

Straying from the Flock

Travels in New Zealand

Dr. Alexander Elder



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*The only sure voyage of discovery would not be to visit strange lands
but to possess other eyes, to behold the Universe through the eyes of another.*
—Marcel Proust

To my favorite fellow travelers—Miriam, Nika, and Danny

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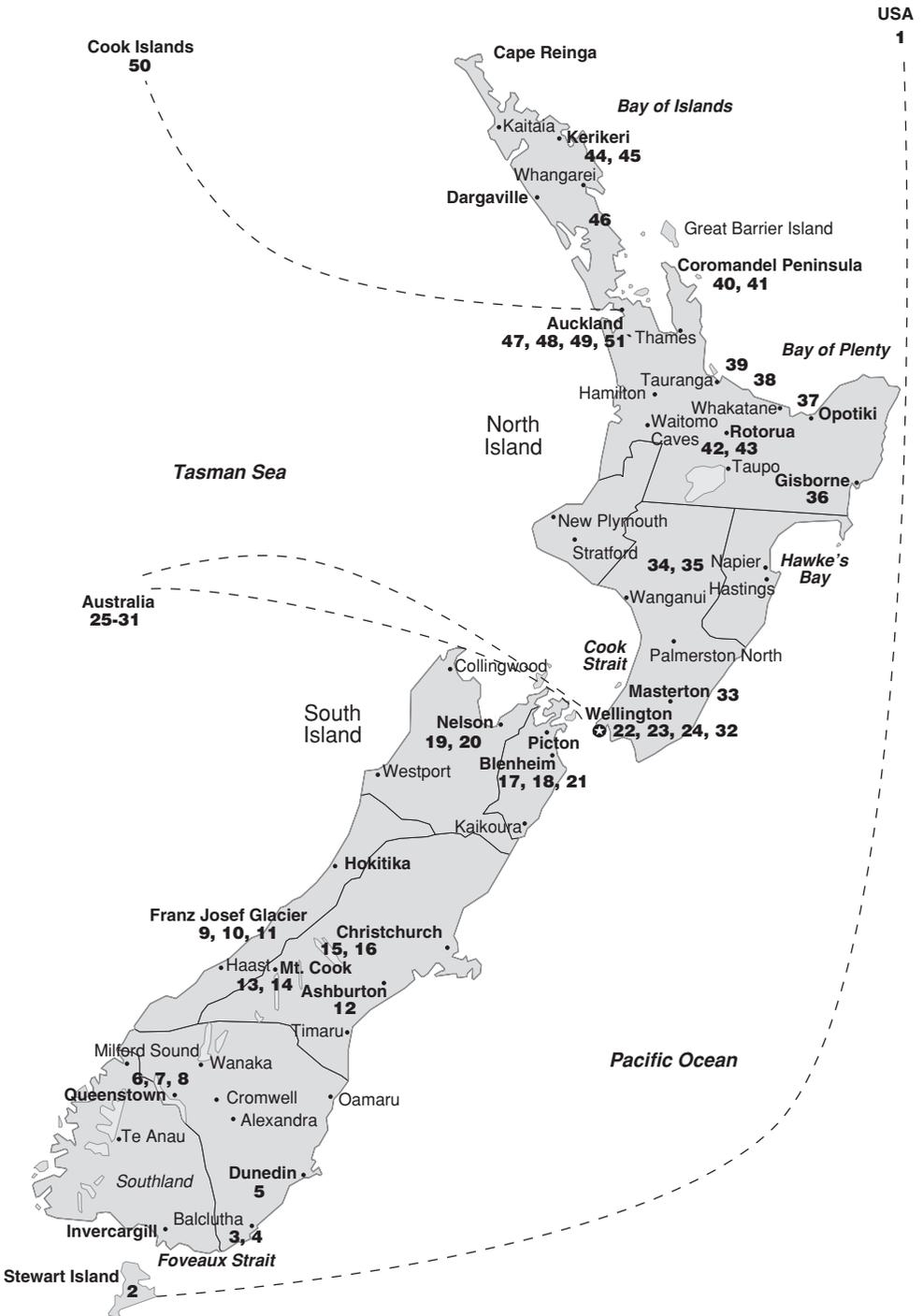
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Each number on this map identifies the location for the relevant chapter of the book.

Your Ticket to New Zealand

It is time to fly to New Zealand again. I planned this roadtrip from the bluffs at its southern tip to the cape at its northern end, where the Pacific Ocean crashes into the Tasman Sea. I'll be on the road for two months, taking quick side trips to Australia and the Cook Islands. My friends are waiting, their houses open to me.

I discovered New Zealand in the mid-1990s, around the time of my divorce, and this affair has been going on ever since. I had been telling my children and friends about New Zealand for so long, it became almost inevitable I should write this book. *Straying from the Flock* has helped me weave together all the strands of knowledge about New Zealand—its history and geography, sport and travel, business and culture, and above all its people with their quirky ways of life on faraway islands in the midst of the great ocean.

The land area of New Zealand is roughly equal to that of Italy or England, but while those countries have over 50 million people each, there are only about three million souls in New Zealand. There are more sheep running free on green pastures than there are people. It was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote. It is a sportsman's paradise where you can ski down the side of a volcano in August, swim in the South Pacific surf in January, and hike, fish, and hunt throughout the year.

But this book is not only about a country. It is also about the life and times of an aging baby boomer, single again after a lifetime of marriage, professionally established, with grown children, free to travel, and intensely curious about the life around him.

Now, as I go through my to-do list before the trip, I turn to you and say, "Come! I have enough frequent flyer miles for another business class ticket. There is a car waiting, a country road, people to meet, sights to see. I was going to fly there alone. Let's go together! Will you come with me?"

Dr. Alexander Elder
New York, 2004

S E C T I O N

1

*The Far End
of the Earth*

As the plane took off from Los Angeles and headed west over the Pacific, I leaned back in a comfortable seat and ordered the first glass of wine. My thoughts drifted back to the final days of my previous visit to New Zealand—it was March, an early autumn in the Southern Hemisphere. Auckland’s harbor was dotted with islands where the ancient Maori built their fortified settlements on high volcanic hills. I had taken a high-speed catamaran to Waiheke Island, which used to be home to counterculture types who moved there to get away from it all and perhaps grow a little grass, but in recent years has emerged as one of the great wine centers in New Zealand. The island has 29 vineyards, and I was surprised to learn that the minimum size for a commercial vineyard is only five acres, although many are much larger.

I hopped off the ferry on a dazzling day—a hot sun in a cloudless sky, clean green water under the pier, blue water with whitecaps in the distance, groves of trees running up the hills, flags and canopies flapping in the breeze. A sleek blue motorcycle stood at the foot of the pier. I had to have it! I rented it and rode up the hill to the information center. A clerk booked me into a lodge in a vineyard whose restaurant was recommended by a friend.

The lodge crowned a hill in the middle of a vineyard, with panoramic views across rows of vines and spits of land interlaced by bays, all the way back to Auckland. The dining room was dominated by a table that could be set for ten—the maximum of four guest couples plus the owners. The pair that owned the lodge came out laughing, greeting me as I parked my motorcycle amidst expensive cars. Since a pickup at the ferry was included in the rate, I asked them to send a driver to pick up my flight bag at the motorcycle rental place and, while at it, bring an extra helmet—I was expecting a guest. I called Phyllis, my best friend in Auckland, and told her the place was exquisite: “Come, hop over for dinner.”

I rode cautiously down the gravel driveway, gunning the engine on the asphalt. The little Japanese engine, running at high RPMs, sounded like a sewing machine gone mad. Riding on Waiheke was a joy. The roads were narrow and twisty, but well marked. The vineyards gave way to sheep grazing on

hillsides and instead of asphalt there were smooth dirt roads, with gates between stations (ranches). I would ride up to a gate, hop off the motorcycle, open the gate, ride through, get off to close the gate, then continue to ride. Returning to the lodge in late afternoon, I sat on the terrace and read, listening to jazz, then drove down to meet the Auckland ferry.

Phyllis had recently celebrated her 71st birthday, but was so full of energy, curiosity, and laughter, that I often thought "If this is what 71 is like, take me there fast!" She stood on the front deck, craning her neck like a teenager. We hugged, and she pulled a helmet over her grey curls. I helped her buckle her helmet and rode to the lodge, leaning deep into the curves and tapping her knee to point out the views.

At the lodge, the owner opened a bottle of local Obsidian red and we drank it on the terrace, as we watched the setting sun. He emerged regally from the kitchen to report on his work in progress and served a plate of grilled mussels to tide us over. The four-course dinner, with more wine and cognac, was a poem. Halfway through the meal Phyllis leaned over to me and whispered, "May I come again tomorrow?" She went back to the ferry in a taxi, since the curves of the mountain road had grown much too sharp for motorcycle riding after we shared all that wine.

The next morning it rained, and after breakfast I listened to music in the library, leafing through an illustrated book on geography. I went for a jog, soaked in the hot tub, and went back to the library. The rain ended half an hour before Phyllis' ferry arrived. I gave the road 15 minutes to dry, took the second helmet and shot down to the pier. "I was so happy to see you standing there with the helmets," she said, clinging to me as we went through hairpin turns. "Riding is so much more fun than taking a taxi." After a gourmet dinner we lingered over cognac, and Phyllis had to tear herself away from the chocolate cake with berries when a taxi arrived to take her to the last ferry.

The next morning the sun was out. There was an amazing breakfast of fruits, jams, homemade cereals and breads, eggs, coffee, and tea. I ate more than I should have, but this was my last breakfast in the country. I had just enough time to ride to the far end of the island and walk through the World War II naval gun tunnels. Phyllis picked me up at the pier in Auckland. "I had breakfast with my granddaughter" she said. "When I told her about our dinners and the motorcycle, she said she envied me." I told her "Any time a teenage granddaughter envies you, it's a sign you're not living a bad life." I picked up my luggage at Phyllis' house, and she drove me to the airport.

1 *Travel without Reservations*

That spring I felt at loose ends. My latest book had gone to the printer, and I felt happy but also blue—that project, the new life which occupied most of my waking hours for the past three years—was out of my hands. The days felt mushy, melting into one another. I missed writing. On a flight home from a conference in New Zealand, I thought: “Let me fly back, drive from one end of the country to the other, and write a book about it.” A few weeks later I called United to buy a ticket to Invercargill, the southernmost city in New Zealand, and a return ticket eight weeks later from Auckland in the north.

New Zealand lies in the South Pacific. Its shape and size are like those of Italy, only the boot is turned upside down and broken into two islands, with a three-hour boat crossing between them. The distance from the Bluff to the Cape—from the southern tip of the South Island to the northern tip of the North Island is under 1,300 miles, but because the country is so narrow, almost any point is within 40 miles of the sea. Since it lies in the Southern Hemisphere, the south is cold (closer to the Antarctic) and the north warm (closer to the equator). A northern exposure gets the sun, a southern exposure the cold wind. The seasons are reversed—July and August are the winter months, January and February the height of summer. The school year starts in February and ends in December.

When I told my friends in New Zealand that I was going to come in mid-July and stay through early September, several said it was crazy to come in winter. I persisted, and that decision worked out extremely well. The winters are very mild in New Zealand, and some days were so sunny and warm that I could wear a shirt outdoors, adding a sweater in the evening. Most tourist attractions

were empty, and I found myself alone in stunning national parks that are filled in the summer.

In the middle of July, as a heat wave hit New York, I packed ski clothes and took a taxi to Kennedy airport. In Los Angeles I changed planes and flew for 12 hours across the Pacific to Auckland. Changing to Air New Zealand, I flew down to the colder South, where I could do a bit of skiing before driving up north. A year earlier I had returned from New Zealand only about 30 hours before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. This time I wanted to return to New York in time for the observance of the first anniversary.

I spent only one night in a hotel in New Zealand, using instead its excellent system of farmstays and homestays. Staying in locals' homes helped put me on the inside track. I had booked only my first night's stay in advance and improvised the rest of the trip, making up plans as I went. Most places are empty in winter, so locals are happy to see a rare visitor and show him or her around. In summer, good places get booked early. One homestay owner told me he earned 90 percent of his rental income in just three months, December through February.

Independent travel demands taking care of many practical details—tickets, accommodations, meals, cars, sightseeing, all with enormous ranges of options. A section in the back of this book, “The Practical Traveler,” lists some of my favorite choices. I didn't tell any of the commercial operators I was writing a book, and they treated me just like anyone else. I traveled just like any other single traveler, but kept my eyes open and noted everything I saw.

2 *Across the Ocean from the South Pole*

On the flight from Los Angeles to Auckland I was reminded that the population of New Zealand is surprisingly small for such a large country. Its land area equals that of England, but while the UK is home to 55 million people, New Zealand has just three million. Whenever you talk with someone, you often find mutual acquaintances. My seat mate insisted on telling me his life story (born poor in England, got lucky, made quite a bit of

money, quit while he was ahead, moved to New Zealand). Enjoying the anonymity of two strangers on a plane, he complained about his wife and kept talking about his transoceanic extramarital affair, which made him into a very frequent flyer. He even offered to fix me up with his girlfriend's girlfriend. When he went to the bathroom I turned off my reading light and put on noise-suppression earphones. When I woke up before landing in Auckland we talked again, and he asked whom I was going to see in New Zealand. Imagine his shock when he realized that one of my friends in a small New Zealand town was his neighbor! He blanched, then turned red, and swore me to eternal secrecy.

A sign at passport control in Auckland—"To deliver the best customs greeting experience in the Pacific"—plunges the visitor into the essential niceness of the country. A yellow line is painted on the floor at a distance of two feet from the luggage carousel, asking visitors to stand beyond it so that everyone can clearly see his or her luggage. New Zealanders' practicality and willingness to cooperate are apparent within your first minutes in the country. Phyllis was waiting for me at the gate—she came to say hello and take some of my luggage. We hugged, she loaned me a cell phone for the trip and drove me to the domestic terminal. Having a cappuccino with biscotti, I watched high dark windows light up as the sun rose across the green expanse of the fields. Seeing the blue bay beyond the runway, I finally knew I was in New Zealand.

Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand, is near the top of the North Island, and it took two Air New Zealand flights to get to Invercargill at the bottom tip of the South Island. Above South Island, the larger and less populous of the two, the pilot turned slightly to the left, showing a magnificent panorama of the Southern Alps on the right. Row after row of snow-covered peaks rose up from green valleys towards the sky. As the plane descended, I kept trying to see Mt. Hutt, where I had skied with my son on his first trip to New Zealand eight years ago, but couldn't make out the ski fields.

In the domestic terminals a rack of fresh magazines stood by each gate, allowing you to take what journals you liked and leave them on your seat upon arrival, where flight attendants collected them and put them back on the racks. I could not imagine such a system working in too many other parts of the world, where stealing freebies is the norm. The farther I got from New York, the smaller the planes were and the more homey the announcements. In a twin turboprop from Christchurch to Invercargill the captain announced "Hello,

ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. A few words about safety, and then enjoy snack service from Gary and Jimmy.” In the Invercargill airport I stopped in front of a sign that was a clear indicator I was near the edge of civilization: “Four minutes to the world’s most southern McDonald’s.”

My fifth and last flight of the day took me to Stewart Island, a speck of land occupied by a national park off the southern tip of South Island. There was no security gate and I sat next to the pilot. We flew south across the Foveaux Straight which eagle-eyed Captain Cook, making his first circumnavigation of New Zealand, had missed in bad weather, thinking Stewart Island was a peninsula. A grass airstrip was cut into the hillside, where small planes land uphill, shortening their run, and take off downhill, with heavier loads. At the bottom of the strip sat an empty shipping container that served as a waiting area in bad weather. The pilot unloaded our luggage and a waiting van took us into town, past a sign reading “Oban, population 350.” With seven passengers on the flight, our arrival had just increased the population by two percent. I was as far away from New York as I was going to get. A huge rubber band was stretched to the max. My journey through New Zealand had begun.

Doug, the lodge owner, waited for me in the car. Throughout this book I use real names, except for descriptions of two visits. Most people in New Zealand are on a first-name basis—young and old, high and low. A respectful friendly informality is the mode of the land. When Helen Clark, New Zealand’s prime minister, visited Stewart Island, she was introduced at a public meeting as Helen: “Good to have Helen here . . . And now Helen will tell us . . .” When one of her handlers chided the introducer that he should have used the last name, it was seen as uppity and out of touch.

Stewart Island was the only place on my journey where I made an advance reservation from New York. I had several preferences during this trip. I preferred farmstays to homestays, small places to large, and also any place whose write-up mentioned its owner’s local knowledge or interest in history. All factors being equal, I chose more upscale places. On Stewart Island I wanted to stay at a one-room homestay run by the captain of a local water taxi, a fifth-generation islander. I found him on the Internet and called, but he and his wife were off the island until mid-August, taking advantage of the slow season. As a backup, I made a reservation at the best lodge on the island, which had six rooms and a Web site with beautiful photos.

Oban, the only settlement on Stewart Island, appeared dowdy—cheap construction, mounds of trash, dead motor vehicles by the sides of houses. The

locals walked around with vacant faces, and when they recognized each other they made little hand signs, moving only their wrists. An outsider might as well be made of glass. We climbed to the lodge past its own trash heap. The rooms were small, with cheap plastic fixtures. This aloof island was absolutely unlike the New Zealand I knew from all my previous visits. The lodge had looked quite different on the Internet—whoever built Doug’s Web site must have had a great way with Photoshop. I told him my plans had changed and I would be staying for only one night instead of two. The ability to make quick decisions is essential for independent travel. I did not regret starting on Stewart Island, but was not going to linger there.

Doug sat me on the couch and spread a worn map on the coffee table to review the island’s history and geography. First came the sealers, then the gold diggers, then the lumbermen. The government planned to subdivide the island into lots of 80 to 100 acres to sell as farms, but the rugged nature held back development until finally the island was made into a national park. The village of Oban was zoned at a quarter acre per house, but some rare birds in the park required 100 acres each to survive. I started asking questions, but Doug told me not to interrupt since he was a person of vast knowledge. His lecture, interspersed with island jokes, sounded very well rehearsed.

I put on sneakers, grabbed a map, and went for a hike, stopping for a bite at the town hotel, which locals called “The place of culture and entertainment.” The menu was limited to beer, chips, and nuts, and I hit the trail without lunch. Small islands tend to go seedy all across the globe, with piles of cannibalized motor vehicles parked years ago by thrifty locals who use them for spare parts. Even in Singapore, so clean you could eat from the floor of the subway, there are abandoned vehicles on the tiny offshore island of Pulau Ubin. They rust, lying on their roofs, only a few miles from the streets where jaywalking could get you arrested. Stewart Island was no exception, and the yards and roadsides of Oban held large collections of long-dead cars and boats.

The trail was well maintained, signposted, and absolutely empty. Everything was green, but in the shade a white coating of frost covered green leaves. The day was windless, empty motor boats bobbed in quiet, sunny harbors. As the trail climbed into the hills, I stopped, feeling something strange. I realized that for the first time in months I was surrounded by total silence, except for the occasional cries of birds and the pulsing in my ears from a hard walk uphill. Strange plants surrounded the trail. One had the trunk of a small palm, ending

in a flat, broad, translucent canopy like a green disk, so sensitive it trembled even in the still air, while thick long straw sprouted from the center and hung all around the trunk. Coming down on the other side of the hill I could hear the surf, and soon faced the ocean. In the yards of houses lay batteries of lobster traps that looked like big black boxsprings.

Two girls coming up from the beach stopped to chat for a minute, unafraid of a stranger. The surf was loud, the tide was coming in. The waves, at the end of a long run from the Antarctic, hit the beach and broke into sheets of fine mist which drifted inland, lit by the setting sun. Rock pools had great piles of kelp, a brown leathery seaweed with green-yellow stalks as thick as arms. The Maori, the native islanders who arrived here before the Europeans, used to make pouches from dried kelp. On the walk back to Oban I passed an all-terrain vehicle with a helmet in the basket and a wetsuit on the handlebars, the owner nowhere in sight. Coming from New York, I was paying attention to such things. You see something like this and know you're not in a high-crime area. Doug told me the only reason to lock a house on the island was to protect the liquor cabinet.

The lodge looked like a \$30-a-night motel in Alabama, but it was at the top of every tourist book, which could happen only on Stewart Island. Doug put on a big smile but had a mean streak. A kaka bird that looked like a parakeet twitted about his terrace. Doug said it was endangered, and when I said it looked pretty happy to me, he drawled, "It'll quickly become endangered if it starts picking on my furniture." I worked on a computer in the lounge and watched the setting sun when Doug brought in his second guest—Gerd, a German professor. Doug sat him down, spread out his map on the coffee table, and lectured him on the island, repeating word for word what he had told me earlier that day. Gerd tried to ask questions, but Doug jerked his leash. It sounded like he was playing a tape, with the same jokes in the same places.

Facing the audience of two, Doug told us that he was an intellectual with a great sense of humor, while his wife was an esthetician. Margaret was a quiet, mousy woman who rarely left the kitchen. I knew that Oscar Wilde was an esthete and I used to be friendly with a professor of esthetics at the university, but I never met an esthetician. Doug explained that an esthetician was a person who made others beautiful—cut their hair and did their nails. I could not resist the temptation to ask Doug several questions about his background, pulling out of him that he used to be a butcher and failed at farming. Here was an Archie Bunker trying to impersonate Masterpiece Theater. Doug offered us drinks

before dinner, and this was my one and only time in New Zealand I could not finish a glass of wine; it was so sour that I switched to beer, a more reliable beverage in the Archie Bunker household. I wolfed down a seafood medley with sides of snow peas, baked tomato slices, and kumara, a sweet potato. It was 7 PM and I had had nothing to eat since an omelet on United at 5 AM and a cup of coffee in the Auckland airport.

I had great company. Gerd, a professor of near Earth space physics from Bonn, was a great lover of birds who had come to Stewart Island to photograph them. He looked like an exotic bird himself—long-legged and long-armed, with a beaky nose. He had many interests and passions. We spoke about space physics, and he told me that the Earth was not quite spherical, but 21 km shorter along the polar axis, wider at the equator because of its rotation. We talked about our children. We talked about his father whom he never met, killed in 1942 in Russia. He told me about the logistics of climbing Africa's Mt. Kilimanjaro, where I thought of going next winter with my kids. Meeting people like Gerd is one of the great attractions of travel. We never could have met in our everyday lives, but here, in a lodge at the southern tip of New Zealand, with nothing but the ocean between us and the South Pole, we were enjoying each other's company.

S E C T I O N

2

*The
South Island*

3 *The Wrong Side of the Road*

The next morning I watched an explosive red sunrise, then walked down to the harbor with Gerd. We had chartered a fishing boat for half a day. Gerd wanted to photograph sea birds; I came along for the ride and to split the NZ\$200 bill.¹ The wooden boat was boxy, with a coal-fired stove, and its fast-talking captain told us to call him Squisy. Short for Exquisite, must have been a local name. The sky became overcast and the waters turned choppy as we chugged out into the Foveaux Strait between the South Island and Stewart Island. Squisy loaned me a warm jacket and I stood right behind him, near a coal stove, peering at the horizon to prevent seasickness. Gerd went back to the open deck, snapping away at seabirds with his telephoto lens.

Squisy turned on the fish finder, a great device owned by most commercial fishermen in New Zealand. He stopped the engine, pulled out a deep plastic dish with pieces of fish and baited his hooks. He would throw a line overboard and immediately pull it back with one or two fish. Seagulls began to gather, and a few albatross flew in. They were a joy to behold—hovering above the white-caps, diving and rising, hardly ever flapping their wings, just catching the air this way and that. Soaring, the albatross could easily chase the boat at 30 miles per hour but flapping their wings they could overtake it. They glided at an angle, the lower wing just a few inches above the water, but no matter how choppy the waves, that wing always stayed a few inches above the foam. Their reflexes were

¹At the time of this journey, the New Zealand dollar was low, about 40 U.S. cents. NZ\$200 = US\$80.