are the recent immigrants to New Zealand: the Filipinos, Chinese, Malaysians, and Indonesians. There's even a large number of Peruvian immigrants in New Zealand. Wellington isn't a place I expected to hear service workers speaking Spanish, but a couple of the maids at my hotel did. New Zealand today seems extremely multicultural, at least as much as Canada. They emphasize British and Maori culture. Those are the two biggest groups, but there are definitely other people here as well.

The uppermost floors of Te Papa are art galleries. Some is traditional work by New Zealand artists you've never heard of—mostly landscapes and portraits of colonial bigwigs. The rest is modern work that apparently rotates. The most interesting displays they had were enormous weavings by groups of Maori women made—some made of yarn, others of rope, and one of duct tape. They filled entire rooms and were supposed to resemble waterfalls—and honestly they did. They also had an interesting display that was supposed to stimulate all the senses. In addition to colorful visual displays, they had music playing in the background and perfume spritzing like you might find at a department store. There wasn't really anything for touch or taste, but they did cover the other three senses.

I spent about an hour and a half at the museum. I could easily have spent twice that long, but I wanted to do some other things as well. I did see everything, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. What's more, since Te Papa is free, I can't say I didn't get my money's worth.

After visiting the museum I stopped briefly at the box office of a theatre next door. I'd ordered a ticket to a show there, but I had to claim it ahead of time. The girl at the desk was quite friendly, though she couldn't seem to find my ticket. Eventually she just put my name in the computer and printed it out again.

I stopped at another little "dairy" where I picked up a couple of postcards. I'll likely be mailing them from home, since I've yet to see an actual post office anywhere. Every dairy, pharmacy, and bank has a sign saying they are an NZ Post authorized agent. They don't sell actual stamps, though. Instead they just put postage meter stickers on items to be mailed. If I do find a post office, those stamps will be on the pricey side. All mail sent overseas—be it a postcard or a letter—costs NZ\$3 for each 10 grams. (That's US\$1.85 for a third of an ounce.) My brother Steve said he'd like some stamps, but I'm not holding my breath on that. Apparently the reason that there's not many actual post offices is that NZ Post was privatized, and they cut expenses by closing most of their locations. It's also a running joke about how bad the postal system is. Apparently it can take a week to move mail across town, two to three weeks to get things across the country, and literally months to move overseas mail.

My next adventure was taking the cross-harbour ferry. At one point I'd debated about taking the Interislander ferry to the South Island, but since I wasn't really planning to see anything at the north end of that island, it seemed rather pointless to do that. The cross-harbour ferry isn't nearly as long as going across the Cook Strait (45 minutes instead of 3½ hours), but it still has nice views of the peninsulas and islands around Wellington.



Rainbow from the window of East by West ferry



**On the beach at Days Bay
(The ferry is on the wharf in the background.)**

the New Zealand usage of “suburb”, since Lower Hutt is the downtown area for Hutt Valley. The bus takes a long meandering route, going through multiple roundabouts, some of them more than once. It goes quite far north and then turns back south to run down Cuba Street in the suburb of Petone. This is the poorest area I saw in Wellington, though even there the houses looked decent. There are some ratty apartments, though, and the businesses aren't kept up at all. The people in the area seem to be Asian and Pacific Islanders. There are restaurants from all over Asia and churches from all the different places in the Pacific that the London Missionary Society or the Mormons left their mark.

Eventually the bus turns westward onto Jackson Street, which is the main business area for Petone. While there are some nice old buildings along here, the area has obviously seen its better days. Most of the storefronts were full, but they were heavy on ethnic restaurants and charity shops. There were a number of beggars there as well, showing that not everyone in greater Wellington is doing well.

I got off at the corner of Jackson and Bolton Streets. The bus stop was right in front of my destination, which is where I had lunch today. Hell Pizza is a Wellington-based chain that has stores all over New Zealand, as well as in Australia, the U.K., Ireland, Korea, India, and Canada. With the name “Hell”, they play up a devilish theme. Their advertising says they're “the best damned pizza”. Their signature pizzas are named after the seven deadly sins. I chose “greed”, which is basically a Hawaiian pizza. I got a snack-sized pizza (NZ\$12 or US\$7.40), and it was sufficient for my meal—not so much that I felt I'd go into a diabetic coma, but enough that I didn't want more.

They only have two tables at the Petone Hell Pizza. They're intended for people to wait while their pizzas are being prepared, rather than for dining. I ended up just munching my ham and pineapple on the sidewalk. It was delicious. The “greed” in the name comes from the fact that they go particularly heavy on the toppings. It seemed like there was actually more topping than crust. They have a pleasantly tangy sauce, and it mixed surprisingly well with both the pineapple and cheese. I'm not a huge pizza fan, but I really liked this lunch.

I walked through much of central Petone as I munched my pizza, ending up two bus stops west of the restaurant. I caught the next bus 83 and rode it around the west side of the harbour and back into central Wellington. For most of that distance the bus runs express, spending part of its time on

The crossing was rather rough, which apparently it almost always is. Our small boat bounced well off the water, and waves came crashing against the windows. I was a bit queasy, but fortunately not truly sick.

The ferry stops at a nature reserve island in the middle of the harbour. One of the boys that made up the crew gave a long lecture to the people who were getting off at the island about exactly what is and isn't permitted there. New Zealand is trying hard not to destroy its environment any further and not to introduce non-native species where they don't belong. Because of this people who visit reserves have to wash check to make sure there are no seeds or insects in their clothing, and they have to wash their shoes with disinfectant before setting foot in the preserved area.

The ferry ends up at a place called Days Bay, which in summer is a beach resort. It's also a commuter town, and there's a big park-and-ride full of people who take the ferry to work. There's a little café across the street from the wharf, and I thought about having lunch there. I decided not to, though, and instead just walked a bit along the beach. It was drippy and cold, honestly not a pleasant day at all. It was still kind of fun, though.

Days Beach is not technically part of the city of Wellington. It is, however, in Wellington Region. There are three levels of government in New Zealand: national, regional, and district. The main subdivisions people refer to are the fourteen regions. These are the size of an AEA region in Iowa, and they are basically the equivalent of British counties. They're the closest thing there is to states or provinces in a place that's really too small to divide that way. Wellington region is basically the southernmost part of the North Island (and, by the way, the definite article is always used with the names of the islands. Most of Wellington region is rural, but there are three incorporated cities (which are one of the forms district government can take). Wellington city is on the west side of the harbor and stretches over the mountains up to Tawa. Hutt Valley is on the east and north sides of the harbor and includes Days Bay. The third city is Porirua, which is on the west coast by the Tasman sea, in the northwest part of Wellington region.

I mention this here because public transport is handled at the regional level, so MetLink Wellington serves all three of the cities and much of the rural area as well. There's a bus stop right by Days Bay Wharf, and while service is not as frequent as it is in central Wellington, at every half hour it's still pretty reliable.

The vast majority of Wellington's bus stops are nice. Almost all have shelters (which was nice with the drizzle), and they also have digital signs that accurately show when the next several buses will arrive. There's only one bus that stops at Days Beach, but it did indeed come when the sign said it would. I got on and so did a young couple who oddly got off the same place I did.

Bus #83 begins south of Days Bay, and it follows a road that meanders through every curve in the coastline. Even in rain it was a beautiful drive. Eventually it reaches a nondescript industrial area that has doubled for U.S. cities in several movies. (I assume they must shut down the road and move traffic to the other side to make that happen.) North of the industrial area is the “suburb” of Lower Hutt. That's

a motorway. It parallels train tracks that also lead to Petone and Lower Hutt, and I think it's scheduled to supplement the train so there's more frequent service between the cities.

During my bus rides today I passed countless gas stations, or rather "petrol" stations—this is a place with lots of British influence. Gas prices are all over the place, and they can end with any tenth of a cent ($7/10$ was the most common I saw). Most prices were around NZ\$2.30 per liter. That works out to a little over five bucks per U.S. gallon. For a very isolated island country, that's actually not that bad. According to GasBuddy, the current price in Honolulu is about \$4.80 a gallon, so New Zealand is fairly close. The only familiar brand of gas here is BP. Besides that I saw Caltex (whose logo is a star), Challenge (whose logo is an exclamation point), Gull (whose logo is a seagull), Waitomo (whose logo is a triangle), and Z Energy (apparently partly owned by the New Zealand government and whose logo is the letter "zed"). The Pak 'n' Save grocery chain also sells gas, at approximately the same prices as everyone else.

I took the bus back to a stop on Lambton Quay that's just a block away from the hotel. I rested just a bit and then caught another bus to the south end of central Wellington. My destination was New Zealand's largest chain store, a place called the Warehouse. This is basically the Wal-Mart of New Zealand, though everything is red rather than blue. The Wellington Central Warehouse is a two-story store that's the anchor of a fairly major shopping center. The Warehouse sells a bit of everything, though their food selection is more limited than the supermarkets. Their prices (both for food and dry goods) are far lower than what I've seen anywhere else in New Zealand. Most things struck me as about the same as they'd cost back home, and some even seemed cheaper—like soup at a dollar a can. That's 65 U.S. cents, when most soup is well over a buck back home these days.

My main purchase at the Warehouse was a sweater. One of the souvenirs tourists are supposed to buy is merino wool, which is among the country's most famous products. I've seen merino sweaters in clothing stores here starting in the \$150 range and going up to three times that. The Warehouse had a "merino blend" sweater for just \$30. It's soft and attractive, and being a blend it's machine washable. It makes a nice souvenir.

I also stopped by another Night 'n Day location where I picked up another "must try" New Zealand food item. This was a Big Ben pie. Savory pies are another thing the Kiwis inherited from the British. I chose mince and cheese. It wasn't bad, and it was certainly worth the NZ\$3.50 (US\$2.15) they wanted for it. I won't be rushing to have another, though.

I did some writing on this travelogue back at the hotel. Then around six I walked back to the theatre I'd stopped by this morning. The show began at 6:30. That struck me as an odd time, but I rather like having an earlier curtain. Wellington has about a dozen local theatres (which is a lot for a place the size of Des Moines), and they're all beginning their fall seasons in May. I chose to see a show at the Circa Theatre mostly because it was easy to book and relatively near the hotel. Cultural events are subsidized in New Zealand, so it was also fairly cheap entertainment.

The show I saw was called *Skyduck: A Chinese Spy Comedy*. Their advertising blurb describes it as "a quirky and irrelevant parody of China's top secret agents trying to steal America's top-secret fighter jet software in the early 1990s – all while Australia was busy preparing for the Sydney Olympics. Featuring an outrageous mix of AV, puppets and musical numbers, *Skyduck* hysterically recreates an international action spy comedy on stage utilising every DIY theatre trick in the books." It's a one-man show, though a couple of assistants operate the A.V. and puppets they refer to. A Chinese—New Zealander portrays three main characters. One stereotypically American, one stereotypically Australian, and one Chinese (stereotypical in a way that relates to a New Zealand audience—with jokes about his girlfriend going away to study accounting in Melbourne while he couldn't make it into engineering school). He had a good sense of comedy, and he also sang and danced well—and he spoke Chinese natively, with captions on the screen behind him that worked beautifully to keep the comedy going. It really was a delightful show.

It was about 8:30 when the show got out. The streets were still fairly lively at that point, so it was an uneventful walk back to the hotel.

THURSDAY, MAY 25

Wellington & Palmerston North

Today I was wide awake at 5:15am. After showering I watched a bit more of *AMNZ*. The big news stories today were Tina Turner's death and a police officer in Australia who tazed a 95-year-old woman with dementia. The woman died while the show was airing. Another story looked at a study in New Zealand that found that high school kids were drinking much less than they did a decade ago. The survey hypothesized this was because they spending far more time on their phones led to less real world social interactions, which is where drinking typically happens. The host of the show couldn't figure out if this was a good thing or a bad one. I'm not really sure either, but I do suspect that the kids I teach back in Iowa are in the same situation—less drinking but way more games and social media.

At about a quarter to seven I walked down to Wellington Railway Station. I wasn't catching a train, but rather a long-distance bus. Intercity buses in New Zealand are mostly operated by a company with the creative name InterCity. They go almost everywhere in the country—far better connections than we have back home. This would be the first of four different trips I'd be taking with InterCity.



Intercity bus on the Square in Palmerston North

Actually boarding the bus was a bit awkward, because two different buses were scheduled to leave Wellington at nearly the same time. Both were headed northbound (which is the only way you can go from here), but in slightly different directions. Eventually the correct bus showed up, and I and about a dozen other people boarded.

My ticket today was in "gold" class. This is supposed to be an upgrade, though the quality of the upgrade varies on different buses. On this bus gold was a lot like business class on Amtrak. We were downstairs in a double-decker bus, while the "peons" had to climb the steps. The gold seats were wider than the regular seats, and they were in a 2—1 configuration. I was happy to take a singleton seat for my ride this morning.

The crew this morning included a very young driver and a middle-aged man who rode “shotgun” and did pretty much nothing but wave at every trucker we passed. I think he also loaded and unloaded luggage, and it may be that they traded off driving partway through the trip. It’s about eleven hours from Wellington to Tauranga (the final destination), and that would be a long trip for one driver.

We left at 7:38, which was eight minutes behind schedule. The bus ran express for much of the trip, skipping a lot of stops I’d make on the return trip this afternoon. Just north of the train station we got on the Wellington Urban Motorway (part of N.Z. highway #1). This reminded me of the roads they had in most of Canada forty years ago when I first drove up there—archaic freeways leading out of the big cities, but turning back to two lanes just a little ways out of town. The Wellington Urban Motorway runs along the west coast through the city of Wellington and the city of Porirua. A second motorway leads up to Hutt Valley, but they both end just beyond the cities. They were also built on as little land as possible, so they have just two lanes in each direction, follow every curve of the landscape, and in most places have just a metal barrier for a median. It’s way better than old state highway 1 (which we’d take this afternoon), but almost any U.S. interstate would be better.

The signage on New Zealand highways is like a weird mix of American and European standards. It seems a little closer to American, since the warning signs are yellow diamonds—something you never see in Europe. The speed limits, though, are numbers in red circles, which is the European standard. On the motorway they had changeable speed limit signs made of LED lights, and the speed limit could be different for each of the two lanes. The default speed limit is 100 km/h, both on motorways and two-lane roads. More dangerous sections usually have an 80 km/h speed limit, and in town it’s typically 50. (Those are basically 60, 50, and 30mph, by the way.)

Our first stop north of Wellington was in Porirua, at a New World supermarket across from the train station. To get there we had to leave the motorway and go through seven different roundabouts. Porirua is a pick-up only point, since you can get there easily on train or city bus from Wellington. A woman got on in gold class in Porirua and proceeded to listen to an audiobook without headphones.

We crossed a range of mountains just north of Porirua, which is probably why the motorway peters out there. It’s still state highway 1, though, and it still moves tons of traffic. There’s actually not all that many cars, since people can take advantage of those cheap plane fares. There’s lots and lots of trucks, though, including big double-bottom rigs. There’s also lots of tourists with tailers or campervans and lots of farm equipment.

North of the mountains things flatten out a lot. We made our next stop there in the town of Levin (apparently pronounced “luh-VINN”). This has traditionally been a farm supply town, and those businesses are still around. Today it’s close enough that it’s also become a bedroom community both for Wellington and for Palmerston North—which would be our next stop and my ultimate destination today. The houses all look brand new, and there’s new suburban businesses that have obviously come in with the population growth.

It is, of course, fall here—well at least sort of. The leaves were definitely changing on the “imported” trees—oaks, elms, maples, etc. The native trees in New Zealand are palms and other trees we find exotic up north. Palm trees just short of shed leaves throughout the year, and I think the other native trees aren’t deciduous at all. While the trees were changing color, it was still warm enough for some farming to be going on. We past fields where they were growing salad greens, and they seemed to be doing quite well with them. This is also wine country, and grapevines do lose their leaves. They were all bright yellow as we drove past the vineyards.

Around 10am the driver announced that we were nearly to Palmerston North. (The first word is pronounced “POM-is-tin”, with both the “L” and the “R” dropped, and locals refer to it as “Palmy”—pronounced to rhyme with mommy.) This is a major stop for InterCity, with people transferring between north/south and east/west buses there. The stop is at a government information centre, where there’s also clean toilets and snacks available. They call these information centres “i-sites”, which makes them sound like they’re Apple products. The “I” just stands for “information”, though.

I had chosen to come to Palmerston North today mostly in honor of my mother. For pretty much her entire life she wrote to penpals around the world. One of the ones she knew best was a woman named Faerea who lived in Palmerston North. Faerea has surely long since passed away, but I thought it would be interesting to see where she lived, a place that may well more representative of the country than the more famous cities.

Palmerston North is the government center for the Manawatu—Whanganui region. The two Maori names are because the national government smashed what were once two separate regions together to save costs. While the national government invariably refers to it by the double-banger name, the local government officially calls the merged area “Horizons”. On a side note, Whanganui gives me a chance to explain that in the Maori language the letters combination W-H is generally pronounced with an “F” sound, so Anglos would pronounce this place as FANG-guh-new-ee. (Actual Maori would say the vowels almost identically to how they’d be in Spanish—so more like fahn-gah-noo-ee.) “Whang”, by the way, means “harbor” in Maori, so there’s lots of place names that have that root. In Iceland almost every place ends in “vik” for precisely the same reason.

In addition to government, Palmerston North is also the main supply region for the agricultural area in central North Island. There’s a major army facility there as well. More than anything, though, it’s a college town. Massey University and Universal School of Learning (a government-run university with open admissions) give it the highest percentage of students of any city on the North Island. If you teleported Iowa City to the southern hemisphere, you’d have a place the same size and with a similar feel to Palmerston North.



War memorial and clock tower

The odd name, by the way, comes from the fact that this was the second place named Palmerston to be established in New Zealand. What was then the more important place of that name was on the South Island, so “North” was added to the North Island town’s name to avoid confusion. Today Palmerston North is now the ninth largest city in the country with around 90,000 people, while the older South Island town hasn’t grown much since the 19th Century and now has about 1,000 people.

The i-site where InterCity stops is in the middle of what they call the Square. This is a big grass plaza equivalent to four city blocks with roundabouts at its corners and in the middle of each side. There are walkways that cut across it diagonally, and in the middle is an enormous but oddly modern clock tower. (It was erected in 1953, but the clock faces are apparently from a much older tower that was damaged in an earthquake.) The buildings range from art deco to the 1970s, but they seem to work better together than the those in central Wellington. Most of the storefronts are full, and while it’s a bit too heavy on coffee bars, there’s a very wide range of businesses.

After making my way across the square, the first thing I visited in Palmerston North was a cultural complex called Te Manawa. There are two museums here, one of which is the primary tourist attraction in the city: the New Zealand Rugby Museum. This is basically the hall of fame for the most popular sport in the country and the only one that charges admission. When I showed up at the desk, the attendant announced that the Super Gold admission was \$13. What she was doing was giving me the senior discount. New Zealanders who have (in local euphemism) “achieved superannuation” (i.e., reached the age of 65) are issued Super Gold cards by the government. This is literally a gold card that allows them to claim old age benefits (the equivalent of social security) and has lots of other perks as well. It provides free public transport in cities and half-price transportation on InterCity and domestic flights. Almost every private enterprise has some sort of “SuperGold” bonus, most often the equivalent of the 10% senior discount you would have in the States. Unlike at home, the SuperGold card is normally required to claim those benefits—except for those who look truly aged. I must have been in that category today, since the elderly woman at the desk gave me the discount without asking. When I actually paid my admission, I age her a \$20 bill, a \$2 coin, and a \$1 coin. She praised me for making the change easy (just a “tinner”, as they say here), and she had a brief discussion with her assistant (a young adult who I think had special needs) about how most people these days don’t know how to make change.

The museum traces the history of rugby—in Britain, in New Zealand, and around the world. They salute rugby players of all ages and abilities and of both sexes, but of course the focus is on the national team, the All Blacks. (Locals say that team name as if they are reacting to something disgusting—“oh bleck”.) While I know basically nothing about rugby, I have heard of the All Blacks—and I knew about them before I was planning a trip to New Zealand. They explore the history of the club, the change of rugby from an amateur to a professional game, and the traditional rivalries New Zealand has had with Australia, the British countries (especially Wales), and South Africa.

They also explore the complex history between white New Zealanders and Maori with regard to rugby. Rugby was brought to the Pacific by the British, and in the past many Maori saw it as a symbol of colonialism. That has become less true as Maori and other Pacific Islander people have become among the most successful rugby players. A “controversy” that seems to be brought up mostly by academic-oriented white women is the All Blacks’ use of the haka, a traditional Maori dance of that can be used for both aggression and celebration. The All Blacks do this dance in both contexts before and after games. Some people have suggested this is cultural appropriation. This doesn’t seem to be much of an issue among people who actually are Maori, though.

In addition to numerous history exhibits, the rugby museum also has what they refer to as the “play area”, an enclosed padded gym where people can practice their rugby skills. Knowing I have no such skills, I passed on that. Apparently for most guests that’s the best part, though. The woman at the desk cautioned me to be careful, noting “many of our gentlemen seem to forget that their top-tier playing days are behind them.”

Besides the rugby museum, Te Manawa houses local art exhibits and a rather interesting display on local history. This was another place that drove home just how short New Zealand’s history is. Being inland, the Manawatu River valley was one of the last regions settled by the Maori. No one knows for sure when they came here, but it’s thought to be around the year 1600. Europeans didn’t come to the region until the 1840s, there wasn’t significant European settlement until the 1860s. The town was incorporated in 1877, and it was proclaimed a “city” in 1930 (which would be about the time those art deco buildings were erected). It’s kind of weird that there are high quality photographs of the first white settlers in Palmerston North—as well as of the Maori who were there at the time.

Like the agricultural regions of Canada and the American Midwest, Manawatu was mostly settled by immigrants from continental Europe. There’s a big Scandinavian influence here, as well as people from central Europe. The British people who did settle here were mostly from the north of England and from Ireland—places known for the same sheep and dairy farming that is common in New Zealand.

The establishment of Massey University in 1927 was particularly important in the history of Palmerston North. Though it was founded as an agricultural college, the school is mostly known today for its medical college. That changed Palmy from a remote town in “wop-wops” (the back of beyond) to a city oriented around well-educated professional people.

After seeing the museums I made my way around the square to a big downtown mall called The Plaza. It looks like the same sort of urban renewal mall Iowa City had in the ‘70s, except the one in Palmerston North is still going strong. Noon on Wednesday isn’t usually the most bustling time, but the Plaza was packed when I was there. Like Canada, New Zealand seems to have invested more than we have in the States in keeping the downtowns of smaller cities going. Whatever they’ve done in Palmy seems to have worked.



“soft” goods (clothes, bedding, etc) rather than having the wider range K-Mart had back home. Prices were notably higher than the Warehouse, but they really didn’t seem particularly expensive. Again the prices were about what I’d expect at a place like Penney’s. I wandered all around the store, with my one purchase being a Bangladeshi-made polo shirt that cost NZ\$11 on sale. That’s about US\$6.70, which is really pretty cheap these days.



Newspaper photo of the All Blacks doing a haka

I had lunch in the food court at a place called Kababa, which says “fine Turkish cuisine” but in fact sells fast food kebabs. I had chunks of chicken over an enormous salad with a sweet and spicy sauce on top. I have no clue what differentiates Turkish kebabs from those of other Middle Eastern countries, but this was a nice meal. The cost was NZ\$16.50 (almost exactly ten U.S. dollars)—not cheap, but a very typical price for fast food of any sort here.

My dessert was from a local chain called Donut King, a place that's several steps up from Dunkin' or Krispy Kreme (both of which also exist in New Zealand). There's basically no such thing as a plain doughnut at Donut King. Pretty much everything on the menu is NZ\$4 (US\$2.40), and they all look delicious. I highly recommend the apple purse, puff pastry wrapped around fried apple chunks and fresh custard.

I also bought freshly squeezed orange juice from a vending machine (credit card only, charging NZ\$5.99 or US\$3.65 for the small size). The machine has a glass front, so you can watch oranges drop from a conveyor and see them squeezed to provide the drink. New Zealand is not known for its citrus (most likely these oranges came from southeast Asia), but it was still tasty and refreshing.

I got yet more money at an ATM in the Plaza. While there I couldn't help but notice a poster showing the rates they were giving for various savings accounts and what they were charging for loans. The loan rates were similar to what you'd find at home, but they pay far more on savings than anyone does in the States. The rates were similar to what I remember back in the '70s and '80s—3 or 4% on basic savings accounts, and up to 10% on long-term investments. That definitely beats the piddly amounts U.S. banks are paying. How American banks get away with charging double-digit interest but paying 1% or even less is beyond me.

One other place I went at the Plaza was a store called Farmers. This is basically the Macy's of New Zealand. Actually, considering their prices, Nordstrom or Lord & Taylor might be a better comparison. I had no interest in paying a hundred bucks for a shirt of sixty bucks for underwear. It was fascinating to look around the place, though.

After spending quite a while at the mall, I explored much of Palmerston North on foot. First I walked east along Broadway. While this stretch is mostly lined with professional offices (especially real estate agents), the most noteworthy site is the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, a small but handsome Catholic church in modern pseudo-Gothic style. There were signs up saying that the cathedral was temporarily closed and giving the mass times at other area churches. I did some googling and found that they'd recently had a major fire there, and the church is closed until repairs are made.



Horizons Regional Council

My ultimate destination in this direction was a small office building that looked like it should be a doctor's office. (Indeed there was a medical clinic across the street.) This was the headquarters of the Horizons Regional Council, the closest equivalent to a state capitol building there is here. I went inside and waited for nearly ten minutes while for the one woman who was working over the lunch hour to get off the phone. Once she did, she was able to help me. I'd come to buy the third in the series of transit cards



Cathedral of the Holy Spirit – Palmerston North

I'll be using on this trip. Horizons has switched to the nationwide Bee card, though I'd read that the only place they sell it in the region is at the council office. The card works in most of the places I'll be visiting later on this trip, and it was good to have one before I got to those places. Like Snapper, there are big discounts for using the Bee card; it more than pays for the \$5 cost after just a couple of trips.



**Historic building (now an art gallery) on the Square
Palmerston North**

long, narrow driveway provides access from the street to all those homes.

I should mention one other thing about urban transit in New Zealand. I timed this trip well, because through June the government is subsidizing a 50% discount on all fares. This was started as a way to help transit recover after COVID, and they extended it when rapid inflation cut people's spending power. The full fares are fairly pricey, even with the card discounts, but with the discount there the same or less than equivalent trips would cost in America.

I made my way back to the Square and then walked south through a mostly residential area. The homes in Palmerston North reminded me of pictures our mother's penpals had sent years ago. They're mostly quite small, similar to the postwar homes you'd see in American suburbs. All have brick or cement block walls around them, enclosing extremely small yards (or “gardens” in local usage). Most are brick or stucco, though there are some with wood siding. The roofs are all steeply pitched, and—like what I'd seen around Wellington—they're pretty much all either metal or tile. While the housing in Palmy is much cheaper than in Wellington (average homes sell for around NZ\$600,000 or about US\$350,000 here), everything is immaculately maintained. It's one of the prettiest towns I've seen anywhere in the world.

Something unique about homes in New Zealand (and apparently also Australia) is that they're often built with two or three homes, one behind the other. The homes have the same street address, with A, B, and C appended after the number. A

I walked quite a ways south to a big city park along the Manawatu River. The most noteworthy feature here was the enormous local cricket complex. I know even less about cricket than rugby, but it was interesting to see the place.

I made my back to the Square, where I stopped briefly at a gift shop. While Palmerston North isn't particularly tourist-oriented, this had all the tacky souvenirs you'd expect. I bought a coffee mug, a deck of cards with scenic views of New Zealand, a few postcards, and a miniature rugby ball with the All Blacks logo. Everything was quite reasonably priced, so it was a good stop.

I went back to the i-Site and got there about half an hour before my bus would be arriving. I wandered around the information displays (basically just brochures for places I had no interest in visiting) and bought a can of apple-flavored soda. That's a flavor I associate with Mexican pop, but apparently it's popular in New Zealand as well.

The bus back to Wellington was a single level bus, and it was much more crowded than the northbound bus had been. I was again in gold class, but this time there were only two available seats. They were filled by me and a businessman who also boarded in Palmerston North. It was still a 2—1 configuration, but the seats were narrower and less padded than they'd been on the morning bus.

The morning bus had run express, but this time we stopped at every little town between Palmy and Wellington. Because of this we mostly followed the old road, a narrow and winding path through the mountains. I almost felt seasick from all the turns.

One memorable thing on this trip was that two women on the bus were talking to each other quite loudly in Spanish. Their accent conveyed that they were almost certainly from Spain itself rather than from Latin America. I'm not sure if anyone else on the bus understood what they were saying, but nobody could avoid hearing them.

South of Levin we followed old highway 1, a winding road that runs right along the rocky Kapiti Coast of the Tasman Sea north of Wellington. It was right at sunset, and the view out the window was really stunning. New Zealand is known for spectacular scenery, and this was really the first of that I'd seen.



Sunset on the Kapiti Coast

We got to Wellington station just after 5:30pm. InterCity buses use Platform 10 at the station. It's parallel to all the railway platforms, but it faces a parking lot. The buses basically make a U-turn in the parking lot to line up next to the platform. That made it very convenient for me to transfer to a suburban train once we arrived. I just had time to use the restroom, and then I got on a train that took me to Johnsonville, a part of the city that's in the mountains south of Tawa. Since the sun had set, there wasn't much to see on this trip, and it about the only thing of note about it were two guys who were trying to make their bicycles fit in a space that was really designed for a single bike.

This train line ends at the Johnsonville Shopping Centre. The mall dates to the same era as the Plaza in Palmerston North, but it hasn't aged nearly as well. There's no real anchor store (the biggest thing is a Countdown supermarket), and they seem to have traded many of the "real" stores for places to get your nails done, get you're a massage, or get a tattoo. The one store I patronized was a bookshop, where I picked up a sympathy card for a woman in my church whose husband recently died. The card was printed in China and had prices for pretty much every English-speaking place in the eastern hemisphere. It was NZ\$5.99, or about US\$3.65.

I also had supper at the mall at another kebab place. Capital Kebabs claims to have the best Lebanese food in Wellington. It was basically the same as the Turkish kebabs I had for lunch or the kebabs of ho particular ethnicity I'd had at the Pita Pit a couple days ago. With my dinner I had a beverage called Lyft (like Uber's competitor). It's a lemon soda that could be called L&P's competitor, except for the fact that both are Coca-Cola products. I'm not sure what the difference between them is supposed to be.

After dinner I caught a train back to the main station. Just two people got on the train at Johnsonville, and only about half a dozen others joined at the stops along the way. The northbound trains, on the other hand were all full. I considered getting a bus from the station to Lambton Quay, but the sign said the next one would be in nine minutes. I knew I could walk back faster than that, so I just made my way to the hotel.

FRIDAY, MAY 26

Wellington area

Once again I was up in the five o'clock hour. I haven't been overly tired with jet lag, but I am a couple hours off schedule. At least it's not seven hours early like the actual time zone difference.

This morning's big issue on *AMNZ* was the New Zealand public healthcare system. Like pretty much every country in the developed world except the U.S., New Zealand provides healthcare for free or at reduced prices. (Perhaps "prepaid through taxes" is a better description than "free".) There's generally good access to routine care, and emergencies are also supposed to be handled efficiently. The system is free for citizens and long-term residents, though there are small charges for non-essential services (a tiny fraction of what they would be in the States). Emergency care is even free for visitors—though I certainly hope I don't have to take advantage of that (knock on wood). As is the case in most countries with public healthcare, though, there are issues with elective procedures and with necessary but non-urgent healthcare. For instance, they spoke with a woman this morning who had waited four years for a knee replacement. Things can be expedited with private insurance to pay for doctors who work outside the system. (That's also true in places like Canada and the U.K., despite what American conservatives imply.) The vast majority of New Zealanders don't have private insurance, though. I suspect the woman might have moved things forward faster by being a bit more of a squeaky wheel with her doctor, but that's just speculation on my part. It is interesting that pretty much nobody is happy with whatever system they have.

I was in no hurry at all today, and I spent much of the morning writing yesterday's account for this travelogue. At about 9:00 I went to the train station. I added some money to my Snapper card and then caught the first southbound bus down to the south end of downtown, where the buses all split to go off in different directions. I transferred to bus #2, and rode it clear to the end of the line: Darlington and Camperdown Streets in the suburb (New Zealand usage—it's still in the city) of Miramar. Miramar basically means "look at the sea" in Spanish. I don't know if the name came from that language or not, but it is appropriate. Miramar is on a peninsula east of the airport that separates Wellington Harbour from the Cook Strait. It apparently used to be a separate island until an earthquake smashed it into the bottom of the North Island.



Typical street in Miramar – Wellington

Miramar looks a lot like parts of Los Angeles. It has beachy bungalows set on tiny lots that I'm sure sell for far more than I could afford. It also has rather junky stores and lots and lots of warehouses. Another thing that it has in common with L.A. is that Miramar is "Wellywood", the Hollywood of the south Pacific. Director Peter Jackson is based in Wellington, and movies like *Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *King Kong*, and *Avatar* (and dozens of others) were made here. I was particularly interested in this area since one of my former students worked on *King Kong*. (Essentially he was an apprentice but you can see Bob Brandenburg's name in the credits if you freeze frame things.) Bob worked at Camperdown Studios. They're housed in a bunch of warehouse-like buildings and certainly don't look like much. They don't offer tours, but I suspect it would be pretty similar to the Warner Brothers, which my sister and I toured out in California years ago

The place that does offer tours in Miramar is the Weta Workshop. Named after the world's largest insect (which is unfortunately native to New Zealand), Weta is basically a combination design studio and factory. They made costumes, props, and set pieces for all those movies I named earlier, as well as for numerous TV shows. While their facility is enormous, it blends in surprisingly well in a mostly residential area.

I had reserved an 11:00 tour, and I ended up getting to Weta right at 10am. Fortunately I was able to change to their 10:30 tour, so I didn't have to wait around forever. I filled the half hour by looking through their combination gift shop and museum. They have lots of character costumes and prop pieces on display, though many of the most famous ones are not there because other companies own the copyrights to those characters. There's also countless replica weapons—from ancient swords and maces



to futuristic guns. I didn't recognize most of the characters, since I haven't seen

most of the films Weta worked on. I did buy a DVD of *King Kong* to check out my former student's work. Just this year I also bought the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I attempted to watch it but I just found it boring. That's typically my reaction to epic fantasy. I never cared for the *Lord of the Rings* books, either.

One thing I did recognize was that Weta had done the two and a half times life size figures for the Gallipoli exhibit at the national museum. They are extremely realistic. During the tour our guide explained the amount of work that went into them. Each hair had to be placed individually on the figures' heads and arms—a necessary step since people are viewing those figures close up.



Website image of one of the Gallipoli displays at Te Papa

stickler for not using imagery they own.) They also are working on future movies, and they don't want things to get out before those films are released. I really wish we could have photographed the main area, because that was far more interesting to me than the museum.



Statue and sign at the Weta Workshop entrance



Pretty much everything in the museum is for sale. You can buy a life-size silicone figure for thousands of dollars if you want to, and cheap plastic collectibles are available in the \$50 - \$100 range. It all looks wonderful, but I can't imagine paying that kind of money for the stuff.

When I finished inside I waited by the trolls figures outdoors. Unfortunately the trees were shedding what I think was pollen. They were like little yellow hairs, and they got all over my clothes. Fortunately the guide soon came to begin the tour.

Photography is forbidden on most of the tour. This is partly because some of the characters are copyrighted. (Apparently Disney is a particular

The tour began with a welcome film by Richard and Tania Taylor, the founders of the Weta Workshop. They told of their interest in crafting things when they were young and how that led to making props for local TV shows in their garage. They outlined all the different stuff they'd worked on and went out of their way to give credit to the many artists who work at Weta. The Oscar that Richard Taylor won is on display in the welcome room, and the guide noted that he refused to get it engraved with his name, insisting it belonged to everyone at the workshop.

After the film we saw a woman from Australia show us how puppets (which feature heavily in those Jackson films) are made. We then saw another film that explained how prosthetics are made for complex costumes. An actor (who others had heard of, but not me) had his entire head covered in silicone to capture the exact shape of his facial features. (The same can be done for other parts of the body, depending on the nature of the costume.) The silicone is then used to make a heavy plastic mold. The other side of that mold is carved into the shape they need the prosthetic to be. They then pour latex between the layers, and voila! The process of making the mold and forming a prosthetic can take half a day. They use heavy plastic molds, because often many copies of the same prosthetic need to be made. Fitting prosthetics also takes time. A facial prosthetic can take about an hour to put on and cover with make-up, full body prosthetics can take most of a morning. With the full body costumes an issue that arises is how to provide convenience when nature calls. There's always some kind of removable joint in the crotch area for that purpose.

Next we saw how they make weapons. It fascinated me that the swords they used in *Lord of the Rings* were mostly actual metal swords. They have an actual blacksmith's shop with three employees who pound out metal swords by hand. They often are made of aluminum to be lighter than a standard sword, and they invariably have dull edges and a rounded tip. The exception will be if there's a close-up on the sword where light has to shine off the tip. Display swords like that will be made of steel, and they'll sharpen them as much as necessary to get the reflections they want. I expected movie weapons to be realistic looking plastic. It really surprised me that the swords were essentially real.

Guns and similar weapons usually are plastic. These are manufactured by computer carving from a block of solid resin. It's basically the opposite of 3-D printing; layers are shaved off instead of being melted together. They then use high-quality paints to make them look like aged metal.

The last artist we saw was nicknamed Dr. Tinfoil. To make props and background characters this guy starts by shaping a clump of foil. He uses simple tools like a teaspoon to make precisely shaped indentations or protrusions that eventually form the shape he wants. He can then take an moldable acrylic substance that he described as "adult Play-Doh" to cover the foil. That dries and hardens, and it can be painted to form very realistic objects and characters. Apparently lots of the stuff in the background of complex movie scenes is just acrylic-covered foil.

At the end they had each visitor pose in a costume in front of a green screen. We were told we would be given a complimentary digital photo and that we could also pay for print-outs. I couldn't figure out how to get the freebie, though, so you'll have to imagine how I looked in a futuristic stormtrooper outfit.

The tour got out right at noon. I left Weta and walked down Park Road in Miramar. I passed the Camperdown Studios where my former student probably worked. There's really nothing to see from the outside, though.

About a mile south of Weta I reached my next destination. Since the motivation for this morning's activity had been the movie *King Kong*, I was amused when I found out that there was a restaurant in Miramar called Gorilla Burger. I decided I had to make that my lunch stop today.

The sandwiches at Gorilla Burger all have catchy names. I had to try the Kong Burger, which for some reason had smoked brisket on top of a beef patty. To me the brisket got in the way. I'd really have preferred just a standard barbecue cheeseburger. I did eat it, though, together with a side of onion rings. This ended up being the most expensive meal I've had so



Gorilla Burger

to keep going. Almost anywhere else in the city I could have just caught a bus if I was tired. This trail is in sort of a dead zone between bus stops, though. It's right beside highway #1, which isn't a motorway at this point, but still is a four-lane highway. There's also a series of roundabouts that funnel traffic off to all corners of the city. It would have been hard to put bus stops in that setting, even if they wanted to. So once I'd decided to follow the trail, I had little choice but to just keep walking. The other option would be to have the wind blow me back to Miramar.



Camperdown Studios

far in New Zealand—NZ\$24.50 or roughly 15 U.S. dollars. That's not horrible, but it struck me as too much for fast food.

Getting anything to drink at Gorilla Burger would have added a minimum of five more dollars to the bill. So I went next door to the Green Door Dairy. This was the first place in New Zealand I saw sugar-free pop that wasn't cola. I was pleased to get some Sprite Zero, though I really wish those lemon sodas would come in a diet version.

I spent the forty-five minutes following a trail along the waterfront that connects Miramar with the area by the airport. On a nice day this would be a lovely trail. The views really are quite lovely. It was bright and sunny today, but it was also **extremely** windy. The airport apparently had sustained winds of 59 km/h (37 mph), with gusts up to 75 km/h (47 mph). The main radio announcer in Algonia often uses the phrase "hold onto your hats" to announce windy weather. Today I literally had to hold onto my hat, or it would have blown far, far away. Most of the time I was walking straight into that wind, and it was really exhausting just to keep moving forward. The good thing was that all along this trail were various rather ugly modern sculptures, with benches set up so passersby could admire them.

While I had little interest in the sculptures, the benches did allow me to rest enough

There were some interesting views along the way. What I probably liked best was a play on the Hollywood sign, with "WELLINGTON" in big letters purposely spaced to look like they were blowing away. That was certainly appropriate today.



Selfie on the Miramar trail

Also interesting was a collection of traps they'd set up filled with poison that are designed to keep invasive animals off the Miramar peninsula. Their goal is to have a predator-free peninsula, and so far it's been very successful. They do periodic testing to find rats in particular, and the last several times they did the tests there were zero rats found in Miramar. They're gradually trying to creep back to keep rats and other invaders out of more and more of the city.

Fortunately the wind lessened when I got away from the harbor and into the shadow of Mount Victoria. It's amazing how just a bit of shelter from the wind can make all the difference. This was where the trail ended, so I followed regular streets to the next bus stop. I caught bus #2 back downtown. TransLink had warned that there could be service disruptions because of the climate protest. That was apparently over, though, because we made it downtown without incident.

My main afternoon stop was at the Wellington Museum, a city-run institution housed in the Queen's Bond Building, essentially an old customhouse. While I chose to go to the museum mostly because it was free, it turned out to be quite interesting. One floor explores different Maori legends and also talks about the Maori who first settled this area. They gloss over the conflicts between the English and Maori and just move on to the days of Wellington being a provincial city and its fight to become capital of the colony. Another floor deals with maritime history. A large part focuses on an inter-island ferry that sunk in Wellington harbour during a storm in 1968. That remains the deadliest event in New Zealand's waters.

There's an entire floor dealing with local history, much of it presented in a light-hearted way. They show a documentary from the '60s that was trying to figure out why everyone hates Wellington and went on to sing the city's praises. That same floor has such interesting artifacts as an umbrella that belonged to a prostitute who fought to get sex work decriminalized in New Zealand. There's also a poster a local artist made during COVID that parodies a famous postage stamp showing the first white settlers landing in the country. Both the original 1940 stamp and the parody poster are shown



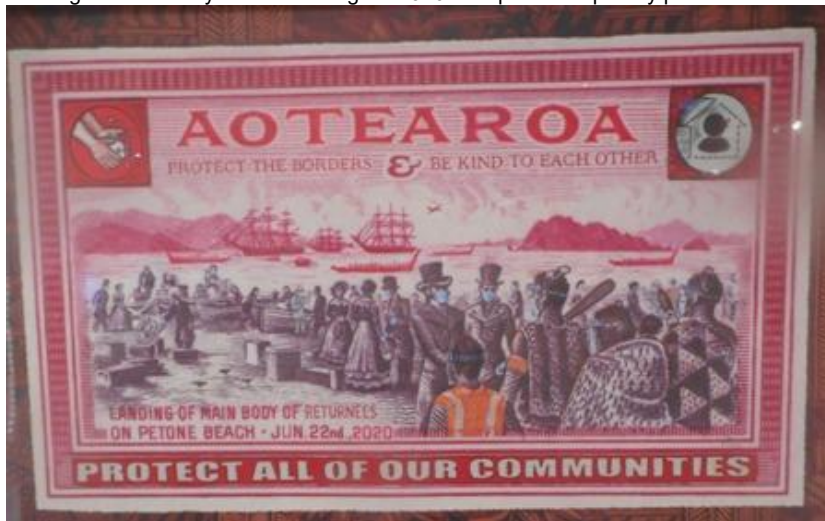
here. Its certainly interesting to see the pioneers wearing face masks. Finally they have a "time machine" where a multi-screen film traces the history of southern North Island from what they consider pre-history (1000 A.D.) to the future. I really enjoyed the Wellington Museum, and I'm glad I took the time to go there.



The official Wellington sign



Invasive species trap



I walked back to the hotel and dumped my stuff. Then I went out one more time. I'd passed a statue of Queen Victoria on the bus, and I wanted to go back and look at it up close. She definitely looks pompous looking out over the empire.



**Statue of Queen Victoria
Cambridge Terrace – Wellington**

to input various details, one of which was my phone number. When I put in the number that the phone says is associated with the NZ SIM (64-291-267-097), it told me to enter a valid number. So I entered the U.S. number, but it said that was also invalid. I think I was supposed to leave off the “64” (the New Zealand country code) at the start of the phone number, but it would have been good if they’d included that information—or not made it a mandatory category. I did end up ordering at the counter, but the guy there seemed a bit annoyed to have to deal with me.

Back at the hotel I wrote today’s account for the travelogue. Then I struggled to get everything I’d accumulated in the past four days to properly fit in my luggage. I probably should have waited until the end of the trip to make any purchases, since now I’ll be dragging what I bought in Wellington around all over the rest of New Zealand. That’s a mistake I’ve made before, and if I continue to travel, I’ll likely keep making that same mistake in the future.

SATURDAY, MAY 27

Wellington to Oban, Stewart Island

I actually slept in later today than any previous day on this trip. I was still up before 6am, though. I’d actually set my alarm for 6:00, though, so that wasn’t a big deal. I did manage to pack everything into my new suitcase. I even fit my main carry-on in there. It’s filled with the stuff I’ll take with me on the small plane flight this afternoon, since luggage is severely limited on that flight.

I left the hotel at about 6:15, stopping just briefly to get a printed folio guaranteeing me that nothing unusual had happened with the bill. Then I walked over to the bus stop on Lambton Quay. Wellington on a Saturday morning is a very dead place. I was the only person at the bus stop, and not many other folks passed by while I was waiting.

On weekdays there are buses every few minutes at the downtown Wellington stops. Often there are multiple buses leaving at essentially the same time. This morning the digital board showed departures up until 8:30am, two full hours from now. The buses were spaced out every 15 minutes or so. Fortunately the Airport Express was the first one on the list.

I boarded right at 6:30. At that point there was just one other passenger on the bus, but it filled to about three-fourths capacity by the time we’d gone all the way through the downtown area. The ride southward was uneventful, and we got to the airport right at 7am.

I’d checked in for my flight online, but I still had to go to a kiosk to check my bag. I got the “IVC” label easily enough and put it around the handle of the suitcase. After that I had to go to an area at the front of the kiosks to actually clear the bag to go on the plane. I answered the same questions I had before, verifying that nothing dangerous was in the bag. Then I was supposed to scan the barcode on the bag label, but it was all but impossible to get it to scan. Even with the help of an employee it took a couple of minutes before the bag would finally go down the conveyor.

I’d actually gotten to the airport much earlier than I needed to. The way Wellington airport is set up, all the businesses and the principal waiting area are on the “land” side of the airport. Only when it gets close to flight time do they direct passengers to go through security, because there’s nothing but gates on the other side. I’ve been at the airport a full hour as I write this. The flight is due to depart in 45 minutes, but it looks like they generally wait until half an hour before departure to put “go to security” on the screens. I assume they know what they’re doing, but it’s weird to wait until the last minute to get inspected.

Queen Victoria reigns over a rather dumpy boulevard that tries to look regal. Most of Cambridge Terrace is painted concrete, though, and it’s hard for that to look elegant. It reminded me of the nice parts of third world cities like Mexico City and Lima that end up looking like cheap copies of Los Angeles.

I did get a laugh out of one of those painted concrete businesses. Just down the street from Victoria is Tony’s Tyre Service, whose logo is a giant red kiwi bird. With the angle it’s at, it’s almost like the bird is mooning her majesty.



Tony’s Tyre Service

I made one more stop today. I walked over to Courtenay Place and stopped at the Wellington location of Nando’s, a chain I’ve now patronized in four different countries. I didn’t have their chicken, since I was still full of burger and brisket. Instead I ordered a couple of snacks from their vegetarian menu—grilled haloumi slices and pita with garlic and cheese. It cost about half what I paid at Gorilla Burger (and also less than Nando’s charges in Chicago). I think I liked it better than the Kong sandwich, too.

I had actually tried to order my Nando’s snacks online, which is the way they prefer you order. It turned out that there were several problems with that. I attempted to download the Nando’s NZ phone app, but I was told that was blocked because it was “outside my region”. (Presumably the phone thinks I’m in the States, even when using the New Zealand SIM card.) Next I went to their New Zealand website, selected the Wellington restaurant, and went to the “place order” section. I selected the items without an issue and made it to the check-out screen. It asked me

I wrote the previous paragraph while I was waiting, but it turns out that passengers whose flight isn't a jet don't actually pass through security. At about 8:33 they announced our flight 8873 was boarding, and I made a beeline for what I thought was the security line. That entrance had a machine where you were to self-scan your tickets. I did, and it brought me into a long hallway that provided direct access to several gates that didn't use jetbridges. I found Gate 11, and a man ushered me out to a ramp that led up to the plane door. Except for a couple of handicapped people and unaccompanied minors, I was the first person to board the plane. I must say it's a bit weird to board without going through security. I think the only other time I've done that was when Margaret and I were on a chartered plane that replaced a cancelled train in northern Canada.

This flight would be on a Bombardier Q-300, a fairly large prop plane with 15 rows in a 2—2 configuration. It's almost entirely full. Indeed, as far as I can tell the only empty seat is the one next to mine (10-C). My multi-stop ticket all around New Zealand allowed me to choose seats for free, and I chose a window seat in the exit row. When I checked in I saw that the aisle was still free, and fortunately it remained so.

They closed the doors at 8:50am, and we pushed back at about 8:55. It took a while for them to rev the engines enough so we could taxi, but we finally took off right at 9am. The take off was quite rough—I assume because of winds similar to yesterday's. We soon cut through the clouds, though, and we were up above the Cook Strait.



Mountains in northern South Island

Our flight path is taking us along the east coast of the South Island, and it's truly beautiful. It's extremely mountainous. Within fifteen minutes of leaving Wellington we were seeing snow-capped peaks. Much of the South Island is uninhabited, and the rest is very sparse. Some of the mountains are covered in forest, while others appear to just have moss or grass. Everything is incredibly green, though. Of the places I've been, it looks most like British Columbia. It even has the braided rivers we saw on the trip to Alaska when I was young—wide stretches of gravel with meandering channels weaving through.

The Pacific is also very pretty. It's a deep aqua at this point, more the color I'd expect from a big lake than from the world's largest ocean. At least through most of northern South Island there don't seem to be any beaches. Instead the mountains just end in cliffs at the shore.

This is one of the longest flights you can take in New Zealand. It's scheduled for two hours and ten minutes, though apparently the actual flying time is an hour and fifty minutes. The only longer flight is from Auckland to Invercargill, and that's only ten minutes more. The country stretches well north of Auckland, but you'd have to change flights to go to the northernmost airport at Whangarei.



**Braided river in farm country
Central South Island**

After about forty-five minutes we've come to the central part of the South Island. It's much flatter and much more settled. I can see farms and small towns below. While there's no position map (or much of anything else) on this flight, I assume we're relatively near Christchurch. It fascinates me that the braided rivers continue here. Some of them are extremely wide, though the channels are quite narrow. It's been decades since I've even thought of braided rivers. They're always fed by glaciers, and the Southern Alps are home to many ice fields.

I have no idea what they grow here, but the farming is intense. There appears to be a combination of straight rows and central pivot irrigation. There are a few patches of bare ground that have presumably been harvested, but most of it still looks very green, even in fall.

Before long we cut across the mountains to another farming area, the Southland region. The plane's wheels went down when we were still over farmland. We then cut across the city of Invercargill and almost immediately landed at IVC airport, just west of town. For a small airport, the runway is surprisingly long, and it took about five minutes to get to the end, taxi back, and park on the tarmac. Again they attached a ramp to the plane, and we deplaned fairly quickly.

It took about ten minutes before they began sending luggage through the conveyor. My bag came fairly quickly, though, and everything was intact this time. I separated out the bag (normally my carry-on) that I'll

be taking to Stewart Island and then made my way down to the Stewart Island Flights desk. Interestingly two bearded guys who had been seated in front of me on the flight from Wellington to Invercargill were also booked on the same connecting flight.

While the confirmation I'd gotten had a QR code on it, the guy at check-in was interested in nothing other than my last name. He confirmed that I'd be flying back on Monday and noted that the time of the return flight had changed from the original reservation. (I'd already gotten an e-mail notification of that.) He stored my big bag and gave me a ticket to claim it on my return. He also checked my smaller bag and suggested that I might want to also check the bookbag I was using as a carry-on. I said I'd prefer to use that as a carry-on, and he noted when I got to the plane I could either check it there or put it between my legs on board. There is apparently no cabin storage at all. The clerk oriented a boarding pass (which looks like a cash register receipt) and sent me on my way.

I stopped by a vending machine where I bought the cheapest pop I've seen in New Zealand, a can of Coke Zero for NZ\$2. The exchange rate has actually improved a bit while I've been here, so that's right at \$1.20 in U.S. money. Next I stopped at an ATM, where I was unlucky. Any increase in the exchange rate was eaten up by a \$7.50 service charge, more than double what I'd seen from other banks here.

There's a small food counter in the Invercargill Airport. For my lunch today I had another New Zealand "delicacy", the Southland cheese roll. This consists of a single slice of white bread and a piece of cheese (white cheddar). Atop the cheese they spread Kiwi onion dip, a staple made of onion soup powder and evaporated milk. The bread is rolled up around the cheese and dip, and then they lightly fry it to make sort of a rolled-up grilled cheese sandwich. Those who like haute cuisine deride the dish, but I found it both cheap and tasty. I actually paid more for a dessert to accompany the cheese roll. They had very elegant looking desserts in a display case, and I chose a blueberry cheesecake. It was delicious. Everything was served on china with metal flatware, which seemed surprisingly nice for an airport.

Invercargill Airport is pleasant, if rather boring. (I've read the same about the Southland region as a whole, so I guess that's fitting.) It's a bit larger than Mason City's airport, but still basically all one room. There's a central waiting area which provides a view of the tarmac (where absolutely nothing is happening) and the parking lot. To one side is the airline check-in area with a big set of kiosks for Air New Zealand and one tiny desk for Stewart Island Flights. At the other end they have baggage claim and car rental desks. On the side with the car rentals is the "jet gate" (it's actually labeled that), the one secure part of the airport. I'm not sure where jets fly to from IVC, but at least at midday on Saturday they seem to have a lot of security employees who are doing absolutely nothing. There are three men and two women wearing uniforms inside the security room. They're just standing by the conveyor belt talking, though. At the moment there are only five passengers in the entire terminal, and I don't think any of them is planning to fly on a jet.

The jet gate at IVC is technically gate 5. Gates 1 through 4 are all a single glass door that leads straight out to the tarmac. I assume if multiple flights leave at once they park beside each other in four specific places. My bet is that it's pretty rare they need more than one gate at a time, though.

The airport has very big glass doors. That has allowed multiple birds to get into the terminal. They're flying around, practically oblivious to the fact that there are people here.

At 12:50 they called Stewart Island Flights WK-161 for boarding. It was fascinating that the guy who checked me also checked people off as we went through the door and walked out to the tarmac. He also stored people's carry-on luggage, and it turned out that he was also the pilot for the plane.

Our aircraft was a Britten Norman Islander, a vintage prop plane that looked like it should be held together with duct tape. The plane has seating for ten, including the pilot and co-pilot. There were seven passengers on today's flight, which meant one empty seat clear in the back. I was sitting in the front, right behind the co-pilot. Next to me was a young Anglican priest who was flies to Stewart Island once a month to do a church service.

The pilot ran through a very quick safety briefing. What stood out was that all the life jackets for everyone on board were in a single box in the back. He also noted that there were latches that could open the doors, but he added, "Please use them only in case of emergency" with a voice that implied someone had accidentally opened the doors at some point in the past.



Stewart Island Flights plane from the window at Invercargill Airport



**LEFT: The pilot of flight WK-161
RIGHT: Digital instrument panel on Britten Norman Islander**

The pilot turned a key to start the plane, just like you might an old car. It coughed and sputtered, but eventually it came to life. I mentioned earlier that the 787 was a very quiet plane. The Islander is quite the opposite. Indeed this was one of the loudest plane trips I've ever been in. I was glad it was only 20 minutes.

On their website Stewart Island Flights notes that the Islander is ideal for their service because it can take off and land in a very short space. That was

certainly true. The pilot drove out to the half-way point on the runway. He then gunned the engines, and in seconds we were in the air—wot tons of runway still beneath us. It intrigued me that the wheels on the Islander didn't retract; they just stuck out below throughout the whole flight.

Stewart Island Flights flies at a very low altitude. Crossing the Pacific on Air New Zealand we flew at 40,000 feet. From Wellington down to Invercargill the cruising altitude was 26,000 feet. Crossing the Foveaux Strait today we flew at 175 feet. At that height you can see individual trees on land and individual waves over water. I could very clearly make out the ferry that is the other way of getting to Stewart Island. I googled things that were 175 feet tall. Among the results was the tallest building in Rockford, Illinois—which happens to be an Embassy Suites hotel. Hopefully that tells you that we weren't very high at all.

We flew almost straight south from Invercargill. (The plane's compass showed that we were either 178 or 179 degrees from north.) That actually made me wonder how compasses work in the southern hemisphere, something I still couldn't tell you. We first passed over some farmland (grass with sheep grazing) and then we were over the harbor south of Invercargill. We passed the southernmost point in "mainland" New Zealand, the port of Bluff, and then for about ten minutes we were over open water. When we reached Stewart Island we actually didn't have to angle down much. Ryan's Creek Aerodrome (airport code SVS) is at the top of a big hill, so we basically just cruised right into it. Though much, much closer to sea level, it was similar to landing in Cusco, Peru. It's a short, but nicely paved runway that happens to be in a clearing in the woods.



**The priest entering the Stewart Island Flights van
(As with all transport vehicles in New Zealand,
the passenger access is on the LEFT side.)**

someone who could help. Before long an elderly man came and presented me with an old-fashioned key, saying "Hello, David." Apparently I was the only person with a reservation starting tonight.

The guy didn't have me sign anything, nor did he scan a credit card. I just went up to my room and dumped off my stuff. The key I was given was for Room #1. It's a traditional room with a view of the sea, which is precisely what I reserved. I have a large room with tired, but comfortable furnishings. The décor is a weird combination of old-time elegance (like an embossed ceiling medallion with the main light hanging from it) and hunting lodge (wood-paneled door, closet, and cabinets). The room has a TV, a sink, and the ubiquitous kettle with tea and instant coffee. It doesn't have an en suite bathroom, but there's a toilet literally right next door (positioned so no other room is likely to use it) and a shower down the hall. At NZ\$100 (US\$60 at the current exchange rate) it's hard to beat the price, and I knew the bathroom situation when I made the booking.

Theoretically there's internet access here, but I can't seem to get the network to connect. There's free community internet across the street on the beach, though, and the phone plan I got with the SIM card has a huge amount of data and works just fine in Stewart Island.

After settling in I headed next door to the main business in Oban, the 4-Square. 4-Square is owned by the same company that owns New World and Pak & Save supermarkets. They have locations in small towns all over New Zealand and also isolated neighborhoods in the cities. You could call 4-Square a convenience store, but it's really more of an old time general store. It has very narrow aisles and shelves packed to the ceiling. They sell a little bit of everything there, though not a lot of anything. The prices are quite reasonable, particularly given how isolated Stewart Island is. Most things seemed to cost the same or perhaps a little less than they did in Wellington and Palmerston North. I was expecting it might be expensive in the southernmost place in the country, but it really isn't at all.

I spent most of the afternoon exploring the Oban area. I saw a sign that said "Observation Rock 1km", and I figured that would make a nice destination. It turned out that one kilometer was basically straight uphill. I huffed and puffed, and I had to rest a couple of times, but I did eventually make it there, and the rock (apparently dedicated for Queen Elizabeth's platinum jubilee) did have some nice views.



Penguin crossing

I walked back down the hill and then walked westward along the coastline. It was a nice waterfront walk, though nothing really spectacular. Probably the most interesting thing I saw was a penguin warning sign. However, while I saw plenty of birds, penguins were not among them.

I made my way back downtown. Oban really does look remote and a bit rough around the



"Selfie" at Observation Rock

edges. Of the places I've been, it reminded me most of Churchill, Manitoba, on the shores of Hudson Bay clear on the other side of the world. Churchill is a bit larger, but they do have a similar feel.

I stopped at the combination building that serves as a post office and the headquarters of Stewart Island Flights. (There's a small gift shop there as well.) This was the first place I'd found in New Zealand that actually sold stamps, so I did buy some that I'll use to send postcards to at least Steve. I got a book of five of the standard international stamps and also some commemoratives of other denominations that I could combine to make the appropriate amount. I got a couple of Christmas stamps, one that commemorated King Charles' coronation, and another from a few years back that commemorated Queen Elizabeth's 95th birthday (with a picture of her that looks to date from the 1960s). The domestic postage rate is NZ\$1.70 for 10 grams and an additional dollar for each additional 10 grams. That does make American postal rates seem cheap.

The woman who served me was the same sweet old lady who had driven the van from the airstrip into town. She had a very pronounced accent (apparently quite common in Southland, which was primarily settled by Scotsmen), and she asked if I would like "a wee bag" for my stamps. This was the first bag of any sort I was offered in New Zealand. All the supermarkets only sell reusable bags; you can't even buy a paper bag, just a cloth one. Smaller stores just expect you to be carrying a reusable bag with you. I almost always do that anyway when I travel. I try to get a typical local bag that doesn't stand out. In America I'll carry a heavy plastic bag from Aldi or Walgreens; in New Zealand that's a bright red cloth bag from the Warehouse.

From the post office I made my way down to the beach. New Zealanders and Australians would say that Halfmoon Bay (where Oban is located) is an inlet of the Southern Ocean. They use that language because it's the ocean that's south of them, and to me that makes sense. Scientists argue a lot over how to divide oceans, and while most do use "Southern Ocean" as a term these days, they wouldn't say Oban lies on it. For scientists that term applies only to Antarctic waters, everything lying in an arbitrary circle at 60 degrees south latitude. The scientists would say Stewart Island is in the South Pacific and the Great Australian Bight (the water south of that continent) is part of the Indian Ocean. They also say the Tasman Sea is part of the Pacific, and they divide the Indian and Pacific with a line of longitude going straight south from Tasmania.

The problem, of course, is that in a sense there's just one great ocean that covers most of the earth. If we are to subdivide things, though, "Southern" makes sense to me when I'm in the southernmost place in this part of the world. It also makes sense because the currents here flow up from Antarctica. While it's lovely to look at, the water in Halfmoon Bay is COLD. The bay apparently never freezes solid, but I can't imagine swimming in it.

I made another stop at 4-Square, where I picked up some Sprite Zero, a small bottle of grapefruit juice (still my favorite beverage, though I can't have much of it with diabetes), and the weekend edition of the *Southland Times* (which seems to be heavy on sports and entertainment and extremely light on news). When I got done at 4-Square it had begun to rain, so I headed back to the hotel and basically settled in for the night.

My dinner tonight is what the guidebooks call "self-catering". I picked up some beans and some canned spaghetti both made by Watties, the local brand of canned goods. New Zealanders are extremely big on canned beans (which is spelled B – E – A – N – Z as a registered trademark of Watties). The standard version is actually vegetarian, rather than the pork and beans we get in America. My two-can dinner cost less than five New Zealand dollars, and given that the hotel restaurant is charging about forty for their mains, canned goods seem like a good deal.

Something interesting about New Zealand foods is that the labels are required to not just list ingredients, but to list the percentage of each ingredient in the overall dish. The "BEANZ", for instance were 51% navy beans and 49% tomato sauce—with 41 of that 49% actually being tomatoes and the rest being various flavorings and stabilizers. In America we always list ingredients in order from most to least, but it is interesting to have the actual percentages.

I spent the evening watching TV and reading through the newspaper. One of the most interesting things was the real estate section, showing the offerings in Invercargill and surrounding towns. Homes in New Zealand do not have an actual asking price. Instead they are listed with phrases such as "accepting offers starting at \$450,000" with a sort of auction among people who are interested in the property. Modest homes in Invercargill seemed to range from \$350,000 to \$500,000 (\$200,000 to \$300,000 U.S.), while more luxurious places were accepting offers from \$1.75 million. It's also interesting that rent in New Zealand is paid weekly rather than monthly. Weekly rents were all over the place, from \$250 to \$1,500 (\$150 to \$900 in U.S. money).

Stewart Island is dark sky sanctuary, where the stars are supposed to be beautiful. They also frequently see the Aurora Australis (Southern Lights) here. It was cloudy tonight though, so I basically just saw darkness.

SUNDAY, MAY 28

Stewart & Ulva Islands

I did, however, see a beautiful sunrise this morning. I also slept longer than I had in Wellington, not waking up until about 6:00. That's the time I get up during the school year, so I certainly can't complain.

I appeared to be up before anyone else in the hotel. That was nice, because it allowed me to enjoy a nice long shower. The showers here are quite a bit nicer than what I had at the Ibis. They have good pressure and easily adjustable temperature. I probably spent ten minutes in the shower, which for me is very long.



Oban Beach



Sunrise over Halfmoon Bay
(from Room #1 at South Sea Hotel)

I thought I'd have breakfast at the hotel this morning. Unfortunately the restaurant was completely jammed. I'd swear everyone on the island was eating there this morning. That may have literally been true, since it seems to be the only place open in the morning. Even if I could get in, it didn't look like it would be a very pleasant place to eat. The crowd in the restaurant all appeared to know each other and were socializing loudly. I just didn't feel like I'd fit in there, so instead I just had some instant coffee and some chocolate and orange cookies ("New Zealand's favorite biscuits" according to the package) that I'd bought back in Wellington. As a bonus, that saves about twenty bucks.

Before this trip I put most of the main events for this trip into the calendar on my phone. As it turns out, that was less than helpful. The calendar assumed the times and dates I'd entered were for Central Time, so it's been giving me notifications after things have already happened. For instance this morning it said my flight to Stewart Island would be coming up—since, of course, it's still yesterday back in Iowa.

My main adventure this morning was a trip to the Rakiura Museum. Rakiura is one of the Maori names for Stewart Island. It means "glowing skies," a reference to the aurora. The museum is housed in a lovely modern building and traces all aspects of the history of the area. Interestingly its geologic history is the opposite of Miramar in Wellington. The island used to be part of the South Island until it was pushed away by an earthquake. Like most of New Zealand, first the Maori and then Europeans came with the goal of using its resources—fish and oysters (both of which are still important today), timber, minerals, and for a time whaling. Fishing still is important in modern times, but by far the biggest industry here is tourism. There are a lot of eclectic artifacts from the early days of the island. Nothing was really a "must see", but it was interesting to visit.

I wasn't feeling particularly well today (I think mostly thanks to too many onions in that cheese roll), so I wasn't really looking forward to the fact that my main activity today would be on a boat. It turned out that as the day went on I felt better, and the excursion didn't go badly at all. I'd prebooked a cruise through Patterson Inlet (the body of water south of Stewart Island) which was combined with a hiking tour of Ulva Island, a nature reserve that they've largely restored to how it was before humans were here.



The boat for our tour

when it is young, but when it grows tall the upper leaves are very soft. It is thought that the tree developed this as a defense against the moa, the giant bird that once inhabited New Zealand. The soft leaves grew above the height the flightless bird could reach, while the "lances" down below kept the birds at bay. I'd have loved to have heard about all the native ferns and about the palms that grow in chilly weather. The lance-leaf was the only plant she addressed, though.



On the beach at Ulva Island

(as well as a couple presentations of the stage play), I can confirm that the woman did look remarkably like an older Shirley Jones.

The final passenger was a woman on the border between middle age and "Super Gold". She lived in Wanaka, a resort town in the mountains of central South Island. Her daughter apparently lives in Pennsylvania. I gather it's fairly common for Kiwis to move away from the country, either for a few years or as emigrants. The newspapers spoke of a "brain drain" and also lamented that many of the country's top athletes had left the country to attend American universities on scholarship.

When we got back from the tour I did a bit more walking, though all near the Oban townsite. I first went on what they call the Fuchsia Walk. I assume the plants of that name must grow along the trail. If they did, they were definitely not in bloom, so I didn't notice them. What was in bloom were purple flowers that were somewhat similar to forget-me-nots. It was weird seeing colored leaves that had fallen on the trail with blooming flowers to the side.

There were only six people on our tour. We were in a boat that could easily hold 100, and there were three employees with us—a skipper, a guide, and a guy who served complimentary coffee and tea and would have served us alcoholic drinks if anyone had wanted to pay for them. The guide, a woman named Karen who came from Malta via Australia did by far the largest part of the work. On the cruise she discussed points of interest and also pointed out wildlife (like albatrosses) we passed. She also led us on the hiking tour while the other two stayed on the boat. The main thing she talked about on the hike was bird life, which is what Ulva Island is most famous for. She also discussed some other native species, most notably sea lions. Sadly we didn't see any of those.

Something I wish she'd have focused on more was the plant life of the area, almost all of which is totally different from what I'm used to seeing. She did note with chagrin a couple of species of trees that were not native to the area, but there was only one local plant she talked about in any detail. This was a tree called the lance-leaf that has extremely tough and spiky leaves

I had dug out the heavier coat I'd brought along, and I was glad I wore it today. It was 9 degrees Celsius, which is about 49 Fahrenheit. Combined with very damp weather and a bit of a breeze, it was a nasty, biting cold. Just having it today made the coat worth the space it took up in my jacket.

Two of the other passengers were young men from Turkey. The guide noted that their national election was today and tip-toed around the subject, less she offend them. They filled in her blanks with words like "dictator" and "corruption". The two guys were in New Zealand on a working holiday visa, which is one of the most common ways younger people visit the country. These gentlemen worked in two different restaurants, and I'd already seen that many of the country's service jobs were filled by people who were not native New Zealanders. They also do a lot of agricultural work.

An older couple on the boat was visiting from Christchurch, another place where my mother had a penpal when I was growing up. When they heard I was from Iowa, they knew the place from *The Music Man*, so it was convenient that I was just down the road from Meredith Wilson's hometown. They apparently had worked in theatre for years and had played the lead roles in the show. Having seen the movie



Fern forest on Stewart Island

The Fuchsia Walk leads to a city park that's little more than an overgrown athletic field. On the other side of the park is the slightly longer Raroa Walk. I have no idea what the origin of that name was, but it was a lovely walk through the fern forest. I didn't know until this trip that ferns were essentially trees, though they reproduce differently from what we normally think of as trees. They towered over the trail and sheltered it from the rain that was falling. I've never been amid that kind of vegetation before, and it really felt a bit surreal.

After my walk I stopped by 4-Square to do a bit more "self-catering". Since my stomach still wasn't the best, I was hoping to get a salad or something of the sort. There wasn't a scrap of lettuce in the place, and what vegetables they did have were incredibly expensive—like NZ\$3.95 for a single bell pepper (or "capsicum" as they call them here). Even after doing the conversion, that's about double what the same thing would cost at Hy-Vee in Iowa. My dinner



Entrance to 4-Square

ended up being a snack pack made of cheese and rice crackers. According to the ingredients list, it's 72% "tasty New Zealand cheddar". I don't believe I've ever seen an adjective on an American ingredients list, but I don't disagree that the cheese was tasty. It also sat pretty well in my stomach, so a decent dinner overall.

I had considered taking part in the one event that is happening on Stewart Island while I'm here. Each Sunday night the South Sea Hotel hosts a pub quiz. While I think this would have been fun, they only allow people to enter in teams of six—and I don't think five imaginary friends would count. Some well-known visitors have done that pub quiz over the years. Probably the most famous was Prince Harry. He and a group of other military officers made a team they called the "Ginger Ninjas". They apparently lost to a group of the prince's bodyguards. When Harry visited Stewart Island, he supposedly stayed in one of the South Sea Hotel's sea view rooms, so who knows—it could have been the very room I'm staying in.

My phone made a horrible noise while I was typing on today's account. Fortunately I'd seen ads on TV explaining that this would be happening. Today the New Zealand government was testing an emergency alert system, which is intended to be used for things like earthquakes and tsunamis. They sent a test notification to every cell phone in the country. The noise it made (a horrible warbling buzz) certainly got my attention.

MONDAY, MAY 29

ban to invercargill

I was up at about 6:30 this morning and once again turned to TV-3 and AMNZ. It was kind of interesting that they had live updates from the Indianapolis 500 during the show. The race is, of course, run on Sunday afternoon, but Sunday afternoon in America is Monday morning down under.

There were three actual news stories that stood out. The one that was most important to me personally was that American politicians appear to have finally reached an "agreement in principle" to kick the debt ceiling can down the road. While that's basically good news in the short term (ingers crossed), I do wish they'd stop their posturing and come up with a long-term budget.

Also in the news was that Turkish president Erdogan had declared that he won yesterday's election. I'm sure the guys on the tour will not be happy about that. The final big story was about fans who had disrupted a rugby match by first throwing things on the field and then going onto the field themselves. The hosts themselves seemed to have a difference of opinion as to how security should have dealt with this.

I can tell from the sun that Stewart Island is quite a bit further south than Wellington. In Wellington sunrise was shortly after 7am, while here it's around 8:00. Compared to Antarctica, Stewart Island really isn't all that far south. It's about the same latitude (but in the opposite direction) as the U.S./Canadian border, and the climate here is somewhat analogous to Seattle or Vancouver. New Zealand as a whole would span much of America's west coast if it were repositioned there. Wellington would be at about the Oregon/California border, and Auckland is equivalent to San Francisco.

I had breakfast at the hotel restaurant this morning. They serve continental breakfast starting at 7:00 and cooked breakfast from 8am. I got there right after 8:00. It's typical in New Zealand restaurants to order and then be seated. I'd encountered this in Britain, so it wasn't unexpected. Most of the choices had poached eggs, which I don't care for. I ended up opting for a waffle with bacon, as well as orange juice. I was given the orange juice immediately, and the waffle came out very quickly. It was artfully presented, with the sections of the waffle arranged on a long plate, topped by a berry compote and some custard. Crisp bacon was arranged atop the berries, and the whole thing had just a dab of maple syrup. I've been craving fruit, which is hard to find and very expensive in New Zealand, so this made a nice breakfast for me. The waffle and bacon cost \$17, with the juice another \$6. NZ\$23 works out to about US\$14, which isn't too bad for breakfast these days—particularly for one that looks as elegant as this one did.

Shortly after 9am I checked out of the hotel. I walked down the street, left my luggage at the Stewart Island Flights office, and mailed some cards to Steve from the adjacent post office. I still had over four hours to spend on Stewart Island, so I went out exploring some more.

The first place I went was the Ackers Point Track, a trail that leads up to a lighthouse at the south end of the island. This ended up being an 8-kilometer (5 mile) walk. First I walked about 2km on the main road that follows much of the coast. Then I turned off on a trail that ran another 2km through the forest that's managed by the Department of Conservation as part of Rakiura National Park. The trail was anything but handicap accessible. It goes up and up and up, sometimes on a slope, but just as often with stairs. There were hundreds and hundreds of stairs. (I stopped keeping track after 400.) Near the end of the trail there were 87 steps leading down. I might have liked that, but of course what goes down must come up.

Something I couldn't help but notice on the trail were rat traps. Having seen something similar in Wellington probably made me more aware of them, but they were absolutely everywhere in the national park. The ones they use down here are big oddly angled plastic tubes. A woman on the tour yesterday said they looked like "ute hoovers". That's Kiwi for "car vac". A "ute" is an SUV, and New Zealanders use the British term "hoover" for vacuum cleaner. The rat traps do indeed look like car vacs. It's too bad they can't just suck up all the rats.



Ackers Point Lighthouse

There are signs along the trail warning you to "mind the burrows". I regret that I didn't get a picture of that to post in my classroom at school. What they're referring to are the shelters penguins, kiwis, and other birds make in the ground. When you look close, the ground away from the trail is full of them. The birds are largely nocturnal, which is the main reason I never saw any. Penguins in particular tend to travel further north in winter. It's possible I may see them later on the trip near Dunedin or Christchurch. I'm certainly not holding my breath on that, though.

When I got to the lighthouse, viewpoint was occupied by two groups of tourists—one from Asia and one from Germany. Both were taking picture after picture after picture. They both had tripods and some of the bulkiest camera equipment I've seen. I, on the other hand, have a cheap digital

camera that's about the size of a deck of cards. It may not take professional quality pictures, but it will due. I could probably take just as good of pictures on my phone, but I never really got into phone pics.



Plastic rat trap



Southern Ocean, from Ackers Point



"Selfie" on stairs of Ackers Point Track

There were some nice views at Ackers Point. It's also a very historic place, since the first white settlers on the island lived there. I saw the stone house where they lived on the way back. I also stopped at a couple of viewpoints along the way, which broke things up nicely. Going down all those steps was actually almost trickier than going up was. They were short, but deep steps, and going down I almost always had to take two steps on each level. I was glad when I finally got back to the road.

I paused a bit at a rest area on the road, though I soon regretted that decision. New Zealanders will tell you with pride that there are no mosquitos in their country. They said the same thing in Iceland, and it's true in both places. What neither country tells you, though, is that the coasts are overwhelmed with sand flies, tiny flying insects that literally suck your blood right out. It's fine when you're moving or when there's a wind. If you stop and the air is still, though, they swarm everywhere. I must have killed a dozen, and I swatter away far more. Then I high-tailed it back to town.



Bathing Beach – Stewart Island

I re-walked the Fuchsia Walk I'd done yesterday—as much to fill time as anything else. While I was on the trail I tried dialing my home number on my cell phone. Supposedly the SIM card I bought lets me call or text for free to most of the developed world. There has to be some trick in doing that, though. America's country code is "1", so it would seem that you'd dial it like a long-distance number back home. All that did was generate a recording, though. A school-marmish woman with a strong Kiwi accent told me the call could not go through.

Next I took the road that leads north from Oban, a direction I'd not been before. Mostly this area is residential, but when I got beyond the houses there was a lovely regional park (the equivalent of a state park back home). I followed a trail that was marked "Bathing Beach". I certainly wouldn't want to bathe there (at least in winter), but it is a beautiful stretch of golden sand surrounded by black rocks. There were also sand flies there, though not as many as there were closer to town.

Also north of town is Church Hill, named after the Oban Presbyterian Church, whose sign says it was "dedicated to the glory of God in the year of our Lord 1904." Like everything in Oban except the school, it has a rusty tin roof. On my way

back down from Church Hill I googled why metal roofs are so popular in New Zealand. Apparently they were the latest rage in London at the time settlers came to the southern hemisphere, and since then it's just been tradition. They are corrugated iron, usually covered with a rust-resistant sealant. Pretty much all of the roofing in New Zealand is made in Melbourne and shipped to the country. There's a free trade agreement between Australia and New Zealand, so imports from Australia are taxed as if they were domestic goods.

Because I'd had a fancy breakfast and was planning a nice sit-down dinner, I really didn't have lunch today. I grabbed a pineapple popsicle and a Bundaberg diet ginger beer from the 4-Square, and that was my lunch—well under the allowable 60 grams of carbohydrate diabetics are supposed to eat per meal.

I wandered around the town a bit more. Probably the most interesting thing I saw was kids at the local school playing a game of flag rugby on the playground. We think nothing of flag football in America, and of course its equivalent would be played with a rugby ball here. A bell that sounded like it could be at any school in the world rang as I passed by, and the kids put down their flag belts and rushed inside.

My flight had been rescheduled to 2:30, an hour after it was originally supposed to depart, and honestly that was about an hour longer than I cared to stay on Stewart Island. I'd seen all I really wanted to, so I went back to the flight office an hour early and checked in. The woman at the desk weighed my bags. Then she said, "Because of the type of aircraft, we'll have to weigh you as well." While I'm anything but svelte, apparently a hundred or so extra kilograms didn't push them over their load limit.

I sat down in their waiting lounge and did some reading. I first read a leaflet they had on the deer removal plan for Ulva Island, where I'd been yesterday. Just like rats, deer are considered an invasive species. To get rid of them, during the month of June they're bringing in hunters and paying them to shoot the deer on the island. During that time no visitors except the hunters will be allowed on Ulva Island. I guess it's good I came when I did, rather than three days later.



Flag rugby at Oban School

Next I read through *Business South*, a publication designed mostly for people who want to invest in the Southland and Otago regions. The most interesting article I found was about the extreme shortage of housing for workers in the tourist towns in the mountains. They noted that wage in places like Queenstown were nearly double what they are elsewhere in New Zealand, but even with the high wages, there's not enough available housing. Some businesses are hiring camper vans and parking them permanently, usually in shopping centre car parks on the outskirts of the towns.

I eventually opened the Kindle app on my phone and did a bit more reading in a book I downloaded earlier this year and began reading on the plane to Auckland a week ago. It's Prince Harry's autobiography *Spare*. The book was apparently loathed by many other royals for being a bit too tell-all, and it is a fascinating read. Prince Harry grew up as third in line for the throne, and after his brother had kids he was essentially kicked totally out of the line of succession. It's interesting reading his account. He obviously liked his grandmother and great-grandmother (Nan-Nan, the queen mother) a lot, but he was always extremely distant from his father. If the book is correct, Charles was even more distant from his own father, barely seeing him as a child. Harry was deeply affected by his mother's death, and he's had a fascinating life on his own. His autobiography really is quite interesting to read.

At 2:05 the woman at the desk announced that it was time to leave for the airport. We all got into the van, she put a "be back soon" sign on the post office door, and we headed up the hill. We stopped right at the end of the runway, and just a few minutes later an even smaller plane than we'd come in on passed right over our heads and landed. Once it was on the ground, the van drove to the far end of the runway to meet it. There was a bit of confusion while they exchanged passengers and their luggage. There was also quite a bag of letters (probably including my postcards) and some parcels that were loaded on the plane as well, and another few parcels came off bound for Oban.

This time we were flying on a Piper Cherokee, an older and smaller plane than we'd flown in on. Most unique about this plane was how we got in and out of it. Two passengers (in our case two elderly ladies) entered the rearmost seat through a back door. Everyone else had to climb up onto the wing and then shimmy their way into either the middle or front seats. The plane seats six people, and on this flight we had the pilot (the same one who brought us down two days ago) and five passengers. I assume they use the aircraft that best matches their load any given day.

Oddly, even though this was a smaller plane, once I'd managed to get inside there was more space around the seat than on the other plane. It was also significantly quieter. We still flew at a very low altitude. Indeed, I felt almost like we were on a hovercraft as we flew just a little bit above the strait.



Crawling over the wing on Piper Cherokee

Flight WK-164 left Stewart Island at 2:15, which was actually fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. Twenty minutes later we were on the ground in Invercargill. I again had to crawl over the wing to get off. I then grabbed my bags and made my way into the terminal. I went over to the Stewart Island Flights desk, and just as I got there the pilot came up to the desk and asked if I wanted the bag I'd left. Of course that was why I was there. He quickly retrieved it, and I made my way outside.

I followed a sign that said "taxis" and found the taxi rank outside the main entrance to the terminal. There was a Blue Star cab parked there with a mostly bald grey-haired driver who looked remarkably like my father. He asked what I wanted, and I said I'd like to go to the Kelvin Hotel. He said he was there to pick up a pre-arranged booking, but he'd call the dispatcher and see if she could send someone. I waited almost fifteen minutes, and I couldn't help but think that the guy could have driven me into town and come back in that time. At one point a Blue Bubble taxi appeared. The man who had called for me assured me that was not my cab, and they picked

up a different pre-arranged booking. Apparently no one just shows up and hails a cab in Invercargill.

Finally another Blue Star cab came, this time with a south Asian driver named Danny who had apparently moved to New Zealand from England. It's about a five minute ride from the airport to downtown. Without luggage I could have walked it easily. With the bags, I was glad to have a cab, though. What I wasn't as excited about was that the fare starts at \$7 (three dollar base fare, plus another four for an airport supplement). It then goes up by 40¢ every 100 meters. By the time we got to the hotel the fare was \$19.80 (US\$12). While one doesn't normally tip in New Zealand, it is typical to let a driver keep change, and Danny earned an extra 20¢ on this trip.

Check-in took a long time, almost ten minutes. The clerk seemed to be fighting to get her computer to work. Eventually she gave me another old-fashioned key, and I made my way up to Room 405. The Kelvin Hotel is right in the Invercargill city centre. It looks to be a fairly old hotel, but it's been kept up nicely. I have their cheapest room type, a small room with a double bed and a chair. The bathroom is nice, the wi-fi works, and there's also a refrigerator and the obligatory kettle. Everything is clean and pleasant, and it seems a perfectly nice place to stay.

One of the first things I did today was to pay a bill that had come by e-mail while I was on Stewart Island. While the cell service on the island was fine, without wi-fi I couldn't access my credit card account online to pay the bill. It was good to get that out of the way. The wi-fi hook-up also allowed me to get a text message from Garrigan announcing that one of our girls had taken third place at the state golf meet. I'll need to put an update to the website about that.

Once I got settled in the room, I set out to do a bit of exploring. Invercargill has just over 50,000 people, yet its downtown seems like it belongs in a place quite a bit larger than that. There are a lot of historic buildings that date to the turn of the last century, and even the modern buildings are big and substantial. The city is known throughout New Zealand for its wide streets, and the streets do look like they belong in North America. The wide streets and the active downtown make Invercargill seem like it belongs in Canada. It reminded me of places like Thunder Bay and Sault Sainte Marie.

My main destination today was Queen's Park. While the queen for whom it was named was Victoria, many of the park facilities date to the silver jubilee of Harry's granny. It's an enormous and truly beautiful park—much like Central Park in New York, but with far less crowding. Many of the buildings in the park are closed for restoration from earthquake damage. Among these was one I would have liked to have seen, the Southland Museum. There was plenty else in the park to interest me, though.

There are numerous formal gardens in the park. Among the ones I saw were a rock garden, a Chinese garden, a bog garden, a garden of native New Zealand plants, and a rose garden. It shocked me to see roses blooming when most of the trees surrounding them had shed their leaves. On the other hand, I remember our mother talking about visiting her penpals in England at Christmas and seeing roses blooming then. I suppose this is the antipodal equivalent of that.

There's a lovely band shell in the park, as well as numerous playgrounds. Something I wasn't expecting was a petting zoo. Tons of mothers were pushing their kids around in prams as they gawked at the llamas. I spent about an hour in the park, and I could easily have spent far more. It really is a treasure.

Just southeast of Queen's Park is the Invercargill Water Works, which is one of the "must see" tourist attractions in the city. While the bulk of the city's water is stored in big circular tanks decorated in a '60s motif, Invercargill still uses their original water tower from 1889. It's not the big metal tower you might expect. While the interior is metal, it's covered with a handsome brick structure that remains lovely a century and a third after it was erected. Today's industrial architecture truly pales compared to what they did in Victorian times.

Further south I stopped in another park, Otokaro Park. I have no idea what the Maori name means or what the park's main purpose is. It has some fascinating sculpture pieces, though. Most interesting was a huge metal umbrella that serves two purposes. It acts as a sundial, which they note has to be adjusted to standard New Zealand time in Invercargill, because it is the furthest west (and also furthest south) city in the country. The interior of the umbrella is designed to show the stars the south pole, which can be seen from the far south of New Zealand.

I went past another lovely building, the First Presbyterian Church of Southland. Southern New Zealand was primarily settled by Scotsmen, so the Presbyterian Church dominates here. There are Anglican, Catholic, and Baptist churches as well, but there's half a dozen Presbyterian churches just in Invercargill. Interestingly, the city also has the world's southernmost mosque.

The mosque actually makes sense given that Invercargill seems to have a very large Asian population. That may be because there's a large university here (Southern Institute of Technology), but there's a higher percentage of both south and east Asians than I've seen anywhere else in New Zealand so far.

My final stop on this afternoon walk was at yet another supermarket, Pak 'n' Save. (In their logo the letters in "PAK" and "SAVE" are all capitalized, but the 'n' in the middle is lower case.) This is considered the cheapest grocery chain in the country, though again remember just two companies own every brand of supermarket here. Their cheap reputation comes from the fact that their stores have a warehouse look to them. They sell a full range, though, and self check-out is the standard at every supermarket in the country. (The 4-Square on Stewart Island was the only place where you could only use a cashier.) Some things at Pak 'n' Save were cheap. I got a 1.5-liter bottle of sugar free L&P for just \$1.49, for instance. There's other stuff that's not cheap anywhere in New Zealand, though. For instance a bag of store brand chopped lettuce that would cost \$2.29 at Hy-Vee (double what it did before the pandemic) was NZ\$5.89 (US\$3.57) at Pak 'n' Save.



Old Invercargill water tower

Frozen blueberries that I by at Aldi for \$3.89 are NZ\$9.99 (US\$6.05) here. I think produce that is in season is affordable in New Zealand, but it's definitely not a place you'll find cheap fresh produce in winter.

By the way, grocery prices do tend to end in "9" in New Zealand, even though there's no pennies or nickels here. If you pay cash, they round things to the nearest 10¢, though it does seem they get rounded up more often than down. The smallest coin is a 10¢. It looks remarkably like a U.S. penny, though it's actually worth more than a nickel. The 20¢ coin looks a lot like a U.S. nickel, and the 50¢ coin looks almost identical to a Canadian quarter. I find the \$1 and \$2 coins confusing. They're both round brass coins with the queen on one side and a bird on the other. The \$2 coin is slightly larger than the \$1, but not much larger. I wish they'd make them bimetallic like Canada does. The only coin that is referred to by a nickname is the \$1 coin, which people invariably call a Kiwi (after the bird on its "tails" side). The rest are just called 10¢, \$2, or whatever.

Pak & Save is just a block away from the hotel, so it was easy to drop my purchases off. After that I walked to the northwest corner of downtown to have my dinner. My destination was New Zealand's largest locally-owned restaurant chain, Lone Star. (Chains like McDonalds, KFC, and Dominos are much more ubiquitous, but of course those aren't locally-owned.) Lone Star is primarily a steakhouse, though they serve a fairly broad menu that includes chicken, fish, pork, lamb, and vegan dishes as well. They claim to have a Texas theme, though that's about as authentic as Outback is Australian. Basically their theme is stereotypical American (with western artwork and country music), and as an American it was kind of fun to eat there.

I ordered what they called Cajun chicken, though no one in Louisiana would recognize that cuisine. It was, however, Tex-Mex. I got a chicken breast covered in the sort of red sauce you'd put on an enchilada, with sour cream, pico de gallo, and sliced jalapenos on the side. It came with a mound of sliced rice that was flavored with an odd, almost Indian spice. The meal was good, and it was amusing that they called something that was neither blackened nor seasoned with Tabasco Cajun.

With my meal I ordered cider, which in New Zealand is always alcoholic. It was quite different from hard cider I've had in the States, though. This was a nearly clear beverage with just a vaguely fruity flavor. It seemed most like the sweet champagnes I've had in Spain and Russia. I liked it, but it wasn't at all what I expected.

Part of the reason I'd come to Lone Star is that they're one of the few places that regularly serves the classic "down under" dessert, pavlova. I ordered what the waitress called "a pav", and it was delicious. Pavlova (which Aussies and Kiwis both claim to have originated) has the essential ingredients of meringue, whipped cream, and fruit. It is often served on holidays and looks like a big cake, with a huge baked meringue shell topped with whipped cream and berries. For holiday meals it's then sliced into individual portions. Lone Star's dessert was more artfully presented and was sort of a deconstructed pavlova. There was a mound of meringue that was just lightly baked so it was quite soft in the middle. It was drizzled with a berry sauce and custard, and sliced kiwifruit was served on the side. Rounding it all out was a dollop of whipped cream and a scoop of vanilla ice cream. It seemed light as air, but I'm sure I don't want to know the calorie count. I will say, though, that it was truly delicious.

This may well be the most expensive meal I'll eat in New Zealand, but it really wasn't all that bad—particularly considering dessert and alcohol were included. The bill was for NZ\$61.30. I used my debit card, and I checked the bank's app when I got back to the hotel. It had been processed for US\$37.38. I've noted before that tipping is rare in New Zealand, and there was certainly no reason add to the bill for service that, while friendly, would be politely described as leisurely and indifferent.

I made my way back to the hotel and worked on this travelogue. It was a full, but quite enjoyable day.

TUESDAY, MAY 30

Invercargill

I had accumulated a week's worth of laundry, and it was time to take care of that. Surprisingly, the Kelvin Hotel has complimentary laundry facilities. There's plenty of American hotels that have washers and dryers available to guests, but they're almost always coin-operated machines. It was weird to have an absolutely free washer available. I did the washing fine, but unfortunately the dryer wasn't working properly. Fortunately the clothes had spun well, so I could just let them drip dry in the room.

While the wash was going, I worked at my computer. It was weird to get e-mails about Memorial Day. It is of course Tuesday already in New Zealand, and Monday was not a holiday here. Through pretty much this whole trip it's been yesterday back home, though.

Once I'd hung some of the clothes and laid the others on the window sills, I set off to have breakfast. I had purposely chosen to eat at McDonalds this morning—not just any McDonalds, though, but the southernmost McDonalds on earth. While Invercargill isn't even close to the southernmost city on earth (places in Chile and Argentina battle for that honor), it is where most global corporations have their southernmost locations. In addition to the southernmost McDonalds, you can find the southernmost Burger King, the southernmost Pizza Hut, and the southernmost KFC. They're all on Elles Road, which is the southernmost stretch of state highway #1. Downtown Invercargill has the southernmost Subway and the southernmost Starbucks (which is right next door to my hotel). I've eaten McDonalds breakfasts for years, though, so I figured they were who I'd honor with my southernmost business. As a bonus, the Elles Road "Macca's" is the furthest south of all the fast food chains.

It's a bit of a hike from downtown Invercargill to what they refer to as "South City". First I walked south on Kelvin to Tyne Street, where the local Catholic basilica is located. I walked east past the Otepunu Gardens until I got to Ness Street. I walked south two blocks to Tweed Street, and then east another block to Elles. McDonalds is another two blocks south.

Something you may have noticed is that many of the streets in Invercargill are named after bodies of water in the British Isles, particularly Scotland. In addition to those mentioned here, yesterday I walked on Tay, Esk, Don, Yarrow, Spey, and Leet; and there's also Dee, Eye, and Ythan—plus more minor streets.

South City is mostly residential. The majority of homes seem to date from the immediate post-war period, much like the neighborhood where we lived in the Quad Cities when I was a toddler. There's a range of construction materials, though it's much heavier on cement and stucco and lighter on

brick and wood than what you'd see back home. This looks like a poorer neighborhood than others I'd seen in New Zealand, but things were still well kept.



ABOVE: Seal logo for Liquorland
BELOW: World's southernmost McDonalds



but the windows are often loose and some had literally fallen out. I've read that homes in New Zealand have very little insulation, and I'm sure those drafty windows make it very chilly even when the winters are comparatively mild.

I passed at least a dozen motels as I walked down Tay Street. The East End also has way more than its share of motels. At one point I'd considered staying at one of them. I'm glad I didn't. The Kelvin is nice, and I really like how central it is.

I had time to kill, so I took a bit of a detour and checked out an extremely boring park. It's basically just a collection of athletic facilities. There are fields for pretty much any sport you could imagine (field hockey and archery, for instance). Sport (the word is always singular and collective here) is very big in New Zealand. The government even has a Ministry of Sport, and New Zealanders are competitive on the world stage at a level far beyond the country's size. That didn't make the local athletic fields particularly interesting, though.



Ford Model E

The east side of Elles Road is a park, with the part by McDonalds being a rugby field. The west side is a business strip. There's a veterinary office right next to McDonalds, with a Chinese restaurant, a real estate agent, KFC, and Liquorland filling the block to the north. (I had to snap a picture of Liquorland's sign, with a revolving seal balancing a beer can.)

The world's southernmost McDonalds is really not in any way remarkable. It's a relatively new building on a strip that does most of its business with a drive-through. It is interesting that the drive-through window has one of those EFTPOS card processing machines outside, where it's exposed to the weather. Inside this McDonalds requires you to order from a kiosk. It took a moment for me to figure out just where the kiosks were, though, since they're rather hidden. I did manage to place my order, and to simplify things I opted to pay by card as well. I got what in America would be called the Egg McMuffin value meal. In New Zealand it's sold as three separate items: a bacon and egg McMuffin (as opposed to sausage, chicken, beef, or no meat on it), a small hash brown (you can order one, two or three slabs here), and a coffee. I should note, though, that there's no such thing as just "coffee" in New Zealand. They call American-style coffee "filter coffee", and it basically doesn't exist here. The closest thing to American coffee is a long black, and that's what I ordered. It's basically watered-down espresso rather than drip coffee. It was good, though. The breakfast came to NZ\$11.70, which came through on my debit card as US\$7.11. That's actually cheaper than the value meal is in Algona these days.

From "Macca's" I walked north to Tay Street, the broad boulevard that carries state highway 1 from points north and east. (This is the same highway I walked along in Wellington, though obviously it has a break between the two islands.) The signs refer to this area as "East End", and it seems to be a part of Invercargill where just about everything is under renovation. There were dozens of old homes that were being restored, and a lot of businesses seemed to be getting makeovers as well.

Something I'd read about before this trip but saw up close in Invercargill was how badly fitted windows are in New Zealand homes. I don't really know why that is, but I've read that homes in New Zealand have very little insulation, and I'm sure those drafty windows make it very chilly even when the winters are comparatively mild.

The detour did allow me to arrive at my destination right when they opened at 10am. I had bought admission ahead of time for Bill Richardson's Transport World, which is by far the largest tourist attraction in Invercargill. (If it weren't for Milford Sound it would be the biggest in Southland.) Bill Richardson made a fortune selling cement, but he and his wife also liked to collect stuff. Much of what they collected—especially motor vehicles—ended up in this enormous museum.

Transport World is first and foremost an antique car museum. Just past the entrance they have a collection of Ford "alphabet cars", and I learned something there. I always knew about the Model A and the Model T, but I didn't realize that there were Ford models for every letter of the alphabet. They have almost all of them here. A couple of the models had less than ten ever manufactured, and somehow one of them ended up in Invercargill. Besides Fords, there were many other truly old cars (in most cases a century or more old). It was interesting that while most had the driver's seat on the right (as is common in New Zealand), others had the driver on the left, and at least one had the steering wheel right in the middle. They're all beautifully restored. They're licensed and carry the current government inspection stickers.

Besides the cars there was a huge room of antique farm equipment and another with heavy construction equipment. They had a huge display on "The Great NZ Caravan Holiday" with trailers and camper vans that dated mostly from the '70s. There was also a display of city buses, and another that featured food trucks. The single largest vehicle collection was for commercial trucks (pick-ups, vans, and semis), which was apparently Mr. Richardson's passion. There were trucks from the 1910s through the 1970s, all lovingly restored.

Another large display is dedicated to a movie that was made in Invercargill. Called *Goodbye, Pork Pie*, it features a couple of teenagers traveling the length of New Zealand in a yellow Mini while being chased by the police. They have three of the vehicles that were actually used in the movie, and they actually let people sit in the Mini—which is just about as cramped as the small airplanes I was recently on. The movie exhibit leads into an exhibit on Minis, which for years were the best-selling car in New Zealand.

Another large exhibit features Volkswagens. VW had a manufacturing plant in New Zealand for about fifty years. They outsold Ford and Holden (what GM does business as in the southern hemisphere) to become the top non-British brand in the country. The VW bus is called a "combi" here, just like it is in Latin America. It's really weird to see the bus set up backwards, with the big door for the back seats on the right side instead of the left.

Besides all the old cars, there are displays on lots of other vehicle-related stuff. There are lots of engines and tires (spelled with a "y", of course), old calendars from oil companies with pin-up girls on them, and tons of license plates (called "number tags" here) and petrol pumps. Those gas pumps show the passing of time. A lot of antique car museums have old pumps with big glass globes on top. Those are way before my time. What most museums don't show is more modern pumps. At Transport World they have pumps from the '70s (when New Zealand was transitioning to the Metric system) and even digital pumps I'd bet were from the '90s.

There are lots of side collections, too. They have model cars and trucks, kids' pedal cars, and an old-time town scene that you might say shows the antique cars in their native habitat. The Richardson's also had lots of other collections, and those are shown off here as well. There's a huge collection of Wurlitzer jukeboxes, for instance, a collection of classic tea towels that reminded me of my mother's penpals, a collection of works of New Zealand fashion designers that's entitled "wearable art", a collection of old cameras (from vintage movie cameras to a Kodak instamatic from the '70s), and a collection of household goods (dishes, board games, living room furniture) that moves through a century of time in one long hallway.



Filet-O-Fish mobile at Transport World

used to send either small or large amounts of water down the drain. The thing that seems to be most universal about the toilets, though, is that they all have cheap plastic seats on them. The seats are often smaller than the bowl, so they don't fit right and seem very flimsy.

I spent more than two hours at Transport World. While I like museums, I usually go through them quickly, so two hours is an eternity for me. It really was a very enjoyable place to visit.

I walked back west on Tay Street. On a whim I stopped into a little takeaway restaurant that had a line out the door. Fat Bastard Pies mostly sells those savory pies for which the country is famous. I'd already had one of those, though, so instead I opted for a creamed corn and bacon roll. If you remember the Southland cheese roll from the other day, this is its cousin. It's literally creamed corn and bacon (which in New Zealand is always very thick) placed in a slice of buttered white bread, rolled up, and then lightly fried. It was surprisingly good, and I've certainly spent four bucks more stupidly.

My real lunch fit the theme of the day. I went to the Invercargill location of Burger Fuel, a New Zealand chain whose with a classic car theme. Their motto is "fuel for the human engine," and all their menu items have cute car-related names. I had the "American muscle", which is basically a fancy cheeseburger. I could also have ordered the barbecue bacon roadster or the hamburguini. Their chicken sandwich is called a thunderbird, and instead of nuggets they have chicken fenders. The food is a bit overpriced. I paid NZ\$13.30 (US\$8.05) for the sandwich, and the sides are marked up even more. It was a fun place to eat, though.

A second museum is co-ticketed with Transport World. It's called Classic Motorcycle Mecca, and the name pretty much tells you what fills their three floors in an old downtown building. For more than a century Invercargill has been the finish of various motorcycle road races, since it's literally the end of the road in New Zealand. I'm not really a great motorcycle fan, so I went through this museum far quicker than the main Transport World. It was still kind of fun to see everything, though.

It began to rain while I was at Classic Motorcycle Mecca. The building had one of those iron roofs that are everywhere in New Zealand, and the roar the rain made on the roof was just deafening.

After seeing the motorcycles I did a bit of browsing through the Invercargill business district. Right across from my hotel was the flagship store of H & J Smith, a department store with several locations around the southern South Island. I'd read in *Business South* that this company was going out of business. There was certainly no sign of that in the store, though. There was no liquidation sale, and basically nothing in the store was marked down at all. Farmers, the national ritzy department store chain, did have a promotion, but not one I'd be taking part in. They had a deal where you could get a \$50 gift card if you spent \$200.



Standing next to a handmade working mini-motorcycle

Even in New Zealand dollars I didn't plan on spending that much. I did pick up some socks at Farmer's (for about a tenth of what would have earned me a gift card). They've actually rugby socks (though I'll just wear them with sneakers), and that struck me as a good souvenir of New Zealand.

Much of downtown Invercargill's business has been concentrated into a brand new mall known as "IC" (which stands for Invercargill Central). I browsed through there as well. The only place I bought anything was a store called Postie. That sounds like it should be the post office, but it's a discount clothing store. They had T-shirts on clearance (just normal T-shirts, not souvenirs), and I was able to get one for NZ\$5 (US\$3). I walked past a bunch of other stores. It's interesting that there is a store named Amazon in New Zealand that has nothing to do with Amazon.com. The NZ store sells beachwear and surfing gear, which is definitely not what I'd have guessed from the name. There's also a chain of shoe stores in New Zealand called Platypus. My final stop was at the Invercargill K-Mart, where I picked up address shirt, some candy, and a tea towel (much tamer than any of the things my mother's penpals sent to her).

While wandering around downtown Invercargill I came across a sign that may have been graffiti or may have been an intentional work of art. It gave the advice "Live each day as if it was your first day on earth." I rather like that message. We're often told to live as if it were our last day, but I like the idea of imagining the first day—that unjaded wonder that a little baby might have. That's kind of the way I felt exploring a new country, and it would be a good feeling to have every day.

My dinner tonight was from a place called Noodle Canteen that served pan-Asian cuisine that you ordered by number. I had pad thai. When the elderly Chinese woman in charge gave me my bowl, she said "good on cold day like this", and she was right. The noodles were delicious, and the price wasn't bad—NZ\$15 or US\$10. The problem was that it was far too large of a person. I think I could have fed a starving nation with all those noodles. It's one of those places where I wish they'd have served half as much for two-thirds the price.

I went back to the hotel and settled in for what I thought would be an uneventful evening. I was working on this travelogue with the TV going in the background when at about 9:05pm the power went off. My laptop, of course, can run on batteries, so it just kept going, but everything else in the room—the TV and all the lights—shut off. It turned out the outage wasn't just at the hotel; the whole downtown area had lost power. It remained off for quite a while. A couple of times the lights flickered on, only to go out again. Mostly, though, it was just very dark.



"Live each day ..." sign

I knew I had to have my stuff ready to haul to the bus tomorrow morning, and I also knew that it would still be dark out when I'd check out of the hotel. So I used the light from the home screen on my phone to gather everything up and get it packed. I'm sure there's a flashlight somewhere on the phone. I'd never used it, though, and I wasn't going to go bumbling around trying to find it in the dark. I did managed to get everything packed and eventually settled into bed. The hotel lights came back on at about 10:15pm, and finally at 10:25 the street lights and traffic signals were back on in the downtown area. I've never had anything like that happen when I've been at a hotel. I'm really not sure what happened, because while it was raining, it wasn't like there was a thunderstorm.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 31

invercargill to dunedin

I'd set my alarm for 6:30, but I was up before then. The power was back on, and the cable had reset itself, so I was able to watch a bit of *AMNZ*. The main news story was a fire at a metal recycling plant in Auckland that was sending toxic smoke all over the southern part of the city. That stood out more than it might have otherwise because Invercargill has a bit of a chemical smell that lingers in the air. A woman on the plane said it comes from an aluminium (New Zealand uses the British pronunciation, with five syllables and an extra "l") smelter just south of the city. The other story that caught my attention was a debate in parliament over whether road signs should be bilingual in English and Maori. While Maori is an official language here, the percentage of people who speak it is less than speak French in Canada or Spanish in the U.S.A. It's not even the first language of most Maori people. I would tend to side with "National" (the more conservative of the major political parties here) and say there are more important things to worry about than bilingual signs. I'd also add that they could solve the problem like pretty much everywhere in Canada except Quebec did by using pictograms and avoiding language at all whenever possible.

Around 7:30 I gathered my stuff together and left the room. I was annoyed, though not really surprised, to find that the elevators were out of service. Presumably their electronics had not yet recovered from the power outage. I was in Room 405, which in America we would say was on the fifth floor. (The lobby in New Zealand is called the ground floor, and the numbered floors are above that.) It was annoying to carry my stuff down flight after flight of stairs, but I managed it. The woman at the desk confirmed that My account was paid in full, and I left.

InterCity buses in Invercargill leave from what used to be the i-Site visitors center. They closed the information center during COVID, but they keep the building open as a bus waiting area. The place is even staffed, though I have no clue who pays for the woman that basically just sits around all day. That building was a block west of the hotel, and there's conveniently a pedestrian mall on that block. I did have to cross highway 1, but I managed to do that without too much problem.

The woman was helpful to a couple of people. I was amused when a young man walked in and began his conversation with her by saying, "Perhaps I seem a wee bit simple, but ..." and he asked exactly where the bus would be stopping. I'd made a point of scouting things out yesterday, and I found the small InterCity sign (the same one they had in Wellington) and a painted yellow rectangle on the pavement, which in New Zealand indicates a bus stop. The woman at the counter assured the man he was not "simple". She gestured to exactly where the bus would arrive and told him it would show up about five minutes before the scheduled departure time. It's helpful that Invercargill is where it originates, so it's pretty certain to be there at the scheduled time. I was, of course, overhearing this, and I was pleased to confirm everything I already knew.

The ticket I bought online said that the bus would be departing at 8:10am. I found out that they'd since changed the schedule, and now it would be leaving at 8:25. That's not really a big deal, but it did mean I had more time to fill in the waiting area. I read the *Southland Express* and another free

paper that highlighted news (such as there was) in the rural region of west Southland. Finally I went through a brochure that highlighted 101 inexpensive family-friendly things to do in Invercargill. I'd done about all of them that sounded interesting.

The bus actually showed up at about 8:15. The woman noted it was there and directed me outside. The driver stored my big bag. I was again in gold class, so I was able to sit in a singleton seat in the very front row. It was interesting to watch the driver. The bus was a stick shift, and he seemed to be forever changing gears.

We made a big rectangle through downtown Invercargill and ended up heading east on Tay Street, where I'd been yesterday. We continued past Transport World on what seemed to be a never-ending business strip. Just before the Invercargill city limit highway 1 narrowed to two lanes and it continued that way for most of the day. While it's the busiest highway in the country, for most of its length state highway 1 is a lot like highway 18 by Algon. It's a busy two-lane highway with narrow shoulders and occasional passing lanes. The biggest difference is that state highway 1 goes straight through every little town rather than skirting them on the edges.

This bus was scheduled to stop in all those little towns. A good thing about InterCity is that they connect the rural areas of New Zealand (at least those along major highways). There are some express buses, but most do allow you to get on and off at many stops along the way. That provides much better connections than Greyhound or Trailways provide back home.

For the bus to stop, there has to be a booking made in advance. We ended up stopping at about a third of the towns. At most one person got on, though in the larger places it could be more. Almost nobody got off until we reached the end of the journey at Dunedin.

The first part of our journey, from Invercargill to Gore, was flat farmland. Highway 1 runs straight as an arrow through this stretch, and most of the traffic goes at the 100 km/h speed limit. We hit our brakes at one point when a double-bottom truck pulled out in front of us from a side road, but that was the only real excitement on the first stretch. The other thing I made note of was that we were passed by a car with European Union license plates. How that car even got to New Zealand in the first place, I have no clue.

We were seven minutes late when we got to Gore, which proudly claims to be the country music capital of New Zealand. There were banners everywhere welcoming people to a music festival that had happened earlier this month. Gore is the size of a county seat town back home. It seems larger than that, though, since the surrounding area is so remote.

The landscape rapidly got hillier past Gore. It's still farm country, but it looks more like Missouri than Kansas. Everyone raises cattle and sheep here. It appears their biggest crop is hay, much of which was sitting in plastic-coated round bales at the edges of the fields. They also grow a variety of vegetables. Lots of roadside signs advised that "swedes" were for sale from the local farmers. I googled it and found that swedes are apparently what we would call rutabagas in America.

The farms seem fairly prosperous, but many of the rural towns in southern New Zealand looked bleak. The towns seem to be almost totally dependent on agriculture, so as it consolidates, they've really suffered.

A little ways east of Gore was passed two turn-offs that led to the town of Tapanui. That stood out because my friend and co-worker Beany Bode taught at a high school called Blue Mountain College in Tapanui. It would have been fun to go there, but the detour would have been more than I had time for on this trip.

The traffic thinned out a bit past Gore, but the road was much curvier. While the speed limit is still 100, it gets reduced to 75km/h on most of the curves. About half of the traffic is trucks (mostly double-bottoms), and they take the curves even slower than that. If there were an interstate between Invercargill and Dunedin, you could cover the distance in a couple of hours. On state highway 1, though, it took us all morning.

At some point in this summary I should talk about the billboards in New Zealand. There are billboards everywhere, but they seem to be limited in size. Instead of the enormous ads you see in America, they have signs about the size of a large TV or my whiteboard at school. They're all professionally made, but usually for local businesses. It was interesting to see all the little signs.

We had a forty-minute lunch break in the town of Balclutha, the second largest place (after Gore) between the two terminals. Balclutha is in a very scenic river valley, but it's another place that appears to have come on hard times. On the other hand, the place where we took our break, the Roseland Café and Tea Room, was certainly booming. I used the restroom there and paid for the "customers only" facilities by buying a bacon and tomato toastie. This is the unrolled cousin of the cheese roll—bacon and tomato placed on a slice of white bread, covered with cheese, and then broiled. While I'm not normally a huge fan of cooked tomatoes, the toastie wasn't bad.

The driver and the vast majority of the passengers on the bus used the lunch break as "smoko", a very common down-under term for what we'd call a coffee break back home. "Smoko" lets you know how people view its purpose, and it does seem like just about everyone in New Zealand smokes. A group of high school boys had boarded the bus at Gore, and they spent pretty much the entire break vaping.

Traffic picked up again past Balclutha. The drive east of there is lovely, following rivers and lakes amid low mountains. It reminded me a bit of the Alaska Highway, though there's more traffic and fewer trees.

We turned off of highway 1 to head to the Dunedin airport. Unlike Invercargill, Dunedin's airport is really nowhere close to the city. Apparently a taxi ride from the airport to downtown carries a fixed cost of \$80. If it were metered, I'm sure it would be many times that.

A little ways past the airport we pulled into a brand new suburban development. That gave way to a dumpy little town that has obviously grown into a suburb. We made our penultimate stop across from a place called Smash City that boasted they were "the collision specialists". Hopefully I won't be in need of their services.

An obese old lady boarded at that stop. She reminded me a lot of my mother. She really struggled to make her way up the bus steps, but eventually she took a seat. I'm really not sure why she made this short journey on InterCity. The Dunedin city buses run out to the area she boarded, and I think it would have been easier to take one of those. The city buses can lower the entrance to make it easier for people to board.

Highway 1 turns into a motorway for the last stretch into Dunedin. While it's four lanes and has exits, it's really not a very good road. They squeezed it through a pass in the mountains, so it's narrow and has a steep grade. The bus really struggled trying to get up the hill

Our final stop was next to a Countdown supermarket just east of downtown Dunedin. The city buses have their main interchange just up the street from where InterCity lets off. For our bus, this was the end of the line. Many passengers were continuing to either Christchurch or Queenstown, and they'd have to change to other buses in Dunedin.

The name comes from the Gaelic name for Edinburgh, and they're very proud of their Scottish heritage here. The place is the size of Cedar Rapids, but Dunedin is the sixth largest place in New Zealand and the second largest on the South Island. It's a major harbor and has a lot of industry. There's also a major university there. Those all combine to make it a very important place.

That said, Dunedin comes across as rather dumpy. It's the oldest place I've been to in New Zealand so far. A lot of housing stock is Victorian cottages, and the commercial buildings are also comparatively old. There is nice architectural character, but a lot of the buildings haven't aged well in the cold, wet weather. It reminded me a lot of the residential neighborhoods in Seattle—nice details, but a dumpy overall look. There's also construction everywhere, so perhaps when that's done things will look nicer.



Victoria Hotel – Dunedin

My hotel in Dunedin was just around the corner from the bus stop. The place is called the Victoria Hotel, but there's nothing Victorian about it. It appears to date from the '60s and features corrugated iron on the sides as well as the roof. It has very little character at all. The room is quite nice, though, and it's both central and quiet. When I got to the hotel no room was yet available. I was able to check in and drop my luggage though. I left my bags and then went out exploring.

The center of Dunedin is an octagonal public space that is creatively named the Octagon. This acts like a big traffic circle, with streets radiating out all over the city. I made my first stop just east of the Octagon. The toastie was less than filling, so I stopped at Dunedin's Nando's for a real lunch. I had a Mediterranean salad with chicken strips on top of it, and I must say it was nice to have a significant quantity of actual vegetables for a change. It really was a delicious lunch.

I made my way to the city bus exchange and boarded bus #8 northbound. I was pleased that the Bee card I'd gotten up in Palmerston North worked properly in Dunedin. (In theory I could have used it in Invercargill, but the buses there are infrequent and run very convoluted routes.) The bus had to make several detours because of construction, but eventually we made our way onto Great King Street. The name of that changes to North Road, and it led to my destination, Baldwin Street.



Baldwin Street – Dunedin



According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Baldwin Street is the world's steepest street. Whether that's actually true is certainly debatable, but they managed to get the record. It has a 35% grade, and I certainly did huff and puff making my way to the top. It's different from other steep streets I've been on because it's arrow straight. It's almost the exact opposite of Lombard Street in San Francisco. There's actually lots of steep streets in Dunedin. The central city is at the bottom of a bowl, with streets climbing up into the mountains on every side.

I was glad I got to Baldwin Street when I did. As I made my way down a bus full of Japanese tourists was just arriving. It would have been much more crowded if I had to fight my way past all of them.

I caught a bus back downtown and did a bit of sightseeing and shopping. I noted before that there was construction everywhere. You can see in the picture at right just what that looked like. It was no small challenge to negotiate my way around downtown. I went to a gift shop, I got some more money at an ATM, and I wandered around Dunedin's version of the downtown mall (the Mercantile). At the mall I stopped at another New Zealand restaurant chain, Muffin Break. Their main purpose is selling coffee, which seems to be the *raison d'être* of almost every restaurant in New Zealand—including McDonalds. While tea is available, this really is a coffee-obsessed country. I didn't buy coffee at Muffin Break, though. I got one of their namesake baked goods, a savory ham and cheese muffin. It was really more like a scone than a muffin, but it was quite good.

I also stopped at Countdown, where I "self-catered" the rest of my dinner for tonight. They had prepared salads that they were closing out since they hadn't sold at lunch. They were perfectly good, though, and again it was good to include a few more vegetables in my diet.



My final stop was at what most books say is the biggest tourist attraction in Dunedin, the railway station. The station (which is no longer served by passenger trains) dates to Victorian times, and I'm sure that in normal times it's lovely. It was one of numerous things that was under construction, though. Most of the building was covered with a big plastic cover on which there was an image of what it was supposed to look like once the restoration was complete. For now it honestly doesn't look like much.

I went back to the hotel and got the key to my room. I settled in and mostly worked on this while listening to TV in the background. I watched several British game shows, a Halloween episode of *The Simpsons*, and a documentary on Canada. It certainly made for an interesting night

THURSDAY, JUNE 1

dunedin

I was up at 6:15 this morning and fairly quickly got ready for the day. The big story today on *AMNZ* was that K-12 public school teachers across the country were staging a one-day strike. (Private schools were still in session, and I'd see plenty of those kids and their uniforms throughout the day.) The strike was supposedly for better working conditions rather than money, but I never really did figure out just what changes they wanted made. Apparently there have been a series of teacher strikes throughout the year, which of course causes problems for parents who suddenly have to care for their kids on a school day.

I decided to have breakfast in the hotel restaurant, a place called Well Manor that pretends to be healthy. Their \$28 breakfast buffet was broad, though not especially healthy. They had scrambled eggs, very fatty bacon, a variety of pastries (all of which had raisins—something I like, but others might have issues with), granola, yogurt, and a wide variety of fruit (including the same berry compote I had on Stewart Island). They also had eight different varieties of juice. Finally there was a choice of white or "wholemeal" toast with various spreads. I had brown bread with butter and honey, since I wasn't keen to experiment with the two yeast extract spreads—Marmite (by far the more popular in New Zealand) and Vegemite. It was a pretty good breakfast, and when I converted the price to U.S. dollars (\$16.85) and realized there was no tax or tip added, it wasn't a bad deal either.

After breakfast I walked over to the bus interchange and caught bus #18. Like pretty much every bus in Dunedin, this has a very meandering route. It winds through the central area and then through an mostly industrial area called Anderson Bay. Then it turns onto Portobello Road and runs along the shoreline of the Otago Peninsula. This is a chain of volcanic rocks that extends far out into the sea and forms Dunedin Harbour. Locals use the peninsula as the border between the Pacific and Southern Oceans. It's very rugged, but it's also heavily settled. Luxury homes with harbor views hang from the cliff all along Portobello Road. The whole peninsula is part of the city of Dunedin, which is why it gets city bus service.



Dunedin Harbour from the Otago Peninsula

is in an absolutely gorgeous setting, but the city itself spoils the view.

I rode out about halfway to the end of the peninsula. My intent was to walk along the coast for a while and then catch a bus back to central Dunedin. As it turned out, I walked a lot more than I intended. The return bus passed when I was in an area where I couldn't cross the road, and after that the schedule switched so buses only ran every hour. Because of that I ended up walking all the way back to that industrial area, which was at least three miles. I ended up walking nearly another mile searching for a bus stop. Why they don't have frequent stops in the industrial area (where I'd think a lot of people would be going to and from work) is beyond me. Lots of different buses run through that area, but I couldn't find anywhere that they stopped. In the end I was nearly back to downtown before I was able to catch a bus—after an hour and a half of continuous walking.

That said, the walk along the coast was quite nice. There's a combination bike path and jogging trail that's even closer to the water than the road is, so there are lots of good views. It was also cool and a bit windy. That kept the insects at bay and made for a more pleasant walk.

Something I didn't really care for on the walk was all the houses. It reminded me of the view from downtown Denver, where the beautiful mountains are blocked by suburbia. Dunedin

That said, I am glad I went out to the peninsula. The views looking toward the ocean are nice, and it's certainly completely different than the city center. As a bonus, I also caught a glimpse of blue penguins standing on the rocks in the harbor. It was a fun way to start the morning.

The Otago Peninsula is also trying to get rid of predatory animals. Rats aren't the issue here, though. Instead they're trying to eliminate possums. I honestly didn't know they even had possums in New Zealand (and apparently they aren't native), and it's an interesting animal to be fighting.

When I finally found a bus stop I caught bus #8 back north of downtown, the same route I'd taken yesterday. This time I got off near the University of Otago (which, by the way, is pronounced oh-TAH-go and is a Maori word referring to the soil in the area). My destination was the Otago Museum, an enormous collection of artifacts run by the university. Admission is free, though they suggest a \$5 donation. I spent about an hour going through their numerous displays.

An entire floor is devoted to the people of the Pacific Islands. They explain what's different about Melanesians, Micronesians, and Polynesians and then further break down the people of all the Parts of Polynesia (which makes a triangle with corners at New Zealand, Hawaii, and Easter Island). I'd learned most of this when I was in Hawaii, but it was good to refresh my memory. There are a lot of carved wooden and stone artifacts here. They reminded me of the displays Steve and I saw from the South Pacific countries at the Vancouver world's fair years ago. The difference, though, was that the world's fair display showed male figures who were extremely well endowed, while the display in Dunedin had been censored to be more family friendly.

Another floor focuses primarily on the Maori, and particularly those who first settled the South Island. Unlike the museums in Wellington, this one didn't try to portray the Maori as perfect people. They noted that they had deforested much of New Zealand, hunted several species to extinction, and were almost constantly at war with each other. They also pointed out the problems with European settlers, but it was nice to not have the Maori portrayed as blameless.

There was a large area devoted to the physical landscape of Otago, with a big focus on geology and the area's volcanic origins. That's followed up by a display on the flora and fauna of the region, both past and present. They have a children's science museum. I avoided that, since it was swamped with families who were occupying their kids on the school strike day. The final area is a collection of artifacts from around the world displayed in a sort of "strange lands and funny people" theme that seemed very dated compared to the rest of the museum. They do have an astonishing variety, including Egyptian mummies, Greek statues, pottery from Pompei, and clothing and weapons from Africa and Asia. (The New World was conspicuously absent.) While it did kind of come across as British plunder, the nice thing about it was that display was comparatively small—meaning I could appreciate the differences between the different cultures without having to suffer through rooms after room of the same artifacts.

I checked Google Maps for the fastest way to get to my next destination and found out it was actually quicker to walk than to take the bus. So I walked another 1.3km (about ¾ mile), heading straight down highway 1. (The bus, on the other hand, would have detoured into downtown and back out.) I ended up at the Otago Settlers Museum, an equally large and to my mind more interesting museum than the one I'd just been in.



Old fire truck at the settlers museum

The Otago Settlers Museum (also with a \$5 suggested donation) traces the history of the region. They begin with the Maori, but the bulk of the museum traces the British settlers who came here in the 1800s and their descendants. They point out that the passage from Scotland to the South Island of New Zealand was the single longest migrant journey ever made. It took three to six months, depending on weather, and nearly a third of those who tried to go to New Zealand died at sea before they made it there. The initial draw to Otago was a gold rush, but later settlers were almost all farmers. They go on to describe both urban and rural life in the 1800s and then how things changed in the early 20th Century, the Depression and war years, and the transition to modern times. They look at changes in lifestyle, education, religion, politics, media, and technology. It really was quite fascinating. Unfortunately I rushed through the museum a bit quicker than I might have otherwise because it was also overwhelmed by families with children.

I did decide to have lunch at the museum's café. I had beef lasagna (NZ\$7.50, or US\$4.50) and some organic blackcurrant soda (NZ\$5 or US\$3). The lasagna was especially good, and it made a very nice lunch.

Just south of the settlers museum is the Lan Yuan Chinese Garden, which was a gift to Dunedin by its sister city, Shanghai. While it's pricier than either museum (\$10—and mandatory rather than suggested), it was interesting to see. Even more than the garden itself I liked learning about the history of Chinese people in New Zealand. Men from China first came here to work in the gold mines. Otago was unique in that the Chinese were welcomed like any other laborers and paid the same as European miners. More Chinese men came to build the railroads in the late 19th Century. When those jobs were done, they worked either as farm hands, grocers, or launderers.

Around the turn of the 20th Century the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand began a mission program in the area that was then known as Canton (now Guangzhou). When the New Zealand government tried to pass a racist policy that would have sent the Chinese workers back to Asia, the church fought against it. It was largely because of the church that the Chinese were allowed to stay in the country permanently and eventually become citizens. Until the 1930s it was almost exclusively Chinese men who lived in New Zealand. With the Japanese invasion of China, the Presbyterians fought to let the families. Again the government consented to the church's request. To this day almost all Chinese New Zealanders are Presbyterians.

Again walking was quicker than the bus, so I logged another ½ kilometer heading back to the hotel. My legs were dead tired, so I spent an hour or so just resting. I watched a couple of game shows on TV, and eventually the time came for my final outing of the day.

I was still dragging a bit from all the walking, so I decided to take the bus to my next destination, even though it was a fairly short distance away. It was right at the end of the school day, and even though the public schools were out on strike, the private schools were in session. In New Zealand it's very common for kids to take city buses to and from school. (That's one of many ways Kiwis aren't as over-protective of their children as Americans are.) There were probably 200 kids in a wide range of different school uniforms waiting at the bus exchange when I arrived. It's interesting that high schools in New Zealand can either be called "high school", "secondary school", "college", or "institute". Those terms all seem to be used interchangeably. One thing that should be noted, though is that a "college" in New Zealand is always a high school. Anything beyond secondary school is called "university" or more casually "uni".



Part of Dunedin Chinese Garden

Having mentioned the teachers strike, I should note that there were posters all over Dunedin announcing a strike of university students that is apparently happening tomorrow. They're protesting government funding cuts to "tertiary schools" that will reduce staff and eliminate certain degrees. I'm not sure what effect a student strike will have on that, but I suppose they just want to bring attention to the issue.

I was startled while watching TV to hear my cell phone ring. It's rare for anyone to call my cell phone when I'm at home, let alone overseas. Perhaps needless to say, it was a wrong number.

My final destination of the day was at the south end of downtown. Months ago I'd booked a tour of the Speight's Brewery. I've done a number of brewery tours over the years, and I thought another might be fun. As it turned out, this was probably the best brewery tour I've been on.

Speight's (which rhymes with "crazy eights") is the oldest surviving brewery in New Zealand. Though they're now owned by a Japanese conglomerate, Speight's accounts for about three-fourths of the beer sold on the South Island, and one of their products is the single most popular beer in New Zealand.



Speight's Brewery – Dunedin

What made this tour more interesting than most was that they made a point of showing how beer-making has changed over the years. There are basically three eras of production at Speight's—one when it was what today we'd call a craft brewery, a second when production was ramped up, but it was still made in a very traditional way, and the modern system where pretty much everything is automated. Our guide (a young woman named Tessa) showed us a photo showing all the company's employees in 1937 and noted that today they have about a fourth as many people working for them, even though they produce about ten times as much beer. Most of their plant is not used at all today, because the modern production methods take up a lot less space than the old ones. The basic process of mixing water, malted barley, and hops hasn't changed, but exactly how that's done is way different than it was in the past.

I found it interesting that all the beer Speight's produces in Dunedin is sold in kegs. You can buy bottles of Speights, but those are actually produced by the Lion Brewery in Auckland (another branch of the same Japanese company). Speights used to have a bottling plant in Christchurch, but it was destroyed in the earthquake twelve years ago.

I won't bore you with all the details of the tour, but it really was quite enjoyable. As all such things do, it ended up in a tasting room. I must say Speight's is far more generous in their samples than the big American brewers are. We were first presented a glass of their core product, the gold medal ale. Then we were given three glasses and told to choose any three of their other products. I chose two beers that the guide said were her favorites, a pilsner and an India pale ale (or IPA). The pilsner could have been any American beer, the Busch or Old Milwaukee I drank in college, for instance. It wasn't bad at all, but it had notably less flavor than the gold medal ale. Tessa noted that in this part of the world IPAs taste quite different than they do in North America. She was definitely right on that. It was less bitter and a much lighter beverage than I expected it would be. My third choice was New Zealand's best-selling beer, a product called Summit Ultra. It's basically the Coors Light of New Zealand, complete with a mountain logo. It's an inoffensive beer that goes down easy, which is of course why it sells so well—apparently with younger people in particular.

But wait, there's more. She noted we could get as many free refills as we wanted until she made a "last call" (which was nearly half an hour after we made it to the tasting room). She all but begged us to try some of their other products. Some chose their stout (which she said tasted like Guinness, but was lighter—"something to drink rather than eat"), but I tried one of their ciders. It was darker than the cider I'd had at Lone Star (which was from Monteith's, a competing New Zealand brewery), looking more like beer than champagne. It tasted like hard ciders I've had in America, something I'd order again. I ended up with five separate drinks, and there were a couple on the tour who had more than that. You can't say we didn't get our money's worth.

I walked back to the hotel. On the way back I stopped at Night 'n Day in the Octagon to pick up something for dinner. I ended up with a chicken, brie, and cranberry sandwich (there was lettuce in it, too) and some trifle (a quintessentially British dessert made of cake, gelatin, and custard). It made a meal that was both inexpensive and tasty.

FRIDAY, JUNE 2

dunedin to christchurch

I had set my alarm for 6:00, but—predictably—I was wide awake before that. I showered, finished packing, and then just sort of bummed around the room for the better part of an hour. At 7am I walked down and checked out. The clerk noted that there was a breakfast that needed to be paid, and she was surprised when I paid for it with cash. In fact, she had to open a safe and dig out a cash box to get change for me. Once everything was settled, I was on my way.

I walked down to the far end of the bus exchange, where the long-distance buses depart. As I was making my way past the local bus stops, I saw an InterCity bus making its way down Great King Street. It was good to know I wouldn't be waiting long to board.

There were about two dozen people waiting to board in Dunedin, so the bus was fairly full at its initial stop. This was the start of a holiday weekend, and lots of Dunedin's university students were heading home. I was glad to be boarding at the origin point, because that allowed me to get a single gold seat for the entire journey. I was intrigued that they had a sign noting that the front three rows were for gold class passengers, with a line clarifying that "gold class" did not mean "golden age". It made me wonder how many self-important seniors had tried sitting there.

We were set to leave downtown Dunedin right on time, but just as the driver was closing the door a young man named Dolan came rushing across the street in front of the bus to board at the very last minute. InterCity's website says to be at the bus stop at least fifteen minutes before the scheduled departure. Obviously that's not strictly enforced, though. They apparently also seat unaccompanied minors in the gold seats. There were several of those on this run, not all of whom were able to fit in those seats. I gather a lot of these were from divorced families and traveling between their parents' homes.

After only about five minutes we made our first stop across from a McDonalds by Otago University. It was just a regular city bus stop (the next stop north on the #8 from where I'd gotten off for the museum), but it also serves as a long-distance stop. About a dozen kids boarded there, the largest group at any stop other than downtown Dunedin.

Our driver was a guy named Malcolm. That stood out because my brother John used to have a cat with that name, and both this guy and the cat had wavy black hair with scattered grey patches. Malcolm was younger than the other InterCity drivers I'd had—into middle age, but nowhere near retirement. After we passed the university stop, he went through a series of rules that passengers were supposed to follow. First was that seatbelts are

mandatory on buses in New Zealand. Second, there is no smoking. Each person is allowed only one seat, and no hot foods may be brought onto the bus. Interestingly, hot beverages were allowed on this bus, though they were prohibited on the bus from Invercargill to Dunedin. Cold food and drink appears to be fine at all times.

About the time Malcolm finished his rules, Dunedin abruptly ended. The road narrowed (by eliminating a turning lane and shoulder—it was already just two traffic lanes), and suddenly we were in the mountains. Also about that time the sun began to rise. The view here is not exactly spectacular. It's green hills in the foreground and low, bare mountains beyond. The biggest thing we saw on this stretch was sheep. While cattle are also important, sheep are easily the #1 type of livestock in New Zealand. You see them grazing pretty much everywhere. I'd read that there could be problems with sheep on the roads. At least along highway #1, though, all the fields are fenced, so the sheep were just grazing on the hillsides.

Like the bus up to Dunedin, this one was scheduled to stop at every little town along the way. In theory we could have made thirty-two stops on the way up to Christchurch. We actually made about a dozen. At the majority of them, the passengers who boarded were high school students at boarding schools who were going home for the long weekend.

Around Palmerston (the South Island city of that name) there were lovely sea views. The mountains are close to the ocean in this area, with quite a few steep grades along highway 1. The bus struggled to get up those slopes. We got down to 55km/h (about 35mph) several times in what were theoretically 100 speed zones. The bus actually had a sticker saying it's limited to 90km/h (basically 55mph), and there appears to be a speed governor that keeps it from going over 95 (around 60mph).

The first main stop (about a fifteen-minute break) was at Oamaru, a town of 13,00 that's the third largest place in Otago. The bus stop there is by the community toilets. This is something New Zealand does well. There are public restrooms everywhere. They're maintained by the local councils as a public service, with people responsible for checking and cleaning them regularly. That means they're almost always immaculate. There's no reason American cities couldn't do something similar, and it's kind of annoying that they don't.

Around Oamaru it flattened out a bit, and there were lots of row crops in the fields. These crops were growing strong in what was the equivalent of December in the Northern Hemisphere. I didn't recognize any of them, but apparently they grow a lot of root vegetables and also cabbage and berries. There's still more grass than anything else, though. Those sheep have to have their food.



Braided river at Otago-Canterbury border



**ABOVE: Sheep along highway 1 north of Dunedin
BELOW: Ocean views south of Palmerston**



I was intrigued to see pass numerous gas stations on the way northward and see that oil companies in New Zealand, like those in America, tend to raise their prices before holiday weekends. The prices had been in the \$2.30s per liter yesterday, while today they were mostly in the \$2.50s. I guess business works the same everywhere.

Before long we crossed an extremely long, narrow bridge over a braided river and passed from Otago into the Canterbury region. The name is one of many ways you can tell that Canterbury's early settlers were English rather than Scotsmen. The mountains are further west in Canterbury, so the populated part of the region is almost totally flat and agricultural. You can still see mountains in the distance, though, and here they're even snowcapped.

Our lunch break today was in Timaru, which is about the halfway point between Dunedin and Christchurch. The second largest city in Canterbury, Timaru looks and feels like Ottumwa or Fort Dodge. It's a rather junky blue-collar city that has more than its share of liquor stores and pawn shops. The bus stop in Timaru is at the former railway station, which hasn't served train passengers in decades. It has public toilets, though, and there's also a pleasant café there. For my lunch I had a bacon and cheese scone (pronounced to rhyme with "one") and a dish called another variation of junk melted on white bread called a "mousetrap". This time they'd essentially made a white bread pizza, with tomato sauce, ham, and cheese. In America we do this with French bread, but I've never seen a pizza made of Wonder bread. The mousetrap was surprisingly good, though.

Some more people boarded at the last possible second in Timaru. One of them ended up

sitting right behind me. He was a fat guy with a beard who was carrying an electric guitar. What really stood out, though, was that he wore no shoes. I'd read that it's common for New Zealanders to go around barefoot, but this was the first time I'd actually seen anyone do that. The temperature outside was 14 degrees Celsius (57 Fahrenheit), and I'd think that would be a bit chilly to have one's feet uncovered. Apparently this guy didn't mind, and no one on the bus complained about it.

North of Timaru the traffic became quite heavy. It certainly didn't help that there were numerous construction zones, some of them with flagmen. They appear to be resurfacing, and the road can certainly use a better surface. The asphalt has worn down in places so there's almost grooves in the tire tracks. There's also basically no shoulder at all, and that's on the most important highway in the country.

Several people got on and off at Ashburton, the last place of any significance before Christchurch. While this wasn't a scheduled break, half a dozen people got off to have a cigarette or vape. That caused us to leave Ashburton about ten minutes late. Fortunately not far past Ashburton the road became a motorway, and we were able to make up a bit of time.

The outskirts of Christchurch are all brand new. I don't know if this area was rebuilt after the earthquake or if it's just recent development, but except for narrower roads, the area around Hornby in southwest Christchurch could be West Des Moines or Waukegan. Our next-to-last stop was in a rather ratty inner suburb called Church Corner. Then we followed Riccarton Road into central Christchurch.

InterCity buses stop on a street in front of the main bus station in Christchurch. I claimed my bag and made my way inside. The first thing I did was to go to the counter and buy a Metrocard, completing the quadfecta of transit cards I'll be using on this trip. The cards in Christchurch are the most annoying to purchase. While in the other cities the cards are essentially anonymous, in Christchurch you have to fill out a rather complicated application and present an official ID (in my case a passport) to get your card. I did eventually get a card, and I put what should be sufficient value on it for the time I'm here.

The bus station in Christchurch has indoor boarding for most of the city bus routes. I used the restroom and eventually caught bus #5 (which happens to go to Hornby) west along the same route the InterCity bus had come into downtown. We went past the main city hospital and a huge park and eventually reached the Westfield Riccarton, an enormous mall on the near west side of the city. I got off there and crossed the street to transfer to another bus. After a bit of a wait I transferred to bus #180. We headed east a couple of blocks and then turned south onto Clarence Street.

My hotel was on Clarence Street, and I knew there was a bus stop right outside it. I pressed the stop button at the right time, but unfortunately there was road construction in that area, which meant the bus was unable to stop there. The next bus stop was several blocks south. I got off there and had to drag my bag across a busy street and then back to the hotel.

While it was annoying to get off at the wrong stop, one thing that is nice about Christchurch's buses is that you just tap the transit card once. In Wellington and Dunedin (and also Auckland, I believe) you have to tap on and off. If you don't you'll be charged the maximum fare, which could be several dollars. In Christchurch the entire city is a single zone, so you don't have to tap off. Free transfers are also included, so I paid just \$1.30 (80 U.S. cents) even though I took two different buses.

A woman who was a bit too helpful checked me in. She told me more than I really wanted to know about the hotel, its neighborhood, and Christchurch in general. She also showed me to my room personally and gave me a map of the city's attractions. I was able to confirm that when I leave here to take the train and then return a day later it will be all right to leave my large bag in storage.

I got settled in Room #6 at the Golden Star (another place with an old-fashioned metal key). It's a corner room, which the clerk noted would provide lots of light. While that's true, the dual windows also look directly at houses next door. There is a fence between the hotel and its neighbors, but it's still kind of weird to be able to see right into someone's house. Aside from that, the room is fine. The place advertises that it's Christchurch's newest accommodation, and everything is in good shape and fresh.

After relaxing in the room a bit I walked up to the Westfield Riccarton. Westfield is an Australian company that manages malls all over the world. (Among others, they own the new World Trade Center mall.) Most of their malls are extremely upscale. The Riccarton mall is nice, but it's probably the most plebeian place they own. It was remarkably similar to the malls I'd been to in Palmerston North, Invercargill, and Dunedin—the same stuff you'd find in any North American mall, but mostly with different names.

I stopped at the Riccarton Pak 'n' Save, where I mostly picked up stuff for breakfast. In particular I bought some crumpets (which are basically what in the States we'd call English muffins) and garlic butter to put on them.

I also had dinner at the Westfield Riccarton. First I had a snack. One of the things you're supposed to try in New Zealand is fresh fruit ice cream, so I had a cone at a place that claimed to sell ice cream made with organic fruit. I had a single scoop of boysenberry, and it was delicious. Then I went to a place called Maki Mono. They mostly sell sushi there, but I got a nice Asian salad. Finally I got a "mini" smoothie at a place called Tank that's in every mall and appears to be the Orange Julius of New Zealand. It's the first smoothie I've had since getting diagnosed with diabetes, and it will probably be the last. Between that and the ice cream, my glucose level went up to about double what it should be. The ice cream was worth the carbs it came with, but the smoothie really wasn't.

When I got back to the hotel the evening news was on. One of the big stories was about the student strike in Dunedin I wrote about earlier. It turned out that the prime minister (Chris Hipkins, who took over when Jacinda Ardern decided to quit while she was ahead) was in Dunedin today, and the protest was timed to coincide with his visit.

I also watched some British and Australian game shows on TV, plus a British show where people take heirlooms that seem to be damaged beyond repair to experts who make them like new. There are four main local networks in New Zealand, all of which are government operated. They're called TV-1, TV-2, THREE (written as a word), and Maori TV. It's interesting that the vast majority of programming on the Maori channel is in English. About the only local programming New Zealand TV comes up with is news and documentaries. There's lots borrowed from ABC in Australia, lots from all the different British networks, and a few American shows (usually quite old). The typical cable system in New Zealand has about twenty other channels. Half of them are sports, one is always HGTV (with both the same and different programming as at home), and one is called Living (which airs a lot of Food Network shows). The advertising is all local, though—with VERY New Zealand accents.

SATURDAY, JUNE 3

christchurch

I was surprised to find that the Golden Star had electric mattress pads. My legs had gotten sore from walking so much in Dunedin, and it was nice to have heat to soothe them. I got quite a good night's sleep and was up around 6:30 this morning.

The shower at this hotel was toward the middle of those I've been at. They were the third place I've stayed that had bath products from a brand called earth. (all lower-case, and with a period or "full stop" at the end) that brag that the shampoo and body wash contains Manuka honey. New Zealand is a huge honey producer, and Manuka honey supposedly has various health benefits. The body wash is a bit sticky, and it definitely smells of honey. It's very weird, and I really don't follow how mixing that with soap is supposed to be a good thing.

For breakfast I had some of my Pak 'n' Save crumpets, a bit of discounted fruit salad, and the ubiquitous Moccona coffee crystals that are what New Zealanders drink when they don't have a barista make them something nicer. Something I don't think I mentioned earlier was that instant coffee was invented in New Zealand. A man from Invercargill named David Strang patented soluble coffee powder back in 1889. So I suppose you could say I was having a local delicacy for breakfast. In theory I could have paid \$18 to have a packaged breakfast delivered to my room. That would have contained a mini-pack of Weet-Bix cereal, a slice of white bread, various spreads, a cup of yogurt, an apple, and a miniature bottle of orange juice. The crumpets and fruit salad were cheaper, and I think better as well.

At about 8:00 the sun finally began to rise, and I set off for the day. I walked south a block to Blenheim Road (pronounced "BLEEN-um"), the busy street I had to cross coming from the bus stop yesterday. I was a bit annoyed to see that the construction was finished, and today the bus stop right by the motel was available.

I turned right on Blenheim and followed a bike path that leads through Hagley Park, an enormous green space that separates central Christchurch from the west side of the city. Parts of this park are lovely, though the route the bike path takes is mostly past various athletic facilities. It was a chilly morning, and frost was thick on the grass on the rugby and soccer fields. That stood out, because the park also has a number of flower gardens, and those were all in full bloom. Obviously it wasn't a killing frost.

My first stop was along the Avon River, just south of downtown Christchurch. I spent a bit of time at the Canterbury Earthquake National Memorial, a memorial wall engraved with the names of those who died in the Christchurch earthquakes in 2011 and 2012. I'd learn far more about the quakes later, but the memorial made a nice place to begin the day.

I crossed the river and spent a bit of time walking around downtown Christchurch. Pretty much everything in the city center was rebuilt following the earthquakes. There's about half a dozen historic buildings in the city center (all built of wood) that didn't have significant earthquake damage. The few other old buildings that are still around are just standing empty and covered with graffiti. Since 2012 Christchurch has enacted an ordinance that limits buildings to less than 28 meters in height. While this could be about a ten-story building, most are no more than about three floors high. A lot of the businesses are just a single story. It's weird for a city that's bigger than Des Moines to basically have no skyline at all.

As part of the restoration of downtown, they've made a point of adding housing to the mix. There are town houses and apartments everywhere in the central city, all covered in grey and white siding. There's also construction going on everywhere, even more than they had in Dunedin. Hopefully they'll eventually have a nice downtown.

One of the most prominent buildings in the downtown area is what everybody calls the Cardboard Cathedral. Officially the Christchurch Transitional Cathedral, it is temporarily (for about a quarter century) replacing the Gothic revival Anglican cathedral that was nearly destroyed by the earthquakes. It was built on the site of another Anglican church that was completely destroyed by the earthquakes. It was designed to be built quickly and cheaply, and it was completed in about a year. The name "Cardboard Cathedral" comes from the fact that the interior walls and the bottom of the exterior overhang are lined with cardboard shipping tubes. Even the altar and lectern at the front are made of smaller cardboard tubes. They are among many recycled materials used in the building. The structural support for the A-frame building is made of shipping containers, and the roof and windows are made of recycled plastics. There's a separate building with the sacristy, vestry, and a meeting room that is just a bunch of shipping containers covered with scrap wood.

I arrived just moments before 9:00, when the cathedral opened for the day. When the vicar unlocked the front door, I entered. He was overly friendly and a bit too curious about having a visitor from overseas (though I saw in their guest book that they do get frequent international visitors). We spent a while exchanging pleasantries, and eventually he allowed me to look



Canterbury Earthquake National Memorial



Christchurch Transitional ("Cardboard") Cathedral



Interior of the Transitional Cathedral

around the place. It really is a beautiful, modern building. I love how bright it is, particularly on a sunny day like this one was. I'd love to attend a service there, but unfortunately that didn't fit in the schedule.

The Transitional Cathedral will remain the seat of the Anglican diocese until restoration is completed on the old cathedral. The works are expected to take about ten more years, and at present the building looks to be in horrible shape. The city and national governments have committed to restoring it, because it is considered the city's biggest landmark.

It's interesting that while the Anglicans quickly built the Transitional Cathedral after the earthquakes, the seat of the local Catholic diocese is still in limbo. The Cathedral Basilica of the Blessed Sacrament was damaged beyond repair. It stood empty until 2021, when it was completely destroyed. The diocese purchased a plot of land to build a new cathedral, but many parishioners in the diocese opposed the plan—mostly because it included closing half a dozen of the city's churches and relocating their members to the new cathedral. The parishioners appealed their case all the way to the Vatican, and later this year the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura will be hearing the case—the first time they've ever had a case that came from New Zealand. Meanwhile their temporary cathedral is St. Mary's Church, one of the parishes that may be closing if the new cathedral is built.

I made my way to the downtown bus interchange and caught bus #60 eastward. This route meanders through a bunch of mostly residential areas, and there weren't many riders on a weekend morning. The homes I passed were a weird combination of brand new and 1950s construction. I'd learn later that whether homes survived the earthquake depended on what they were built of and what sort of foundation they had. Almost everything built of wood is still standing, and stucco also stucco-covered cement blocks also did pretty well. Brick, on the other hand, was pretty much uniformly destroyed. Homes on slabs generally did better than homes with basements, because the slabs would move with the motion of the quake, while basement walls would buckle. Pretty much every home in Christchurch suffered severe damage, but a cheap '50s wood home on a slab stood the best chance of being salvageable.

My ultimate destination was the pier at New Brighton. This area was named after one of the biggest seaside resorts in England, and even on a cold day it was a pleasant beachy area. I didn't actually stick my toe in the Pacific, but I did walk along the beach a bit and gawk at the surfers. I also walked the length of the pier. While the temperature was at least 30 degrees colder, it reminded me of the piers south of Los Angeles. It really made a fun place to spend a bit of time.



**ABOVE: Surfers on the beach
RIGHT: David Burrow at New Brighton Pier**



Old post office with construction around it

Just across from the beach they were holding weekend market, and I had a fun time wandering through it. Fortunately none of the junk that was for sale looked tempting. I did have a little snack, though. A food truck was selling what they called "Crazy Spuds". They'd sliced up potatoes, put them on skewers, and deep fried them. The result was sort of a kebab of potato chips. They were available in a range of flavors, but I chose plain salt. As the locals would say, it was "flavoursome". The NZ\$5 price (\$3.03 at today's exchange rate) seemed pretty reasonable, too.

I took bus #5 back downtown. This takes a more direct route, through a mix of residential and commercial areas. It looks like a poorer area than what the other bus went through. The new construction is mostly apartments, and a lot of the older houses are in disrepair (peeling paint, rusting roofs, etc.) There were beggars in front of some of the neighborhood "dairies", and a guy who was washing windshields for tips tried to get money out of our bus driver by cleaning his mirror. The driver got mad at him and spent a while after re-adjusting the mirror.

When I got back downtown I caught the Christchurch tram. This is an actual historic tram, as opposed to one of those buses designed to look like a streetcar. It's basically a tourist attraction rather than real transportation, though. The tram makes what the driver described as "a deformed figure of eight" that goes near most of the points of interest in the city center. The driver did a running commentary on everything. One of the things he pointed out was the old post office building, which is the oldest

surviving building in the city. The exterior has been restored, but the interior is awaiting redevelopment. The post office has relocated to an industrial park near the airport, and they're hoping to create a hotel and restaurant complex in the old building.

The tram had to stop and reverse because of construction that was blocking the tracks. Eventually we made it to my next destination, Quake City. This is a very well done museum that shows what happened during the earthquakes and how the recovery has been going.

There was a long series of earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. The strongest (what most people call the "first" quake) happened at 4:51am on September 4, 2010. There was substantial damage from the 7.1 quake, but only 2 people died and 100 were injured—mostly thanks to its happening in the wee hours. Along series of aftershocks happened over the next several months, with what people call the "second" quake happening at 12:51pm on February 22, 2011. Even though this one was only a 6.2 quake, because lots of people were out on lunch breaks at the time, it was much deadlier. 185 people were killed, and about 2,000 were injured in the second quake. A lot of buildings that had been damaged by the first quake were completely destroyed by the second one.

The museum began with a Maori legend on the origin of earthquakes—a child of the earth mother was punished by being trapped underground and periodically struggles to break free. They then detailed exactly talk about the history of earthquakes in New Zealand and detail exactly what happened in the two big recent quakes. Photos and a few carefully selected artifacts that show what sort of damage was done in various places.

Probably the most interesting part of the museum was a film that had different survivors recollect their experiences. One of the most interesting was a police officer whose main job was guarding the courthouse and transporting prisoners between a holding area and the courtrooms. At the time the second quake struck two officers and the six prisoners were the only people in the building. The holding cells were underground, and understandably the inmates started screaming when everything went dark and the ground started shaking. One of them was a middle school kid who was in the court on a shoplifting charge. The judge had sentenced him to spend the lunch break in the holding cell as punishment for swearing in court. The officer said "I think he was surely scared straight, and I certainly haven't seen him re-offend."

For months after the second quake there was a curfew in Christchurch, and certain areas (including the whole downtown) were off limits. The New Zealand Army kept order in the city for most of 2011. More than 2,000 kilometers of streets and highways were damaged, and almost the entire water and sewage systems had to be rebuilt. The government distributed more than 45,000 "port-a-loos" to Christchurch residents, and tanker trucks parked on every block to distribute fresh water. The pictures from that era looked a lot like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

A "Student Volunteer Army" was formed from high school and university kids whose institutions had closed. They provided much of the labor for the initial reconstruction. On school holidays thousands of other students from around the country joined them. The group continues to work today, though the focus has changed. Today they work mostly on nature and conservation projects, as well as volunteering in nursing homes and day care facilities. Today's construction work is mostly done by private companies eager to take in insurance funds.

It is interesting that more than a decade after the quakes, Christchurch still isn't really "normal". New Orleans recovered quicker than that, but then the main downtown buildings weren't much damaged by the hurricane. Apparently for about six years most of Christchurch's downtown stores operated out of shipping containers. New Orleans also had the advantage of a much larger country from which it could draw construction workers. With only 5 million people instead of 300 million, there's a lot fewer people who can help out with a disaster in New Zealand.

After seeing Quake City I took a stroll through the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. This was another place where I couldn't really figure out just what season it was. The trees were either yellow and orange or already had bare branches. On the other hand there were fountains running like it was summer, and a wide range of flowers had brightly colored blooms.

I boarded another tram that was extremely crowded. I got off near Cathedral Square and had "lupper" at a Wendy's. New Zealand makes four countries where I've had a Wendy's taco salad (the others being the U.S., Canada, and Spain). The one in New Zealand was the strangest, too. Basically it was chili on top of lettuce, with an entire tomato quartered and strategically cut into wedges and placed around the perimeter. There was no hot sauce, sour cream, or salsa. There was a tiny bit of white cheese shreds beneath the lettuce, as opposed to on top of the chili. The salad did come with tortilla chips, but they were unsalted. Something else unique about Wendy's in New Zealand was that they have caramel frosties. Of course I tried that out the "junior" version of that as well. I found it interesting that it was topped with unsweetened whipped cream, which was actually a very nice complement to the frosty.

This particular Wendy's was slow and filthy. I'm willing to give them the benefit of a doubt, because they only seemed to have two kids working, and I think they had an unexpected late rush. It seemed to take forever to get anyone's food out, though. Many of the tables had not been cleared, and those the one I ended up sitting at was sticky like someone had spilled a soft drink there and it had hardened.

Something I've found odd about fast food restaurants in New Zealand in general is that people don't seem to bus their own tables. They have those same counters by the door with trash cans and shelves for trays. Everyone seems to expect employees to take their stuff away, though. They leave things on the table, and it just stays there until someone goes around to clean. A couple of times employees acted surprised when I bused my own stuff. I'm not sure why it's done differently here.

Next I took a bus back to Riccarton. I then walked north a bit to a national historic site that is the home of Kate Sheppard. I've seen Kate Sheppard's image every day I've been in New Zealand. She appears on the \$10 bill, which is by far the most commonly used banknote in the country.



Fountain and autumn tree at Christchurch Botanic Gardens



Kate Sheppard on the New Zealand \$10 note

Sheppard was an immigrant from Liverpool who was New Zealand's most famous suffragette. She was the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and later formed the National Council of Women in New Zealand. At the national museum they have the text of the speech she gave before Parliament, using an argument based on Christian values that women should have the right to vote. In 1893 New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant women's suffrage. Sheppard's home was surprisingly luxurious (much more so than Susan B. Anthony's), but honestly there wasn't much to see there. The fact of what Sheppard did is far more interesting than where she lived.

I went to one more location in Christchurch this afternoon. At the east end of Riccarton, just across from Hagley Park, is the Al Noor Mosque. You may know that in March of 2019 a white supremacist attacked two mosques in Christchurch.



Al Noor Mosque – Christchurch

Forty-four people were shot to death while worshipping at the Al Noor Mosque, and seven more were killed at the Linnwood Islamic Centre east of downtown. The killer livestreamed his attack on Facebook. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described it as "one of New Zealand's darkest days". She led the fight to see that the killer got life in prison without parole, when normally the sentence for murder in a country that doesn't see a lot of violence is either ten or twenty years in prison. Ardern's handling of the mosque attack came right before an election, and it led to her party getting an absolute majority—which is very rare in the New Zealand parliament.

That put her in charge of the country's next big crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. When she resigned as prime minister earlier this year, she said she was tired and wanted "to just be a mum". With all that's happened in the past few years, I can understand that.

The Al Noor Mosque is a modern building with a lovely gold dome and minaret. There's a nice monument in front of the mosque in memory of those who died that day. I stopped to pay my respects. It's sad that anyone should be killed, and all the more horrible for them to die at a worship service.

I caught the Orbiter bus back to my hotel. The Orbiter is a nice feature of Christchurch's bus system. It runs a roughly circular route through all sides of the city without ever going downtown. More cities should have a routing like that, instead of requiring that you go through downtown to get anywhere. Part of the Orbiter's route runs down Clarence Avenue, right in front of the Golden Star.

I packed up almost all of my stuff. When I checked in I'd arranged to leave most of my stuff here when I took the train across the mountains. I packed just one change of clothing in the bookbag that mostly holds my computer, and everything else went in my main bag. I went down to the office and spoke with the Chinese woman who owns the hotel. She was very accommodating and labeled the bag with my name and when I would be back.

While I was working on the travelogue, I was watching a bit of TV in the background. I turned in relatively early because I needed to be up on time to make it to the station tomorrow.

SUNDAY, JUNE 4

christchurch to greymouth & west coast

I was up around 6:00 this morning. While getting ready I had the North American darts championship on in the background on Sky Sport. That stood out, because a couple of years ago that very event was taking place at a Chicago hotel where I was staying. This year's event was apparently in New York, and I must say watching people shoot darts is every bit as exciting as it sounds. There's a reason why darts normally goes with drinking.



The weather app on my phone showed it was 30 degrees Fahrenheit this morning. It actually felt slightly warmer than yesterday, but it was still on the nippy side. I had a brisk walk down to Christchurch railway station. The station is strangely located by an office park and shopping center, but nowhere near downtown. It was just a short walk from the Golden Star, though, which was my main reason for staying there.

Check-in for my train was very easy. While lots of things I booked in New Zealand came with confirmation numbers or bar codes, so far I've never been asked to provide anything more than my surname. That was the case with KiwiRail as well. With just the name they printed out a boarding pass. As it turned out nobody ever asked for the boarding pass either, though. I think I could have stowed away with no problem.

They called boarding at 7:45. My boarding pass was for Carriage A, Row 4, Seat D. There were three seating cars on this train, labeled A, B, and P. "P" stands for "premium", and unlike on the bus I didn't pay extra for that. All it really means on KiwiRail is that for nearly double the price of a standard ticket, you get a free lunch with wine. While I did have to pay for food, I actually ended up being the only person seated in Row 4—nobody next to me and no one across the aisle. The car was actually mostly full (tour groups from Japan and Australia), so it was kind of nice to have all the space I wanted.

Before we started off I stopped by the café car to pick up essentially the same fruit salad I'd gotten from Pak 'n' Save the other day as well as a bottle of orange juice. I paid with high-value coins that had accumulated in my pocket. The clerk was grateful about that. On much of this trip there's no cell service, which means their EFTPOS system can't process card payments, and she said she was happy to have coins she could use for change.

At 8:10am someone blew a high-pitched whistle like a referee would use. That's apparently the signal that everything is good to go, and a couple minutes later we were on our way. The first part of the trip took us through a rather dreary industrial area in Christchurch. Fortunately most of the trip would be much more scenic than that.



In Row 4, Seat D of Carriage A

Many guides describe the TranzAlpine as one of the best train trips in the world. While I was expecting it to be nice, I was honestly skeptical of that hyperbole. I've been on a lot of train trips, though, and this really was one of the best. I'd rank it right up there with the trip to Machu Picchu in Peru and with Amtrak's top trains. For a trip that's less than five hours long, it's amazing just how many different kinds of scenery the train passes through—and pretty much all of them are beautiful.

We were given complimentary headphones that we could use to listen to commentary throughout the trip. Whenever there was something new, a beep would sound as a signal to put the headphones on. You could listen in English (which was, of course my choice), Mandarin, or Te Reo (the official name of the Maori language). They did a good job of timing things. They explained each point of interest just before it appeared, and they filled much of the dead time with history and geography.

The TranzAlpine is definitely not a high-speed train. I have a speed app on my phone, and it showed we were chugging through the outskirts of Christchurch at about 40 miles per hour. The top speed, as we cruised across the plains, was 60. (In contrast most Amtrak trains go about 80mph, and that's considered slow by world standards.) When we got to the mountains, we really struggled. Even with two engines hauling the train we rarely did more than about 25. It's less than 150 miles from Christchurch to Greymouth, so coast to coast our average speed was about 31mph.

New Zealand's railways are narrow gauge. They were built before the country switched to Metric, so the tracks are 3½ feet apart. That's more than a foot narrower than standard gauge tracks. I had heard that this would give a bumpier ride, but overall the trip was very smooth.

Once we left Christchurch we went through the Canterbury plains. The commentary noted that while Canterbury seems flat, in fact there is a fairly rapid rise as you head westward from Christchurch. By the time we reached the base of the mountains at Springfield, we were already 1,000 feet above sea level—even though we were just 40 miles west of the ocean.

The towns we went through were typical farm service towns. One thing I noticed was that John Deere equipment is big here. Pretty much all the tractors and harvesters are green.

The commentary pointed out that the soil in much of Canterbury loess, the same type that can be found along the Missouri River in southwest Iowa. Their biggest crops are wheat, rye, and oats, and they also grow a lot of produce. Livestock is way more important to New Zealand than any crop, though, and most of it isn't really raised for meat. They raise sheep primarily for wool, and they raise cattle mostly for dairy. Those animals are eventually slaughtered and sold for meat, but they get as much value out of them otherwise as they can.

Neither the plants nor animals found in Canterbury are native. The commentary told us it is by far the most ecologically altered region of New Zealand, with more than 95% of living things being non-native. The biggest wildlife we saw were deer, which are one of those invasive species. They seem to be everywhere in the high plains, just munching grass like the sheep and cattle.

Quite suddenly we were in the mountains. There aren't really any foothills of the Southern Alps. Instead the planes just give way to serious mountains. The mountains we went through were lower and green, but immediately to the side were snowcaps.

Many of the mountains are covered with what looks like a pretty yellow wildflower. In fact this is a non-native weed called gorse that was brought by British settlers. In England it is commonly found in hedges, and the settlers tried to use it for that purpose in New Zealand, too. It spread like kudzu, though, choking out grass and clover so it now requires more land to graze a sheep than it used to. It is pretty, though.

They call the ranches in the mountain area sheep stations, a term borrowed from Australia. The land for the stations isn't owned, but instead given in long-term leases from the government. That's a tradition that goes back to Maori times, but it's convenient today. It allows the government to build infrastructure and provide conservation projects without having to get approval from NIMBY landowners.

Shortly before we got to the highest mountains, we entered a much more arid region, the same thing you find on the eastern slope of the Rockies. The native grass here is called tussock, which has long narrow leaves and grows in bunches. It looks very different from the lower elevations.



A snow-cap in the Southern Alps

Near the top it got wetter again, and we saw a lovely rainbow out the window as we made our way through Arthur's Pass National Park. The commentary pointed out here that almost all the native trees in New Zealand are evergreen. The deciduous trees were all introduced from either Europe or Asia (mostly oaks and ginkgoes). The most common trees in Arthur's pass are native beech trees. The beeches found in the Northern Hemisphere are deciduous, but those in New Zealand have tiny leaves that stay green year-round.



Braided river near Arthur's Pass

While we were stopped at Arthur's Pass, they added a third engine to the train. It's not that the grade increases. Instead the extra engine was there as a safety measure while we passed through the longest tunnel in New Zealand. The Otira tunnel is 8.5km (about 5¼ miles) long, and it took 14 minutes to pass through it. There obviously isn't good ventilation in the tunnel, because the diesel fumes were horrible. They read a rather lengthy safety announcement before we entered the tunnel. In particular everyone has to be in their assigned seat the entire time—not just your car, but your seat. You can't even get up to use the restroom. I've been through similarly long tunnels on Amtrak, and they didn't make quite as big of a deal of it there.

My lunch today was a savory scone filled with bits of bacon and diced leeks and covered in melted cheese. I also picked up a 300ml glass bottle of Pepsi to add to my collection. You wouldn't recognize it's from New Zealand, but it does look different than anything else I have.

When we left the tunnel we passed from Canterbury into the region known alternately as West Coast or Westland. Westland is a temperate rainforest, the same classification given to western Washington and Vancouver Island. The vegetation looks more tropical than those places, though. Of the places I've been, it looked most like Mexico's Yucatan—even though the temperature was a fraction of what it is in Cancun. The vegetation is almost impossibly lush, a real jungle that must have been nearly impenetrable for the early settlers.

We were told this is a podocarp forest (though it sounded more like "pot of carp") that has three different levels of canopies. The highest trees are hardwoods that take as long as 700 years to grow to maturity. Sadly large parts of the area were deforested because their tall, straight trunks were ideal for construction.

The train ran through a valley between two mountain ridges in Westland that the commentary told us was the fault line between the Pacific and the Asian/Australian plates. The Southern Alps are on the Pacific Plate, while the Coast Ranges are part of greater Australia. The Australian Plate is sliding under the Pacific Plate at a rate of horizontal movement of about 1.5 centimeters per year, which in turn raises the Southern Alps by about a centimeter a year. Fortunately none of that movement was noticeable today.

We made a long stop at Moana, a resort town that is on Brunner Lake. Then we headed rapidly downward, following the wide Grey River to our ultimate destination at Greymouth. This area was originally mining country—first gold, and later coal. Numerous explosions in the mines led to hundreds of deaths and the eventual closure of the mines. Today most of New Zealand's coal comes from Indonesia.

In the outer suburbs of Greymouth we passed a packing plant. The recording noted that the plant was unique in being fully halal certified. This allows them to not only sell to the New Zealand market, but also to market to Moslem countries like Indonesia and Pakistan. The company that owns it is a major food conglomerate, and it made me wonder why companies like Tyson don't do halal meat.

The conductor made several announcements about our arrival into Greymouth. What stood out was that she repeatedly said we'd be arriving at 1:00 **this evening**. It was afternoon, not evening, when we arrived, and each time she said it everyone sort of looked at each other in wonder.

It had been raining ever since we left Arthur's Pass, and it was utterly pouring in Greymouth. This is, of course, a rainforest, so that's not really unexpected. It was still annoying though. While the place I was staying was about as close as possible to the train station (about two blocks, though straight up a hill), I got thoroughly soaked by the time I got there.

No one was at the desk when I arrived, but there was a sign saying I should pick up a phone and call. The owner soon answered, and she came down to check me in. I was staying at a place called the Sundowner Motel. I booked it because it was cheap and close to the train station, but it's really quite a nice establishment. I have a huge room with a king bed, a full kitchenette, good lighting, and a balcony. The only real issue is that the place seems to have no insulation at all. Even with the heat (an electric radiator) on "MAX", the room is chilly at best.

After settling into my room I headed back to the reception. I had scheduled a tour for this afternoon, and I wanted to make sure I wasn't late for the pick-up. While I was waiting, I had a chat with Abby, the proprietress. She and her husband T.J. bought the hotel just four months ago, and so far she's

been surprised at how many customers they've had. She's originally from England but grew up mostly in Asia. She and T.J. moved to New Zealand a year ago after previously living in Qatar. She likes New Zealand, but she thinks it's very cold here. She couldn't believe that it routinely got below freezing in winter in the American Midwest.

Eventually the driver from Explore West Coast showed up. When I got in the van, she informed me that I was the only person on the tour today. It surprised me a bit that they didn't cancel with just one, but apparently they can make enough money to go with it.

This woman wears a variety of hats. In addition to working as a tour guide, she also works at the local i-site visitors center. She handles luggage for the railroad, and apparently she's also a waitress. I've gotten the feeling that lots of New Zealanders work multiple part-time jobs. None of them pays well, but they combine to make a decent income. The good thing in a country with public healthcare is that they don't need to worry about benefits with that kind of set-up.



Tasman Coast north of Greymouth, New Zealand

conditions like that plenty of times at home. I don't like it there, and I would have absolutely hated it on unfamiliar roads. This was also a winding, narrow road with steep drop-offs. The guide clearly knew it well, but even she was driving with two hands the whole time.

As we made our way north from Greymouth the guide talked about the mining disasters, and we stopped briefly in a little town that has a display of the heavy machinery used to do mine tunnelling. We then made a few stops at scenic lookouts along the way north. The convenient thing about being in a van in a country that drives on the left is that she could simply open up the side door and let me take pictures without going out into the rain. The wild coast reminds me of Oregon or central California.

The ultimate destination of this tour was Paparoa National Park, which is about 45 minutes north of Greymouth. There are two main things this park is known for: the Punakaiki pancake rocks and the blowholes. The pancake rocks are formations of eroded limestone that are in regular layers with indentations between them, much like stacks of pancakes. There are a number of theories on how these formations were made, but none of them is definitive. They are fascinating to look at.

A blowhole is a hollow rock formation with a hole at the bottom that waves can enter. The water then blows through the top, almost like a geyser. Both the guide and the woman at the hotel noted that heavy rain was actually the best time to see the blowholes, because it takes strong waves and lots of water to actually create the blowing effect. Even today it wasn't all that strong, but I did see a couple of them being active.

There's a lovely trail that leads among the pancake rocks and blowholes. The guide recalled that when she was a girl she and her friends would go walking right on the rocks. "That was before all the health and safety regulations," she said. While I'm sure that was fun, the new trail (a concrete walkway that is handicap accessible) makes it easy to enjoy. I'm sure it does help keep people safe, but it's probably just as much about keeping the rock formations from being damaged by visitors.

It was absolutely pouring when we hike through the rocks. The guide lent me an umbrella, and she wore a plastic raincoat. Both of those did work fairly well, and I was glad I had solid leather sneakers on. If I'd been wearing anything breathable, they'd have been completely soaked.

We drove north a couple miles and hiked another trail that goes through the rainforest to a viewpoint on the coast. The guide pointed out all the different plants as we passed by—what I'd hope to learn back on Stewart Island. The most common plant that's not a tree here is flax, the plant both linen and rope are made of. It grows wild all over the South Island, and its long fibrous leaves make it look a lot like the yucca you see in the desert. There are also a lot of palms here. Something that stood out was that there were comparatively few ferns. There are some, but not nearly as many as I saw further south.

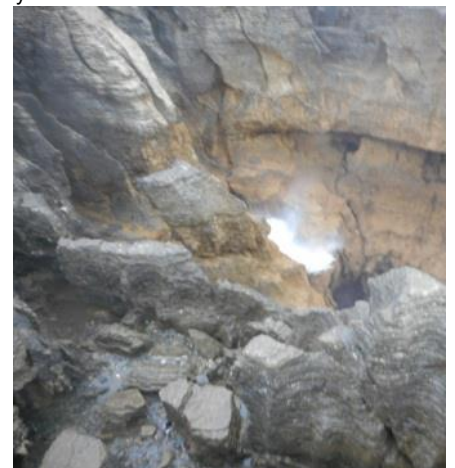
We turned around and made our way back to Greymouth. As we did the guide noted that there was almost no traffic on the road, which is apparently quite unusual. She said it made her wonder if there had been a rockslide. These happen very frequently along the seaside coasts. The West Coast region typically receives between 2 and 3 meters of rainfall annually (that's over 100 inches), and there have been years they've gotten over 10 meters (400 inches). My part of Iowa gets about 30 inches of rain a year, and in Greymouth they've gotten that much in a single day. They rarely have flooding from the rain (though tsunami-like flooding happens every few years). What happens

My tour today took us on a drive up state highway 6, the road that runs along the Tasman coast north of Greymouth. The guide said that this road has earned honors as one of the ten most scenic drives in the world. Even in the rain I could see why. The cliffs and rainforest line the east side of the highway, and waves crashed in along the coast to the west. It really was stunning.

At one point I had thought about renting a car and driving this route myself, mostly because I thought it would be cool to drive on the left for the first time in my life. It turned out the tour, though a bit pricey, was actually cheaper than renting a car would be. Car rentals in New Zealand automatically include insurance (you can't get them without), and it would have been about \$150 for a one-day rental, plus gas. The way the weather turned out, I was very glad not to be the one driving. At times the rain came in sheets, and the wheel groves in the asphalt were badly flooded. I've driven in



Punakaiki Pancake Rocks



Blowhole

instead is that all that water comes rushing down the cliffs. It erodes them and causes rockslides. This can apparently happen a couple times a month, and the highway is closed until they can clear the rocks away. A recent rockslide happened on the night of the high school prom. Kids from north of town couldn't get to the prom, so a pub in a little town had a party for them instead.



At a Tasman Sea overlook

Zealand menu is quite a bit different than the one back home, but there were lots of good choices. I ordered a large salad (which isn't an option in America) with "leg ham" as the protein and "old English cheddar" cheese. I have no idea how that's different from any other ham and cheese, but they were good. I got all the vegetables they offered except for beetroot (a very common option on everything in New Zealand), and I chose a sweet onion and chili dressing. I walked down to the store again to pick it up, and by the time I returned both I and the bag the salad came in were soaking wet. Fortunately the salad itself was intact, and it was delicious. It really was exactly what I'd been craving.

It finally stopped raining in the evening, and it appears tomorrow will be a nice day. Hopefully the trip back to Christchurch will be even nicer in sunny weather.

MONDAY, JUNE 5

greymouth area to christchurch

I was up right at six this morning and proceeded to get ready in slow motion. The Sundowner had the best shower of all the places I'd stayed so far. The temperature was a bit tricky to adjust, but it was a strong flow from a traditional shower head that was well positioned. A directions sheet posted in the bathroom said to open the window while showering, and that did indeed keep the place from steaming up. It's probably not the most energy-friendly thing, though. It seems odd to me that on some things (like recycling plastics) New Zealanders are very conservation focused, but on others (like insulation and wasting energy on heating) they aren't. I suppose we're all that way, just with different things.

For no good reason (other than that I recently heard it at the start of a rugby match while flipping through TV channels), New Zealand's national anthem was going through my head over and over again this morning. It's a stately Victorian hymn that is much easier to sing than "The Star-Spangled Banner", and it also has words that strike me as more fitting. It's traditionally performed first in Maori and then in English (similar to what they do with "O Canada" at sports events). Normally it's just a single verse that's sung, but I'm going to copy the whole English text here, because really do like it:

God of nations, at Thy feet,
In the bonds of love we meet,
Hear our voices, we entreat,
God defend our free land;
Guard Pacific's triple star
From the shafts of strife and war,
Make her praises heard afar,
God defend New Zealand.

Men of every creed and race,
Gather here before Thy face,
Asking Thee to bless this place,
God defend our free land;
From dissension, envy, hate,
And corruption guard our state,
Make our country good and great,
God defend New Zealand.

Peace, not war, shall be our boast,
But, should foes assail our coast,
Make us then a mighty host,
God defend our free land;
Lord of battles in Thy might,
Put our enemies to flight,
Let our cause be just and right,
God defend New Zealand.

Let our love for Thee increase,
May Thy blessings never cease,
Give us plenty, give us peace,
God defend our free land;
From dishonour and from shame,
Guard our country's spotless name,
Crown her with immortal fame,
God defend New Zealand.

May our mountains ever be
Freedom's ramparts on the sea,
Make us faithful unto Thee,
God defend our free land,
Guide her in the nations' van,
Preaching love and truth to man,
Working out Thy glorious plan,
God defend New Zealand.

While the words are very much of the 1800s and in modern times have been criticized both by feminists and anti-religious activists, I do think it's a lovely, timeless poem. I wish our national anthem had peace and unity as its theme, rather than "bombs bursting in air". While New Zealand is far from perfect, I love that its anthem shows the place is striving to be so.

At about 7:00 I went out for breakfast. It's still dark at that hour, and pretty much nobody was out. While this is a holiday (the King's official birthday, formerly the queen's—and basically just "June bank holiday"), barring a huge snow storm, you could find more traffic on the street at 6am on Christmas day in Algona than there was at 7:00 today in Greymouth.

I ended up at a McDonalds that faces a roundabout a little ways south of the hotel. I was actually thankful traffic was so light, because there's nothing more annoying as a pedestrian than having to cross a roundabout. This McDonalds was open, but also empty at 7am. Here they don't even seem



**Maori art wall hanging
in Room 6 – Sundowner Motel**

that honors the victims of the numerous floods that happened before the seawall was completed.

to have the local farmers coming in at that hour for coffee. The place looked more like a traditional McDonalds than the one in Invercargill. There was a playland attached, a larger counter area (though they still made customers order from kiosks), and no McCafe selling overpriced pastries. This place did have a “bacon and egg” combo meal, which allowed me to get a large “long black” with my breakfast for the same price I’d gotten a small in Invercargill. I paid with cash and ended up getting back about the same amount of \$8 in high-value coins, putting me back in the same position I was when I spent the coins yesterday on the train.

I made a quick stop at Kiwibank to get some cash. New Zealand appears to be like Canada, where there are about half a dozen national banks that have branches everywhere in the country and basically no local banks at all. We’re heading more and more that way in the States, but at least in little towns you can still find smaller banks. The debt ceiling deal has apparently sent the U.S. dollar soaring. Today I got NZ\$180, and it went through on my bank account for just US\$101.08. That’s a buck seventy-eight for every U.S. dollar, an increase of almost fifteen cents from the last time I exchanged.

I finished the latest installment of this travelogue. Then about 8:00 I set out again to do a bit of exploring in Greymouth. There was a bit more traffic once the sun was out, but still not much. Greymouth is about the size of Spencer or Oskaloosa, but if anything it comes across as a bit smaller than that. Even though it’s the regional seat (essentially the capital) of the Westland region, it’s a relatively unimportant, out-of-the-way town. The downtown area is more active than Algona’s, though a large part of that is that the railway station and shopping center are right next to downtown.

The nicest thing in Greymouth is the Mawhera (ma-FAIR-ah) Quay river walk. The walkway is really just a way of beautifying a seawall that was built for flood protection. It provides lovely views of the river, though, and even on an extremely windy morning it made for a pleasant stroll. Along the way I also saw a memorial to the men who died in mining disasters and another



LEFT: Miners Memorial on Manwhera Quay in Greymouth



RIGHT: Highway 6 bridge over the Grey River

Except for the wind, the weather today was glorious. It was a bit chilly, but bright and sunny. That wind dried everything out, so I didn’t need to worry about getting wet today.

I spent some time watching *Lingo*, a British game show that is much like the game Wordle. Then at a quarter to ten I went down to the lobby. The guide who had taken me north from Greymouth had told me to be there at 9:50, but she was already there when I arrived.

This time we headed southward from the hotel. Like a lot of seaside places, Greymouth is long and narrow. The central area is right by the hotel, but both businesses and homes stretch on and on both north and south. Our destination today was 10km from the hotel, and it was developed the whole way. On the other hand, everything is only a block or two deep.

Eventually we reached the Shantytown Historic Park. The guide walked in with me to make sure I got in free. They didn’t have a record of my booking, but fortunately I’d printed out a copy of the confirmation. The clerk of the desk just made a copy of that and let me in.

Shantytown is kind of like Living History Farms or Plymouth Plantation, though done on a much smaller budget and with mostly volunteer workers. It was also like the pioneer village at Old Threshers, but multiplied many times in size. The bulk of the place is a collection of buildings arranged to make the commercial district of a town. A couple were originally on this site, others were moved here from other locations, and still others were built new to look old. All of these have period furnishings and decorations (though it’s interesting that it’s not all the same period). They also all have excellent signage that explains what was going on and in many cases the continuing history of the people or companies involved after the period shown. Most of the buildings aren’t roped off, so you can go right up and look closely at things. (There are “do not touch” signs, which people seem to respect.) A few have interpreters, but at most visitors are just free to explore at their leisure.



Shantytown – Greymouth, New Zealand

and this humble West Coast cobbler grew into one of New Zealand's biggest companies. You'll find a Hannah's shoe store in every mall in New Zealand these days, and their original store is still going in downtown Greymouth.

One building housed the interesting combination of barber and tobacconist, which was apparently a common duo at the turn of the last century. Another was a recreation of the original building of the *Greymouth Star*. There was also numerous "tradies" (the word for craftsmen here): a carpenter, a watchmaker, a tinsmith, a blacksmith, a butcher, a baker, and a laundress. There was also a water-powered flour mill from the 1800s, a foundry from the early 1900s, and a car repair shop from the depression era.

Probably the most interesting thing in the old town was their hospital, which a small town used into the 1950s. It depicted medical practices from a number of eras, including a very early x-ray machine and an actual iron lung. There was a similar multi-era set-up in their fire station, with everything from a horse brigade to a 1940s fire engine.

Every historical village has an old church and a one-room school. This one had both of those. The church was built by Anglicans but used interdenominationally. It was relocated from a town that actually had the name "No Town". The story is that the founder was asked what the town should be named, and he responded, "I ain't gonna name no town." The school is a recreation designed to depict the depression era. There's a second building that was once an actual school (though with three rooms, not one) that they now use as a museum to depict the geology of the West Coast region. They also have an old movie theatre where they show a gimmicky film.

There were two things I hadn't seen in any other old town I've visited. One was a masonic lodge. The Greymouth masons donated their old building when they moved into a new one. It's actually set up as it would have been in the 1970s, though I suspect that was little changed from the '40s or '50s.



Iron lung at Shantytown hospital



**LEFT: Coronation Hall
RIGHT: Steam train**



They also have what they call Coronation Hall, which was used as the town hall for Ross, New Zealand. (The coronation in question was that of King Edward VII, who succeeded Queen Victoria.) The building has been under restoration for nearly twenty years, with various improvements made as funds become available. They're currently using it to show how they go about doing a restoration, and that was fascinating to see.

After seeing a town that was quite a bit larger than I expected, I took a ride on their old steam railway. The steam engine looks like nothing I've ever seen before. It's a very compact model that was apparently mostly used to haul logs through the forest in approximately this location. Today it runs a very slow passenger service on about a kilometer-long track. The engine pushes the train up a hill and then pulls it back down. The downward trip

doesn't go all the way back to the station. Instead they stop at a historic sawmill and gold mine sluice. In this area they also have recreations of the homes where miners and sawyers might have lived.

From the sawmill I took a surprisingly rough trail (the Manuka Track) that led back to the town. The scenery was similar to the trails on Stewart Island, but the trail itself was much rougher. I then followed a much more modern trail lined with interpretive signs that explain the mining history of mining on the West Coast.

Next I visited Chinatown, which is set up with a few literal shacks surrounding a small vegetable garden. Interestingly most of the signage there was actually in Chinese. I was glad to have learned more about Chinese New Zealanders back in Dunedin.

The one thing I didn't do at Shantytown was to pan for gold. For \$8 they guarantee that you will strike it rich—with "rich" meaning finding a tiny speck of precious metal that they enshrine in a plastic vial. I think this was actually included with my admission (and they gave me a gold-colored plastic card that identified me as a prospector). There was no one at the panning station when I showed up there, though, and I really don't think I missed out on much. I'll keep the gold card as my souvenir.

My final stop was at their restaurant, where they serve both snacks and meals. There was a sign noting that there was a 10% surcharge on all food purchases today because of the public holiday. In New Zealand employees that work on holidays are required to be paid double the usual wage. Some places (like McDonalds) just absorb that as a cost of doing business, but many restaurants pass it on with a surcharge. I bought an ice cream cone at the restaurant. It was salted caramel flavor, which in this case meant actual caramel candies mixed into vanilla ice cream. It was really delicious, and even with the surcharge it was just NZ\$3.30 (right at 2 US dollars).

There was almost nobody else at Shantytown when I arrived, but that soon changed. Tons of parents brought their kids for a family outing on the holiday, and by the time I left it was really kind of crowded. The driver had told me that she'd be back to pick me up at 12:15, and she was already waiting when I went outside at 12:10. While two hours wasn't a huge amount of time, it did allow me to see everything, and I'm definitely glad I made the trip to Shantytown.

While tipping is not normally done in New Zealand, I did feel the driver went above and beyond in taking me up on the trip yesterday. I gave her a ten when she dropped me off at the railway station. That's about 10% of the cost of the longer trip yesterday, which is what books say is acceptable for outstanding service. (No one would even consider tipping 15 or 20% for anything here.) She said the tip wasn't necessary, but then quickly took it and thanked me.

I claimed the book bag that the guide had left at the station and checked in for my trip back to Christchurch. I still had more than an hour before the train would be boarding, so I decided to go out to lunch. Carrying the bag around for just a short while made me very glad I wasn't carrying it all over Shantytown.

The highway 6 strip in Greymouth is built above the downtown area, and there's a pedestrian path cut into the cliff that leads from the Warehouse parking lot to the highway. (Cars have to take a much longer route to switch levels.) The pedestrian path isn't all that long or steep, but while it is a ramp, it's probably not a grade that would work for wheelchairs. A woman was sitting on a bench halfway up, and she was puffing heavily when I went by. She said, "You must not be a smoker. I had to stop and rest." While I certainly did rest on those long sets of stairs on the Stewart Island trails, I can usually do fine on a short climb. I'm certainly not in outstanding shape, so perhaps it is that I'm not a smoker.

I tried to have lunch at a Chinese restaurant along the strip. It said it was open, but when I went inside no one—neither an employee nor a customer—seemed to be in the place. So I completed the trifecta of Greymouth's fast food establishments by having lunch at KFC. That's a place I almost never eat at back home, so I don't know that I can really compare the New Zealand version with the American restaurants. In Greymouth KFC was in a very small building (much smaller than McDonalds). They had one table for two and two tables for six inside, with all the seating on big boxes that looked like footstools rather than actual chairs. The service was quick and efficient. I ordered a popcorn chicken salad (I don't know if that's even a thing in the States). It consisted of a large portion of chicken nuggets on top of coleslaw, with a couple of tomato slices on top of everything. It was actually pretty good, and for nine bucks (US\$5.45) I have no complaints.

I browsed through a very nice gift shop they have set up in the railway station, and then I waited a while on the platform. While there I made a couple of note about New Zealanders I wanted to be sure to include here. One was the country's fondness for shirts with random cities on them. Everyone in New Zealand seems to dress in sweatshirts that say "Paris" or "Los Angeles" or "Tokyo" or "Lima". These aren't souvenirs of places the people have been. You can buy those shirts at K-Mart or the Warehouse. Many of the places aren't even particularly exotic. I saw a shirt that said "Cincinnati", for instance.

Another extremely common clothing item is what New Zealanders call gumboots. These are big rubber boots that a little kid in America would wear in the snow. In New Zealand they're just wear them as shoes. I think they were originally considered good for use in muddy or wet situations, but a lot of people just seem to wear them all the time.

The other note I made was about New Zealand's use of the tag word "eh". Americans get a laugh out of how Canadians use that word. New Zealanders also use it, but it sounds different in New Zealand than it does in Canada. In Canada "eh" is always said with the voice going upward; it's a question similar to an American adding "isn't it" at the end of sentence. In New Zealand "eh" is said strongly, like adding "and that's a fact" at the end of sentence. It's more of an exclamation than a question here.

At 1:40 I went inside to use the toilet. When I got back to the platform they began boarding the train. Boarding began five minutes before they had said, and the train ended up leaving ten minutes early. This time they actually did scan everybody's boarding pass, and since all the passengers had boarded, they figured there was no reason to hang around in Greymouth.

For the ride back I was in carriage C, row 5, seat D. This was a window seat on the opposite side from what I'd sat the other way. Once again I had no seat mate—even after 53 additional passengers boarded at Arthur's Pass. I'm sure that was just pure luck, but it was nice.

In winter this train runs four days a week: Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. This was the last trip before the break, and they announced that because the café was overstocked all the perishable food was half price. I decided to buy my dinner early before they ran out.

With one exception, the audio commentary was identical to what we'd had in the other direction, though obviously reversed and with the words left and right interchanged. The exception was that this time they talked about building the Otira tunnel and why the extra engine is required to traverse it. The engine is actually needed eastbound; westbound it's just being repositioned. The tunnel is basically the "golden spike" in New Zealand's railway system. Decades before it was built railways were constructed from Christchurch and Greymouth up to the pass. Up until the early 20th Century passengers would board a stagecoach for the run over the pass to rejoin the railway. The problem with building the tunnel was that the approaches from Greymouth and Christchurch were at vastly different elevations, with the Christchurch approach about 2,000 feet higher. To connect the two, the tunnel was built on a slope. They extended it from both directions, and the result was off by only 1cm when the two sections met. That slope, though, means that eastbound trains have to go up a steep grade inside the tunnel. The extra engine both provides extra power and makes sure that if something goes wrong there's a back-up so that trains don't get stuck miles from daylight.

I noticed there were far fewer diesel fumes on the eastbound run, and the narration explained why that was. When eastbound trains enter the tunnel, the western entrance closes behind them and strong extractor fans go to work. They can't use the extractor fans until westbound trains leave the tunnel, though, since the exit has to be open.

We of course saw the same stuff we had the other way. There were some differences, though. Most notable was that there was quite a lot more snow on the mountain tops (though still nothing at the level the train was at). Obviously a lot of that rain we'd had yesterday had turned to snow at the highest elevations.

I had the dinner I'd bought at around 4pm. It consisted of that same fruit salad I'd had before and also a packaged sandwich that said it consisted of champagne ham (whatever that may be), Swiss cheese, salad (and there was a strange mix of vegetables), and Dijon mustard on rye bread. I also had a glass bottle of 7-Up. It was a decent meal.

It began getting darker as we entered Canterbury. They dimmed the lights in the coaches at 4:55pm, and the sun set almost immediately after that. At 5:30 they announced that the café was closing. Once there was nothing more to look at outside, I spent the rest of the trip reading more of Prince Harry's autobiography.

At 6:05 they announced that because we'd been running ahead of schedule, we'd be getting into Christchurch half an hour early. They switched the light back on at 6:15, and at 6:25 we arrived at the station. It was drizzling heavily in Christchurch—certainly not the storm Greymouth had yesterday, but enough to get my coat and bag wet as I walked back to the hotel.

I made my way back to the Golden Star, reclaimed my bag, and made my way to Room #14. The room is directly above the room I was in before, but it's set up totally differently. Annoyingly there's not an actual desk, so I lay in bed to work on the travelogue. The room is perfectly fine, though, and it was nice that both my computer and phone connected automatically to the wi-fi.

Of course I had the TV on in the background while I worked. The most interesting program tonight was *Cadbury's Good Sorts in Sport*. They found amateur athletes and coaches all over New Zealand who had somehow made a difference, and the candy maker donated \$5,000 to their teams. They also got famous people in the same sports (people I'd never heard of, since no one plays netball or cricket in North America) to present the oversized novelty checks while everyone else on the teams went crazy.

The oversize novelty check is an interesting concept in New Zealand, because checks as such don't exist at all here. Absolutely everything is either done with actual cash or with an electronic transfer. I'd read that the last bank to do away with checks (of course spelled with a Q – U – E here) was ANZ, and their accounts have been entirely paperless for more than a decade now.

I also watched a couple more game shows. These seem very big in New Zealand. They have a couple of local game shows, and they show games from Britain, Australia, and the States. It's fascinating just how many they have,

TUESDAY, JUNE 6

christchurch to queenstown

I was up about 6:15 this morning. While I got ready for the day I had my computer read my brother Paul's weekly letter aloud, and I caught up on what was going on with him. He sends those letters on Sunday nights, and it was weird to think that Monday had already come and gone as I listened to it in New Zealand.

I went out and found it was still drizzling fairly heavily. Nonetheless, I walked up to the Westfield Riccarton. The mall proper wouldn't open for three hours yet, but I went to a restaurant called Drexel's that has its main entrance on the lowest level of the carpark rather than in the mall itself. Drexel's claims to specialize in "American breakfast", though their menu also features the full English with its beans, blood pudding, and tomato. I had an omelet with ham, bacon, and cheese. It was served with what is best described as a hash brown cake (tasty, but odd), toast, and that same berry compote that is everywhere in this country. I also got grapefruit juice. The meal wasn't cheap (NZ\$30 or about US\$18.25), but considering there was no tip and all taxes were included, it was about what you'd pay for the same thing at IHOP or Perkin's.

The weather had settled to a very light drizzle as I made my way back to the motel. I finished packing up my stuff. Each time I do that it gets a bit more challenging to get it to fit into one big bag and a carry-on. I managed, though, and then I dropped the key in the box by the office (reception doesn't open until 9:30am) and made my way to the bus stop across the street.

At about 8:40 I caught the orbiter bus back to the Westfield Riccarton. It's not a long walk up there, but on a wet morning with luggage the bus was the only real option. Google Maps suggested I should change buses at a random stop further west than the mall, but I knew that the Westfield was a better option. They have a nice indoor waiting area there with TVs that tell you when all the buses are coming. At the stop Google suggested both my

luggage and me would have gotten soaked, and I would have been constantly checking my phone to see when the bus was coming. An electronic voice at the mall waiting area announces bus departures. I was amused by its very British pronunciation of the word "due", with a definite "y" sound before the "oo".

I had to wait about twenty minutes for the bus I wanted. Bus #3 goes to two different western termini, and only every third bus runs to the airport. One of the reasons I had gotten a Christchurch Metrocard is that with the card the fare to the airport is the same as anywhere else in the city (\$1.60), but there's an \$8 supplement if you're paying cash. That alone more than covered the cost of the card.

Bus 3 takes an extremely convoluted route, serving the Canterbury University and a bunch of really upscale residential areas in western Christchurch. I'd bet most of the people in those luxury houses never set foot on the bus, but they do have a very convenient service should they choose to. Eventually the bus crosses under the highway 1 bypass and runs past a big shopping complex that includes the International Antarctic Centre museum. Christchurch is the #1 place from which people leave for Antarctica, mostly since it has far more developed transportation infrastructure than southern Chile and Argentina. It might have been interesting to see the museum. It costs \$50, though, and I'd have had to trade something else in the schedule for that.

We got to the airport at about 9:20. At that point an Asian girl and me were the only people left on the bus. I figured I'd follow the girl, but it turned out she had no clue where anything was at the airport either. The bus stop is convenient to the international section, but it's a long walk to anything else. Eventually I made my way to Air New Zealand check-in, went to a kiosk, and printed out a ZQN destination tag.

I suspected that since this would be another small plane flight (though not quite so small as those in Stewart Island), I likely wouldn't be dealing with security. That was correct. My flight would be departing through Gate 7, and it turns out that Gates 3 through 10 all leave from a single door from which passengers walk out to different areas of the tarmac. This is on the bottom level, the same level as arrivals. Departures that require security are all from upstairs.

There was a little convenience store (the Hub Café, Bar, and Grab & Go) adjacent to the regional waiting area for regional departures. They had a sale on salty snacks (two "big grab" bags for \$6 or US\$1.85 each), so I picked a couple of uniquely New Zealand snacks. One was called burger rings, which is a snack I won't be sampling again. They supposedly have "full on burger flavour", but what they really have is a strange, unidentifiable savory taste.

I got caught up to this point in the travelogue as I watched people head out for flights to Wanaka and Palmerston North. Just as happened yesterday I went to the restroom, and immediately on my return they began boarding. I was the first one through the door at 10:45. To get to the plane I had to walk down a long walkway next to the terminal building, then (according to signs 230 meters later), I turned into a corded off area that led out to the tarmac. My plane was the only one on the tarmac when I boarded, but still three different people confirmed that I was going to Queenstown.

This plane was an ATR-72, a turboprop made by a subsidiary of Airbus. It apparently holds 72 passengers and is unique in that boarding is from the rear. That stood out because my seat was 1-A, so I had to walk the length of the plane to get to it. It was nice to have boarded first.

They closed the doors at 10:55am, five minutes before we were scheduled to depart. We began taxiing at 11:00, and we were in the air at 11:04. As soon as we were out over farmland it was entirely clear; only Christchurch itself seemed to be having a gloomy day. They did the standard coffee and water services. This time in addition to Cookie Time (which the flight attendant referred to as biscuits), they had tiny squares of fudge wrapped up in foil. I chose that, and it was delicious.

I soon realized that I should have chosen 1-D, rather than 1-A. While I had a pleasant enough view, the right side of the plane had spectacular views of the mountains. I mostly looked out at farms and the blue Pacific. It was amazing how much calmer the Pacific was than the Tasman Sea had been the other day; it really lived up to its "peaceful" name.

We flew pretty much straight south for about half an hour, flying over roughly the same area I'd been through by bus the other day. At about 11:30 we angled southwest, and then both sides of the plane were over mountains. At first what I saw on the left were dry, brown and grey mountains that had just a dusting of snow at the top. On the right side, though, everything was fully snow covered. Before too long we were flying over a high valley that also was covered in snow. Then both sides of the plane were right in the middle of the snowy white peaks. I suppose this is what it must be like to fly to somewhere like Aspen or Breckenridge in winter, but I've never had that experience.

I should note that most of the mountains around here have no vegetation on them that can be seen from 16,000 feet. They're basically just bare rocks. I think that's because geologically these are extremely young mountains. They haven't really had time to break down into soil. They still look pretty, though.

At about 11:50 they made a very abrupt announcement that we would be landing shortly and that the toilet would be closed for the duration of the flight. A flight attendant then offered Air New Zealand's signature purple lollies. We rapidly descended, cutting below the snow level into the verdant valley where Queenstown itself is located. At 11:58 we touched down, we were parked at 12:02. The flight time on the schedule is an hour and fifteen minutes, but obviously it's shorter than that when things go right.

Sitting as far from the door as possible, it took a while to exit the plane. I walked across the tarmac into a very crowded airport and followed some rather confusing signs to reach baggage claim. My bag was one of the first on the belt, and it appeared to be fully intact. I then followed much clearer signs for the airport bus stop.

I just missed a bus. That was actually all right, because it gave me a chance to get my bearings and make sure everything was balanced. While I was waiting, a taxi parked in the bus loading area. An inbound bus (not the one I wanted) came shortly after that. The driver pulled around in front of the taxi. Then she got out of the bus and gave the taxi driver a piece of her mind.

Queenstown is in Otago, so they use the Bee card, just like Dunedin does. When I boarded an outbound bus the driver seemed surprised that I already had a card. Just like in Christchurch, having the appropriate card saves a ton of money. The cash fare if you board from the airport is \$8, but with a Bee card, every ride is just \$1.

Three people boarded an empty outbound bus at the airport. There are just two more stops after the airport—one by a mess of hotels where we all got of and another at a shopping mall in the same complex as the hotels. There's not really a crosswalk at the hotel stop, but I dragged my bags across a surprisingly empty four-lane highway and up to the entrance of the Ramada—Remarkables Park.

It was only about 12:20, so I was expecting to just leave my luggage and check in later. The east European woman at the desk told me a room was ready, though, and soon I had another set of wooden electronic keys. That concept does seem weird to me, since with the technology inside of it, the card clearly wouldn't be recyclable. I guess they just like to seem green, though.

When I got to my room I called Air Milford, the company that I was supposed to travel with tomorrow. I first tried their local number, but that did not go through. They also have a toll-free number, though. In New Zealand free calls begin with "0800". I called that, and it worked. Theoretically my SIM card is supposed to offer unlimited calls to regular New Zealand numbers, but perhaps I dialed something wrong the first time. At least the toll-free call went through.

The company had asked that I call when I got to Queenstown to confirm my reservation. The package I'd booked was a "coach—cruise—fly" tour of Milford Sound, which is probably the biggest attraction in New Zealand. Unfortunately I found out in my call that the "fly" part of the deal probably wouldn't be happening. They require a minimum number of passengers to do it (though they don't reveal what that minimum is), and apparently the limit had not yet been reached. The tour was still on, but I'd likely end up taking a bus both directions instead of flying back.

I spent a while getting caught up on this morning's happenings in the travelogue. Then at 1:45 I went back to the bus stop across the street. A girl who did not speak English (I think perhaps her native language was Greek) was standing there. She was a bit confused when the driver of the first bus that showed said she was going out of service. Almost immediately, though, another bus showed up. Queenstown's bus #1 makes a loop through the Remarkables Park Town Centre, a commercial area named after the surrounding mountains. Technically the stop by the hotel village is the end of the line and the other stop over by the New World supermarket is the start. You can get on or off at either, though. I took the bus around the loop, back through the airport, and then northeastward from there.

I got off at the Frankton Marina stop, two stops in from the airport. My intent was to take a ferry across the lake the Queenstown lies on, which I knew was due to leave Frankton a few minutes after the bus arrived. Unfortunately there's no signage at the marina to indicate exactly where the ferry leaves from. I walked across all the dock area, nearly tripping several times on its icy surface. I never did figure out just where I was supposed to go, and nothing that looked like a ferry ever showed up. I did see a small boat labeled "water taxi", so perhaps that was it. With no better information, I just went back to the bus stop.

I actually lucked out a bit and got to the stop just as a bus pulled up. I rode the west of the way into central Queenstown and then spent an hour or so checking out the place. Honestly that was really all the time I wanted to spend there. Queenstown is a playground for young people on gap years and older people who have money to burn. I fit neither of those descriptions, and I was very much a fish out of water in Queenstown. For the twenty-somethings they have vegan restaurants, hookah lounges, and all kinds of adventure sports; and for the rich elders there are art galleries, day spas, and stores selling fine jewelry and designer handbags. There are expensive bars catering to both groups. Being neither young and beautiful nor old and dripping with money, very little interested me in Queenstown. I'd seen the same stuff in other resort towns like Aspen and Park City, and I left both of them pretty quickly as well. Queenstown is lovely, but it's pretty boring if you don't have deep pockets and you're not into its rather specific offerings.



View of mountains and Lake Wakatipu from Frankton Marina



On Marine Parade in Queenstown

I did pop into a couple of gift shops, and I actually bought a sort of souvenir for myself. It was a Swiss army knife with a wood base carved with a mountain scene and the words "Queenstown, New Zealand". The other side has space to have a name engraved, and I got a "David" knife. I've carried a pocket knife pretty much my whole adult life (except when traveling through airports, of course), and I rather liked this one. For NZ\$27.50 (US\$16.75) it wasn't badly priced, either.

I combined lunch and dinner into a single meal today. I stopped at a place called Devil Burger. (I'm not sure why Satanic-themed restaurants are so popular in New Zealand.) This is the competition to Ferburger, a place with a continual line that all the tourist guides recommend. Devil Burger is supposed to also be good, but it doesn't get nearly the hype. Both are severely overpriced, but Devil Burger costs about a third less than Ferburger. As at Hell Pizza, all the menu items went with the theme. I chose their "classic devil", which was basically just an oversized standard hamburger. They say it contains "prime NZ beef, cheese, lettuce, tomato, red onion, aioli & devil relish". It was basically a pretentious Whopper. I don't know what Burger King charges for their signature burger in New Zealand, but I'm willing to bet it's less than \$13. I also got their cheesy garlic

chips (an additional \$9), which were good, but too large of a portion. Adding a Pepsi Max (the equivalent of Diet Pepsi) to the mix made things add up to the same price my breakfast had been. It was a good meal—definitely better than Gorilla Burger—but not at all worth the price.

I stopped by the Queenstown Night 'n Day to pick up a couple of rolls I'll have for breakfast tomorrow. The bus for Milford Sound leaves early, and even the hotel restaurant doesn't open until after it departs. I'll have a very nice breakfast for a third the cost of my meal at Devil Burger.

There were several places in New Zealand where I saw posters like the one shown at right, which was on the door of the building next door to Devil Burger. Until the end of 2022 these QR codes were everywhere, and everyone in the country was supposed to scan the code any time they entered a public building, took public transportation, or was part of a large gathering of people. Many buildings and most of the buses I took still have them posted, and there was one in the back of the van that took me up to the pancake rocks. Then, whenever someone tested positive for COVID, they'd contact everyone who had been to any of the same places they had been. This continued until the COVID restrictions were finally lifted this past new year. The guide in Greymouth told me that many businesses are hanging onto the QR codes, because they expect the system may come back if there are too many new cases. That tracking system is very intrusive, but then again New Zealand did much better with COVID than most countries.

I waited at the main downtown bus exchange in Queenstown, together with about four dozen other people. I must have just missed a bus, because it was a full fifteen minutes before bus #1 came along. The bulk of the people waiting were either school kids or workers at the downtown businesses. It quickly became clear that just about none of the service workers in Queenstown is a native New Zealander (neither white nor Maori). The people who run cash registers are pretty much all young people from Europe or east Asia on working holiday visas. Some of them also work as maids and janitors, but there are also middle-aged women from Africa or Latin America in those jobs.

The bus emptied out gradually as we made our way east from central Queenstown. There were only four people left on the bus when got to the airport. Several people were waiting at the airport bus stop, and one of them asked if the bus was going to Queenstown. Technically the answer to that is "no", but the driver explained that it would go around a loop and head back. They all boarded, each paying that \$10 cash fare. The bus company must make a fortune from airport fares.



COVID tracking QR code

The bus ride from central Queenstown to Frankton is really beautiful. Most of the way the highway runs right along the lake, with a cliff on the other side of the road. The development is largely hidden from view in the lakefront area, so what you see are the mountains and the lake. I think I got just as nice of a view from the bus as I would have gotten from the ferry.



View from bus #1 in Queenstown, New Zealand

my clothes clean again, and I just might be able to make this wash last until the end of the trip.

I made my way back to the Ramada and settled in for the night. This is a really nice hotel. They cater to skiers, and if I were staying here a month from now I couldn't afford the place. Before the slopes are ready, though, it's quite affordable. I'm paying N\$139 (US\$85) for a king bed, an easy chair, a nice table, a full kitchenette, and a beautiful view of the mountains. Then there's the in-room laundry. They actually have a washer and dryer available in the room itself for free. They're slow and noisy, but they're getting the job done. They even provide free laundry detergent, though I'd bought some detergent sheets clear back in 2020 when I was originally planning the trip. It's nice to have all

While flipping through the television tonight I came across Parliament TV, New Zealand's answer to C-Span. It was fascinating. Most interesting was the formal "Oral Question" series, where members of parliament formally question the various government ministers. These are very carefully planned. Members from the ruling party (currently Labour) ask cushy questions, to which the ministers read prepared remarks. Then the opposing parties (National and Green) ask questions intended to trap the ministers. The questions have to be submitted ahead of time, and theoretically both the questions and the responses are addressed to the speaker of the House of Commons. In fact, they're really addressed to the TV cameras in hopes of creating good sound bites. Most of the debate involved whether or not to regulate various industries, ranging from home improvement contractors to school food service. National was basically against all regulation, while the Green party felt the Labour government hadn't gone far enough. Several people also brought up a scandal involving the Minister of Transport, who it was discovered owned shares in the corporation that runs Auckland Airport. It was eventually revealed that the prime minister had asked him twelve times to sell those shares, and of course the opposition is still trying to milk the story. It was interesting to get a glimpse of how politicians operate in another country.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7

queenstown & milford sound

I had set my alarm for 5:45 this morning, but I was up well before that. What woke me up was the people above me doing their laundry. The dryers in particular are extremely loud. I was glad I'd done my laundry in the early evening, when it was unlikely to disturb other people.

My breakfast today was an apricot cream danish and a chocolate frosted doughnut I'd picked up at Night 'n Day. I watched a bit of TV (nothing of note this morning), and then at 6:45 went downstairs to the lobby. I was told to wait in front for my tour pick-up, so I waited by the door where I'd entered yesterday afternoon. I waited quite a while there, expecting a tour bus to stop by, as had happened on the tours I'd taken in Iceland. It turned out I was wrong in two ways. There are actually two entrances to the hotel, and apparently I was supposed to wait at the other. Also, it wasn't a bus that was picking

me up, but rather a taxi. A young Filipino woman came through the lobby calling my name. She was the driver who was going to take me to meet the bus, and apparently she'd been waiting by the other door for about five minutes.

The taxi driver drove me up to the Frankton bus hub, a park-and-ride north of the airport where city buses, InterCity buses, and tour buses all stop. She had me sign a voucher that showed her company would earn \$2.30 for the ride (which was about half as far as the \$20 ride in Invercargill), and told me to expect "a big red bus" from Southern Discoveries. I stood there shivering with a couple dozen people who were on their way to work. A couple city buses came and went, and eventually the bus for Milford Sound showed up.

There were five other people who boarded at the Frankton bus hub. They had all come by taxi from other hotels in the suburbs. Apparently that's more efficient for the company than stopping at each hotel individually. Once again all anybody cared about was our surnames. The driver checked us off the list, and we boarded. The bus was already quite full, and when I boarded the only remaining seats were single aisle seats. That was not a big deal for me, but I felt sorry for a couple who boarded at Frankton and ended up sitting several rows apart. We turned south and headed out of town, going straight past the Ramada on our way.

Our driver was a man named Ben, whose name was pronounced "bin" like what you'd put rubbish in. ("Bin" is actually pronounced "bun" in New Zealand.) Ben had fully grey hair, but aside from that he looked and acted rather young. He had a very broad New Zealand accent, and he seemed to use all the "typical" expressions I'd read about ahead of time. When describing things he'd ramble off incoherently and then end the thought by saying, "but, yeah" or "anywho". He would ask a rhetorical question, pause and then say "yeah nah", which in New Zealand means a definite "no". He frequently used the phrase "happy days"—either to mean something was in fact good or as a sarcastic expression, and the phrases "sweet as", "simple as", and "foggy as" were also part of his speech. New Zealanders love using phrases with "as", but without completing the comparison. So they just say "sweet as" instead of "sweet as sugar" or "foggy as" instead of "foggy as @#\$%". It was indeed "foggy as" when we set out this morning. At that point it was also still dark, and with heavy traffic on the curvy mountain highway, I'm sure it was not "happy days" driving a bus.

Including stops, the morning bus trip took five and a half hours. As the crow flies Queenstown and Milford Sound are actually quite close. However the only road that connects them makes a big "U". It travels 288 kilometers (179 miles), with the beginning and end having lots of steep stretches with hairpin curves that slow the speed down to 25km/h (16mph). There were several temporary signs that warned of black ice, a number of construction areas, and even a big accident with three different ambulances. Adding on a toilet break and several scenic lookouts, and that makes for a long trip.

Ben filled most of the dead time by explaining the history, the scenery, and the ecology of the area. We started by learning the history of Queenstown. It's one of the few places in New Zealand that doesn't really have a Maori history. The Maori knew of the place, but they never really settled there, most likely because there wasn't a good source of food. The main thing the Maori did here was gather greenstone (jade, which they used for toolmaking) from nearby rivers. Queenstown was established during the Otago gold rush, and when the boom busted it quickly became a sleepy backwater. It stayed that way until the late 1900s, when they began making a big push for tourism. Its biggest growth came between 2000 and 2010.

I also learned more about agriculture on this trip. In recent years New Zealand's farmers have been rapidly switching from sheep to cattle mostly because the government used to subsidize wool, but they no longer do. New Zealand's main dairy company, Fonterra, is a cooperative, and almost all the milk New Zealand produces is either dried or turned into butter or cheese and exported. I was intrigued to pass a cattle station and see farmers rounding up the cows with motorcycles. Apparently that's very common in New Zealand.

Another type of livestock raised in New Zealand is deer. The first deer in New Zealand were twelve animals given by President Theodore Roosevelt. They quickly expanded to thousands and became such pests that the government hired people to hunt them. There are still some wild deer in New Zealand (like the ones they wanted to get rid of on Ulva Island), but the country also exports a lot of farm-raised venison. Another introduced pest that is also farmed in New Zealand is rabbits, which are used for both meat and fur.



Low clouds and snowy ground near Gaston, New Zealand

wandering around the town. Several people on the tour complained about the toilets at the café. I used the public toilets a block away, and they were pleasant—but of course the tour company doesn't get a kick-back from them.

Te Anau is entirely made up of pre-fab buildings, which makes it look very similar to the towns in northern Canada. It appears that its only industry is tourism, and they have plenty of businesses to cater to tourists at all income levels. I'm not sure what the permanent population is, but they're far outnumbered by people passing through.

The stop at Te Anau was the first of several that illustrated the issue with group tours. The guide had given us a specific time when we had to return, but of course not everybody was back by that deadline. On tours you always end up moving at the speed of the slowest person. I quickly got annoyed at a couple of the people on the bus who were late each time we stopped.

We entered a flatter area and came to the town of Garston, which the guide remarked was the place in New Zealand that is furthest from the sea. Garston is 128km from the Pacific, the Tasman, and the Southern Ocean. While that's a fairly long drive on mountain roads, it's still not very far from the water.

At Garston there was a big sign that said "Drive to the conditions". Beyond there we started seeing the black ice warning signs, though I'm pretty sure they had treated the asphalt. All over New Zealand they have "slippery when frosty" signs, but I think that may frequently be an issue in the mountains of central South Island. While the road remained relatively clear, as we gained elevation we started seeing snow in the surrounding fields as well as on the mountaintops.

We pretty much drove straight through until about 10:00, when we made a lengthy stop in the town of Te Anau. The stop was officially at a café, but I spent the half-hour break

We skipped one stop because the fog was too thick for us to see much of anything. The fog began lifting, though, when we got to a stop called Mirror Lakes, and we hiked a brief trail there. We made a couple more photo stops and then took a toilet break at what had been a camp for New Zealand's equivalent of the WPA, which was who built the road to Milford Sound.



LEFT: Mirror lake in Fiordland
RIGHT: Homer Tunnel on Milford Highway



Kia (an alpine parrot) in Fiordland National Park

The last stretch of that highway includes the Homer Tunnel, which didn't actually open until the 1950s. The tunnel is more than a kilometer long and just one lane wide. They have traffic lights at each end, and since you can't see from one end to the other it's vital that those lights be obeyed. Those traffic lights run on solar power. There are no lights at all inside the tunnel, so it's important that vehicles have their headlights on.

Milford Sound is in the Southland region (where Invercargill and Stewart Island are located), and it's part of Fiordland National Park. The guide noted that the name of the national park tells you what Milford Sound actually is and went on at length about the difference between a sound and a fiord. (Basically fiords are formed by retreating glaciers, while sounds are natural inlets of the ocean.) Milford Sound is unique in being the only one of numerous fiords in New Zealand that is accessible by car. All the others can only be reached by water or after multi-day hikes. The remoteness of Fiordland has made it home to several unique species, which is the main reason it has been declared a UNESCO world heritage site. It also happens to be one of the most beautiful places in the world.

We parked and were told that our boat would be leaving from Pier #10 and that we should board at 1:05pm. We'd been given plastic cards, one of which we surrendered and another to exchange for the included lunch. During the wait before boarding I inquired on the status of my flight back to Queenstown. It turned out there was good news. Apparently they'd gotten more than enough to make the trip, and the weather would be perfect for the flight. So that was a go!

The boarding process at Milford Sound Terminal was extremely chaotic. Multiple ships were boarding at the same time, and it wasn't clear where anyone was supposed to go. Eventually I did make it onto the Pride of Milford (a ship apparently built in Invercargill), and after the mandatory safety video we were on our way.

Every guide to New Zealand says that Milford Sound is the #1 must do in the country. While the items later on their lists differ, they're all in agreement at the top. I can't disagree. If anyone is pretty much anywhere on the South Island, Milford Sound is well worth the detour. On its own it's probably not worth a trip halfway around the world. (I've seen similar places in Newfoundland and British Columbia, and I'm sure the fiords in Scandinavia are also similar.) Combined with all the rest New Zealand has to offer, though, it really is worth seeing.

The boat we were on was quite large. People from three different buses boarded it, and even then it was only about a third full. There were two indoor levels, each of which also had some outdoor viewing areas. Then there was a third deck at the very top that was entirely outside. I spent some time in each location, and the views were surprisingly different from the different levels.

A box lunch was included with our tour. (I think I actually paid extra for that, but it was ages ago, so I don't fully remember.)



On the Milford Sound cruise

The main part of the lunch was a ham and cheese sandwich that included white bread, lettuce, mayonnaise, and a huge amount of shredded carrots. I'm not sure I've ever had carrots on a sandwich before. They weren't bad, just a bit strange. There was also a big apple and a tiny orange, a packet with three rice crackers and three surprisingly large slices of cheese, a small bag of "crisps", two small cookies, and a miniature bar of Whittaker's chocolate. They also provided free tea to accompany the lunch. (You could buy other drinks for five to ten bucks each, but I passed on that.) I certainly can't complain about not having enough to eat. Since all the sandwiches appeared to be ham, though, I did wonder what several people on the boat who were in Islamic dress ate.

The vast majority of people on the cruise were from Asia. They represented all different parts of that continent: China, Japan, Korea, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East. In keeping with stereotypes, these people spent most of the trip taking either selfies or girlfriend pics.



One of many waterfalls in Milford Sound

I took way too many pictures myself, but not as many as the Asian tourists. There were also a few Australians on the boat, a couple of New Zealanders, at least one Canadian, and me. It appears they cater to many other international tourists as well. While the narration was all in English, there was a rack of guide books in basically every language you could imagine.

We spent an hour and a half cruising down the fiord, passing through a bit of the open Tasman Sea, and then heading back to the terminal. On the way we saw lots of mountains and lots of waterfalls. We also saw a number of birds and some dolphins. It's one of those things that's almost too beautiful to describe, so I'll have to make sure that each picture really is worth a thousand words.

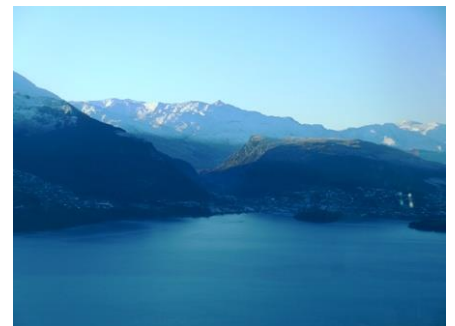
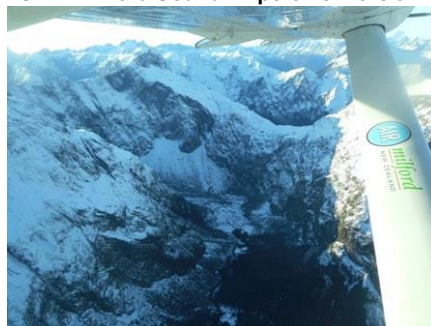
The bus driver told me and a couple of other people who were flying back to "wait by the rock", an abstract sculpture at the entrance to the cruise terminal building. It turned out that I was actually flying with a different airline than the other passengers, and my pilot was the first to show. He accompanied me and some other people who had stayed in Milford overnight and were flying onward to a shuttle bus that would take us to the airport. Seeing the number of people who ended up flying to Queenstown, I wondered how there hadn't been enough to fly the night before. We ended up with nine passengers in a plane that could hold ten.

Our plane was a Cessna Caravan, a plane that is apparently most often used for VIP flights. It also works well for flying to and from small, remote airports. The plane had three rows in a 1 by 2 configuration, and an additional passenger could sit in the co-pilot's seat. The pilot was very conscious of balancing weight, and he assigned where everyone would sit. I ended up sitting right behind the pilot. (As a side note, while cars in New Zealand always have the steering wheel on the right, the airplanes all have the pilot sitting on the left.)



LEFT: Air Milford Cessna Caravan
RIGHT: Milford Sound Airport from the air

Milford Sound Airport (MFN) has a very short runway, and on take-off it



Typical views on the flight (the approach to Queenstown is at right)

appeared that we were flying straight into a mountain. The pilot banked abruptly, and we ended up over the fiord instead. We then turned 180 degrees and flew back right at the top of the snow-covered mountains.

This was easily the most beautiful flight I've ever taken in my life. There were a few flights that had nice views in places—like flying from Minneapolis to Anchorage or landing in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. This flight, though, was spectacular from start to finish. The pilot explained everything we were seeing as we passed over, and our elevation was low enough that we could see all the mountains up close. The flying conditions were perfect, and it really was a fantastic flight.

They schedule 45 minutes for this flight, but it hour. We turned off the runway onto a back taxiway and drove over grass to get to a parking area right next to the Air Milford hangar.

For the coach—cruise—fly package, Air Milford bills the coach and cruise portion when you book, with the balance paid after your flight. Short flights like this aren't subsidized in New Zealand, and on a per-mile basis this was probably the most expensive flight I've ever taken in my life. It was just over NZ\$400. That sounds a bit better as US\$250, but it's still pretty expensive. It was definitely worth it, though.

The Air Milford office is literally just across the street from Remarkables Park Town Centre, and I could easily have just walked to the Ramada. The package booking included round-trip transportation to my hotel, though. Instead of a taxi, this time the office secretary drove us in an Air Milford pick-up truck.

Almost immediately after going to my room I turned around and went back out. There was a strange man in the elevator when I joined it. He was carrying two big video cameras with padded microphones like a professional TV cameraman might use. It made me wonder what was going on.

I walked over to the New World supermarket in the shopping center. While it's owned by the same company as Pak 'n' Save, New World is a much classier store. Oddly, the prices really didn't seem all that steep, though. To my mind Countdown has the most expensive groceries in New Zealand. I picked up a few things for breakfast tomorrow and then went to the bus stop.

Since I had ranted yesterday about how the Devil Burger was just an overpriced Whopper, tonight I decided to have dinner at Burger King. The New Zealand master franchisee of Burger King is currently in receivership, and most of their locations have closed. The Queenstown restaurant is still open, though. It's in an odd location in the basement of a parking ramp across the highway from the Frankton bus hub. I took my life in my hands crossing the street by a roundabout at rush hour, and when I did make it across I was greeted by a sidewalk that was solid ice. The grass next to the sidewalk was walkable, though, and the outdoor stairs leading down to Burger King weren't slippery at all. I had the Whopper Jr. value meal with onion rings and a small drink. I used my debit card, and the bank app showed it came through as US\$8.04. That's almost identical to what I paid for the same thing at the Burger King in Spencer a while back. The meal wasn't great, but it wasn't bad either. It was certainly more worth its price than Devil Burger was.

Fortunately the east side of the roundabout was less packed with traffic than the west side. I made it to the outbound bus stop and waited there with a bunch of commuters and school kids. Looking at the kids reminded me of something else that's common in New Zealand. Kiwis love wearing shorts. It was below freezing in Queenstown today, but pretty much all the kids were in shorts. Some of the girls had tights on under them, but the boys' legs were bare. That's not unique to New Zealand, of course. The kids I teach wear shorts when it's below zero Fahrenheit (which is -20 or so Celsius). What stood out in New Zealand was that lots of adults were wearing shorts in cold weather, too. Both men and women had a puffer jacket, shorts, and gumboots.

The bus I ended up taking back was not a standard city bus. Instead they'd taken a long-distance coach bus and slapped a piece of paper on the front saying it was "#3 – Kelvin". Many people at the bus stop looked a bit confused, but I joined them in boarding. Not being a city bus, there was no station in it to tap a Bee card. The driver just made a note of how many people boarded, but presumably no one's card got charged. Bus #3 goes right past the Ramada, but it doesn't stop there. It does stop at the shopping centre, though, so I got off there and walked back to the hotel. It was a weird transit experience, though.

I got back to the hotel and relished the fact that I would finish writing most of today's travelogue installment before most of my companions had gotten back to Queenstown on the bus. While expensive, the bus—cruise—fly deal really was the ideal trip to Milford Sound. It gave me every possible perspective, and it got me back home in daylight.

THURSDAY JUNE 8

Queenstown to Wellington

Yesterday was a wonderful day; today—not so much. I got through an unexpected hiccup, though, and hopefully the rest of the trip will go well.

I slept in a bit later this morning, not getting up until nearly 7:00. I happened to notice that, as had been the case yesterday, it was foggy out this morning. That would turn out to be a very bad thing.

My breakfast today was cheese and crackers I'd bought at New World, plus some Lewis Road Dairy chocolate milk and the in-room instant coffee. While I was eating I got a notification on my phone that my flight to Christchurch had been cancelled. I attempted to work out a change in the Air New Zealand app, but it wouldn't let me do anything. I figured my best option was to get to the airport as quickly as possible and work things out there. So I threw my stuff together, checked out, and ran to the bus stop.

There was of course already a line at the one manual ticketing counter, and an extremely overworked staff was trying hard to rebook everyone from the cancelled flight. While the weather was rapidly clearing, cancelling the incoming flight meant there was no plane they could use to fly to Christchurch. If they could have just delayed the flights, things would have worked out, but that wasn't an option with the cancellation. Even for people just headed to Christchurch, there were limited seats on the afternoon flight (which was probably the same smaller plane I'd flown in on). For those transferring, there were actually somewhat more options, because it was possible to work out connections in either Auckland or Wellington. In fact some



Kia ora David,

We're sorry to advise, your flight NZ644 to Christchurch today, has been cancelled due to weather conditions affecting our network.

Your cancelled flight

Queenstown - Christchurch

	Departure	Arrival
Scheduled	10:45	11:40
	Thu-08-Jun-2023	Thu-08-Jun-2023

(basically the Maori version of a luau), and I had to cancel it. Fortunately I got that done right before the penalty deadline. The other cancellation was a bus trip from Rotorua to Taupo. Technically that was free, but the refund was in the form of a credit for future travel rather than crediting my card. I'll look into possible day trips from Wellington, but I doubt I'll actually use that credit.

I did really want to do the hangi, which also included a Maori cultural show, and Rotorua is basically the only place where that's available in winter. Rotorua also has lots of geothermal sites, but I don't know that there's much that I haven't seen at Yellowstone. The other thing I'd have done in the next couple of days is honestly kind of stupid. Taupo has a McDonalds located partially in an old DC-3 airplane, and I thought it would be cool to have lunch there. That won't be happening, though.

I looked into things to do in greater Wellington that I hadn't already done and also possible day trips from the capital. I do tend to plan things to death, so perhaps a bit of spontaneity will be a good thing. I also booked a hotel for the two additional nights, so at least I'd have a place to stay. While I'll be at the Ibis again on Saturday, I decided to stay at a different hotel (the Mercure Abel Tasman, also an Accor property) both because it was cheaper and because I figured that checking out something different wasn't a bad thing.



Taupo McDonalds

The flight to Wellington was on an Airbus A-320. Because it was a jet, I had to go through security at Queenstown airport. I set off the metal detector for no reason I can figure out, but when they put me through the body scanner everything was fine. In Queenstown they required me to have my laptop and cellphone each in its own tub, and they required that shoes be taken off. On the other hand, they couldn't have cared less about liquids.

The only thing past security at Queenstown airport was a coffee bar, so I just kept googling things to do in Wellington while I waited to board. At 11:00 (ten minutes after we were supposed to board), they announced that we would be boarding "from both doors 2 and 3". Doors 2 and 3 are really just two sides of the same door. The boarding process did go faster since there were two machines where people could scan their boarding passes, though.

While I had purposely booked a window seat on the flight that was cancelled, I was on an aisle (23-D) for this flight. As far as I could tell, there was only one empty seat on the entire plane, though, so I was just glad to be traveling. I did a double-take when a woman sat down in the seat across the aisle from me. She looked almost exactly like Jacinda Ardern, the former prime minister. The woman across from me was a bit older than Ms. Ardern (who has kept that name after her recent marriage), but her hair and facial features were the same. It made me wonder if she could be related.

It would be entirely possible to sit next to someone famous on an Air New Zealand domestic flight. There is no first class, nor even premium economy. Since it's also the only airline that services most New Zealand destinations, people from all walks of life end up flying it.

At 11:07 the head flight attendant announced that boarding was complete. Then a couple minutes later the pilot announced that our take-off had been delayed and that we should be leaving in about ten minutes. The delay was a bit longer than that. They played the safety video at about 11:30, and it wasn't until 11:40 that we were in the air.

They again played quiz questions on the video monitors during this flight. In fact I got a few ideas for our quiz bowl tournament next fall. I thought of my brother John while they played that quiz, because it was periodically interspersed with public service ads for the New Zealand Blood Bank. John has been a generous blood donor for years, so the ad brought him to mind.



Former Prime Minister Ardern

Otherwise it was a typical Air New Zealand domestic flight. This time the coffee and water service was accompanied by either a cookie or a muesli bar. Since I hadn't had it yet, I chose the bar. They had barely finished that service when we began our descent, and the flight attendants rushed to pass out the purple lollies. We landed at about 12:30 and were at the gate about ten minutes later.

people whose destination was Christchurch were sent there via Auckland. Unfortunately the smaller the ultimate destination, the fewer options there were. I was told there were no seats available on the possible connecting flights to Rotorua from Wellington or Auckland. I explored a variety of other options, but the closest I could get to Rotorua was Taupo, a town about an hour away whose airport was even further away still. I could try to fly tomorrow, but that could bring the exact same problems and would also mean cancelling some of my plans in Rotorua.

In the end I decided to just fly to Wellington. I had to be there by the weekend anyway, there was space available on a flight there, and it was the easiest option to work things out from. I spent quite a while dealing with the dominos that fell from this change. I first had to cancel the hotel I'd booked in Rotorua. It was technically past the deadline to cancel it without penalty, but the manager there was kind enough to let me cancel anyway. I also had scheduled a hangi dinner

It took quite a while to de-board the plane. I used the restroom once I was back in the terminal, and then I went downstairs to reclaim my bag. I went back up, though, to visit with another Air New Zealand agent. I'd noticed that the app on my phone had sent me a notification that my flight from Christchurch to Rotorua was boarding, and I wanted to make sure the remainder of the itinerary wouldn't be cancelled because I was unable to take that flight. The airport agents for Air New Zealand work with old green screen computers, and even if they had state-of-the-art technology, they don't seem to be empowered to actually do much. The agent was able to say that she had my flights from Christchurch to Rotorua and from Rotorua to Wellington had been cancelled (essentially replaced by the Queenstown to Wellington flight), but she couldn't print out any evidence of that or make the change appear on the phone app.

I lucked out and arrived at the airport bus stop just as the Airport Express was ready to depart. I rode to Manners and Cuba Streets, a couple stops south from where I'd gotten out to go to the Ibis. The area around the Mercure Abel Tasman is hip and trendy, much more so than I am. It's full of young people who are out to change the world and senior citizens who are barely getting by. The area is more than a bit on the grungy side, which is probably why the Mercure was cheaper than the Ibis. It will do for a couple of nights, though.

The girl at the Mercure's front desk was American, here from Massachusetts on a working holiday visa. She checked me in fairly quickly and gave me yet another wooden electronic key. I made my way up to Room 413. This is an old hotel where the last renovation was several years ago. It's not in bad shape, but it could definitely use a bit of sprucing up. The worst aspect of the room is that there's no overhead light. The few lights at the sides of the room are tiny and dim, so the room is very dark even with every light in the place on. The queen bed, desk, and closet/refrigerator don't leave a lot of extra space, and the bathroom seems to have a lot of wasted space. The view is of a parking ramp, and the electric radiator could use a fan to distribute its heat. I've certainly been in worse rooms, though.

After settling into the room I called Air New Zealand's toll-free number (such numbers begin with "0800" in New Zealand, theirs was 0800-737-000). By this point the app had stopped showing the rest of my domestic itinerary at all, and when I tried to find it, I got an error. I spent a full hour on the phone, and I ended up speaking with two different people. They verified that the final two domestic flights were in fact in the system. Apparently the app can only handle a limited number of changes, and after that it just crashes. The second assistant assured me that I was still booked on the two flights I needed and that I should be able to check in at a kiosk (since I couldn't check in online without the reservation in the app). That means I'll need to get to the airport early, but hopefully it will work out all right. I will say that I am thankful I was in an English-speaking country when dealing with this problem.

It was mid afternoon now, and I hadn't had anything to eat except cheese, crackers, and a muesli bar. In lieu of lunch I had an afternoon snack. I went to a place I'd heard about called the Little Waffle Shop. "Little" is the key word in its name. It occupies a window at the side of a multi-use building whose main tenant euphemistically calls itself a "gentlemen's club". A very bored looking young man was sitting behind the counter vaping when I showed up at the window. He seemed surprised that there was a customer, but he was very happy to make me their berries and cream waffle. He had a waffle iron next to the cash register and some sauces and garnishes below the counter. He cooked a waffle, put several dollops of that same berry compote I'd so often had for breakfast on it, and then adorned it with whipped cream and a white chocolate sauce. It was served in a little box with a wooden spork. I sat on a bench to eat it, and it was fairly tasty.

I wandered around central Wellington a bit, and I ended up buying myself a souvenir. I got an All Blacks shirt. These are surprisingly hard to find, probably because both the team is very protective of their logo. I actually found it at an Adidas store. (The brand is pronounced ADD-uh-dass here.) Adidas is one of the sponsors of the All Blacks, so I guess it makes sense for them to market their stuff. I also made a brief stop at another New World, where I got some more crackers and cheese that I'll have for breakfast tomorrow.

At New World I also picked up a package of what is supposedly a New Zealand delicacy, ANZAC biscuits. These are basically the cookies that someone's grandma made that sit around at the bake sale until everything else has been sold. The key ingredients are oatmeal, coconut, and raisins, but they're oddly hard. The name comes from the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps from World War I, and supposedly they were originally sent in care packages because the ingredients did not spoil easily. I won't be buying more, but it was good to try the product.

For dinner tonight I went to a place called Abrahakebabra, which says it sells "magic kebabs". I actually had shawarma. It was a bit odd that they served it over fries (or rather chips) instead of rice or salad, but it wasn't bad. I was also able to get a full meal for the price of the starters in the hotel restaurant.

On the TVNZ news tonight they had two stories from America, one of which had footage from Des Moines. Apparently Mike Pence had kicked off his Presidential campaign in Iowa. It was weird to see the golden dome of the Iowa capitol from halfway around the world. The other big story was pollution from wildfires in Canada. We've gotten that smoke many times before in Iowa, but now that they're getting it in New York, it's become world news.

There was an interesting ad on the news tonight. It was addressed to people of Maori descent and was about the coming election. The ad reminded Maori that they could choose the role they wished to take in the election. Seven members of the New Zealand Parliament are guaranteed to Maori representatives. Maori people can either vote for those seats, or they can vote for the regional representatives who make up the bulk of the parliament (who may be of any race). It has to be one or the other, though; they can't vote in both capacities. The ad was reminding them that each Maori person has until early July to decide which election her or she will vote in.

Had I made it up to Rotorua, I'd have been busier tonight. As it was I watched a bit of TV, did today's travelogue update, and just relaxed a bit. After all, relaxation is supposed to be one of the main points to a vacation.

FRIDAY, JUNE 9

Wellington

I did the daily headers for this travelogue before the trip. Originally this said "Rotorua & Taupo" (and, by the way, "Taupo" is said "TOE-paw") in Kiwi pronunciation), but of course that's no longer the case. Changing this reminded me that I also needed to change yesterday's header. I'd come to terms with being in Wellington, though, and hopefully the next couple of days would be good ones.

I set the alarm on my cell phone for 7:00 this morning, and this was one of the few times I was actually still in bed when it went off. *AMNZ* was discussing the topic of whether New Zealanders should have more children to sustain their economy in the long term. As in most developed countries, the birthrate in New Zealand has been dropping quickly. The country's population growth in the 21st Century has almost entirely been from immigration. There's a hidden undertone of racism in the argument they're making, but it is an interesting discussion.

The newscasters were also talking about how cold the weather forecast was, a forecast we might think was beautiful on a fall day back home. With the exception of the mountains, pretty much the whole country will have highs in the 50s today and tomorrow. They did note that there were places in the South Island mountains that could have "high temperatures below zero". They mean, of course, below zero Celsius, and only a degree or two into the negatives at that. That's around 30 degrees Fahrenheit, which is not all that cold to me. I'm glad I did drag along the mid-weight coat for my time on the South Island, but I'll be back in a light jacket now that I'm further north again. It may not be sunbathing weather, but it's definitely not bundle-up weather either.

The TV shows I watch do have ads, of course. One fascinating feature of the commercials is how they announce prices. Harvey Norman (a chain of furniture stores) and Noel Leeming (an electronics retailer) were both advertising their sales, and they announced the prices of their items by rattling off single digits, so "\$1,298" would be said as "one, two, nine, eight". I suppose that makes high prices seem more arbitrary and makes it harder to realize that the price is over a thousand bucks.



Wellington Railway Station

and bought a cup of hot chocolate (a very popular drink here). For just NZ\$2 (US\$1.25) I got the largest of their sizes. The chocolate was darker and not as sweet as hot chocolate is in America. It was quite good, though. I drank the cocoa while people-watching on a bench across from the main building of Victoria University. The strangest thing I saw was an older couple who stopped for quite a while in a bus lane by the entrance to the university. Eventually the wife got out of the car and went inside. (Perhaps she was a professor.) The husband stuck around for a couple more minutes and then drove away. Why it took them more than five minutes to accomplish something that should take a few seconds, I have no clue.

My main morning activity was a tour of the New Zealand Parliament, something I couldn't fit into my schedule when I was in Wellington earlier on the trip. I'd booked a 10:00 tour, and I knew their visitors center opened at 9:30. Shortly after 9:30 I walked a block west and up a rather steep hill to a modern addition (apparently formerly a car park) that separates the modern Beehive (which serves the executive branch of New Zealand's government) and the nearly century-old parliament building. I had done a bit of googling to find this addition between the two buildings was where the visitors center was located.

They have a security screening at the entrance to the Beehive, but it's very efficient. They x-ray anything you bring inside and have people walk through a metal detector. The officers were polite and almost apologetic, and the screening went quite quickly.

At about a quarter to nine I left the hotel and walked north on Willis Lane. This eventually becomes Customhouse Quay, which leads straight to Wellington station. I was very much walking against traffic this morning. Thousands of people walk from the train station into downtown at morning rush, but almost nobody goes the other way. I had to be careful to keep left (done on foot as well as driving) to avoid being trampled.

I had gone to the station to buy a day pass, but just as I was approaching the ticket counter they shut the curtain in front of the window and put up a sign that said "back at 9:30". I ended up going to the information counter, where I found out I could add a pass to the Snapper card. I forked over eight bucks and had my unlimited transit for the day.

I had a bit of time to fill before my first stop of the day, so I stopped into a McDonalds across the street from the station. The chocolate was darker and not as sweet as hot chocolate is in America. It was quite good, though. I drank the cocoa while people-watching on a bench across from the main building of Victoria University. The strangest thing I saw was an older couple who stopped for quite a while in a bus lane by the entrance to the university. Eventually the wife got out of the car and went inside. (Perhaps she was a professor.) The husband stuck around for a couple more minutes and then drove away. Why it took them more than five minutes to accomplish something that should take a few seconds, I have no clue.



Charles III coronation tree



Tours of parliament are free, but you have to book in advance. I'd booked online yesterday while I was waiting for our delayed plane to leave Queenstown. Once again I had a QR code on the booking I'd made for the tour, and once again nobody cared. The woman at the desk looked up my name and gave me a sticker that said "tour" on it to put on my shirt. She did want a phone number as well, though. I had no clue what the New Zealand phone number was, but I got out the phone, found the specs in the settings menu, and showed it to her. The number was 064-291-267-097, and that fulfilled her requirement. A couple who entered after me was from Texas, and they just gave her a U.S. number. I think I could have just made up a number; they just needed something on their form.

The tour began with a film that explained New Zealand's government system, which is a bit different than any other country I've been to. Officially the country is a constitutional monarchy. King Charles is the head of state, represented by a governor-general appointed which the monarch officially appoints but in reality is named by the prime minister. So far that's the same governmental structure they have in Canada, and just like Canada makes a point of appointing French female governor-generals, New Zealand's governor-general is a Maori woman.

The biggest difference between New Zealand's parliament and that of Canada or the United Kingdom is that the New Zealand parliament is unicameral. There's a house of representatives, but since the 1950s there has been no upper house equivalent to Britain's House of Lords or the Canadian Senate. There are about 120 members of parliament. The number is fluid because there are actually two elections in each New Zealand election. Everybody votes for their own member of parliament (which is normally geographical, but also includes those guaranteed Maori seats I noted earlier), but then they also choose their favorite political party. Additional members of parliament can be added so that all the parties get representation approximately equal to how people voted for their favorites.

Something else that makes New Zealand different than many other countries (among them the U.S.) is that there is universal suffrage for residents of the country. You don't have to be a citizen to vote in New Zealand; you just have to be registered as a permanent resident. People on temporary visas can't vote, but people with long term working visas or with refugee status can vote in national elections.

After the film a plump young woman named Melissa introduced herself and began our official tour. She started by asking where everybody was from. In addition to me and the people from Texas, there were visitors from Australia and the Netherlands, plus people from about five different places in New Zealand.

Melissa led us through a door and into a formal room and asked if anyone knew where we were. One lady in the group groaned and said "the COVID room". It's actually the prime minister's official press conference room, but it became famous in New Zealand when Jacinda Ardern held briefings at 1pm each day throughout the pandemic. The stage features two high lecterns, with a shorter desk between them. At the COVID conferences the prime minister stood on the stage right side and any number of other ministers or health experts would come and go from the other podium. The center was always occupied by a sign language interpreter. Melissa noted that when possible the interpreter liked to read through the text of a speech beforehand, because it made it much easier to sign along with the words. New Zealand sign language (apparently quite different from the signing done in America) is an official language of the country, and all government communication that isn't in print must be signed.

On a vaguely related note, I should note that New Zealand TV doesn't have closed captioning. There's not even an option for closed captioning on the remote controls, so even if an American program was captioned at home, you couldn't see those captions in New Zealand. That means the sign language interpreter would be essential to serve the deaf community.

After the press conference room, Melissa gave us details on the history of the government buildings. The original government buildings were built nearby. Some of them (those made of wood) are still standing, while others (built of stone) were torn down after severe earthquake damage. In the early 1900s the current Parliament House was designed. Its building coincided with World War I, and the design was streamlined because of the war. One of its wings was never built. Instead in 1964 they held an architectural contest to design a new home for the executive branch, and the then ultra-modern circular design of the Beehive won the day. Construction was delayed for many years. The Beehive was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth in 1977 as part of her silver jubilee tour. It was not actually completed until 1981, though. There is an underground bunker in the Beehive that has been used multiple times, most recently during Cyclone Gabrielle last February.

The next thing we saw was the Legislative Council chamber. The Legislative Council no longer exists, but it used to be the upper house of parliament. Members were at one point appointed for life and later for five-year terms. In 1951 the council voted itself out of existence. The room is still used, though, as the site of the state opening of parliament. In a tradition borrowed from Great Britain, the governor-general's representative knocks on the door of the house debating chamber and invites the members to come to the council room. Neither the monarch nor the governor-general is allowed in the debating chamber, lest it be construed as interfering with the actions of parliament. The council chamber is also used as an event venue, mostly by charities.

Next we did enter the debating chamber, which looks remarkably like the house chamber in the Iowa state capitol. It's fairly small and set up so all the members can see each other. The speaker (appointed by the majority party, but bound to impartiality) sits on a higher level at the front, and an enormous mace sits in front of the speaker. "The government" (the majority party or its coalition) sit to the speaker's right, and the opposition sits to his left. The parties determine who sits where in the seats assigned to them. Generally ministers and more senior opposition members sit to the front and the most junior members are in the rear.

We got to actually go inside the chamber because parliament had concluded their current session yesterday. They will next meet on the 20th of June. When they are in session, tours skip the chamber entirely and focus instead on artworks in the hallways.

Normally votes in parliament happen on party lines and are in fact on most bills no formal vote is taken. The bills all go through three readings, and it's the amendments along the way that are voted on. As with politics everywhere, there's a lot of bargaining behind the scenes. Many times votes from the smaller parties are needed to make a majority. However, in the present parliament the Labour Party has the first absolute majority in New Zealand history—which is why so many bills just pass without a formal vote.



Dame Cindy Karo
Governor-General of New Zealand

There are two doors that have traditionally been used for votes. The door on the government's side of the chamber is labeled "Ayes", and opposite it is a room labeled "Noes". Melissa told us that today these doors are most often used for votes involving moral issues, where the parties tend to avoid taking a formal stand.

There are five primary parties in New Zealand, almost all of which are well to the left of any of America's parties. The government is the Labour Party, which is equivalent to Canada's Liberal Party or the Social Democrats throughout Europe. The National Party, which is considered the centrist conservative party by New Zealanders, tends to have policies equivalent to the Democratic Party in the U.S. They're conservative on business and financial issues, but generally liberal on social issues. The third largest party is the Maori Party, which also draws support from Pacific Islander immigrants. The Green Party, well to the left of Labour, is the fourth largest party, and a party that goes by the acronym A.C.T. (Association of Consumers and Taxpayers) has policies similar to our Republican Party but is a very small minority party in New Zealand.

We visited what used to be the members lounge, another space that is most often used for charity events. We also saw the grand foyer where state dinners are held. We walked past a number of offices (most of which had their doors open) and then went into a committee meeting room that had ornate decorations in a Maori theme. We passed through a hallway with photos of all the past prime ministers and "class pictures" of the past parliaments. Here Melissa noted that women have long been part of parliament. Today the house is almost exactly split with 59 women and 60 men (apparently one of whom is transgendered). While the country didn't have its first female prime minister until 1997, since then they've had three men and three women in that position.

The final thing we saw was the speaker's mace. This was the only thing in the parliament building we were allowed to photograph—and those pictures didn't really come out because of the highly reflective case the mace is stored in. In an era when they broadcast the debates on TV and have pictures available online, I'm not really sure why they don't let visitors take photos. I did obey the rules, of course, though.

I walked over to Lambton Quay and caught bus 2, the same bus I'd taken to Miramar to see the Weta Workshop earlier. This time I rode in the opposite direction. West of downtown the bus follows a series of winding, very hilly roads past Victorian homes that look like they should be in San Francisco. It's a pretty area, but I was glad I was on the bus rather than walking it.

I exited just past the Karori Tunnel. Initially I made a wrong turn, confused by the fact that Google Maps' orientation doesn't seem to be standard, at least in New Zealand. Eventually I made it to my destination, Zealandia. This enormous park bills itself as the world's first fully fenced urban ecosanctuary. Part of it is native forest, and part of it is artificial, built around water supply reservoirs. It's privately run, and it's a beautiful nature reserve.



On top of the dam at Zealandia

successful in introducing the species they want (native birds, fish, and lizards), with some endangered birds nesting for the first time other than on isolated islands.

Not all the animals at Zealandia are native. They allow any birds that want to come here in. It is interesting that they're supposedly creating a "native" habitat, but they don't have any issues with flying things that are invasive. There are apparently also quite a few non-native fish.

There are miles and miles of trails at Zealandia. They have trails for all ability levels—from handicap-accessible paved routes to very rugged tracks. I hiked some of all the types of trails, and it definitely gave me a thorough work-out. I couldn't begin to estimate how far I hiked, but I spent about three hours walking around without a break. While I walked the words of Longfellow kept running through my head: "This is the forest primeval". There are no pines or hemlocks here (neither is native in New Zealand), but it does have the same sort of feel of the deep, swampy forests in Louisiana (though "Evangeline" was supposedly set in the original home of the Acadians, Atlantic Canada). It really is other worldly, and it was a wonderful place to hike.



Korus on a silver fern at Zealandia

Zealandia is named for the so-called microcontinent that New Zealand is a part of. I noted earlier that many different tectonic plates come together in New Zealand. While it's usually lumped together with Australia, geologically it's not really part of that continent. It actually has more in common with Antarctica than Australia. Zealandia and Antarctica split millions of years ago, and Zealandia has slowly drifted northward ever since. The microcontinent or continental fragment is mostly submerged, but the land areas were isolated enough to develop very different life forms than are found elsewhere. The ecosanctuary attempts to protect those lifeforms.

To visit Zealandia, you pay your admission (NZ\$24 or US\$14.60) and then brush off your shoes and make sure there's nothing invasive in any bags you may be carrying. You go through two sets of double doors before entering the actual sanctuary. They really are serious about keeping unwanted things out. The whole place is fenced, and they have signs showing that the height was chosen to be higher than most species can jump. (Interestingly the highest-jumping predatory species is house cats.) The fence also goes far underground to prevent burrowing animals, and there are the poison and traps you see everywhere in New Zealand. They've apparently been very

successful in introducing the species they want (native birds, fish, and lizards), with some endangered birds nesting for the first time other than on isolated islands.

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Zealandia was another place that was not originally on my itinerary, but I was glad I was able to see it. While I didn't see a lot of animals, I certainly heard birds everywhere. I also loved all the forest plants.

I was pleased to see something at Zealandia that I hadn't seen before: korus. These are the rolled up bits that eventually unfurl to become fern fronds. For the Maori the koru was a symbol of rebirth, and it has become a common symbol of New Zealand. Even Air New Zealand uses a modified koru for their logo, and they call their frequent flyer lounges Koru Clubs.

I also saw a plant I'd heard of, but never seen before. That was the liverwort. Signage in the park described these as "prehistoric plants". They're somewhat akin to mosses, but they develop dark green leafy scales. Once I knew what they were, I couldn't miss them; they're all over the ground at Zealandia.

I caught bus #22 back to Wellington Station, where I very quickly transferred to a train. I took the Hutt Valley line northward to Waterloo station. From there I walked about a mile west along Knights Road. My ultimate destination was the Westfield Queensgate, the biggest mall in greater Wellington. The place is almost entirely surrounded by parking ramps, and it's not particularly welcoming to pedestrian visitors. I did eventually find an entrance, though, and I made my way inside.

Most of the inside looked like all the other malls I'd seen in New Zealand—or all the urban malls all over Canada, for that matter. I patronized only a single store in the place, a chain called “Two Dollar Things”. The store has a little plus at the end of their logo (as do a lot of American dollar stores) to imply that the price could be higher than the price point their name implies. The vast majority of things at Two Dollar Things do indeed cost NZ\$2 (basically a buck and a quarter in U.S. money). I picked up a couple of snacks, and I also got some wooden clothespins (called “pegs” here and pronounced “pigs”). I use those to hang clothes on my deck at home, and the supply has been dwindling over the years. It's hard to get wooden clothespins in America these days, so a package of them for two bucks was a good purchase.

I had dinner at the Queensgate Nando's. My order combined the items I'd ordered earlier on this trip. I got a Mediterranean salad with spicy chicken fingers and an order of halloumi sticks with sweet chili jam. Since I hadn't eaten lunch at all, a big dinner was just what I wanted.

Queensgate is located almost exactly halfway between two different rail lines. Since I'd come in on one line, I walked further west to get to the other. It was right at sunset as I walked through Lower Hutt, and the streets were full of cars heading home from work. The central area of Lower Hutt is a maze of roundabouts, and I took my life in my hands repeatedly trying to cross the street near several of them. Roundabouts may work for cars (though I think that's debatable, too), but they're absolutely horrible for pedestrians.

Eventually I reached the Melling station and caught another train back to central Wellington. This particular train parallels the Hutt Valley motorway, and it was kind of fun to speed along quite a bit faster than the traffic.

The trains and buses in greater Wellington have a series of posters intended to encourage good behavior from passengers. They all say “ride like your aunty is watching” and follow that up with specific things people should do to be polite when riding public transportation. When I was a child we'd always get Christmas presents from “Auntie Chick” (spelled with an i-e), who was the penpal my mother knew best. I got a laugh out of the idea that people would change their behavior because “aunty” was watching them. Perhaps that's better than Big Brother. I will say that in general the people I've seen on transit in New Zealand have been very polite. Even the high school kids (and there are a lot of them on trains and buses) are generally very well behaved. While there's a few bad eggs, I'd say the percentage is lower than it is in American cities.

I caught a bus from the station south to Willis Lane and walked back to the hotel. I settled in and mostly just watched a bit more TV while working on the travelogue. This may not have been the day I originally intended, but it really was very enjoyable.



Ride like your aunty is watching

SATURDAY, JUNE 10

Wellington area

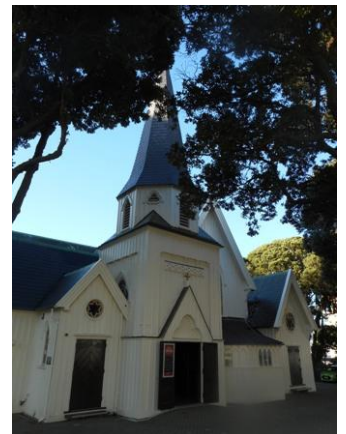
This was a pretty laid back day, but not a bad one. Had I gone with the original plans it would have been a travel day, so I probably accomplished more than I would have on that itinerary.



Thistle Inn

I was up about seven o'clock, but I dawdled around the room at the Mercure. I had paid for an early check-in at the Ibis today (that was part of the original plan), so I checked out of the Mercure at 9:00, caught a bus northward three stops, and then walked a block east to the Ibis. My sense was that they actually have quite a few people checking in early at this hotel. It's a big place for businesspeople to stay, and those can sometimes involve odd hours. At any rate, I got more wooden keys and made my way up to Room 911.

I basically just dumped my stuff in the room and set out again. I went up to the station and put another seven-zone day pass on my Snapper card. Then I did a bit of sightseeing. In particular I saw the outside of a historic pub, the



Old St. Paul's

Thistle Inn, and stopped in to Wellington's oldest surviving church, Old St. Paul's, which was once the seat of the Anglican diocese. At some point I should count up how many “historic” churches I've been to with buildings that are newer than my own church in Algona. Old St. Paul's (which is no longer regularly used for religious services) is a lovely old wood church. Many famous people (Queen Elizabeth among others) have worshipped here, and it is still a

avored location for weddings and funerals. The attendant tried to offer a bit more help than I either wanted or needed. I did eventually manage to see around the place, though.

I made my way back to the station to catch a train. I was intrigued to find that they use two-car trains on weekends, similar to what they do on the 'L' in Chicago. That appeared to be the right choice, too. There were enough customers to fill that space, but it would have been empty with more cars.

A kid wearing gym shorts boarded shortly after me, and he asked an old man by the door if this was the train for Tawa. The man grunted and pointed at the map above the door. "But does it stop at Tawa," the kid said in a somewhat exasperated voice. I nodded at him, and he thanked me. The question probably came from the fact that at rush hours they run both express and local trains, and the express trains would skip many stops. On weekends all the trains stop everywhere, though. Having been to Tawa before on this train, I knew it was the one he wanted.

There were a number of people on the train who had issues of various kinds, which I suppose is because they're more likely to be just occasional riders on weekends. A girl in front of me didn't tag on with her Snapper card. You have to tap a machine on the platform when you board and also when you get off. The system then uses the two zones to calculate the fare. The conductors come around with a cell phone that has some sort of app that can read the chip on the cards and tell whether people tapped on or not. Mine displayed a green checkmark when he scanned it, but the girl's had a red "X". Normally what's supposed to happen in that situation is that you either buy your ticket with cash (which is quite a bit pricier than with Snapper), or you're given a fine. The conductor was overly nice to the girl. He let her get out at Takapu Road station (where the outlet mall I'd gone to on the first day of the trip is located), tap her card there, and then get back on so he could scan it then. That would actually save the girl quite a bit of money, since Takapu Road is in Zone 4, while Wellington is Zone 1. I believe the difference in fare is \$1.80.



Drop, cover, and hold

The train had both posters and audio instructions that told passengers what to do in the event of an earthquake. This is something I've seen and heard over and over again in New Zealand. The picture at right is of a leaflet that was in my hotel room last night, and pretty much everywhere I've been they have earthquake instructions prominently posted. Every place has its own natural disasters. I've lived through tornados, and I spent quite a bit of time in hurricane country. Earthquakes are not something we think about in the American Midwest, though, and it's definitely strange to see it so much here.



Plimmerton Beach



There were also a couple of women who had trouble getting off. On Wellington's trains you have to press a button to make the doors open. (I saw that first in Paris, but there are a number of places that use buttons.) They couldn't figure out why the doors weren't just opening, and people shouted at them, "Push the button!" There's an array of buttons by the door, most of which are intended to be used only by the conductors. They pressed several buttons, and people started shouting, "The one at the bottom!" That actually wasn't really correct advice either, because the bottom button actually was intended for emergency communication. Fortunately nobody answered. Eventually pretty much the whole car yelled, "The green one!" They pressed the button that is clearly labeled "DOOR OPEN" and were finally able to leave.



Flax Trail beside Kiwi Rail Kapiti Line

My destination this morning was Plimmerton, a seaside community about half an hour north of central Wellington that's technically part of the city of Porirua. First I made my way to Plimmerton Beach. While it definitely wasn't sunbathing weather, it was clear and crisp, and I had fun walking along the Tasman coast.

South of Plimmerton there's a lovely trail that runs right beside the railroad. The trail was actually installed by Kiwi Rail as part of an expansion of the line along the Kapiti Coast north of Wellington. It's a combination bike and pedestrian trail that they call the Flax Trail (presumably due to the many flax plants along the way). The trail was being heavily used on a weekend morning. Dozens of people were walking

their dogs, and many others were biking along the trail. I walked south about four kilometers from Plimmerton. For most of that distance there were beautiful views of the coast and the offshore islands to the west. I intended to walk about another kilometer south, but the trail turns sharply inland to avoid a railroad bridge. I could see it crossing over the motorway, then crossing the inlet on the motorway bridge, and finally crossing back to join the railroad. That seemed like an awfully big detour, so I just walked back north to the nearest station, a place called Mana. The Mana station is in the middle of a complex of athletic fields, and both kids and adults were playing just about every outdoor sport you could imagine this morning.

I caught the next southbound train and got off at Porirua Central. I'd actually been at this station on the InterCity bus from Palmerston North. It's located next to yet another shopping mall, though that was not my reason for coming here. I followed signs that said "Porirua Centre" and found myself in a very strange mostly pedestrian suburban business district. Apparently the first McDonalds in New Zealand opened in this area back in the '70s, though that wasn't where I was having lunch today. I was going to a somewhat ritzy place, Cobb & Co (the "company" is always abbreviated). This restaurant company is the descendent of the stagecoach company I'd seen at Shantytown in Greymouth. Today they're basically the Applebee's of New Zealand. While I don't think they have many tables for one, they were perfectly willing to serve me this afternoon.

I passed on having alcohol for lunch, though their signature cocktail—a combination of red, orange, and green alcoholic slushes called the "traffic light"—might have been interesting. (... And the middle light on New Zealand traffic lights is indeed closer to orange than yellow.) A carafe of water was sufficient to wet my whistle. For my main meal I had pork ribs with a sesame glaze. It came with "classic fries" (which they didn't call chips) that were served in a wire cup. There was also a tiny salad of leaf lettuce, tomato, and cucumber. I splurged and ordered another pavlova for dessert, and I must say Cobb & Co. wins the pavlova battle. Their meringue and whipped cream came with a generous amount of a delicious tart berry sauce (one that was actually different than the compote that's been part of every breakfast).

The service at Cobb & Co. was quite slow, but the food was really very good. While NZ\$40 seemed a bit on the pricey side, that's \$24.50 in U.S. currency—and nearly half of that was the pavlova. You'd be hard pressed to get an entrée and dessert—including tax and tip—for that in America.

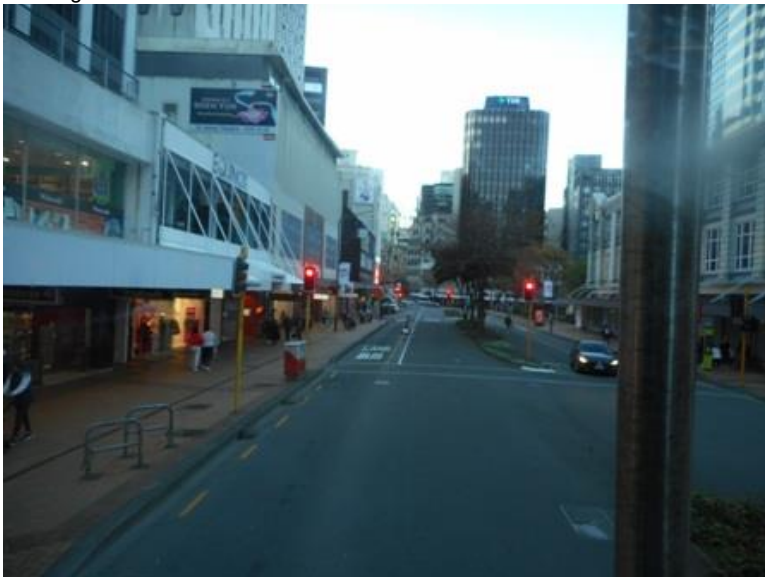
A fascinating feature of Cobb & Co. is that the food was brought to the table by what is best described as a robot busboy. The contraption had four trays on it that could hold up to four people's dishes. Someone in the kitchen programmed it with the table number, and it automatically went to that place in the dining room. The waiter or waitress followed it and actually put the plates on the table. Then they would press a button, and the machine retreated to the kitchen. I'd certainly seen nothing like it before.

I took the train back to Plimmerton and investigated the actual town for a bit. The business area is an odd combination of "op shops" (things like the Salvation Army store) and fancy restaurants (with French, Thai, Indian, and Malaysian cuisine). There's also an old wood Anglican church that I personally found more interesting than Old St. Paul's.



Robot busboy

The trail by the railroad continues north from Plimmerton, and I considered walking it north to the next station. When I saw a sign that said the next station was 5.7km away, though, I thought better of that idea. I made my way back to Plimmerton station and caught the next southbound train back to Wellington.



View of Lambton Quay from the top of a double-decker bus

near Algona, they created a new official parish name. The individual churches still keep their old names, though. I suppose in Wellington when they outright closed the other churches, they didn't want it to seem like Peter & Paul was dominating everybody else.

I rested up a bit back at the hotel. Then around 4:15 I made my way over to the nearest bus stop and caught bus #1 northbound. My destination was Johnsonville, where I'd had kebabs back at the start of the trip. The train also goes to Johnsonville, but on weekends the bus is much more frequent. On the way to Johnsonville I sat in the front of the top level of a double-decker bus, right above the driver. It was fun to look out at the world from up above.

I thought it might be fun to go to a church service in New Zealand, and Saturday mass was basically the only thing that worked with my schedule. I did a bit of research and found that the easiest church to get to was St. Francis of Assisi—Ohariu Parish in Johnsonville. Mass was scheduled for 5pm, and I got to the church at about 4:50.

St. Francis—Ohariu is the remains of three churches that were merged into one. The actual church building I visited used to be called Saints Peter & Paul, and there's still a school of that name adjacent. The other churches were recently closed all together, so everybody from what they call "the northern suburbs region" worships here. Ohariu is the name of a smaller suburb west of Johnsonville that was part of the merger. None of the churches was previously called St. Francis, which was apparently a compromise name. When they merged the Catholic churches



St. Francis—Ohariu

On the outside St. Francis—Ohariu looks like a mainline Protestant church, and inside it's the least decorated Catholic church I've ever seen. Indeed the interior really looks a bit forlorn. The walls appear to just be the other side of the brick exterior, painted white on the inside. In the front there are two TVs that they use to show hymns and responses, and a very simple lectern and altar. The only real adornment is a painting of a smiling Jesus giving his blessing. Away from the front the only decoration are Maori carvings of the stations of the cross. Most of the windows are clear, though there are a couple of highlight windows in yellow and pink. Something I couldn't help but notice was that a couple of the windows were cracked and there were gaps where the windows met the brick. There were also cracks in some of the bricks that appeared to have been patched with putty. Perhaps that was earthquake damage—I have no clue.



Interior of St. Francis—Ohariu

The main part of the church has ten pews (two rows of five) facing the altar. The bulk of their seating is in chairs though. They have two sections of chairs set up at the sides, making a sort of semi-circle and many more chairs (a couple hundred) behind the pews in what I think used to be the parish center. (It has a wood floor instead of the carpet the main part of the sanctuary has.) The chairs don't have kneelers. Some of the people who sat in them knelt on the floor, and others just sat. A lot of the people in the pews never knelt either, probably because the pew kneelers were unpadded wood.

While you can't tell it from the one old white man in the picture, the congregation at St. Francis was extremely multiethnic. In an announcement for an upcoming mass to honor refugees, a woman noted that 45% of the population in the northern suburbs was born overseas and that their congregation includes people born in at least two dozen different countries. There were a lot of Asian people at mass, as well as many people New Zealanders would call "Pacificka" (who we'd call Pacific Islanders in the States). The altar server and two of the communion distributors were named "Fernandez" and I assume were Filipino, and one of the lectors appeared to be Maori. It was interesting that the white worshippers mostly arrived well before the service (mostly before I showed up), while those of other ethnicities mostly came at the very last minute.

Having taught at Garrigan and travelled with my students, I've been to a lot of masses over the years. With no offense meant, I have to say this was the strangest mass I've ever

been to. It was almost a comedy of errors. It started with sound problems. Then the PowerPoint they were using to show their responses failed, and they had to reboot the computer. Then during communion they ran out of hosts. The priest left and I think went to the sacristy to get more. Whether those had actually been consecrated is an interesting question.

Those "technical difficulties" are really just the start of the strangeness, though. There was, for instance, no homily at all. In lieu of that, they had people in the congregation fill out cards giving their contact information and saying what ways they'd like to help out in church. They passed offering baskets, and the completed cards were supposed to be placed in them. Even weirder, though, they didn't send around the baskets to collect money. I suppose in this heavily cashless country a lot of people may contribute online. It was weird not to even have a reminder to give, though.

There was also an endless parade of announcements, something that actually reminded me of my church back home. Different people kept coming up, introducing themselves, and then giving individual announcements. These weren't just at the end, like what I normally expect at a mass. They just happened at random places throughout the service.

The current priest in Algona is extremely concerned about doing everything by the book (a bit too concerned with that, if you ask me). Fr. Matthew definitely wouldn't get along well with Fr. Pete Roe in Wellington. The wording of the mass is somewhat different in New Zealand than what the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops came up with. There were a couple of things that I'm sure are in the Latin mass on which both translations are based that Fr. Pete didn't include this evening, though. The one that stood out most was the priest's line near the end of the Our Father ("Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin, and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.") Essentially they said the Protestant Lord's Prayer here. That is, they tacked on "the kingdom, the power, and the glory" without any words from the priest between. Fr. Pete was very casual in general throughout the service, quite the opposite of Fr. Matthew in Algona.

Having pointed out all the flaws, I must say that overall I rather liked the service. The choir was excellent, accompanied by piano, guitar, and flute. The lectors (two high school boys) also read extremely well. It was also interesting that they interspersed Maori words from time to time among the prayers. I'd come to see how things were the same and different in a New Zealand church, and that's exactly what I found.

After church I made my way over to Johnsonville station. I saw that there would be nearly a half-hour wait until the next train, so when I saw that bus #1 was due in just five minutes, I decided that was how I'd get back downtown. I think we made it downtown faster than the train anyway, since there were almost no stops along the way.

I stayed on the bus past the stop for the Ibis and continued south to the area where the Mercure was located. I had dinner there at yet another of America's contributions to the Kiwi restaurant scene, Taco Bell. I rather like Taco Bell back home, though I think it's getting to be a bit overpriced. I doubt I'll be patronizing the chain again in New Zealand, though. The Taco Bell at Manners and Cuba Streets appears to cater primarily to the party crowd,

people taking a break while going from club to club. I was easily the oldest person there, and I suspect I may have been the only person who was sober. The restaurant was filthy, and it took fifteen minutes to get my food.

The food itself was fine. I ordered something they called a "cantina bowl" that consisted of the ingredients of a chicken taco on top of rice. The "bowl" was actually a cardboard burger container. I also had a taco supreme. There was nothing wrong with either of the items, but nothing really made me want to have them again, either. I may patronize the Kiwi KFC or Subway again, but I don't think I'll be going back to Taco Bell.

While I'd ordered my food to eat in, when I finally got it, the food was in a takeaway bag. (This is very common in New Zealand. I wonder if it's like Canada where the tax rate is different on dine-in and take-out items.) I decided to just catch the bus back to the Ibis and eat it there. As dirty as the restaurant was, that was probably the wisest choice.

That pretty much sums up this day. It was far from the most eventful, but it certainly wasn't a bad day.

SUNDAY, JUNE 11

Wellington to Auckland

I was up about six this morning and fairly quickly got ready to check out. On my way to the elevator I lightened up my bag a bit. While repacking my bags, I watched a show called *Ready, Steady, Cook* on TV. "Ready, steady" is the British (and presumably Kiwi) version of "on your mark, get set," so you can probably figure out how the show worked.

People who have read these travelogues before know I often throw out old clothes when I travel. Today I got rid of the winter coat I'd been dragging around. Looking at the forecast, it was extremely unlikely I'd need anything more than a light jacket for the remainder of the trip. I'd gotten the coat years ago at a second-hand store, and I believe it cost \$10 at the time. I've certainly gotten more than that in value. I left the coat in the hotel's laundry room, so if someone wanted to take it, they could.

At 6:40 I checked out of the Ibis and wheeled my bags up to the railway station. It's six blocks from the hotel to the station. There was basically no traffic at all this morning, so I wasn't paying much attention crossing the streets. I suddenly woke up from what was essentially sleepwalking when a bus loudly honked at me. There are no bus stops on the street where that happened, so I suppose it must have been going to or from the garage. Fortunately I made it out of the way safely.

Wellington Station was just barely open when I got there. They had essentially blocked off all the platforms. Whenever a train arrived or departed, a guard would quickly open the gate to the appropriate platform, but then quickly close it—making sure no one who didn't belong there made their way to the platforms.

There was a sign by the ticket counters saying check-in for the Northern Explorer would open at 7:15. That seemed quite late to me, since their website said everyone should be checked in by 7:25. I stood by the counter, and around 7:00 a woman showed up and opened things. I was the first person to check-in for the train.

After checking in a man in an orange vest tagged my luggage "PAK", indicating I was getting off at Papakura, a station at the south end of Auckland. I then had to take the bag down to the baggage car. The workers there thought "PAK" stood for National Park (and of course the "r" in "park" is silent in New Zealand). I corrected them, and they loaded the bag on board.

There was still a bit of time before actual boarding would begin, so to save a bit of money I stopped by a New World Metro (a smaller version of the supermarket chain) that's located right inside the train station. Most businesses in New Zealand have limited hours on Sunday, but supermarkets are generally open from 7am to 9pm seven days a week. All I bought was a bottle of pop. Coke products were cheaper than Pepsi, so I got a 1.5 liter bottle of Diet Coke. This was the first time I'd seen that product in New Zealand; normally it's Coke Zero that is the sugar-free alternative. As far as I can tell Diet Pepsi doesn't exist at all; the zero-calorie Pepsi product is Pepsi Max. Coke is way more popular than Pepsi in New Zealand, though both products are available almost everywhere. The Coke cost five bucks (US\$3.05). That isn't cheap, but on the train they sell 300-milliliter (10 ounce) glass bottles for \$4 each. The 1.5-liter Diet Coke is equivalent to five of those bottles, and five bucks is a lot cheaper than twenty.

While I waited to board the train I watched the same InterCity bus I'd taken up to Palmerston North board from the adjacent platform. The same guy was driving that bus this morning. Just as before, there was confusion as to which of two buses went to which intermediate destinations.

They began boarding the Northern Explorer at 7:40am. I was assigned to carriage D, Row 4, Seat A. As it turned out, there were very few people on the train today, far fewer than there had been on the TranzAlpine. Carriage D was probably one-third full, and it never got any fuller than it was in Wellington. I never checked how crowded the other cars were, but my sense was they had a very light load.

A guy soon arrived in Carriage D who was lugging around a huge backpack, a duffel bag, and a bag of camera equipment. They clearly state on the website that any large bags (like his backpack) should be checked, and the cars really aren't designed for luggage. They have glass shelves overhead which look nice, but won't support much weight, there's no storage space at the ends of the cars, and there's also very little space beneath the seats. When the conductor came around to check tickets, the guy tried to show her the confirmation he had on his phone. Long-distance trains in New Zealand require you to get a boarding pass with an actual seat assignment, though, and he hadn't done that. The conductor asked him to join her in the café. I noticed later that she'd assigned him to a handicapped seat. There were no disabled people on the train, and the extra space worked better with his luggage.

Someone on the platform blew that referee whistle at 7:53pm, and at 7:54 we set off. Technically that was a minute ahead of schedule. We'd remain on time until just south of Auckland, where track construction would add about forty-five minutes to our journey.

Like on the TranzAlpine, there was recorded commentary on the Northern Explorer. Kiwi Rail gives out free headphones for this. They make a point of saying they're free and that passengers can keep them. I'm not sure why any passenger would keep them, though. I think Kiwi Rail must get their headphones from \$2 Things. I had to fiddle with the wires to get any sound at all.

As the train departed, the guy who had loaded the baggage car waved at us. He was the first of many people who would wave at the train as we passed by. One farmer had carried his son on his back out to the edge of a field so they could wave at the train. I definitely felt properly greeted, and I waved back at most of the people who waved at us.

The first part of the trip was familiar. We made our way up to Plimmerton following the exact same tracks I'd been on yesterday. Beyond Plimmerton we were quite suddenly into fairly serious mountains. We weaved through them and headed back to the coast where we had a lovely view of the offshore islands.

Our first stop of the day was at Paraparaumu. We'd stopped there on the bus back from Palmerston North as well, though nothing about it looked at all familiar. We paralleled the motorway through much of the coast, but the view from the train was different (and generally better) than it had been on the bus. By the way, Sunday is definitely the day to make time if you're driving in New Zealand. The motorway was absolutely empty on Sunday morning.



Kapiti Coast north of Wellington

The coast line is double-tracked and electrified up to Waikanae, where the commuter trains from Wellington end. Then the line reduces to a single track and cuts inland through a narrow pass, roughly following but out of sight of the road we'd taken up to Palmerston North. It intrigued me that the railroad tends to skirt most of the towns, rather than going right through them. That's the opposite of what happens in much of America. The commentary here pointed out cattle, row crops (mostly potatoes and salad vegetables), vineyards, and orchards. As we neared Palmerston North it also pointed out what to this Iowan is a very familiar sight: an enormous wind farm. Apparently about three-fourths of New Zealand's electricity comes from renewable sources, mostly hydropower and wind, with a bit of geothermal as well. Their goal is 100% renewable electricity by 2025.

We got to Palmerston North right at 10am. It intrigued me that there were quite a few people who both got on and off there. The Northern Explorer seems to be used by locals for transportation much more than the TranzAlpine was.

While I was watching people board at Palmerston North I was reminded of another Kiwi fashion trend. It seems to be extremely popular for New Zealand's teenagers and young adults to wear purposely mismatched shoes. I'm not sure if they buy two pairs and then wear one shoe out of each or if the shoes are sold to be mismatched. It definitely looked weird to me, but I'll probably see the kids I teach doing that next fall.

While about half a dozen people actually left the train there, nearly half the Northern Explorer passengers went out to smoke or vape on the platform. I said before that New Zealanders smoke a lot. I'd actually say more people vape than smoke cigarettes—not that there's really any difference in the effects of them. I don't know what the legal age to vape is, but it seems like every kid of junior high age or older does it—and so does every young adult. The older adults are more likely to smoke cigarettes, and there also seems to be a higher proportion of nonsmokers among older people.

A couple of things on this trip reminded me of things I should have mentioned earlier in this travelogue. The café attendant mentioned that biscuits (i.e. cookies) were available, and that reminded me that on the parliament tour they made a point of pointing out "the great biscuit tin". This is literally a can that at one point had cookies in it. Today it is used for what they call "the great biscuit tin lottery". Normally bills in parliament are proposed by the majority party. However every member has the right to place a bill in the biscuit tin. What actually happens is that they submit the bill to the speaker, the bill is given a number, and that number is put in the tin. Each week five of those numbers are randomly drawn. (The guide told us that when school groups visit, they have the kids draw the numbers.) The bills with those numbers are put on that week's docket. It's basically the only way that minority members can submit a bill, and all members will often try to submit bills that will specifically benefit their districts.

I was reminded of something else when the conductor came by with a trash bag and announced herself by saying, "Rubbish, love?" "Love" is the word women use in lieu of the "sir" or "ma'am" we might use in the States. So far I haven't heard a man speak in a similar situation, so I don't know if it would be correct for men to use that term or not. Women use it all the time, though, and they do use it to refer to people of both sexes.

At one point the narration pointed out the pothukutawa plant. Because of its bright red flowers, this is often called the New Zealand Christmas tree. That reminded me that when I went past the Thistle Inn yesterday, they had posters up advertising a "Christmas in Winter" party. Of course in the Northern Hemisphere Christmas is always in winter. In New Zealand it's a summer holiday, though, and apparently it's most often celebrated by barbecues at the beach. A number of times I've toyed with the idea of going out to Los Angeles for the holidays, and I suppose Christmas in New Zealand would be similar to southern California.

We made our way north through the green hills of Manuwatu. The green, but treeless landscape reminded me of Iceland. I actually had memories of many different places today. When the land flattened out a bit, it looked a bit like Nebraska. At other times I was reminded of the jungle landscape you see in pictures of Africa. At one brief point we were in the rain shadow of a tall mountain, and it looked like Arizona. We also saw snow-capped mountains that looked like they could be in Washington state or British Columbia. New Zealand isn't that large of a country, and it amazes me just how different things that are only a few miles apart can look.

Overall the North Island appears to be wetter than the South Island. I know there was excessive rain throughout the summer and fall, and it seems to have made almost everything on the island impossibly green.



Cattle in the Manawatu Region

We passed countless herds of sheep. The sheep seem to outnumber cattle on the North Island, though there are a lot of both. One thing I quickly learned was that sheep are scared of the train. Whenever the train approached a grazing heard, they'd scurry in the opposite direction. Hopefully the fright didn't scar them for life.

At one point we passed a ranch where they were using a helicopter to herd sheep. Helicopters are quite common in New Zealand. I could have done a helicopter tour instead of flying back from Milford Sound—though that would have cost even more than I paid.

It was a beautiful, crystal clear day. At several points the narration would say, "If the weather is fair, you may be able to see ...". Today we saw everything they pointed out. I really couldn't have picked a better day to do this journey. The one negative was that the bright sun glared in through the oversized windows in the train car, and that tended to make me a bit sleepy. Many other passengers (especially the locals) actually did fall asleep. I didn't, but at times I did struggle to keep awake so I could take everything in.

Much of the narration told about the construction of the North Island Main Trunk Railway, which we followed in its entirety today. This line is actually newer than the South Island line, and it sounds like—with the exception of that one big tunnel—it was actually harder to build the North Island line. Instead of crossing just one range of high mountains, there's range after range after range of low, but rugged mountains on the North Island. There are about a dozen very high viaducts, lots of horseshoe curves, and what they call the Rimu Spiral, a five-mile collection of switchbacks including a full circle at one point. There's also a lot of swampy areas, and parts of the rail line have been buried by volcanoes more than once. Indeed, back in the 1950s the predecessor to this very train went over a cliff when a volcano took out a bridge. They now have an early warning system that shuts down both the rail line and state highway 1 if there's any sign of an eruption.



View from one of the rail viaducts

The narration made a big deal of Whakapapa, which is New Zealand's biggest ski resort. I have to point out, though, that in New Zealand pronunciation the name of that resort doesn't exactly sound PG. Remember "W-H" makes an "F" sound, and the first "A" is said with a schwa, so it sounds like somebody's doing things they shouldn't with their father.

I should mention a couple of strange things I noticed about the railroad. Whenever there's a grade crossing in New Zealand, the road always curves so that it doesn't meet the railroad at a 90 degree angle (which is what we most often have at home), but rather at an oblique angle. I'm not sure why they think that's preferable (motorcyclists must hate it), but it's how pretty much every crossing in New Zealand is designed.



The railroad crossing signs in New Zealand amused me. They have a cross-buck at the actual intersection (though the text is in red instead of black and it says "railway crossing" instead of "railroad"). Before the crossing, though, is a warning sign with a picture of what looks like a 19th Century steam engine. It's definitely not the type of train you're likely to encounter at the crossing these days.

Another interesting feature, not just at rail crossings, but at other unusual intersection on New Zealand roads, is that they have mirrors to let cars see around the corners. It's weird to see those mirrors in rural areas, and I certainly hope they're angled so that lights don't reflect badly off them at night.

Something that intrigued me was that most, but not quite all of the rail line is electrified. Because it's not quite all, our train was diesel-powered. What's weird is that the breaks aren't in the most remote or inaccessible area. They have overhead wires through most of the mountains. I already mentioned the break south of Palmerston North, and the other break is between Hamilton and Auckland—a straight, level line that connects two of the biggest countries in the country. It is weird that they haven't filled in those gaps in electrification.

One final random thing I noticed is that every little nothing town seems to have a lawn bowling center. Lawn bowling is very big in New Zealand. They also have indoor ten-pin bowling, but it's lawn bowling that's much more popular.



Volcano n Tongariro National Park

The big tourist draw on the Northern Explorer is Tongariro National Park. This is New Zealand's oldest national park and the second oldest in the world, after Yellowstone. There are major stops in tourist villages at the south and north edges of the park, and from the northern stop there are convenient bus connections to Taupo and Rotorua. Tongariro includes three large volcanoes, which are side vents for the super-volcano for which Lake Taupo (New Zealand's largest inland body of water) is the crater lake. The whole volcanic system is still active. Eruptions in the Taupo area occurred as recently as the late 1990s, and further afield there have been eruptions less than five years ago.

Here's a few other things we saw

or that the narration discussed, in no particular order:

- There were areas of current logging, mostly with planted pine trees. The pines mature in 30 years, while the native hardwoods can take 500 to 1,000 years to mature.

- One of the towns we passed had a memorial to Maori who died in the 1918 flu pandemic. In New Zealand that pandemic is still the deadliest one to date, though other places (like the U.S.) surpassed it with the COVID pandemic.
- We saw the former logging site where the Shantytown steam train originally operated.
- The northern part of our trip (called “central North Island”) doesn’t have much crop farming. That’s because the soil is almost entirely pumice. The pumice is a very acidic soil; even to grow grass, they have to neutralize that acid with lime.
- Most of the sheep in the fields had been recently shorn.
- In describing the viaducts we passed over, the narration noted that Victorian engineers balanced three challenges: strength, economy, and grace.
- The word “schedule” (as in “our train is running according to schedule”) uses the American pronunciation with an “s – k” sound in New Zealand, not the British “s – h” pronunciation.
- Many of the caves in North Island are noted for their glowworms. Glowworms are the larvae of gnats.
- In Hamilton we passed a store called “Cheep Liquor Centre”, with “cheep” spelled “c – h – e – e – p” and a picture of a bird on their sign.
- Hamilton, New Zealand’s fourth largest city, is a very junky looking place. Almost all of its population growth was after World War II, and it seems overrun with mobile homes and warehouses.
- The fields toward the north end of our trip were almost entirely flooded.
- There are surprisingly large areas on this route with no cell service, more than there were on the TranzAlpine. Even much of the area between Hamilton and Auckland (which is fairly developed) is a cell dead zone.



Kiwi Rail sign
(Note logo with track ties forming a silver fern.)

Much of the North Island Main Trunk Line goes through a region that was traditionally sacred to the Maori called the king country. This was an area occupied by the Maori kings and in which all tribes were welcome. It was also an area where the British fought heavily in the Maori wars that led to the modern nation of New Zealand. It was the last Maori area to be surrendered to the British, and that was another key factor that delayed the construction of the railroad.

Today the king country has no special territorial status. It’s just part of the wider region of Waikato, which is centered in the city of Hamilton. It does have the look and feel of an Indian reservation, though, and it’s clearly more impoverished than much of the rest of the country.

The locals complained about how long this trip was. Having taken much longer train trips in the U.S. and Canada and a much longer plane flight at the start of this trip, today’s ride didn’t really seem all that long to me. It is about twice the length of the TranzAlpine, but the views changing all the time made it interesting. The only real break I took was getting some coffee and the same scone I’d had on the South Island. That was my lunch for the day.

The sun began to set around 5:20pm, which I noted was nearly half an hour later than it had down in Invercargill and Dunedin. Just after that we reached the town of Tuakau which happens to be where Sir Edmund Hillary of Everest fame was born. Hillary is immortalized on the \$5 note.

At 5:30 we came to the southern border of the Auckland region. We made a long stop at Pukeohe, the southern end of Auckland’s commuter train line. They’re doing work in that section, so we basically crawled the rest of the way north.

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ABOVE: Rocky hillside in the Waikato king country
BELOW: Sir Edmund Hillary on the New Zealand \$5 note



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We reached my destination, Papakura, at about 6:10pm. While Papakura is technically in the city of Auckland, the actual Auckland station is more than half an hour further on and doesn't connect with the city train system. I'd researched things ahead of time, so I knew that by exiting at Papakura I could fairly easily get to my hotel near the airport.

My bag was already on the platform when I exited the Northern Explorer. The commuter train I wanted was on the next platform, but I had to take an elevator up, walk over a skyway, and take another elevator down to get there. I made it on just before they were closing the doors. I was very glad I'd already bought an AT-HOP card for the Auckland transit, so I didn't need to take the time to buy a ticket at the station.

I rode the commuter train (Auckland's South Line) north five stops, getting off at the Puhinui Interchange. There I had just a three-minute wait to catch an express bus that goes to the airport. (There is no train to Auckland Airport, and in fact a proposal to build one was part of the scandal for the transport minister who owned stock in the airport operating company.) I rode past all the stops at the airport itself, but pressed the stop button just beyond the international terminal. My hotel was just off the airport property beyond there.

Tonight I was staying at the Ibis Budget—Auckland Airport. You'll note that in Wellington I stayed at an Ibis, while this was called an Ibis Budget. There is definitely a difference. The hotel used to have the name Formule 1. I saw those hotels in France, and I suppose they must be like this. It's definitely a budget hotel, with tiny rooms that have very few amenities. I was pleased that I chose a room with two single beds rather than one queen, because I could put my suitcase on the other bed. In a room with just one bed, I have no clue where I'd store the bag. There's nothing really wrong with the place, though, and I'm just here overnight. For NZ\$124 (US\$75) I certainly can't complain.

The food options close to the hotel were all American fast food. If I'd wanted to, I could have had Taco Bell two nights in a row. Instead I chose to go to McDonalds, since I'd only sampled their breakfast menu so far. McDonalds was just a block south of the hotel, and I didn't even have to cross a roundabout to get there. For my sandwich, I chose the "BBQ Bandit", a promotional item that's a barbecue bacon cheeseburger with onion rings stuffed inside it. The onion rings were strange, but it was a pretty good sandwich. Indeed I liked it better than the "gourmet" burgers I've had in New Zealand. I got a combo meal with fries and a small Sprite Zero. I also got an apple pie. In New Zealand they still serve deep-fried pies, and they sell them a la mode. What they actually do is put a little swirl of soft serve in a small dish so you can dip the pie in ice cream. It's probably a good thing that I only record my glucose levels every other day—and today was the off day.



**McDonalds advertisement for the BBQ Bandit
(In mine the onion rings were actually
on the bottom, not the top.)**

Mercurie), the shower was decent, they had free wi-fi (which—oddly—was provided by the airport rather than the hotel itself) and it was the first place in New Zealand I found a toilet that had a solid seat that didn't seem like it would break instantly.

Back at the hotel I worked on this, watched a bit of TV (notably *Masterchef Australia*), and enjoyed looking out at the runway lights at the airport. I must say that while I liked Wellington, I'm kind of glad to have left it—hopefully for the last time, at least on this trip.

MONDAY, JUNE 12

auckland to new plymouth

I'd set my alarm for six this morning, but I was awake at 5:35. I must give the Ibis Budget its due. While the room and bed were extremely small, it was good in other ways. It had the best lighting of all the hotels I'd been to (way better than the



LEFT: Mural by the elevator lobby at the Ibis Budget



RIGHT: Leonard Isitt Drive in South Auckland, with the Ibis Budget and a northbound bus 38 at the left

I had breakfast at the same McDonalds I'd eaten at last night. That took longer than it should have. They had plenty of staff, but they all seemed to be working in slow motion. Something I found fascinating was that I got a discount for ordering orange juice with my breakfast instead of coffee, the exact opposite of how things are priced in the States. The total was NZ\$10.70, which works out to US\$6.55 at the current exchange. That's about two bucks cheaper than the same meal would have cost at home.

I gathered my stuff and made my way to the bus stop across the street from the hotel. It's in front of the New Zealand School of Tourism, which is an interesting concept. Before long bus #38 happened by and took me to the airport. With the AT-HOP card, the cost for going two stops south was

NZ\$1.38 (85¢ US). They also have a shuttle that serves all the airport hotels. A sign on the side of the shuttle bus says “from \$8”; I’m pretty sure I got the better deal.

I purposely got to the airport early in case there were issues with the cancellations in the middle of my multi-flight booking. Fortunately there weren’t. Even though the flight today didn’t appear in the Air New Zealand app, it came up fine when I scanned my passport at the check-in kiosk. I checked in, sent my bag off to the ether, and spent a while working on this travelogue.

While I was sitting in the terminal several people from the New Zealand Navy were sitting across from me. There were six of them, three men and three women—all in identical uniforms. It intrigued me that the New Zealand military uniforms have kiwi birds embroidered on them.

I used up \$3 in small value change by buying a local snack from a vending machine at the airport. The product I bought was kumara crisps. I really should have known better than to buy these. Kumara is a type of sweet potato that has been cultivated by the Maori for centuries. I don’t care for the sweet potatoes we have in America, and I can’t say I liked kumara crisps any better. In fact I couldn’t finish the package.

I also filled some time nursing a coffee (a long black) from Dunkin’ Donuts. I was surprised to see them at the airport, and they had Krispy Kreme there as well. Dunkin’ has a New Zealand website, and it appears they have locations in malls and gas stations all over Auckland, but not (as Aucklanders say) “down country”. While sipping the coffee I entertained myself by watching a bird that had flown into the terminal.

At 10:15am they called boarding for flight 8843 to New Plymouth. I was actually the second person to scan a boarding pass, but the first guy made a wrong turn on the tarmac, so I ended up being the first to board. Most domestic flights in New Zealand board and deplane from the tarmac. That’s true with all of the small planes and even with many of the jets. Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington are the only airports that have jetbridges at all, and even there the bridges are mostly used for international flights.

Today we were flying on another Q-300. This is a 50-seat plane, and today it appeared there were 47 passengers aboard. Back when I rebooked everything, I had some extra money left in the credit, so I selected “preferred” seats for all the domestic flights. Those cost ten bucks more, and the empty seats on today’s flight were the other three seats in the exit row. I was actually glad to have an empty seat next to me, because the window seat in the exit row has less than standard space because of a protruding window.

The flight from Auckland to New Plymouth is very short. We took off at 10:40 and were on the ground again at 11:16. In that time the lone flight attendant (a young woman named Catherine) did a water service, passed out cookies and fudge, and gave us our complimentary farewell lollies. I actually read an article in the in-flight magazine (*Kia Ora*) about a plan to revise the snacks. Air New Zealand apparently ran a contest for snackmakers around the country to come up with the perfect airplane snack. They assured everyone that Cookie Time would still remain an option, and the lolly service was not going away.

I was amused to see a girl in the row in front of me thumbing through her phone and admiring prom pictures of herself. I have no idea when prom is in New Zealand, but it seemed pretty clear that their traditions are pretty similar to those we have in America.

I’d booked a window seat hoping to enjoy the views on this flight. There were some views of the coastline, but the view from my seat was mostly blocked by the engine. I’d have nice enough views later in the day, though.

We flew over an oil refinery just before landing. The Taranaki region has huge offshore oil and gas reserves, and today energy has surpassed agriculture as the most important part of their economy. It was kind of weird that the refinery butted right up against very nice suburban homes, houses that had the largest yards I’d seen in New Zealand. I’d think both the refinery and the airport would make the area less desirable, but it seems to be a very nice area.

New Plymouth Airport is a long way from the downtown area. I looked at options ahead of time and had booked a shuttle van. When I showed up at baggage claim, a guy was holding a little whiteboard with “Burrow” scrawled on it. I’ve seen such things for other people, but it’s the first time I’ve had one myself. I introduced myself to the driver and noted I had to claim a bag. He told me to meet him in the van outside, and in the meantime he tried to sell a couple of other people on a cheaper ride into town. It would turn out, though, that I was his only customer. He invited me to ride “shotgun” in the van, and we had a nice conversation about travel on the twenty-minute ride into town. He had just returned from a trip to Vietnam, and right before COVID he was in America—in Kansas, of all places. The shuttle, by the way, costs a fixed rate of NZ\$26 (US\$16—each way). A cab from the airport to central New Plymouth is metered, but they estimate the fare at around \$60. That’s more than the airfare from Auckland to New Plymouth. While city buses run fairly close (serving the refinery and residential area), unfortunately they don’t go all the way to the airport.

I was surprised that my room was ready at noon, and I quickly took my stuff upstairs. This is the third time on this trip I’ve had a room number ending in “13” (in this case 313). Obviously New Zealand hoteliers don’t feel compelled to play to superstition and put the maid’s closet in that location.

This is an absolutely gorgeous hotel room. It’s a Millennium Hotel. I’ve stayed at one of that chain’s properties exactly once before, on New Year’s Eve in Minneapolis a few years back. Both there and here the rate I paid seemed cheap for the kind of hotel it was. In New Plymouth I have an enormous and spotless room with a sea view (technically a partial sea view; the full-on ones cost double), a king bed, two big easy chairs, an enormous desk, both a bathtub and separate shower, lots of storage space, and good lighting. There was even a welcome card with my name on it signed by the hotel staff. I did have some issues getting the power to work at first. It’s another place where you have to put a card in a slot to turn on the power, but this one has to sit just the right way.

After dumping my stuff, I went out for lunch. The Centre City Shopping Centre (CCSC) is just down the street from the hotel, so I patronized their food court. I ended up eating at a place called Tortillas that claims to be “the modern Mexican alternative”. I ordered a quesadilla. Apparently “modern Mexican” means that you order things like at Subway. I chose a meat (pork carnitas) and had the option to have various other fillings. I passed on almost all of them, because things like beets and pineapple chunks aren’t really my idea of Mexican food. They added the chosen ingredients to the tortilla and also automatically added cheese and (for some reason) spinach. Then they grilled it and served it with sour cream (not salsa) on the side. While I’m not sure I could have identified the meal as Mexican (modern or otherwise), it was actually a surprisingly good lunch.



Tortillas in the Centre City food court
(Note the ad for a grilled cheese burrito at left.)

I stopped by an ATM and got some cash (which annoyingly came in the form of \$50 bills, when twenties are much more spendable). Then I made my way to the bus exchange outside the mall. For a place the size of Sioux City, New Plymouth has a fairly decent bus system. They run loop routes that extend to all the different areas of the city and also a couple of routes that serve nearby small towns. The service is infrequent (basically hourly), but it does seem pretty reliable.

I caught bus #9 and rode east through the downtown area. Central New Plymouth is a strange looking area. While it's been a fairly large city for more than a century, the downtown area seems much more like that of a small town. Most of the buildings are one or two stories, built of cement blocks, with metal roofs. There are a few exceptions (like the hotel that is three stories and mostly glass), but overall it's a very low-rise place. Interestingly, the business strip in the neighborhood of Fitzroy (where I got off the bus) doesn't look much different than downtown.

I got off next to a Domino's pizza shop in Fitzroy. The bus turns off there to head to an industrial area near the airport. I began a long, but really quite enjoyable walk. I first walked about a mile and a half east of the bus stop, through a nice middle-class looking residential area. Everything here was blond or rose brick, again with metal roofs. The yards were small, but well kept, and it just had a pleasant feel about it.



Residential street in Fitzroy – New Plymouth

It was trash day in Fitzroy today, and each house had a trash dumpster and three different recycling tubs. For most people the fullest by far was the glass tub. These people drink—a lot. Almost every house had a full tub of beer and wine bottles. The containers for metal and glass (which are recycled together here) and for compostables (which includes food waste, paper, and all things like those wooden utensils) were much less full than the glass containers.

My final destination was a very artistic bridge called Te Rewa Rewa. There was a bit of disappointment when I got there because the bridge (which was built in 2010) is apparently undergoing repairs. It's open, but the whole thing is wrapped in plastic and they've built a superstructure above it that wasn't part of the "whale skeleton" design. While it wasn't really much to look at, there was a sense of accomplishment in finding it.

Te Rewa Rewa is part of the New Plymouth Coastal Walkway. I spent the next couple of hours slowly walking back along the walkway to downtown. Some of the walkway is right along the coast, while other parts are slightly inland. It's about a five-kilometer walk. I took my time and spent quite a while gawking out at the waves.

There's artwork all along the Coastal Walkway, though I can't say most of it was terribly memorable. They have three chairs that look like nude women, and I was amused to find a couple of teenaged boys sitting in them. The largest of the artworks is right by the hotel. It's called the Wind Wand, and it's basically just a big metal stick that points in the direction of the wind. I suppose that's more interesting than a sculpture that was entitled "Cube" and was everything its name implied. I'd love to know how much they paid for these.



Te Rewa Rewa Bridge – New Plymouth

Art seems to be a big deal in New Plymouth. That intrigued me, since it comes across as a very blue-collar town. There are sculptures all over the city, and I saw half a dozen art galleries downtown.



Scenes from the New Plymouth Coastal Walkway



It was about four o'clock when I finished the main part of the walkway (it continues both north and south of the part I walked), and I noticed that the Taranaki Regional Museum (officially called Te Puke) would be open until five. The museum is free, so that was my next destination for the day. There are similarities in all the regional museums I've been to, but this one may well have been my favorite. They do a really good job of tracing three types of history: natural history, European history, and Maori history in Taranaki. I went through the floors in that order, and it gave a fascinating introduction to the place.

Taranaki is named for and dominated by the volcano that looms over the entire region, and much of its natural history is due to the volcano. The museum said that Taranaki (also called Mt. Egmont) controls the weather, and that does seem to be the case. It was clear all around today, but for most of the day the peak of the mountain was buried in clouds. Unlike the volcanoes further north, Taranaki left very fertile soil, and the frequent rain and mild temperatures have made it ideal for farming.



The Wind Wand

While the natural history section mentioned unique species that have been lost, they were far less concerned with invasive species than many of the other places I visited on this trip. They noted that the first extinctions were caused by the volcano itself, and those dead animals are the reason for the oil and gas deposits in the region today.

The original white settlers in New Plymouth came from old Plymouth in Devon, and they came 225 years after the Pilgrims landed in America. It's weird to think of a coastal city with a history shorter than my Midwestern town. The settlers sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and then south of Australia before they reached Taranaki. The first settlers were farmers, but later New Plymouth was a whaling port. Then in the early 20th Century they discovered coal, and later oil. Farming is still important in the area, but there's a reason the local taxi company calls itself Energy City Cabs.

The Maori exhibit was one of the most balanced I've seen. New Zealand seems to have a lot of white guilt about the Maori, and a lot of exhibits



Maori carved column

go out of their way to present them the natives in the best possible light and the settlers in the worst way possible. Here they made it clear that the Maori exhibit had been prepared entirely by the local iwi (native council). It portrayed history from a Maori perspective, beginning with the original settlement of New Zealand (which they note is not much earlier in the great scheme of things than the European settlement was). They talk about the pre-colonial Maori life and note the problems the Maori themselves caused for the environment. Then they give the Maori reaction to settlement and the environmental damage the later settlers caused. They explain the Maori wars from the perspective of people who had no concept of individual ownership of land, and they then talk about how Maori life changed when European settlers came—in both good and bad ways. They also explain the Maori reaction to more recent immigrants, particularly Asians and Pacific Islanders who now outnumber them. It really was quite interesting.

There's a settler's cabin outside the main Te Puke museum, but I didn't go there. That's because several homeless men were camped in front of it. New Plymouth seems to have quite a lot of homeless people—not as many as Portland or Seattle, but the same visibility as the homeless have in Chicago or Minneapolis. Taranaki has just about the mildest climate in New Zealand; it's rarely very hot and never truly cold. That probably makes it a comparatively easy place to be homeless, so people make their way there in the same way that homeless Canadians flock to Vancouver and Victoria. I have no idea what aid programs there are in New Zealand, but obviously some people are falling through the cracks.



View of Mt. Taranaki from the Warehouse car park – New Plymouth

claim to be a multi-action fluoride toothpaste that prevents cavities, fights plaque, and freshens breath. It also cost a whole two bucks (US\$1.25). The tube is small, but too big to put in the liquids bag when I fly back home.

While at the Warehouse I also bought a children's toy that I'll end up putting on the table of random junk I have in my classroom at school. It's a very famous New Zealand toy called Buzzy Bee. It's a wheeled toy that's made primarily of wood, and kids pull it around on a string. The box says it's "New Zealand's favorite toy since 1940". The box also says "created in New Zealand" in big letters, and "made in China" in a much smaller font. Legend has it that Queen Elizabeth was presented with a Buzzy Bee when she first visited New Zealand, and her younger children played with it. Prince Harry's autobiography also mentions that Princess Diana got one as a gift when she was expecting, and both of her sons played with it. It's intended for ages twelve months and up, but I can see high school kids—and even a sixty-year-old—having fun with it too.

I went back by way of the shore, hoping that there might be a nice view at sunset. Honestly, there really wasn't. There was a bit of yellow-orange in the sky, but nothing particularly memorable. The coastline really looked a lot nicer by day.

I looked around for somewhere to have dinner, but nothing really stood out to me. The mall was now closed (pretty much everything but supermarkets and the Warehouse closes at five in New Zealand), and what was open was either the same fast food options I'd already patronized or some very expensive restaurants (like Mongolian barbecue for \$60 a plate). I ended up going to a little shopping center across the street from the hotel. Next to an urgent care doctor there was a place that called itself the Flavour Favor Bakery. The proprietors are apparently Fijian. They do serve baked goods (and I might go there for breakfast tomorrow), but they also have full meals. I passed on the Fijian specialties like prawn curry and instead opted for a strange, but nice sandwich. It consisted of deli ham that had been fried, an unidentified cheese, lettuce, onion, and tomato, and (the thing that was both weird and good) cranberry relish. It came with chips (i.e.: French fries) which were also very good. My glucose level was higher than it should be tonight, but so be it.

Back at the hotel I read through my brother Paul's weekly letter and got started updating this travelogue. I also watched the news on TV. It was particularly interesting to see the current prime minister, Chris Hipkins, speaking from the press conference room I'd seen in the parliament building. The sign language interpreter was there as well.

Since this was the first hotel I'd been to in New Zealand that had a bath tub, I decided to soak for a bit. That was just what my tired leg muscles needed, and hopefully they'll be more refreshed tomorrow.

TUESDAY, JUNE 13

new plymouth to auckland

I didn't set an alarm last night, because there was no particular time I needed to be up. I ended up getting out of bed around 7:30. After showering, I checked out and dropped the luggage in the storeroom behind reception.

For breakfast this morning I went to a different café in the shopping center across from the hotel. (By the way, the concept of a shopping center across from a downtown hotel is one way New Zealand is very different from the U.S.) The place I went was called Target Bakeshop. They had a bit of everything on the menu, but I just ended up picking up a couple things from their display case. They had bars of the sort someone's mom might bring to a bake sale. I got a ginger bar and a caramel bar. Both had a cookie base and a solid top in the given flavor. While small in size, I'm sure they were about my one-meal limit in carbs. The definitely provided the energy I needed for an active morning.

I made my way over to Centre City mall and found the stop for bus #9. The only passengers boarding were a girl in a school uniform and me. We'd end up waiting quite a while before going anywhere. When the driver tried to leave, she couldn't get the front door to shut. She was able to operate it with an emergency button, but the regular switch just made it move about an inch and then bounce back open. She called her supervisor, who apparently told her to try such things as turning the bus off and then turning it on and trying again. (That didn't work, by the way.) The driver asked if I was in a hurry to get anywhere. When I said no, she looked at the girl and said, "Well you're just going to school. You probably want to be late." The girl didn't disagree. The driver tried a few other minor things (like physically shoving the door), and they didn't work either. Eventually a technician showed up and took down the panel that covered the operating mechanism for the door. He tried a number of things that also wouldn't get the door to close. Finally another bus

showed up, and the driver said, "We're moving up to the new one." I asked if I needed to tap my Bee card to board the new bus, and she just waved me aboard. About fifteen minutes late we finally set off. A teenager who did not appear to be going to school boarded after a few stops and asked why the bus was late. The driver just shrugged at him.

I got off in the suburb (i.e.: neighborhood) of Lower Vogeltown. This was slightly older than Fitzroy was, and also unique in that all the homes either had wood or vinyl siding. It actually looked a lot like a mid-century neighborhood in the States, except that the yards were all extremely small.

I spent pretty much the whole morning in two lovely parks. They're technically the equivalent of state parks, since they're run by the Taranaki Region, but they function like city parks. Brooklands and Pukekura Parks are technically separate, but they border each other. From what I could see the only real difference is who donated the land for each of them. The enormous green space is an unexpected asset in a comparatively small city, and it appears to be heavily used.

I first tried to go to the Brooklands Zoo, but I couldn't figure out how to get the gate open. So I spent a while on a nature hike around Brooklands Park. It's a beautiful forest area, though it's entirely planted rather than natural. The land was originally a farm whose owner was killed in what are variously called the New Zealand Wars, the Maori Wars, the



LEFT: Enormous Norfolk Island pine

RIGHT: Chimney of King home – Brooklands Park – New Plymouth

After the Maori attack, the stone and iron chimney was all that remained. I saw it from a distance and thought it was a public barbecue. It was interesting to get up close and find it was historic.

I came back to the zoo and saw someone else entering, which showed me the correct way to open the gate. The whole of Taranaki is about the size of Cedar Rapids, and New Plymouth itself has about 80,000 people. With that in mind, I was expecting a sorry little zoo like the one they had in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where I went to graduate school. The Brooklands Zoo is certainly not large, but it's well kept and has a nice collection of small animals. It was originally started as an aviary (which makes sense in bird-crazy New Zealand), and that is still the centerpiece. There's a variety of birds, but they're especially proud of their parrots. In addition to the aviary there's a fascinating display on backyard wildlife. The intent is to teach families how to make their yards wildlife friendly, and in the process they illustrate a lot of the native animals of the area. They also have a huge display on monarch butterflies. This is seasonal, though, and winter is not the season when they're in New Zealand. They have what they call the "bug hotel", whose guests include the giant weta for which the film studio was named. There are also enclosures that are home to owls, reptiles and amphibians, a tortoise, Bolivian squirrel monkeys, meerkats, a cotton-top tamarin, a tufted capuchin, capybara water hogs, otters, and bats. There's also a farmyard section with such animals as chickens, Guinea fowl, pigs, and an alpaca. Finally they have a fake display of kiwis, fur seals, and blue penguins—noting that these animals are suitable to be held in zoos.

The zoo was extremely popular. It appears to be a big place for daycares and elementary schools to take kids on field trips, and there was also a group of special needs adults who were visiting the zoo when I was there. Add to that moms and grannys pushing around "prams", and it was very busy indeed.

The next thing I saw after the zoo was another Chinese garden, this one donated by the city of Kunming, which is one of those cities with millions of people (8 million, apparently) that no one in the West has ever heard of. In the explanation of its donation they list New Plymouth's many sister cities. Alphabetically first among them was Dubuque, U.S.A. Though everything about it is newer, New Plymouth is actually fairly similar to Dubuque. They're both hilly waterfront cities (though one's on a river and the other an ocean), they're not far apart in size, and they both have an odd combination of blue-collar and artsy.



Service technician working on the door mechanism on the bus

His heirs donated the land to make a park. Because it's planted forest, it's not nearly as dense as what I'd seen on the South Island or Zealandia. It also features both native and non-native trees, all of which seem to thrive in the Taranaki climate. For instance there was an enormous Norfolk pine tree. Back home those tend to be small ornamental trees, but this towered like the flash pines in Mississippi. They also had a vast Chinese ginkgo tree.

The nature trail had some steep parts, and those included stairs. In one place the stairs were covered with lovely pink petals that had fallen from a flowering tree overhead. I felt like I was walking down a wedding aisle.

There's an interesting historical site in the park. It's the chimney from the house that originally stood on the Brooklands farm.



Alpaca at Brooklands zoo



Chinese Garden – New Plymouth

tiger salad”, which turned out to be delicious. It was “rocket” (what we call arugula in America), spinach, and what looked like dandelion greens topped with chicken, red onion, cucumber, and orange sections. The dressing was yogurt and harissa (a Middle Eastern pepper sauce). At NZ\$25.80 (US\$15.85) it was a bit pricey, but it really was an outstanding salad.

The waiter at Joe’s was a college-age kid who wore purple camouflage pants, a black T-shirt, and a green knit cap. He called every man either “mate”, “bro”, or “buddy”, he addressed the women as “dearie”, and he responded to everything with the quintessential Kiwi phrase “sweet as”. He certainly provided some entertainment during my lunch.

After lunch I made my way back down to the Coastal Walkway. This time I walked west of downtown, the opposite direction from what I’d done yesterday. This part of the walkway appears to be much less popular, probably because it mostly goes past rocky coastline with no nearby beaches. It was still a really pretty walk, though. I hiked about two miles until I got to the Port of Taranaki. The walkway actually continues way beyond there, but that was as far as I cared to go. I waited a while in front of a little “dairy” (convenience store). When I saw a bus go the opposite direction, I knew that in about fifteen minutes it would circle back and head toward downtown. I walked down to the next stop, which happened to be by an intermediate school, and caught the bus there. Interestingly the driver was the same woman who had been driving my bus this morning. She didn’t seem to recognize me, and she didn’t say a word—even though I was the only passenger on the bus.

I did a bit of browsing at Centre City mall and was pleasantly surprised to find that the Farmer’s department store was having a clearance sale. I picked up a couple of shirts that will be additional souvenirs of Kiwiland. Between that and lunch I was able to break the \$50 bills I’d gotten at the ATM yesterday.



New Plymouth clock tower

assets”—whatever that may mean. The motto on their building said “Make everyday better.” They spelled “everyday” as one word, though I wonder if

I crossed into Pukekura Park, where I hiked a couple of other trails and saw what they call the “famous” poets’ bridge. (Perhaps it is locally famous, but I doubt anyone outside of Taranaki has heard of it.) The most interesting thing in Pukekura Park was their fernery and display house, which is similar to the indoor conservatories in Chicago. Something that fascinated me was that the fernery was kept cooler than the ambient temperature. They have a fern room at the Garfield Park Conservatory, and it’s always a sauna in there. Perhaps the type of ferns is different, because the ones in New Plymouth were thriving in much cooler temperatures than they have in Chicago.

There’s also a major athletic facility in Pukekura Park. In addition to recreational sports, they have professional rugby, cricket, and basketball teams in Taranaki. It surprised me a bit, but basketball is extremely popular in New Zealand. There are professional teams in most regions (often made up primarily of Maori players), the secondary schools all have basketball teams, and Kiwis seem to follow the NBA religiously. In New Plymouth the local basketball team plays at the TSB Arena (as in Taranaki Savings Bank—they do naming rights here too), and the outdoor sports play at the Steelformers Grounds. (Steelformers is a company that makes those metal roofs I’ve seen everywhere.) There’s also a horse racing track that’s part of the complex, and it looked like they were getting ready for races when I passed by.

I slowly made the long walk back to downtown. I’d definitely made the right plans in taking the bus to the parks and walking back, though. While there are hills going up and down, for the most part the further from the water you go, the higher it is. The city does, after all, have a mountain in its back yard. By taking the bus out, I was mostly walking downhill on the way back.

I ate at a place called Joe’s Garage (pronounced “GARE-ij” here). This is a chain of pubs with locations in pretty much all the regional capitals. While lots of people were enjoying a pint of Speight’s at lunch, I passed on anything alcoholic. I ordered what they called an “easy



Rocky shore by Port of Taranaki

I still had about two hours to kill before my shuttle would pick me up, so I wandered around downtown New Plymouth. I got some money at a Kiwibank ATM (\$20 bills this time, thank goodness). I also stopped into another \$2 Things store, where I just picked up some Pepsi Max. Mostly I just looked at what the downtown area was like. It has an interesting mix of businesses—including at least four barber shops, seven tattoo parlors, and five nail salons. There are also tons and tons of restaurants. Something most of the restaurants had in common was that they were offering a special on pumpkin soup. I suppose pumpkins are probably in season in New Zealand, but it did seem odd that it was everyone’s soup du jour.

Except for stuff like small restaurants and tattoo parlors, almost every business in New Zealand is franchised, with the same plastic signs on the sidewalk awnings in every different town. There’s even a chain of pawn shops called Cash Converters. It’s interesting, though, that except for fast food restaurants, none of the chains is American.

At about 3:45 I made my way back to the hotel and reclaimed my bags. I read a bit more of Prince Harry’s autobiography as I waited in their lobby. I was surprised when the shuttle van showed up at 4:05, fifteen minutes before it was scheduled to arrive. The driver seemed even more surprised that I was ready to depart at that time.

There was an elderly lady in the van when I boarded. She was from Auckland and had apparently come down to visit her son who was in the hospital. (I noted that she included the definite article, unlike British English that would just say “in hospital”.) The driver (a younger guy named Shaun) noted that there would be a few more pick-ups as well. His next stop was at a downtown hostel. He waited there quite a while, but nobody showed up. He then called a contact number, but it went to voice mail. At that point, he just left. Next we stopped at an office building that was the headquarters of a company called “BECA”. I have no idea what that stands for, and after googling the company all I found was that they “design and optimize

they didn't mean it as two. While we were waiting, the driver collected the fare from the woman and me. He eventually went inside, then came back and informed us that "the gentleman is in a meeting and will find his own transportation". We stopped at another office building, where we picked up a woman named "Bex" who informed the driver that her colleague "Annika" would be coming along as well. While we waited for Annika, the driver phoned the next pick-up and said he would be there in three minutes. We picked up that guy a block up the street. Our final pick-up was at a community college (Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki, or WITT), where a well-dressed woman with a briefcase got on.

With all these pick-ups, I wondered if we'd make it to the airport by the 5:15 check-in deadline. We ended up arriving at 4:56, and I high-tailed over to the Air New Zealand kiosks. A rather bored looking employee said I didn't need to bother with the kiosk; she'd check me in instead. She just confirmed my name was on her list, and she tagged my bag and gave me a boarding pass. I guess Scott's Airport Shuttle must know what they're doing, though, because we got to the airport with time to spare.

I filled the short wait by drinking the Pepsi Max I'd gotten at \$2 Things and staring around at the airport. Something that stood out was that there was no security at New Plymouth Airport. No jets fly there, so there's no need to have security officers. They do control access to the tarmac, of course, but nobody goes through x-rays or metal detectors.

The information screen showed that multiple flights to and from Christchurch (abbreviated CHCH on the board) had been cancelled. I overheard some people talking about that, and apparently Christchurch is notorious for cancellations. It may, in fact, have been Christchurch rather than Queenstown that was the problem with my cancelled flight. Had I known that when I booked, I might have tried for a different itinerary. There's no use worrying about it now, though.

The plane from Auckland arrived at 5:15, and we began boarding at 5:30. That's about the fastest turn-around you could ever have. This was another ATR-72, one of the planes that boards from the rear. I was in seat 13-A, which was towards the back. This turned out to be a completely sold-out flight. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the people who had been bound for Christchurch were rerouted through Auckland. A bearded man who looked to be prematurely gray sat next to me. They closed the plane door at 5:40, and we were in the air at 5:45. Half an hour from touchdown to take-off has to be nearly a record for turning a plane.

For the first half of this short flight there was a beautiful sunset out the window beside me. It was really much nicer from the plane than it had been on the shore yesterday.

This was a very smooth flight, and pretty much completely uneventful. The only thing that really stood out was that something in the plane's engines seemed to be at a frequency that resonated with my phone. It felt like the phone was vibrating all through the flight. There were no messages or missed calls, though, so it was something weird connected with the plane.

It took nearly twenty minutes after we landed in Auckland for our luggage to show up. When I'd booked the shuttle that would take me to downtown Auckland, I had debated between a 7:05 or a 7:35 departure. I was glad I decided on the later one, because it would have been tight to get out there by 7:05.

Once I got my luggage I got a bight to eat, since Joe's Garage had been a long time ago. I went to the airport Subway, where everything cost about half again as much as it should. I got a small salad, and that was the same price as the large one I got in Greymouth. On a whim I also got a mini quesadilla, a surprisingly tasty item they advertise on a poster that says "\$2 snacks". At the airport it cost \$3.50.

There was no sign that indicated where the SkyDrive bus would stop. Their information had said it was by door #4 at the domestic terminal, but nothing there said anything about SkyDrive. I must have looked confused, because an Air New Zealand employee who was heading toward the parking ramp asked me if I needed anything. She told me the bus would stop in front of the city bus stop, but that I was waiting in the correct place.

The bus showed up at 7:28pm, seven minutes earlier than it was scheduled. Many people were just hopping on without a reservation, and the driver seemed surprised that I actually had booked in advance. Like pretty much everyone in New Zealand, though, he couldn't have cared less about the QR code on my confirmation; he just waved me aboard.

We left the domestic terminal at 7:37pm, two minutes after the scheduled departure. We then made two different stops at the international terminal—one in the departures area and one at arrivals. At Auckland Airport these are both on the same level of the terminal. They are at opposite ends, though, so it makes sense to make separate stops.

We drove right past the Ibis Budget where I'd stayed two nights ago and then got on state highway 20, the Auckland Southwest Motorway. There was almost no inbound traffic, so we cruised right along at 100 km/h. Highway 20 merges with highway 16 at a weird interchange in a curving tunnel, with highway 16 leading to downtown Auckland. Something that stood out on the motorway was that all the distance signs were given in tenths of kilometers, saying things like "Coronation Boulevard 4.6". The actual exit signs were usually located 400 meters (or a quarter mile) ahead of the ramps.

The motorway ends just past state highway 1, with different lanes becoming "exit only" to an assortment of downtown streets. We exited onto Nelson Street and before long made out way to Auckland's biggest downtown building, the Sky Tower (until 2022 the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere). Auckland's central bus station is at the SkyCity complex adjacent to the tower, and that was the shuttle's destination. Fortunately my hotel was very close, and I'd scouted how to get there ahead of time. I walked two blocks north, crossed the street and made a right turn. Then I walked a block and a half. Just past Auckland's Catholic cathedral was the Holiday Inn Express—Auckland Centre.

The hotel is in a skyscraper that also includes another hotel (the Voco) and several restaurants. At ground level the Holiday Inn Express sign is by an automatic sliding door (which almost every business in New Zealand seems to have) that leads to an escalator that in turn leads up to an elevator lobby which the elevators call ground floor (even though it's one level up from the sidewalk). Signs indicate that reception is on second floor, and I rode up there. The check-in people were extremely friendly and almost overly helpful. I actually



Night view of the Sky Tower from Room 1918

got a free upgrade to a "view" room, so I rode the elevator up to the 19th floor. I have a lovely view of the cathedral, the Sky Tower, and much of downtown Auckland.

I got settled in and worked on the travelogue. Then I just gawked at the city lights spread out below me.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 14

auckland area

I didn't sleep particularly well last night, though I don't think the hotel is particularly to blame for that. The bed was comfortable, and the room was quiet. My mind wouldn't seem to turn off, though, so it was a fairly restless night.

I was up at 6:30, even though there was no particular reason to be up early today. I began the day by experiencing the strange bathroom in this hotel room. It's very modern, and I'm sure some designer won awards for it. The bathroom wall is all frosted glass, and a single panel in that glass can serve either as the bathroom door or (when swung around) the shower door. I'm glad that I was in the room alone, because it would likely have been awkward with double occupancy. Surprisingly the shower didn't leak only leaked through the door a little, but less than many other glass showers. It didn't have much pressure, though, and it seemed to take forever for the hot water to make it up to the 19th floor.

Breakfast was also not the greatest feature of this hotel. The positives are that they did indeed offer a free breakfast. I think that's mandatory with the Holiday Inn Express chain, but it's the only place I'd been in New Zealand that did provide it for free. They also had a gorgeous dining room, with space for well over a hundred and comfortable seats at the tables. The main negative was the hot selections on the buffet. They had extremely undercooked scrambled eggs. I think the only time before I'd seen scrambled eggs so runny was in Mexico. I'm sure some chef thought they were perfect. I knew I'd never keep them down, though, so I didn't take any. They also had some of the fattiest bacon I've ever seen and, a type of plump gray sausage link that seems to be extremely popular in New Zealand, and the ubiquitous canned beans. I picked at a couple slices of bacon, but otherwise my breakfast was truly continental. I will say the pastries they had were nice. They also had those hash brown patties they call tri-tators at school lunches, and they were tasty. The other negative was that they had self-service gourmet coffee machines. This fits the Kiwi taste for freshly ground espresso drinks, but it created a line (or rather a queue) because everyone took about two minutes to get their coffee. With only two machines, it was quite a back-up.

A perk of being an IHG frequent stay program (though I really don't stay with the chain all that frequently) is that they gave me a certificate to get one free item from the hotel shop. I chose a chocolate milk, which I put in the refrigerator in my room. Had I bought it from the store, it would have cost \$5.50, though Night 'n Day sold the same thing for \$3.

While I didn't use it other than for the freebie, the store was a nice feature of the Holiday Inn Express. Most of the hotels I stayed at didn't even have a vending machine to buy beverages or snacks. They expected you to have "real" food and drinks in the restaurant instead. Another feature we take for granted in America that none of the New Zealand hotels had was an ice machine. Beverages in restaurants did generally come with ice (though less than we'd normally get back home), but that wasn't an option in a hotel.

I did a bit more work on the travelogue and watched some of the TV news, where the big story was Donald Trump being arraigned in Miami. Then, fortified by my starchy breakfast, I set out for the day.

First I walked northward on Queen Street toward the harbor, with my destination being the downtown ferry building. The building itself mostly houses offices these days, but behind it are the piers that serve the cross-harbor ferries.



Auckland Ferry Building

While I waited for a boat, several times I heard an announcement in an almost painfully New Zealand accent: "The 8:15 ferry for Devonport is delayed by ten minutes. We apologize for any inconvenience and delay in your journey." "Ferry" was pronounced "FEAR-ee", like something that induces fear. "Devonport" was pronounced "DAVE-un-pot", "ten" was pronounced "tin", and "journey" came out like "Jenna". That pronunciation of ten is something I hear all the time here. Among other places, it's in ads for the Kiwi equivalent of Menards or Home Depot, Mitre 10, which comes out roughly like "MATE-uh-tin" and could almost pass for the phrase "made it in".

I was in fact waiting for the Devonport ferry, so my journey was delayed—not that it mattered at all. While I waited I gawked at the many ferries that serve Auckland harbor. They're in every conceivable size. Some only hold a dozen or so passengers, and others (including the Devonport ferry) accommodate hundreds of commuters at a time. It took nearly ten minutes to unload all the incoming passengers from Devonport before we were allowed to board.

The ride itself was very short, only about five minutes in all. We went across the narrowest part of the harbor, with views of the port and the enormous cranes that unload shipping containers on one side and the harbor bridge on the other. Before long we'd reached the southern tip of what Aucklanders call the North Shore. There were only a handful of people on the northbound ferry, but a long line of southbound passengers were waiting as we exited.



Port of Auckland from the Devonport ferry

Devonport is part of the city of Auckland, but it still looks like the little seaside village it was in the late 1800s. Marine Parade and High Street are lined with Victorian business blocks that today are filled with shops and restaurants that cater to the area's wealthy residents and day-tripping tourists. Except for an entirely different setting, it reminds me of Galena, Illinois. They're both quite lovely places.

The view from Marine Parade honestly isn't the best. You have a choice of either looking at the Auckland port or looking at a Navy base that's located in Devonport. I wandered around a bit, but then I made my way uphill from the water.

... And by uphill, I mean way uphill. Devonport is at the foot of Mount Victoria, one of numerous extinct volcanoes that dot the Auckland area. Victoria is one of the more accessible cones, and I set out to climb it this morning. There's a trail that goes all the way to the top. It's steep, but perfectly manageable. At the top is a weather station and several viewpoints that look out over the surrounding area. There's also the remnants of a fort that was built during the Maori wars and used regularly through World War I. During World War II they even mounted a canon there in case there were a need to defend Auckland harbor.

I walked down from the summit through a neighborhood of craftsman-style cottages from the turn of the 20th Century.



Commercial area of Devonport, Auckland



Mount Victoria Summit – Devonport, Auckland

of the 20th Century. Then I browsed through some of the shops on High Street, buying a couple of postcards and a flannel shirt. The shirt is from Swandri, which is very big brand in New Zealand. I'd seen similar shirts for over \$100, but this one was being clearance for \$30 (US\$18.50), so it really was a bargain.

I made my way back to Marine Parade and caught a northbound bus. Bus #814 follows a weird meandering route through Devonport, Cheltenham, Narrow Neck, Belmont, Bayswater, Hauraki, and Takapuna. I couldn't begin to tell you where all this bus ran, but I saw lots of those same little craftsman cottages and also palatial mansions jammed onto tiny lots. Entry level homes on the North Shore are around a million dollars, and there really is no ceiling.

I got off this bus too early. Everyone else on the bus exited at the Takapuna interchange, which is in the back of an extremely upscale mall. I thought that was the end of the line, so that's where I got off. I soon realized my mistake, and the AT Transport app let me know that another bus (#801) would be coming soon and take me where I needed to go.

Something interesting about all the AT Transport buses is that they have recordings that announce stops bilingually. A female voice is in Maori, and a male voice is in English. Auckland is the first place I've been since Chicago where there were consistent bus announcements, and as a passenger that's very nice. It was amusing to hear the Maori voice give announcements for streets with exceedingly English names, though.

I took the bus to Akoranga (definitely not an exceedingly British name), which is in an industrial park next to the northern motorway. They call Akoranga a "station", since it serves a dedicated busway that runs adjacent to the motorway. There are no trains that run north of the harbor, but they have a frequent bus service that runs up and down that busway. I took a bus two stops north to see what it was like. I got off at Sunnynook, which is the name of a residential street that for some reason has a major busway station. I turned around there and took another express bus back into downtown.

I got off at Wellesley and Hobson Streets, quite near where the SkyDrive bus dropped me last night. Months ago I'd bought a ticket to go up in the Sky Tower, and I was here to redeem it. Surprisingly, the entrance to the tower is not signed at all from the street. I asked a guard, and he directed me to the very well signed SkyCity Casino. It turns out you enter through the casino and then take an escalator downstairs to the basement of the tower. This was one place they actually did have to scan the QR code on my ticket. That was important, since it wasn't a reservation for a specific time, but rather an open ticket. The woman gave me a flyer and circled the two floors I was allowed to visit. They sell lots of adventure packages that include things like bungee jumping from the tower and a slide that goes from the top down to ground level. I passed both because of the price and because I'm just not an adrenaline junkie. So I was allowed on the 51st floor main observation deck and the 62nd floor sky deck.

It intrigued me that the elevator at the Sky Tower was not exceptionally fast. It went about the same speed as the one at the Holiday Inn Express and took a couple minutes to get up to floor #51. The view from the top was nice, though certainly nothing worth traveling halfway around the world to see. Honestly Auckland's skyline really isn't anything special. The tallest buildings are in the direction of the port, and those shipping cranes dwarf most of them. The view toward the harbor bridge (shown in the picture at left) is really nicer, but there's basically no skyline at all in that direction. I'm glad I went up in the Sky Tower but it's not something I'd really recommend. The views aren't nearly as nice as what you'd see in Chicago or New York.



View from the Sky Tower – Auckland

up, and they'd sprayed water all over the plaza by the church. The water had made those tiles extremely slippery, and I had to be very careful making my way across. My bet is someone was not so careful and had slipped on the wet tiles and gotten injured. First an ambulance showed up, and then a fire truck. The firefighters spread all over the plaza by the church and then closed it off with security tape until everything could dry. Meanwhile there were a number of traffic problems. The fire truck had parked facing oncoming traffic, so cars that wanted to proceed had to go over to the other lane and battle oncoming cars. It really was quite a mess.



Fire truck by St. Patrick's Cathedral – Auckland

was that in spite of its skyscrapers, Auckland seems older than most of the other places I've been in New Zealand. In particular its residential neighborhoods are older. There's a lot of Victorian homes around Auckland and a lot of buildings from that era that were built as businesses and now house apartments. I'm sure there are newer homes further out, but these close-in neighborhoods had a higher percentage of older homes than Wellington, Dunedin, Invercargill, New Plymouth, or Palmerston North—and of course everywhere has a higher percentage of older homes than Christchurch.

I got off at the stop for the Westfield Newmarket, though this was one mall I didn't check out at all. I just made my way over to the nearby train station. Something that struck me today is that the school day in New Zealand must be shorter than what we have at home. There were high school kids on the buses this morning around 9:30am, and there were high school kids on the train this afternoon right at 3pm. That's a good hour less time than the schedule we have at Garrigan. Perhaps they have more days in their year, though.

It's not really surprising that the kids tend to travel in packs. Groups of a dozen girls or half a dozen boys will all crowd on a bus or train car together. They'll go to a central stop and then disperse into different directions. Secondary schools in New Zealand are not geographic. Even the state-

After seeing the tower I went across the street to have lunch. I happened to notice another American institution, Denny's. I think I ate at Denny's exactly once before in my life, and that wasn't a pleasant experience. Steve and I ate at a Denny's in Tacoma, Washington, and I ended up being very sick after that meal. Fortunately today's experience was quite a bit better.

This particular Denny's is in an odd location. They're on the second floor of a building that has a convenience store and a Chinese restaurant at ground level. I made my way upstairs and was seated at a booth. Denny's New Zealand division claims to be "an old-fashioned American diner", though their menu is oddly international. I could have had anything from pho to enchiladas, and I almost did order chicken satay. I settled instead for lasagna, mostly because it was ten bucks cheaper. With that ten bucks I also had a rum and coke, being amused that this family restaurant is licensed to serve alcohol in New Zealand. The rum and coke came as a pre-packaged cocktail in what looked like a beer bottle. It fascinated me that the label on the back had far more nutritional information than you'd find on booze in America, plus the URL of the website cheers.org.nz, which discusses "better choices about your drinking".

The rum and coke was a rum and coke, and the lasagna was the same thing I used to get at Marc's Big Boy when I'd visit our mother in the Burlington hospital. It came with a surprisingly good side salad and some garlic bread. It was NZ\$28 (US\$17.25). That seemed rather steep to me, but I have no idea what the equivalent meal would cost back home these days.

I made my way back to the hotel and worked on the travelogue for a bit. That gave the lasagna a chance to digest. While I was at the computer there was some interesting commotion by the cathedral below. I'd noticed that while walking back from the Sky Tower that there had been some sort of construction going on there. The workers had apparently tried to clean

After the main part of lunch settled, I went out for dessert. One of the most highly recommended places in Auckland is an ice cream shop called Giapo. It's in an odd neighborhood a short walk from the hotel that combines hostels and piercing studios with jewelers and designer handbag shops. The ice cream is almost comically expensive (NZ\$11.50 per cone, or US\$7.10 or a small waffle cone), but it really was very good. I got the quintessential New Zealand ice cream flavor, hokey pokey. This is basically what at home we'd call butter brickle. The crunchy bits are made of what New Zealanders call honeycomb, which is basically like the hard candy base that makes peanut brittle. What Giapo does to make a cone they can sell for a steep price is to coat it in chocolate and then have larger bits of the candy embedded in the chocolate. It's probably a million calories and carbs, but it was indeed very tasty. With just occasional exceptions my glucose levels have been normal on this trip, so an occasional treat isn't terrible.

Next I did a bit of a cheap tour around the central city. In addition to more than a hundred regular routes, AT Transport has three roughly circular routes that run around the city center and the near close-in suburbs. Today I caught an inner link bus and rode southeastward from downtown. The areas I went through are called Parnell and Newmarket. Something that struck

run high schools tend to specialize in different areas and draw kids from all over their region. That's why it's so common for kids to get to and from school on city buses and trains.

I rode back to Britomart, the big train mixmaster in downtown Auckland. The station is located underground, and I had to go up multiple escalators to reach ground level. Something I rather like about Auckland's train stations is that they all seem to have turnstiles at the exits. Not only does that make the system more secure, but it also means you really can't forget to tap off with your transit card when you finish your ride.

Just outside Britomart station was an H&M department store. I'd seen these in American cities, but I'd never actually been in one. The company is apparently Swedish, and they claim to sell the latest fashions (all their own brand) very cheaply. It comes across kind of like the clothing department at Target, but the prices actually seem lower than that. I picked up yet another shirt at H & M. I should be well stocked to start off the coming school year.

While walking back down Queen Street I saw two people who I assume were tourists. They were speaking French. What really stood out was that they were carrying NASA t-shirts that it appeared they had just bought. Auckland seems like a strange place to buy a NASA souvenir.

I made one more stop on my way back to the hotel. This was at a New World supermarket in a very odd location. It's in the basement of a downtown bank headquarters. It's a cramped and dingy store, but they did sell everything you'd expect. I got some sugar-free Sprite and also another quintessential New Zealand snack: chocolate fish. These are marshmallows pressed into a vaguely fish-like shape and coated with extremely cheap chocolate. It's exactly the same thing as a marshmallow Santa, but in fish form. Apparently this is the classic reward any time a kid does something good. I've read that when someone tries to milk praise for just doing their job, the common response is to sarcastically say, "Oh, have a chocolate fish." The "i" in "fish", by the way, is a schwa in New Zealand, so it comes across more like "fush".

Since I'd had a full lunch and ice cream, I didn't have a real dinner today. Instead, after working on the travelogue for a while I went out in search of a place with the cute name Lord of the Fries. It took three attempts to find it, but I eventually did. The place actually offers full vegan meals, but I passed on their meat substitutes and just had their namesake item. I got a small order of classic fries with Vietnamese dipping sauce. (They offer sauces from all over the world; the Vietnamese is a combination of hot chili sauce and mayonnaise.) It was very good, and certainly more of a dinner than I needed today.

When I came back from getting my fries two Asian girls were trying to get into the elevator that's beside the escalator at the entrance to the hotel. The reason I say they were trying to get in the elevator is that each of them had three enormous suitcases. The tiny elevator just wasn't designed to hold two people and six suitcases, and I did wonder why anyone needed that much luggage.

While writing on this travelogue I thought there had been another power failure like the one in Invercargill. At 6:35pm the room suddenly went totally dark. I was about to head out to see if the whole hotel was affected when I noticed the little charge icon on the computer was working. I got up, and the lights instantly turned on. It turns out there's a motion sensor on the room lights. If it doesn't sense anything for an extended time (like when I'm just sitting at the computer), the lights automatically shut off. That's actually not a bad feature, but I wish I'd known about it beforehand.

While searching for what was happening while I was in Auckland, I came across one fine arts event, the play *Kinky Boots*. On a whim I bought a very cheap ticket to the show that happened to be for Wednesday, June 14. At about ten minutes to seven I left the hotel and made the short walk (500 meters, according to Google Maps) to the corner of Queen and Wellesley, where Auckland's Civic Theatre is located.

I had read that this was a touring show from Canada. That's not actually right. While the lead performers had performed the show in Toronto and Vancouver, the entire cast is New Zealanders and the tour (which also includes stops in Australia and South Africa) is run by a Kiwi company. It was a professional cast, and it also had a live orchestra (unlike the Broadway production, which was criticized for using recorded background music). While the speech director in me might criticize the stiffness of some of the blocking, overall the production was very well done.



Kinky Boots is not a show that the current leaders in the Iowa legislature would like, but it is one they should probably see. On the surface it's a story about a struggling British shoe factory reinventing itself by making boots for drag queens. More deeply it explores how everyone has struggles and has the message that we need to except everyone as they are. The legislators would say it's promoting a gay message, but it really isn't. It is promoting freedom and tolerance, though, and a lot of politicians don't have much time for those things these days.

Something I particularly liked about the show was the character development. All the characters have unexpected twists in their personalities that combine to give the message that nobody's perfect.

The show also uses a surprisingly broad variety of music. The songs were written by '80s pop star Cyndi Lauper, but they cover a wide range of styles. The cast sang everything excellently, too. They all had powerful voices, even when they were singing ballads.

Unlike the show in Wellington, *Kinky Boots* was sold out. My seat was in the very back of the theatre (Row V of the "stalls", what we'd call the orchestra or the floor seats in America.) The theatre is surprisingly intimate, though, and I could see everything very well. The only real issue was that the theatre is set up with only side aisles, and Row V is 59 seats across. I was sitting in an aisle seat, so I was forever getting up to let people in.

New Zealanders dress well, but mostly not formally for the theatre. They were also surprisingly reserved. Everyone was clearly enjoying the show, but they were doing it very quietly. In the Midwest there probably would have been a standing ovation at the end these days. In Auckland they clapped through two encores, but everyone was sitting the whole time. Something else I noticed was that almost all the theatre-goers were white. I saw two or three Asian people, but no one who was Maori, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or African. Auckland has a good number of all of those races, but they definitely weren't at the Civic Theatre.

The show got out at 10pm. Queen Street was still quite lively at that hour, almost a bit too lively for my taste. A lot of the people had obviously been drinking, and while everyone seemed jovial, I just don't care for that sort of environment—particularly on a Wednesday night. I did make it back to the hotel without any issues, and I was very glad I'd decided to see the show.

THURSDAY, JUNE 15

auckland area

The alarm went off at 6:30 today, and I grudgingly got up at that time. I'd have loved to sleep in later, but today was the last day I was trying to pack in a number of things in a day.

Breakfast was the same spread as yesterday, and again I avoided the runny eggs. I did figure that while down under I should take the opportunity to try the "delicacy" that is fermented yeast paste. While I wish the hotel had stocked Marmite (by far the more popular brand in Australia) instead they had the world-famous Vegemite. It was in little plastic tubs together with butter margarine, and honey. (It intrigued me that these were actually the same plastic tubs we have back home; when I went to Taco Bell, they feigned environmental friendliness by putting the sauces in little bags made of waxed paper.) New Zealanders (and most of the Commonwealth, for that matter) most often consume yeast spread by spreading it lightly on buttered toast, which is what I did this morning. I can identify that the flavor was pretty much identical to the Burger Rings snack I'd had a few days ago. Basically it's an unidentifiable savory flavor. I suspect that if you sprinkled MSG (like Accent powder) on toast, the flavor would be the same. It wasn't bad, but I don't plan to waste another of those plastic tubs—and I'm certainly not buying a jar of the stuff.

At 7:45 I walked up to the Britomart train station. I caught an Eastern line train, which had mostly been re-routed onto the Southern line tracks because of track construction. However at the very end it turned off and ran to its normal destination. Beyond where I'd been yesterday, most of this line runs through a rather bleak industrial and warehousing area. There's acres and acres of vast pre-fab buildings. Beyond the industrial area we entered what most people call South Auckland. This area looks a lot like what the area of Los Angeles they used to call South Central. Both areas are the poorest in their respective cities, but they don't really look like slums. South Auckland is mostly single-family homes from the '50s and '60s together with low-rise "council homes" (i.e.: public housing apartments) that look like cheap motels. It's clearly not a nice area, but it doesn't really look bad. As in L.A., there are trees and flowers everywhere, which makes it look nicer than it really is. I'd read that many of these homes are very poorly constructed, and they have almost no insulation. It's not just South Auckland that has this problem; it's an issue all over the country. Last year parliament passed the "Warmer Kiwi Homes Act", which requires landlords to insulate their properties and provides funding for homeowners to do the same.

I rode to the end of the line at Manukau (MAN-uh-koh—"a – u" is always pronounced like "o" in Maori words). Manukau used to be a separate city and it's the site of Auckland's second harbor and the airport. The Manukau interchange is in a much nicer-looking area than most of South Auckland. The train station is in the basement of a technical school, the bus interchange is across the street from another Westfield mall, and there's an amusement park just down the road.

I exited the train and crossed the street to the bus interchange. This is an enclosed building similar to what they have in Christchurch, but it's much larger. I boarded an empty bus 366 at Manukau. A few people got on and off during my ride, but there were never more than three passengers total. We followed a meandering route southward, crossing the Southern Motorway three times. The area looked was mostly 1970s homes (pretty similar to where I live in Algona, though with smaller yards), and it looked very middle class. The most interesting thing we passed was a construction site where they were building a new Mormon temple.

My destination this morning was the Auckland Botanical Gardens, an enormous park that's one of the best botanic centers I've seen anywhere. In contrast to Christchurch's formal gardens, the Auckland Botanical Gardens are divided into sections that are designed to explain different plants and how to best cultivate them. I saw a section on herbs and vegetables, a rock garden with plants from the Americas, an area with different kinds of trees that grow well in urban areas, a huge section devoted to roses, an area with plants that resemble those on other continents that go back to when all were parts of Gondwanaland, and another part that includes plants that only grow in New Zealand. There's also a huge area devoted to magnolias and camellias (which they note provide color in the cooler months), one devoted to plants that blossom in spring (which had a number that were blooming in winter), a recreated African jungle, an orchard, an arboretum devoted to palms, and an enormous children's garden. They also had formal gardens devoted to perennial plants, a show garden they called the glade, and another garden showing how a yard can be decorated with the manuka plant. Finally there was a what they called the trial garden, where they test how different new plants will grow in the Auckland climate.



A plant called "tractor seat plant" at Auckland Botanical Gardens

Besides the formal gardens, there are displays that show how they use the Auckland Botanical Gardens to treat create a wetlands area that treats some of the city's wastewater and storm runoff. There was also an area that showed off plants that had different diseases such as myrtle rust. They use their public restrooms to show how green roofs work, and on top of all that there's a visitor's center. The park is entirely free to visit, and hundreds of people were there this morning. Most were walking their dogs, but there was also a school group there, and a few folks were getting ideas for their home gardens.

I spent about an hour and a half at the botanic gardens and then made my way back to the bus stop. The stop is in the middle of a neighborhood of '60s home that looks like the area where I grew up in Mt. Pleasant (but again with smaller yards—nobody has a big yard in New Zealand). Across the street from the bus stop was a big construction project where they're apparently building a retirement home. A bus showed up after about ten minutes, and for some reason there was a supervisor on board as well as the driver. Aside from that it was an uneventful ride.

We first travelled east from the botanic gardens, passing through what appeared to be a rather wealthy area. The homes were beautifully maintained mid-century modern style houses with small but well manicured yards. We then turned south and the area changed to a mix of true mansions and rather tacky-looking condos that looked a lot like West Des Moines. The people in both of these areas were a mix of white and Asian. Most of the people on the bus were either Hispanic or "Pacifika" and were working at those wealthy homes. Further south we got into another area that looked like South Central L.A.—poorly maintained single family homes and apartments, all built of cement blocks and with metal roofs that were missing their rust-repelling paint. The people here were very diverse: Maori, Pacific Islanders, Asians, Hispanics, and Africans (in decreasing order of their frequency), plus a lot of elderly white people who I assume have lived here their entire lives.

I rode to the end of the line at the Manurewa train station. The station and its bus interchange are across a parking lot from a place called Southmall, which brags that it is "New Zealand's oldest shopping centre". I'd been to a lot of malls around New Zealand, but Southmall was like none of the others. The only big chain store here is a rather dumpy New World supermarket. There's no Farmer's department store, no K-Mart, and no Warehouse. The mall is far from dead, though. Inside it seems almost like a Third World bazaar, with shoppers from that multicultural neighborhood seeking bargains.

I patronized three stores in this mall. The first was a store called Cracker Jack that said "we scour the world for the best deals". It reminded me of the Hudson's chain I saw in Mississippi, where they buy up excess stock from other stores and liquidate them. I bought a T-shirt there, and I also bought a box of Christmas candy. In June they had cardboard boxes shaped like Christmas trees with little bell-shaped chocolate ornaments filled with Nutella. The box had a tag that showed that at Christmastime some store was selling it for \$12.50. I paid two bucks for it. I ate a couple of the candy bells already, and it was perfectly good—and delicious, too. I also went to a store called 1—2—3, which featured merchandise at those numbers of dollars. There I bought a coin bank that was decorated with a picture of the New Zealand hundred dollar bill. While I will keep some lower-value banknotes as souvenirs, I don't plan on getting a hundred. (Also, fifties are the biggest thing in the ATMs, so hundreds really aren't available anywhere.) The hundred features Nobel prize-winning scientist Sir Ernest Rutherford who has been called the father of nuclear physics. I rather like the idea of featuring a scientist on money, particularly on a high-value note.



The third place I stopped was called Dollar Deals. They had very cheap greeting cards there, so I picked up a couple. In addition to those stores there were lot of shops that sold groceries and clothing to appeal to the various ethnic groups, three different second-hand stores, and a couple of ma 'n' pa places that just seemed to sell a little bit of everything. In addition to that there was a community center, a military recruiter, and the most popular place of all—a lottery ticket kiosk. I've been to one other mall that was similar, in a poor ethnic neighborhood in Toronto. Auckland actually seems quite similar to Toronto. They're both enormous immigrant-filled cities that tend to dominate their countries. A lot of "down-country" Kiwis dislike Auckland (I heard a lot of that in New Plymouth), and Canadians who live anywhere else hate Toronto. I rather like both cities, though.



**Picture of the turnstiles at Manurewa station
(from the website of *Our Auckland* magazine)**

everyone seemed to have clothes hanging on their decks and balconies. As someone who dries my clothes outside as often as I can, I was glad to see that.

I made my way back to Manurewa station. They have turnstiles there where you're supposed to tap your AT-HOP card, and a sign above them said "Hop on, not hop over". I got a laugh out of the sign, but I must say it would be all but impossible to hop over those turnstiles. Actually, if I wanted to evade the fare, I think it would be much easier to crawl under the turnstile than to jump over it.

I boarded a northbound train and rode up to Newmarket. This was the same South Auckland area I described earlier. Two things stood out. Lots of homes had the flag of Samoa flying outside. Obviously a lot of people from that country live in this part of Auckland. The second thing was that it must have been laundry day, because



Having mentioned flags, I should note that while some New Zealanders do display their flag, it's not nearly as common a practice as it is in Canada or the United States. People often confuse New Zealand's flag (shown at right) with Australia's. Both show the Union Jack and the Southern Cross. The big difference is that the stars on New Zealand's flag are red, while Australia's are white. Australia's stars also have seven points, and there's an extra star below the Union Jack.

A few years ago New Zealand held a referendum on whether the flag should be changed to a design that removed the Union Jack. While the proposal was eventually voted down, as part of the process they invited New Zealanders to submit designs. The winner had the same color scheme as the current flag, but it replaced the Union



Jack with a fern. Ferns, korus, and mountains were common to most of the submissions. The most famous submission, though, was called the kiwi flag. It shows a kiwi bird shooting a laser beam from its eye. I actually did see one of these flying in Wellington. It certainly does look unique.

I noted before that the trains have electronic announcements in both English and Maori. It amused me when they had an announcement encouraging people to visit the Auckland Transport website. The female voice began in Maori, but for the website itself, she just spelled things out with English letters and the word "dot". New Zealand websites pretty much all end in "dot-en-zed", and even foreign companies will make sure they have a local website with that domain.



While we were heading north a Maori man boarded and sat in front of me. He was memorable because he absolutely reeked of smoke. It's been a while since my eyes watered just from someone sitting near me, but they definitely did today.

While the Maori are historically a Pacific people, it's surprisingly easy to tell them apart from the "Pacificka" immigrants from places like Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. The Maori have a somewhat different build (generally taller and less stocky than Pacific Islanders), their skin is somewhat lighter, and they invariably have most of their bodies covered in tattoos. I don't know that I would specifically recognize a Maori person in America (I'd likely think they were Native American or Hispanic if I just saw them in passing), but in their homeland, I can tell who they are.

I needed to change there to a West line train, and I assumed I'd need to go to a different platform to do so. (There are four platforms at Newmarket, and I figured that would be for outbound and inbound trains on different lines.) I rode the escalator up to the lobby to find the TVs that showed departures and was surprised to find that the outbound Western line train would be on the same platform as the inbound Southern line train I'd come in on. I suppose people who come here often know it's an easy transfer, but I certainly wasn't expecting it. They must do a lot of complex switching to make that happen.

West Auckland definitely looks different than South Auckland. The first area we went past was Mount Eden, which is a dense neighborhood where they appear to have replaced whatever was there before with brand new apartments and townhomes. Further west it looks a lot like south Minneapolis—a mixture of homes from the early 20th Century and brand new condos built on lots whose owners sold their land. There's a lot of those old Victorian cottages in this area, with ornate woodwork above the porches. Those contrast greatly with their glass and steel neighbors.

Quite literally the biggest thing I passed in West Auckland was Eden Park Stadium. This is where the All Blacks play, and it appears they can accommodate anyone who wants to watch. It also hosts other rugby teams, as well as cricket, football (i.e., soccer), and concerts.

I got off the train at Mt. Albert station. Mt. Albert is the district Jacinda Ardern represented in parliament, and it's been the home of most of the recent leaders of the Labour Party. (The current prime minister is the exception; he's from the Hutt Valley area in Wellington.) While they probably vote the same way, Mt. Albert could not be more different than Manurewa. The majority of the people in Mt. Albert are white, with the remainder being Asian. There's no Maori or Pacificka to be seen around here. You can tell very quickly that this is a wealthy area, the sort of place the former prime minister and her sportscaster husband would live. You wouldn't see Southmall in Mt. Albert, and you won't find organic coffee bars in Manurewa. I passed a home that was for sale in Mt. Albert. The sign out front said they were accepting offers starting at 3.5 million. This was a pretty large house, but my bet is that even those Victorian cottages also command extremely high prices.



**Ambulance on Great North Road, the main street of Mt. Albert
(Notice the most prominent business is a real estate broker.)**

I had stopped in Mt. Albert to have lunch. I'd come across a chain called Burger Wisconsin, and the name just amused me. The only "Wisconsin burger" I can think of is Culver's, and I thought it would be interesting to see what the Kiwi take on that was. Unfortunately Burger Wisconsin is only open at night. Their open 5 – 9pm on weekdays and 5pm to 1am on weekends. It was about 12:30 when I showed up, and I certainly wasn't going to wait around four and a half hours just to have another burger. I ended up having lunch at a place whose main sign was in Chinese with the words "dumplings and noodles" written in English below. I had a cucumber salad and Kung pao chicken over noodles, and both of them were delicious.



Looking north from the Mt. Albert summit

Because of changing restaurants, I crossed the street by the station in Mt. Albert several times. It's one of many intersections I've seen in New Zealand that's set up with what they call a pedestrian scramble. Normally cars have the right of way, first in one direction and then in another. When someone presses the walk button, though, the lights go red in all directions. Pedestrians can then walk in any direction, including diagonally through the intersection. That would be jaywalking at home, but it's actually quite common here.

I walked diagonally through the Mt. Albert scramble to get to my next destination. I'd climbed Mt. Victoria yesterday, so I figured it was appropriate to keep her company by climbing Mt. Albert. The prince was quite a bit easier to climb than his queen. You can tell from its cone shape that Mt. Albert is another volcano, but it has clearly eroded more than Mt. Victoria. It has also been developed more. There's a heavily used asphalt trail all the way up to the summit, and an archery range and soccer field are cut into the mountain. It occurred to me that cutting the archery range

into the mountain is actually kind of smart, because the terrain itself should keep any errant arrows from hitting things they shouldn't. The Mt. Albert Domain (the official English name of the park) was very heavily used, mostly by people walking their dogs or pushing their babies around.

Something unique about Mt. Albert is that it offers coast to coast views. You can see both the Pacific and the Tasman Sea, both of which aren't that far away. The surrounding area is mostly residential, which I thought made for pretty views than the port and construction you see from the Sky Tower

I made my way back to the train station. On most of the train platforms in Auckland they have vending machines that sell pop, milk, and yogurt. The dairy products are in those foil-lined boxes we put juice in, and they're designed for a long shelf life. I had some time to kill, and I figured I'd use up some of my coins by buying something from the vending machine. Unfortunately the coin mechanism was jammed, so I continued to have a heavy pocket.

I continued further west, with riders in my car listening to two competing pieces of music—both just listening to music on their phones without headphones, something that seems surprisingly common in New Zealand. One was playing classic country music, and the other adult contemporary. Those two styles of music combine to make the soundtrack of New Zealand. Almost everywhere I go there's one style of music or the other. I haven't really heard any real "rock" songs and no hip-hop or anything similar. It's adult contemporary or old-time country.

I rode west to the Henderson station, which is just a couple stops from the end of the line. Beside this station is another mall that's completely surrounded by parking ramps. Oddly most of the space in those ramps seems to go unused because the majority of people come to this mall on transit. The reason I'd come to WestCity mall was to duplicate a food experience I had in Puerto Rico. The WestCity food court has a branch of Texas Chicken, the international name for the chain known as Church's in America. In Puerto Rico I enjoyed Church's "biscuit helado" (basically a biscuit a la mode with sauce on top of it), and I noticed that Texas Chicken had the same thing on the menu (with the name "biscuit shortcake") in New Zealand. Unfortunately when I tried to order it, I was told that they had no desserts today. I suppose it must be like so many McDonalds, where the ice cream machine keeps breaking down. I ended up using that change I was trying to spend in the vending machine to get a scoop of boysenberry ice cream at the Pita Pit.

I rode back east a few stations and got off at New Lynn. Here I went to yet another Nando's. I ordered the same garlic cheese pita and grilled halloumi I'd had back in Wellington at the start of this trip. I got it "for takeaway" (the phrase for "to go" in most of the Commonwealth) so I could eat it as my dinner back at the hotel. While I was waiting for them to finish grilling the cheese, I noticed that they were selling beaded wristbands to fight malaria in Africa, and I picked up one of those as well. While I'll probably never wear it, I like the cause, and it may just end up being a Christmas ornament.

Just a little ways past New Lynn we passed a lovely Buddhist temple. That's not really what you expect to see while riding a train in an English-speaking country.

I got off again at Mt. Albert, this time to transfer to a bus. It was in the 3:00 hour now, and the bus stop was crowded with kids in school uniforms. These looked more like junior high kids, rather than the secondary students I've seen most places I've gone in New Zealand. Fortunately the first bus that showed up was not the one I wanted, but it was the one most of the kids boarded.

I boarded the Outer Link bus, the furthest out of those circular routes I noted earlier. Much of what we passed through was similar to what I described earlier, Victorian cottages and cement block businesses. The picture at right would be a very typical street scene in West Auckland.



Typical homes in western Auckland

There was a construction zone along the way back downtown, and at one point we stopped at what was clearly marked a temporary bus stop. The old lady who had signaled to get off told the driver this wasn't the right place. The driver's initial response was "yeah, nah". This very common Kiwi phrase is a polite way to say the answer is a definite "no". He went on to explain that he couldn't stop at the usual bus stop because of the construction. They argued and argued, and eventually the driver had to all but throw the old bat off the bus. There

were some school kids who wanted to get off at another place in the construction zone. There was no temporary stop at all near where they signaled, and the driver had to pull far ahead to let them off. They must have gotten a lot of exercise walking back to where they wanted to be.

At another point there was a roundabout that was so tight the bus couldn't fit around it. To avoid the problem, we made a left turn (which of course is the "easy" turn when you drive on the opposite side), drove down to a much larger roundabout, made a U-turn there, and then drove back to the first roundabout and turned left again—all to end up going straight ahead on the same street we'd started on.

I switched to the inner link bus at Victoria Park, which is just west of downtown Auckland. I rode that back to Britomart and then walked back to the hotel. I enjoyed my halloumi and garlic cheese pita while watching Australian game shows. Then I got back to updating this report.

When I went to plug in my phone to charge it overnight I had a message from Air New Zealand reminding me that it was time to check in for my flight to Chicago. While I'm sure they'll need to verify the passport details at the airport, I did want to check in as best I could. There are more steps to the process than there were flying the other way across the Pacific, apparently requirements of U.S. Homeland Security. I went through the process three times, and each time it told me my information was incomplete. I finally realized that what was missing was an emergency contact. I put in my brother Paul's information (though as soon as I submitted it, I thought John might have been a better choice, since Paul is more than a bit overworked at the moment). Once that field (which was not marked mandatory on the form) was complete, my check-in went through fine. I certainly hope the emergency information won't be necessary—knock on wood.

FRIDAY, JUNE 16

auckland to chicago, including air new zealand flight 26

I slept in until after seven on this, my last day in New Zealand. I could easily have slept longer still. It certainly didn't help that the weather had changed, and this looked to be a gray, drizzly day.

The breakfast room was a bit more crowded today, which makes sense since it was later when I ate. I overheard a young couple asking if this was the way to the "brekkie". That reminded me of something. I'd read that, like Australians, Kiwis tend to shorten words and end them with "-i-e" or "-o". Perhaps they do, but I heard this in exactly two words. One was "brekkie", and except for this couple, the only time I saw it was in restaurant menus or ads that were purposely trying to be informal. The other was the universal word "smoko", the universal word for what we'd call a coffee break with origins that are obvious from the term. There are signs that say "On smoko, back at ..." with moveable clock faces that show when a place will reopen. One doesn't have to smoke on smoko, just as one doesn't need to drink coffee on a coffee break. In New Plymouth there was even a bakery named Smoko that sold the treats one might have at that time. Guides give dozens of other words New Zealanders supposedly shorten, but "brekkie" and "smoko" are the only ones I encountered.

Looking out the window while finishing the previous paragraph reminded me of a third shortened expression they use in New Zealand. They're building a new skyscraper next to the Holiday Inn (something that has to be miserable in the rain), and watching the construction reminded me of the term "tradie", which is used for tradesmen such as those construction workers.

At 9:00 I went downstairs and, checked out, and left my bags for the day. The first thing I did was to take the CityLink bus, the one that loops through the immediate downtown area. I rode down to Karangahape Road (almost always referred to as "K Road"), by far the most happening place in Auckland. Happening, that is, at night. At 9am the few people where were out weren't ones I cared to see. Most of them seemed like a bit mentally disturbed or perhaps suffering the effects of drugs. One man kept walking in front of cars, yelling at the drivers, and threatening to sue them. There are a number of hotels in this area, including the one I would have stayed at had the trip in 2020 worked as planned. I'm glad I didn't end up in this neighborhood, though.

After a ten-minute wait I caught an Outer Link bus and rode a couple stops eastward to the Auckland City Hospital stop. While I didn't need the hospital's services (thank goodness), according to both Google Maps and the AT Transport app, that was the closest stop to the Auckland War Memorial Museum, which was my first destination this morning. I'd find out later this was false. In fact there's a bus stop right outside the museum. It's on an infrequent route, though, and the apps were trying to save me time waiting around. In the rain, though, I wanted to be as close as I could get. At any rate, I got off at the hospital and had about a ten-minute walk through a park. About half the time I was sheltered by trees, but I still got totally soaked in the process.

I made it to the museum entrance just as they were opening at 10am. The museum is free for residents of the Auckland region and "gold donation" (which means a \$1 or \$2 coin) for other New Zealanders. It costs twenty-eight dollars for foreigners, though. I'd bought a ticket online before the trip, and I certainly wanted to get the value out of it. An overly helpful woman at the entrance exchanged my confirmation for an actual ticket and gave me a bit more information than I really cared to know about the place. Eventually I made my way in to the galleries.

My favorite part of the museum was the very start. It's a section called "We Aucklanders" that explores the diversity of the city. Almost 60% of the city's residents are foreign-born, and only about 10% of adults were actually born in the city. One of the things they explore is the rapid urbanization of New Zealand. A generation ago most of the country's residents lived in small towns, but today the vast majority live in the five biggest cities—about half of them in Auckland.

One interesting exhibit in the We Aucklanders section is a mock-up of a caravan (i.e.: trailer) they use to house homeless residents. While I did see quite a few beggars and marginal people, I didn't see anyone living on the street in Auckland. Perhaps those caravans are the reason.

This museum had the same exhibit on Maori history that was found in most of the museums I visited. When I entered the woman at the desk told me that photography was allowed everywhere in the museum. When I saw there was a Maori exhibit, I suspected that was in error, and sure enough outside the marae (the meeting house for an iwi or group of Maori) there was a no photography sign. Maori consider these places holy, and they somehow feel the spirit of the place leaves if photos are taken. This is, of course, not an active marae, but for some reason they have the same rules. There were plenty of visitors who seemed not to notice the sign, though.

I passed a T-Rex skeleton and then made my way up to the top floor. There they have a photography exhibit that was taken on a road trip across the country in 1979. Those photos confirm that forty-four years ago New Zealand was indeed a much more rural country. They didn't have chain convenience stores then, for instance and the pictures just showed a much more backwards place than what I visited. It was fascinating to see the difference.



Homeless caravan

The main thing on the top floor is reflected in the name of the museum. This was created to be a war memorial, and the bulk of the top floor is about Kiwis at war. Interestingly the war the focus on most is World War II, as opposed to the huge World War I display I'd seen at Te Papa in Wellington. They explore the causes and leaders of the war and then have mock-ups to show what life was like for soldiers, sailors, and airmen (who they called the coconut bombers), as well as on the homefront. They made a big point of the fact that almost every New Zealand woman spent the war knitting sweaters and blankets that kept both New Zealand and British troops warm during the war. There was also a display on two nuns who served as nurses and were killed in Egypt. It was interesting to find that, like America, New Zealand had internment camps during World War II. What was surprising, though, was that the immigrants who were sent there were not Japanese, but rather Italian.

There is a smaller gallery on World War I. I was fascinated to learn that during that war the Kiwis imprisoned conscientious objectors. Then they had a section called "Under the Blue Beret" that went through all the missions New Zealand forces have been involved with as U.N. peacekeeping troops. They've been to Zimbabwe, Cyprus, India, Pakistan, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, East Timor, Bosnia, Cambodia, Haiti, Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan, Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, and the island of Bougainville. They had stories from soldiers who fought in all those conflicts.

While I was looking at the war exhibits, a couple of Maori dancers ran through the gallery and then down the steps. They apparently did a performance in the atrium. Unfortunately I missed that, but I assume it's similar to what I saw at the International Maori Festival in Hawaii a few years back.

An enormous exhibit is devoted to volcanoes. All of Auckland and much of the country is built on volcanoes, and they point out that the question is when (not if) they will erupt again. They talk about the geology behind volcanoes, and what benefits they have (such as providing construction material and—in Auckland, if not Waikato—fertile soil). For me the most interesting part was a detailed display of exactly what the Auckland Council's plans are in case of a major eruption. Needless to say those plans are very detailed. They explain how people will be evacuated (the St. John's ambulances), where they'll go to (mostly Latter Day Saints churches), and who is responsible for providing refugees with food, clothing and water (most other churches, but especially the Salvation Army).

The museum has some rather dull parts, too. There's a dusty collection of relics from ancient civilizations and a collection devoted to European and Asian decorative arts that was mostly the legacy of wealthy Aucklanders of the 1920s. There are more dinosaur fossils, the requisite fossil of the extinct moa bird, and tons of stuffed kiwi birds. There's also lots of rocks, and Rajah, a stuffed elephant that has been part of their collection for eighty years. There's a children's area with "hands on" explorations of natural history, and a gallery that purports to present natural history from a Maori point of view. While they did go through the Maori creation myth, there really isn't much about it I'd describe as natural history. Finally there was a gallery on various Pacific Islands that I think would be offensive to many of Auckland's residents today. It probably dates to the '60s and explores the natives from a "strange lands and funny peoples" point of view.

I picked up a few postcards in the gift shop. That's all I could even consider buying there. Steve had expressed interest in a Maori carving. They have authentic ones at the Auckland Museum, but the cheapest are \$180. That was also the starting price point for jewelry and various other handicrafts, and they had things for sale at over \$5,000.

While I was in the museum I checked the schedule of bus 781, the one that serves the museum. When I'd finished I went outside about five minutes before it was due to depart. There were five different "out of service" buses parked by the bus stop. One of them did have a driver in it, and while his native language was probably Korean rather than English, he was able to confirm that this was the bus I wanted.

I rode the bus over to Newmarket. There's a little "dairy" in the station, and I used up most of my last New Zealand coins buying a bag of Bluebird chips. Bluebird is a division of Frito-Lay, and it's the primary brand of chips in New Zealand. They do mostly call them chips, too, as opposed to the British "crisps". French fries can be referred to as either fries or chips, but I've gathered chips tend to be the hand-cut fat kind, while fries are the shoestring-cut potatoes you get from fast food places.

I had some time to kill, so I took a ride on the one Auckland train line I hadn't been on yet, the Onehunga line. This was actually the first train line built on the North Island, built to connect Auckland with what then was a separate town on Manukau Harbour. Today most of the Onehunga line runs past rough-looking industrial areas. From the train the very end didn't look much better. Onehunga appears to be the car repair center of Auckland, and much of it has the charm you'd expect from such a place.



Historic Onehunga post office

(This is now a restaurant and apartments.. There are no dedicated post office buildings in New Zealand today.)

Right outside the Newmarket station I found a little Japanese restaurant (Roll & Don) that advertised protein of your choice on rice for \$9.90. That's just over six U.S. dollars, which is an incredibly good deal for a meal. I had a lunch of teriyaki chicken that was both affordable and good. I gave the girl at the counter two five-dollar bills, the last banknotes I had.

I turned the opposite direction of the repair shops, though, and I spent half an hour exploring a fascinating area. It still has the feel of a little town, even though it's part of a city of two million. The "downtown" area is one-story buildings from the mid 20th Century, with a few two-story buildings dating to the 1800s. They have a bunch of historic markers around the area, from which I learned such things as Onehunga had the first female mayor in the British Empire. She took office in the 1890s.

I went past a couple of stores in Onehunga that reminded me of another New Zealand fashion trend. Kiwi teenagers, and especially Maori and Pacific Islanders, love wearing jerseys of U.S. sports teams. They especially like basketball and hockey jerseys, but I saw baseball and football too. There are both pro and college teams represented, and they're not the best-known or best-performing teams. There are Rebel Sports and Adidas stores in every neighborhood in the cities, and both chains stock those jerseys. It does seem that if the kids aren't in school uniforms, they're in American sports jerseys.

I caught a train back to Newmarket. The Onehunga trains run express past most of the Southern line stops, so it's a surprisingly quick ride.

I caught an inbound train to Britomart. I used the toilet there. Earlier in the day I'd used the museum's restroom, and I must say the train station kept theirs much cleaner. Most restrooms in New Zealand are pretty nice, but the ones at the Auckland Museum were about the worst I'd been to.

I walked back down Queen Street one last time to get to the hotel. While down by K-Road it's a bit questionable, the part of Queen Street by Britomart is one of the poshest shopping areas in the world. It's like North Michigan in Chicago or Fifth Avenue in New York, but without all the skyscrapers. They compare it to Oxford Street in London, and that's probably the best analogy there is. Since I'm not in the market for a Rolex or a Christian Dior suit or a Fendi bag, the only place I ever went inside of on Queen Street was that New World supermarket in the basement of the Bank of New Zealand building.

Today I was glad for one feature that is found not only on Queen Street, but in almost every commercial area in New Zealand—awnings. They have big metal awnings that cover almost every inch of the sidewalk. Most of the time I was here I thought those were ugly. Today I was glad for the protection from the rain.

I made my way back to the Holiday Inn Express, reclaimed my bags, and repacked a bit to get things like the chips I'd bought to fit properly. Then I dragged my bags over to SkyCity. I'd distributed the weight differently, so this time they were a bit top-heavy, which made taking them over there a bit of a challenge. I did make it all right, though.

At about 2:55 the SkyDrive bus showed up. Again the driver didn't scan the QR code. He just saw I had a confirmation and waved me aboard. The bus was almost entirely full on this trip, and a young woman who spent the trip speaking to her boyfriend in Spanish on the phone sat next to me. There was much more traffic than there had been on the inbound trip. (It was, after all, daytime rather than night.) We followed the exact same route, but it looked different, both because we were headed in the opposite direction and because it was daytime. I must say it's weird to travel along a motorway with all the exits on the left. I suppose if I had to, I'd get used to driving on the left. Watching the bus and taxi drivers, though, what looked like the hardest part for me would be operating a stick shift with my left hand. It's hard to imagine getting used to that.

The thing I remember most on the way down to the airport was the headquarters of Mainfreight Logistics. They had a big changeable sign on their building that today had the following quote on it: It's never too late to be what you might have been. Apparently that quote is from George Eliot, and it certainly seemed strange to be featured by a trucking company.

A man boarded at the domestic terminal and sat down next to me. He yelled to the driver, "Oy, mate! Can I sit up front?" Many buses in New Zealand, including this one have a "shotgun" seat, with the entry door behind that. He wanted to ride in that unoccupied seat. This time the answer wasn't "yeah, nah", it was a flat "Nah, bloke, no!". The guy's reply was, "Had to try, mate, had to try."

We got to the international terminal about 3:55pm. I made my way to the Air New Zealand check-in area. Today I'd be traveling in premium economy. The ticket is actually significantly cheaper than the skycouch I had travelling the other way. Because it's considered a higher class, though, I was able to use the premium check-in area. This basically meant an employee worked the kiosk machine for me and placed the "ORD" tags on my bags. She then directed me to an elevator that heads directly to the exit customs area.

In the exit customs area, I first scanned my boarding pass. A gate opened, and I walked forward through an empty tape maze. Then they had the same e-gate set-up I'd gone through when entering New Zealand. I scanned my passport, and it took a picture of me. The front of the e-gate opened, and I was officially in the no man's land beyond the New Zealand border. Next up was security. For some reason my book bag (the only carry-on I had today, since premium economy passengers can check two bags free) triggered a secondary inspection. They found nothing, of course, and the guard wished me a pleasant flight.

Before leaving, I'd bought a pass to access the Strata Lounge at Auckland Airport, so I walked past the duty-free shops and made my way up an escalator to the lounge area. The guard carefully examined my confirmation, my boarding pass, and my passport, but eventually he let me in. I had dinner in the lounge (presumably the first of two, since I'll also be eating on the plane), and I spent most of my time updating today's account of the trip. From then buffet I selected a bit of curried chicken and squash, a spoonful of spinach gnocchi, some garlic bread, a scone, a chicken salad mini-sandwich, a salad that I found out had no dressing after I took some, and some caramel mousse. Between that and a relatively calm place to wait, I felt I got my money's worth.

For most people the motivation of the lounge is free alcohol. I passed on that, but others drank beer after beer of downed endless cocktails. Unlike the bars I've seen in American airport lounges, this one had self-serve alcohol. It would seem they're asking for abuse with that system.

They had a screen listing all the evening's departures. Fortunately NZ26 to Chicago was on time. What stood out was that NZ8, the daily flight to San Francisco, was cancelled. I'm certainly glad my cancellation was on a domestic flight rather than an international one.

I spent most of my wait doing those online quizzes from *Stuff NZ*. I think I got ten ideas for our quiz bowl tournament from what I went through today. I used the bathroom at one point and was intrigued to find that they were individual cabins with showers in them. I didn't have need of a shower, but it is a nice feature for people who are making international connection.

I did a double-take when I looked at a table near the entrance and saw a guy who was sitting there with a guitar as his carry-on bag. The guy looked almost exactly like my colleague Beany Bode, the guy I mentioned did his student teaching on the South Island of New Zealand. It wasn't Beany, of course. His wife Joanne will probably be relieved about that, since this guy was quite close with the woman next to him.

Eventually I saw that the TV was displaying "go to gate" for my flight. It also said that it would be a twenty-minute walk to Gate 17, when in fact I got there in ten walking at the speed of everyone else in the terminal. On the way to the gate I passed something I'd gotten a text from Air New Zealand about, a voluntary weight check. They're trying to gather data on how large their current passengers are, so they're asking people to step on a scale with their luggage. While it's totally anonymous, participation is also voluntary. My bet is that will give them a significantly lower average than what the real number is, because people on the larger side are more likely to opt out. I may use this in my stats classes as an example of how not to gather data. By the way, I chose not to participate, and of course I'm on the larger side myself.

I followed the signs for Gate 17 until I got to a barricade at Gate 16. A guy there gestured that we should go around the back of the desk for that gate. Gates 17 and 18 are for flights to the United States, and the detour is to have a person check that everyone going to those gates has a printed boarding pass—meaning their passport was pre-checked by U.S. Homeland Security. Everyone who had a paper pass got waved on, but if people had checked in on their phones, they had to go to a kiosk and submit their passport.

The waiting area at Gate 17 was extremely crowded. My bet is that it actually has enough seats to hold the maximum capacity of the flight, but of course nobody wants to sit right next to another party. That meant about a third of the seats were unused and essentially unusable, and tons of people were out in the hallway. I spent nearly an hour next to the "traveletor" (moving walkway), and I heard a recorded female voice over and over again say "Attention. Please take care when stepping off." I nearly went insane listening to her.

My boarding pass said the anticipated boarding time was 7:20pm. (Related to that, New Zealand seems to use am/pm and a twenty-four hour clock pretty much interchangeably. The am/pm method is definitely more common in New Zealand than in England.) It wasn't until 7:30 that the flight crew showed up, though. Then at 7:45 they announced that there would be a fifteen-minute delay due to a safety inspection. At that point I got a text from Air New Zealand that gave a delayed take-off time, but an early arrival time in Chicago. They finally began boarding at 8:05pm, and I went down the jetway at 8:10—precisely the time we were originally supposed to take off.

On Air New Zealand there is a far bigger difference between economy and premium economy than there was when I upgraded on Delta. On that flight you got a standard economy seat with a couple more inches of legroom between the rows—and in at least one case the premium economy seat I had as worse than most of the economy seats. Air New Zealand's premium economy are big captain's chairs like you'd find on domestic first class in the States. They're notably further apart, but they're also much wider and better padded than the seats in the economy section. They have big armrests on each side, so you're well separated from your neighbor. Premium economy on Air New Zealand is in a 2—3—2 configuration, while regular economy is 3—3—3.

I had chosen the first row of the premium economy cabin. While it seemed like a good choice on paper, I don't actually think that was the best decision. There was tons of legroom, far more than the other rows. However, there was nowhere other than overhead to store anything, and both the tray table and the TV screen had to be pulled out from the arm rest instead of being built into the seat in front. That made the upper part of my body feel more confined, and it was particularly slow if the flight attendants were slow in clearing things.

Each of the premium economy seats was supplied with a bigger pillow than in the economy section, a think blanket (which was completely unnecessary on this flight), better quality headphones than in economy, and an amenity kit that included a pair of Air New Zealand socks, a set of ear plugs, manuka honey hand lotion, a toothbrush made of wood with organic bristles, and a wooden Air New Zealand branded ballpoint pen. There's nothing in the amenity kit I wanted or needed, but they do make some interesting souvenirs.

While I didn't really venture further back, my sense was that this flight was full to capacity. I know every premium economy and business premier seat was filled, and I think that accounting for the skycouches economy was also full. I know a number of passengers had been rebooked to this flight from the cancelled San Francisco flight. Presumably they were headed somewhere other than either of those cities and would be connecting on United. I assume that they tried to connect people whose destination was San Francisco on flights through Los Angeles or Honolulu. Air New Zealand does have flights to all those cities (as well as Houston and New York), as well as a code-share partnership with United, so they can rebook if space is available. All those people took a while to board, and I gather that some kept standing in the aisles. The head flight attendant said rather tersely, "We ask that all our guests please be seated, so we can shut the door."

Having taken both the skycouch and the premium economy services, I now know that the skycouch offers privacy and a better option to sleep (essentially a lie-flat bed). Premium economy offers better food, more comfortable seats, and rather pretentious service. Business premier appears to combine both of those into a single ticket, and it's priced accordingly.

The cabin crew on this flight was entirely male. I recognized three of them from the flight I'd taken the other way, but the others appear to be new. Apparently the crews are based in Auckland. They fly to an overseas destination, stay two nights there, and then fly back to Auckland. By contrast, most of the domestic crews just shuttle back and forth between the same cities all day long. The crew members bid individually for the destinations they want, but they require a Chinese-speaking attendant on flights to Asia, a Spanish-speaking attendant on flights to the U.S., and a French-speaking attendant on flights to Canada. I learned this from overhearing a response to another passenger's question.

While we were waiting to take off, the flight service manager (i.e.: head flight attendant) went through and talked with everybody in business premier and to the frequent flyer passengers in premium economy. He rather conspicuously skipped the other premium economy people, myself included. He would come back again toward the end of the flight to ask those same people if they had enjoyed their flight.

The service began before the safety video, when the attendants distributed hot towels in premium economy. The business premier passengers got a glass of wine with the towel, but we had to wait for drinks. Amusingly, while trying to put towels passengers had used away to be washed, one of the attendants knocked over an entire tray of clean towels. I think that affected our service, because we didn't get another towel at the end of the flight.

At 8:40pm the pilot came on and announced that we were waiting for a tow driver to push our plane back. He then added, "and they're loading a couple of bags they found lying around." While it's good those bags were loaded, you do wonder why they were just lying around. We finally did push back at 8:50, and we were in the air at 9:05pm. The captain assured us, though, that this should not affect our arrival. They schedule about an hour less for the eastbound flight than the westbound one, but in fact the flying time is nearly two hours less. On flights as long as Air New Zealand flies, the jet stream really makes a difference.

I was surprised to discover that this flight was equipped with wi-fi, when the flight the other direction hadn't had that feature. Apparently the airline is in the process of updating all their long-haul jets to include wi-fi, with the installation scheduled to be done by the end of this year. Another surprise is that Air New Zealand's wi-fi is free, while other airlines charge as much as \$20 a flight. Unfortunately something went wrong with out wi-fi toward the middle of the flight, but a little wi-fi is better than none.

They played that same Maori history safety video while we taxied. That was a bit weird sitting in the front row of the section, because I was told to pull out the TV screen to watch the safety video and then to immediately store it for take-off.

When the bell went off that we'd reached the critical altitude, the attendants jumped into action with a drink service. In premium economy theoretically unlimited alcohol is free, though no one was abusing that like they did in the lounge. I did have a rum and diet Coke to start things off this evening. The attendant poured rum into a real glass cocktail cup and then gave me a can of pop to mix with it.

Dinner was served at 10:15pm, and it was definitely a bigger spread than I'd had in the economy skycouch. We had been given a paper menu with the various options. Dinner for everyone included a cold chicken and carrot appetizer, a choice of various bread served with both olive oil and a tube of Canary Squeez brand squeezable butter. There was also a package of rice crackers and a packet of Canary Cheez to put on them. For the main course I chose roast chicken in a brown butter sauce with an eggplant and white bean side dish. There were also beef and salmon options, and at least one person had pre-ordered a vegan entrée. Finally there was a vanilla mousse with mango gelée and raspberry sauce. The portions were quite large,

and everything was excellent. It was served on china dishes with stainless cutlery—none of the wood stuff in premium. The only real issue with dinner was that the tray table wasn't big enough to hold everything, even though it was larger than the ones in economy.

Something that stood out on this flight was that they didn't serve a midflight sandwich like they had on the way to Auckland. That meant it was nearly twelve hours between meals. They did stack some fruit, bags of chips, and Cookie Time packets on a counter across from the toilets, but nothing substantial.

I alternated between napping and reading from Prince Harry's autobiography, which I eventually finished. Mostly on purpose, I didn't try for extended sleep. I wanted to be tired when we got to Chicago so my body would be ready for night. It was also notably harder to sleep in premium economy than in the skycouch, so brief naps were just easier to do.

On the flight to Auckland I noted that it was basically dark the whole time. That was not the case this time, but it might as well have been. The 787 has electronically dimmable cabin windows, and they had them set to dark all the way across the Pacific and through much of the American West. I noticed when I went to the restroom and passed the main door (where the window wasn't dimmed) and I saw that it was light out when we were still between Hawaii and Mexico.

Speaking of the restrooms, Air New Zealand tends to decorate their toilets with a theme. On this flight, at least in the premium economy section, the toilets had a library theme. They were wallpapered with what looked like shelves of books. If you checked the titles, they all had some sort of a flying theme, which a nice touch.



Inside a restroom on Air New Zealand 787

They basically do this entire flight on Auckland time, and on that schedule it makes sense that the other meal we were served was breakfast. It would have been about 9am Saturday when they served breakfast. At that point we were already over the Central Time Zone, so it was about 4pm on Friday. Breakfast took forever to serve, mostly because they had almost too many choices. They started at the back of the premium economy cabin, so by the time they got to me the only option left for a main course was scrambled egg with that fatty New Zealand bacon, cooked cherry tomatoes, and a weird slimy mushroom. The other option would have been banana hotcakes with custard sauce and sausage. Then we had to choose from two types of cereal (I chose muesli) which the attendant poured from a bag into a china bowl, fruit salad or a piece of fruit (I had the same fruit salad I'd already had multiple times on this trip), and a croissant with numerous choices of toppings (I had butter and strawberry jam). We got to choose what type of three milks (dairy, soy, or almond) we wanted on cereal (I surprised the attendant by having mine dry), and there were also numerous beverage to choose among (for me orange juice and some coffee that had an incredible amount of sediment in it). It took quite a bit of time to serve each individual passenger, and that made breakfast a lengthy meal.

The map on the TV screen edged closer to the destination. At 4:45pm Central Daylight Time (9:45am tomorrow New Zealand time) we were over the Kansas City area. Not long after that they cleared the breakfast dishes, and we began our descent. The head flight attendant did the purple lolly service and chatted up the frequent fliers again. While he was visiting with other passengers I found out that the couple across the aisle from me were transferring in Chicago and flying on to Ireland. Auckland to Dublin on United is already quite a marathon—and apparently they'd actually begun their flight on the South Island.

We landed at O'Hare at 5:47pm and proceeded to taxi for quite a while. At 5:55 we parked on the airport apron, and the pilot announced that we were waiting for our assigned gate to clear. Evening is when international flights mostly depart O'Hare, and our arrival had to wait for an outgoing flight to leave. We didn't actually leave the apron until 6:18pm.

It was amusing to turn my phone out of flight mode and see not only the clock but also the calendar change. The whole time I'd been in New Zealand the calendar had been telling me the wrong dates and times for events I'd entered back in Iowa. Suddenly everything was back to normal.

The weirdest thing about this flight is that it arrives at the destination before it leaves the origin. While we'd been in the air fourteen and a half hours, the local time when we touched down was almost three hours earlier than when we took off. Crossing the date line really is weird.

We finally reached the gate at 6:23pm, but then we had another delay. Apparently there were mechanical problems with the airbridge (what I've always called a jetway), so it wasn't until 6:35 when we were finally able to leave the plane. Sitting at the front of premium economy, I was actually one of the first to leave, with only the business premier passengers ahead of me. There's only 18 of them, six rows in a 1—1—1 configuration.

While I'm sure there must be a few gates at international airports that are actually close to customs facilities, I don't think I've ever been at one that was. Since most international arrivals are in the morning, when we finally did get to customs the line was minimal. The formalities were also easy, at least for me. I was asked if I had any food, to which I responded with the bag of potato chips I'd bought at Newmarket. The officer stamped an orange piece of paper and sent me on my way.

It intrigued me that when I went up to the customs officer, he greeted me by name before even looking at the passport. Obviously there's some sort of reader in the waiting area that recorded the information from the chip on my passport. That's fascinating, since the machines you have that scan your passport when you check in for a flight are very finicky and seem to take forever to register.

I actually went through customs before claiming my luggage. They'd begun removing bags from the plane while we were waiting for the jetway, so there was no wait at all at the claim carousel. Anyone who got a stamped orange paper at customs just gave it to an attendant at the exit door and was on their way. Presumably the others had to go elsewhere for additional screening. After customs I found the inter-terminal people mover and made my way to Terminal 3. From there I made my way down to the tunnel that connects terminals and walked to the O'Hare CTA station, which is under a parking ramp between Terminals 2 and 3. I finally boarded a train at 7:15pm, and we left O'Hare station at 7:20.

The most noteworthy thing on this trip was a group of college-aged black girls who boarded at the Cumberland park-and-ride along the Kennedy Expressway. To say they were loud would be an extreme understatement. They were clearly going into the city to party on Friday night, and they wanted everybody in Illinois to know it. I suffered through them for about half the trip, until they finally got off at Chicago and Milwaukee. That choice of exit stations struck me as odd, because there aren't really any clubs in that area, and the people who live there are almost all white yuppies. I suppose they must have transferred to a bus and made more people suffer through their loud conversation.

Both Google Maps and the CTA's Ventra app suggested that the most efficient way to get to my hotel was to transfer at Grand (just one stop beyond Chicago, where the girls got off) and take bus 8 south from there. On most trips that would be true. The problem today was that I had bulky luggage, and Grand is not an accessible station. So I continued all the way through the Loop and finally got off at UIC—Halsted, which is about two miles straight south of Grand, in the middle of the Eisenhower Expressway. The expressway median stations all have ramps and handicap-accessible turnstiles at their exits. (They're the big reason Chicago has a far higher percentage of accessible stations than cities like New York and Boston.) I was able to wheel my luggage out to the street. Had a bus arrived soon, I'd have transferred to it. I could tell from the Ventra app that walking to the hotel would be quicker, though, so that's what I did.

I finally got to the Crowne Plaza—West Loop at about 8:35pm. This was the one hotel on the trip that was free, a point booking through IHG, the company that owns Holiday Inns. It surprised me a lot that I wasn't asked for an ID or for a credit card that might be used for incidentals. I just gave the guy at the desk my name, and almost immediately he handed me the keys to Room 1031.

The Crowne Plaza is a cement slab from the '60s that looks like a public housing project. The rooms are definitely showing their age, but mine was clean and pleasant. While this is a nice hotel with lots of different services available, I never left the room. I spent a bit of time working on the travelogue with more familiar TV going in the background. Then, at the end of a doubly long day, I finally went to bed.

SATURDAY, JUNE 17

chicago, illinois to algona, iowa

I was up before six this morning. This was another hotel where it seemed to take forever for the water to heat up. Once it did, I had a decent shower, though. I also enjoyed some coffee from the Keurig machine in the room, which was oddly weaker than the instant coffee and kettle water I'd gotten used to in New Zealand.

I'd barely unpacked anything from my luggage, so getting ready went quicker than it often does. At about 6:30 I went down to the desk and handed in my keys and was off.

Again I checked the Ventra app to see when a bus was coming. It showed there would be a fifteen-minute wait (not really unexpected early on a Saturday), so I just walked the half mile or so over to Union Station.

I got some more coffee and a couple of breakfast bars in the Metropolitan Lounge and finished up yesterday's summary in the travelogue. At 7:20 they called train 381 (the Carl Sandburg) for boarding. Carl Sandburg and Illinois Zephyr are really just two different names for the same train. The name changes depending on the time of day each train runs. The station was pretty dead this morning, and it appeared the train was as well. Only three other passengers boarded in business class, and the coach section didn't look much busier.

They've added new recorded announcements to the Amtrak trains in Illinois. At the start of the trip they played the wrong recording, though. They said this would be the Lincoln Service, which heads down to Springfield and St. Louis. We did round the bend to follow the Burlington Northern tracks west, though, confirming I was on the right train.

On Midwestern trains the business class section makes up half of the café car. This morning the café attendant was training a new employee. The girl looked terribly confused. I'm sure she'll do fine. Most parts of the job are common sense, but there are a bunch of details to keep straight. Business class passengers are entitled to free drinks, so I got the coffee and cranberry juice I always get on Amtrak. I also had a product they called omelet bites. They were little slabs of cooked egg, bacon, and cheese—strange, but not bad. It felt kind of weird forking over a U.S. \$5 bill, something I hadn't used in a month. Greenbacks look so plain compared to almost every other currency in the world.

Looking out from the train it appeared they've gotten plenty of rain while I was gone. If anything, parts of central Illinois appear to have been flooded. Hopefully the rain remains adequate through the summer.

We got to Princeton right on time at 9:25am. I was pleased to see my car was right where I'd left it and even more pleased that it started right up. It was 80 degrees already when I got to Princeton, a bit change after having highs in the mid teens Celsius (low 60s Fahrenheit) or sometimes even lower for the past month. After wanting a winter coat on the South Island and a jacket on the North Island, now I wanted the least possible covering.

I left Princeton right at 9:30 and headed west on Interstate 80. It occurred to me as I made my way along that the best thing about driving in America is our rural interstate system. I-80 is basically the equivalent of New Zealand's state highway 1. It runs all the way across the country and connects many of the most important cities. The interstate is always at least four lanes wide, though—even in rural areas. New Zealand does have some motorway sections, but they end just outside of the cities. There's plenty of traffic (including campers and double-bottom trucks) in New Zealand, and on a two-lane road there's not a lot of opportunities to pass. Even the motorway sections aren't that good. I was reminded of them when I went through the elevated stretch of I-380 in Cedar Rapids. Auckland, Wellington, and Dunedin had similar roads—built on the least land possible, with lots of tight twists and ever-changing speed limits. There was plenty of traffic on my trip today, but having adequate lanes made it easier to drive than it would have been down under.



Welcome to Iowa sign on Interstate 80 in Davenport

The landscape in Illinois and Iowa is completely different from New Zealand. Much of New Zealand is farm country, but it's tiny fields and range land set among rolling hills. Even the trees are different. Obviously they're different species, but they grow differently as well. North American trees tend to be fuller individually, but more spread out in forest areas. The trees in New Zealand had very separated branches normally growing from a long, slender trunk with tiny leaves that let through a lot of light when a tree just grew alone. In forests, though, many trees would grow together filling in all the gaps. So the forests seem denser, but the individual trees are smaller in New Zealand.

Another thing I observed while driving home today was that overall business buildings in America (stores, factories, and warehouses) look nicer than those in New Zealand. A lot of Kiwi businesses look run-down and tacky. I think the main reason why our buildings look better is that here things have to be built to withstand winter weather, so they look sturdier and more permanent. In New Zealand you can patch a few leaks and call it good. There's also more competition between businesses in America, which may provide a motivation to make the buildings more eye-catching. In New Zealand there's usually only one or two companies operating in each sector, and I think they may see things as "take it or leave it". At any rate, while the homes in New Zealand are usually fine, many of the businesses have almost a third world look to them.

My first stop on the way home was in Cedar Rapids. I picked up a few groceries at Aldi (a store Australia has, but not New Zealand). Then I had lunch at the Taco Bell on Blairs Ferry Road. The restaurant now lets you order only through a kiosk, and part of the process asks how many of various types of sauces you want. I do like lots of sauce, so I selected 3 of the most common heat levels. They ended up giving me a huge handful of each type of sauce, more than twenty packets in all. The prices in Cedar Rapids were definitely higher than they were in Wellington, particularly once tax was added on. American restaurants serve their food much more efficiently, though, and they strike me as cleaner than the fast food places in New Zealand.

I stopped again in Charles City. This was mostly because I needed to use the restroom. However, when I saw on the pump that Kwik Star had E-15 gas for \$2.94⁹ a gallon, I filled up as well. The weird thing was that their sign advertised the price of standard unleaded—\$3.49⁹. That's a huge difference in price, and there was no indication on the sign that a cheaper option was available.

I got home about 3:45pm. It was chilly in mid-May when I left, and I still had the blankets I put over the bedroom doors and the sliding door to the deck up. They were necessary in May, but now the apartment was hot and stuffy. I'll need to get those down fairly soon.

The first thing I did was to kick off the shoes I'd worn all through the trip. These were solid black Nike sneakers, and while they looked nice and their all-leather design was good in wet weather, they had a problem I've found with every pair of Nikes I've ever owned: they squeaked. I'm not sure why this was, but throughout the whole trip I was embarrassed by making a squeaking noise wherever I went. It was nice to be done with that.

I spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking and discovering a couple of things I'd forgotten I got (like the honey I bought at the Warehouse, which I probably should have told the customs officer about). On any trip most of what I save is stupid stuff like product packages. They bring back fun memories, though. I basically had a suitcase full of paper and plastic at the end of this trip, and over the next couple of weeks I'll slowly put that into scrapbooks. Every now and then I'll look through those relics from earlier trips; it's fun to relive things that way.

IN CONCLUSION

the i.a.q.

Since I included shots of the other banknotes at various places in the travelogue, I included the \$20 and \$50 at right. I think they're lovely bills, and I certainly became familiar with them on this trip. As with euros and pounds, the physical size of the notes increases with the value, so the \$5 is rather small and the \$50 is significantly larger than American bills. On the fifty you can see a marae, the Maori meeting house that's not supposed to be photographed. In addition to the current versions, there are older plastic notes in circulation also, including one with a portrait of the Queen from about 1970. Presumably King Charles III will be on the twenty when they produce the next series, but there doesn't appear to be any rush to get that out. All the notes include holograms of local birds in the corner and intricate engravings of those same birds in their native habitat on the back.



New Zealand \$20 banknote

Having included those, I should mention that while I'd read that New Zealanders prefer using cards to cash, for small merchants it's quite the opposite. Whenever I'd buy something at a "dairy" or similar place, the proprietors were always delighted when I paid in cash. It made me wonder if some or even all of their cash income doesn't end up off the record for tax purposes.

... And now on to some questions I've put at the end of many of these travelogues, and perhaps one or two new ones as well.

DID YOU LIKE NEW ZEALAND? IS IT YOUR FAVORITE OF THE COUNTRIES YOU'VE VISITED?

Yes to the first question; no to the second. New Zealand is a beautiful place, and I'm certainly glad to have gone there. It's biggest strength is how many different landscapes are packed into a relatively small area. It's amazing how much you can see in a comparatively short trip. I wouldn't say New Zealand is my favorite country, though. That honor would probably go to Canada, which is so much larger than almost everywhere else I've been that it's hard to beat. New Zealand is certainly way up there, though. Once you go to the trouble of getting there, it's an easy place to visit, and it really is lovely.



New Zealand \$50 banknote

(Sir Apirana Ngata on the fifty was a prominent Maori politician.)



Reverse of some New Zealand banknotes

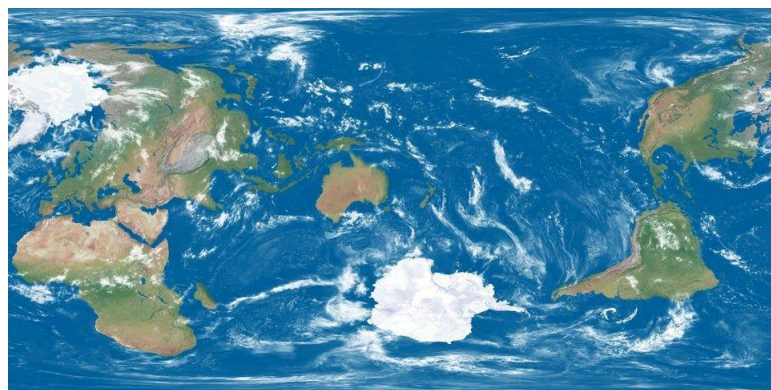


New Zealand coins

(The coins all have Queen Elizabeth on the front, and they vary in size, as described early in the travelogue.)

WHAT DID YOU LIKE THE MOST? THE LEAST? I always get a laugh out of these questions when I go back to revise my travelogues years later, because over time the memories are often quite different. However, the two things that stand out most positively at the moment are the Northern Explorer train across the North Island and the "flight-seeing" trip from Milford Sound back to Queenstown. On the negative side, I'd probably just put all the dingy business strips that make up so much of New Zealand. Residential and rural New Zealand are nice, but the commercial and industrial areas really aren't.

WHAT ARE NEW ZEALANDERS LIKE? There really is no one answer to this question, because New Zealand (especially in its major cities) is every bit as diverse as the United States or Canada. That said, I found the Kiwis more quiet and reserved than I expected, more like stereotypical Brits than Aussies. It's also a place that almost goes out of its way to be egalitarian. Nobody cares what someone else's job is, and no one is assumed to be better or worse than anyone else. While there certainly are rich and poor people here, wealth is generally not ostentatiously displayed, and there's a sense of obligation to care for those in need.



World map centered on New Zealand

the crime rate is minimal. People don't worry about crime like they seem to in America. It was refreshing to be in a place where kids still played outdoors and even took public transportation on their own.

I read before this trip that New Zealand is a place that works to live rather than lives to work, and I could definitely see that. With very rare exceptions, you won't find 24/7 business here. Indeed, shops often don't open until ten, and they close at five. The work day is shorter than in most western countries, and regulations require that workers be given substantial breaks throughout the day. Going along with that is a sense that work doesn't need to be done perfectly; it just needs to be good enough. That's very different from the continuous improvement demanded of most American workers. That is, of course, what's behind the shoddy construction and indifferent service I've referred to, but it also means Kiwis overall are less stressed than most people in the developed world.

Adding to the low stress environment is the fact that New Zealand is one of the safest places in the world. While there are occasionally serious crimes (like the mosque attack), overall

New Zealand is of course a very isolated country, but overall the Kiwis seem quite content with that. While nearly half of the country was born somewhere else, I didn't get any sense that people felt they were being invaded by foreigners nor that New Zealand should be responsible for solving all the problems of the world. New Zealand is about as far from everywhere as you can get, and for the most part they seem rather content with that.

New Zealanders also seem to be somewhat like myself on the social—political spectrum. They tend to be quite conservative in their own lives, but they're very tolerant of what others do. It's one of the least religious countries in the world (right up there with Scandinavia), and they make a point of keeping religion and politics separate. There are churches everywhere (especially Presbyterians and Mormons), though, and most of them seem actively involved in projects that help people like food banks and day care.

HOW DO THE MAORI FIT INTO NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY? That's really hard to say. In a country that has no clear majority ethnic group, they're one of many minorities. In modern times they're not really oppressed in any way, and in fact the government has made a big push to advance the Maori language and culture. That said, they're among the poorest people in the country, almost all working in blue-collar jobs in construction and manufacturing. Much like black Americans, the way Maori kids dream of fame is through sports. Kiwi English has borrowed a number of Maori words and there are signs in Te Reo Maori all over the place, but everybody (including the Maori themselves) seems to speak English in their day-to-day lives. There's a Maori TV channel in New Zealand, but almost all its programming is in English. Every formal greeting by a public official or a TV announcer begins and ends with Maori words and calls the country "Aotearoa", but I have a feeling those are the only native words most people (including most Maori) know.

WHY IS NEW ZEALAND SO OBSESSED WITH INVASIVE SPECIES AND PREDATOR CONTROL? My brother Paul asked me this question. I must say I wondered about it myself at times, but here's what New Zealanders would tell you. Because of the country's isolation, it developed many species—particularly flightless birds—that never existed anywhere else on earth. The nickname for New Zealand's people, Kiwis, comes from the unique native bird of that name. Before the Maori came to New Zealand the only mammals on the islands were bats, and the flightless birds thrived. The Maori brought rats with them, and later the British brought other invasive species that tended to attack the birds. Some flightless bird species went extinct, and others became seriously endangered. Even some birds that could fly were threatened by the comparatively new mammals.

In the late 20th Century as part of a broader environmental movement there rose a desire to preserve those things that made New Zealand unique. It was taken as an article of faith that the native species were inherently superior to introduced species. There are limits on that, though. New Zealanders are quite willing to trap and poison rats and other "disgusting" animals. However dogs and cats are also introduced animals that are dangerous to the native wildlife, and no one wants to get rid of them. Indeed, there has been some controversy over the predator traps because house pets have been killed or injured by them. So there is definitely some inconsistency, but the idea is to preserve the animals that were there before humans came to the islands.

WHAT FOODS DID YOU LIKE OR DISLIKE? My brother Steve actually asked me this. My least favorite was definitely the kumara chips, which I literally couldn't finish. I was also not a fan of the meat pies, which are supposed to be a Kiwi specialty. Finally, even though I'm a big bacon fan at home, I didn't care much for New Zealand's fatty, undercooked bacon.

On the other hand, there's a lot of great Asian and Middle Eastern food in New Zealand. Most of my favorite meals were in those categories. They also have excellent ice cream, and Whittaker's chocolate is outstanding. New Zealand is known for its wine, but I actually liked the beer and cider I had there better. They generally don't export New Zealand beer, but if they did I'd probably buy it from time to time.

WAS THIS AN EXPENSIVE TRIP? Sort of. The single biggest expense in visiting New Zealand is getting there, and for me that was paid for back in 2019, mostly with money from my sister's estate. If you time things absolutely perfectly, you can occasionally fly from the American West Coast to Auckland for right at \$1,000 round trip. It's at least \$500 more from further east in the country, and if you either don't time things to coincide with sales or chose to upgrade in any way (like the skycouch I had on the way there), you can easily add another thousand to the price. Once you're in New Zealand, domestic travel is cheap. Both the planes and buses were significantly less than equivalent trips would cost in America, and even the very tourist-oriented train rides weren't particularly expensive (though they definitely were more than Amtrak's lowest fares).

Besides getting there, the main thing that made this an expensive trip for me was that I stayed nearly a month. I had to pay for food and accommodation all that time, and that adds up. That said, the prices were actually less than what I was expecting. I'd read many places that New Zealand was an expensive country. It's certainly more expensive than a third world country, but overall I found it cheaper than the United States, Canada, or Europe. As an American, I loved that the quoted price was always the final price; there's no added tax and no tipping. The hotels I stayed in had base rates lower than equivalent places would be in the States, and by the time you add lodging tax to the American prices (which can be as high as 20% in some cities), the Kiwi hotels were an extreme bargain. I paid for much of the food and lodging with a bonus I got for having taught at Garrigan for forty years. The balance in my checking account is a lot less than it was a month ago, but I do feel I got good value for my money.

WHAT WILL YOU REMEMBER MOST? I end most of my travelogues with this question, and it's another place where the answers often seem ridiculous when I look back at them later. For now, though, I'm going to mention two things. First was how new the entire country is. At my church today there was a picture on the front of the bulletin celebrating our 165th anniversary. The oldest churches in New Zealand are about 25 years newer than that. New Zealand was the last major landmass on earth to be settled. The Maori didn't get there until nearly the time of the Renaissance, and permanent European settlement (and Christianity) wouldn't come until the era of Queen Victoria. Because of earthquakes, almost nothing that was built before the 20th Century still survives. That makes the place feel much different than almost anywhere else I've been. There are photos and sound recordings of most of the country's history, which is something that can be said about almost nowhere else on earth. It's weird to see a place where things people think of as "old" are so recent.

For something more specific to this trip, I keep coming back to the constantly changing scenery on that train trip across the North Island. New Zealand has just about every conceivable landform and climate type, and it's just amazing how quickly the landscape changes when you travel even short distances. In America you can travel 500 miles and still have more or less the same scenery. (I did that at the end of my trip, coming back from Chicago.) That distance would cover most of the length of New Zealand, and in it you couldn't count the number of different landscapes you'd see. It's really amazing just how much is packed into a relatively small space. That more than anything is what I think makes New Zealand a very special place.

