

This is the account of our 2012 trip once we had left Perth. There is a selection of photos at the end of it and a map of New Zealand with details of our route and how long we stayed in each stop-over.

We hired a car for a week from 11th of November and found ourselves a holiday apartment in Mandurah, a coastal resort about an hour's drive south of Perth. We had stopped there briefly on our way to Fiona's wedding five years ago and knew it was a good holiday area. The apartment was in a holiday village complex which had a swimming pool and hot tub as well as a free outdoor barbecue area. It was just a couple of minutes drive from shops and the waterfront. The tourist office had free wifi, which we could also connect to sitting on a bench outside when it was closed in the evening, very handy. It has a modern marina with houses and apartments built alongside the water. Pelicans abound in the area as well as cormorant and other seabirds. We picked up a thermos flask and a couple of mugs so that when we went out for the day we could stop and have a coffee whenever we wanted. On one of the days we made a trip inland to get a different perspective of the area. On our last full day there, we went up to Fremantle, which we had visited on our previous trip. This time we took in a couple of the large markets which we had not had time for on our first visit. We drove back to Perth on the following day, the 18th November, but as it was a Sunday the car hire place closed at 11:30 am. As it was only a twenty minute taxi ride to the airport and our flight to Auckland was not until 5:50 pm we spent a few hours picnicking on a bench outside the airport building.

We landed in Auckland at 5:15 am and after clearing immigration etc were picked up by the car hire company and taken to their nearby depot. We had arranged the hire car well in advance for the whole of the visit, picking it up in Auckland in North Island and dropping it off at Christchurch in South Island. No extra charge for that and it included a free ferry crossing between the islands for the car, although we did have to pay as passengers. We got a budget deal which gave us an older but larger Nissan estate car for a similar price to a very small new car. We had two large suitcases, hand baggage plus a few extra bags for picnic gear etc so wanted something a bit more roomy. I had already calculated that it was quite a bit cheaper to hire a car and stay in motels than hire a camper-van and motels would probably be more comfortable. Our original plan had been to head straight to Waihi Beach, which is roughly two hours south-east from Auckland on the East coast. We were going to spend a couple of nights there with Dave and Anne, who had emigrated there after Dave had taken early retirement from the Revenue around the same time that I had. However many friends who had visited New Zealand had said that we must visit the Bay of Islands, which is about 5 hours north of Auckland. We decided we could squeeze that in, if we drove straight there after picking the car up from the airport and did not spend any time in Auckland itself. By the time we had collected the car and had some breakfast in a nearby café we were heading through Auckland in the morning rush hour. It was a long day and we stopped several times on the way, once at an i-centre (tourist information centre) where we booked two nights in Paihia in the Bay of Islands and a few times to get a bit of rest. By the time we got there at mid-afternoon it was looking a bit duller with some rain. We picked up information on boat trips round the bay and dolphin watching but when we woke up the next morning it was wet and everywhere was shrouded in mist. It stayed like that for the rest of the day so we abandoned the idea of the boat trip and tried to dodge the weather by visiting the nearby Waitangi Treaty Grounds, the site where the treaty between the British and the Maoris was signed. It was an interesting visit and worth having the Maori guide to describe this important piece of history during our mainly outdoor tour in torrential rain! Later we also visited a town called Russell, a short ferry ride across the bay. It is a pleasant place and the photographs I took, sheltered under an umbrella, make the weather look better than it actually was. One of its main claims to fame is that this is the location of the first licensed premises in the country, giving us an ideal excuse to enter The Duke of Marlborough Hotel, down a large glass of red wine and dry off a little while waiting for the return ferry.

The next day we headed south, back through Auckland although with no time to stop there, to Waihi Beach. We did call briefly at a couple of wineries for tasting and purchasing a few bottles to take to Dave and Anne's. We stopped for lunch at a somewhat quirky cafe that Dave had told us we would pass en route. The following day we drove around the Coromandel Peninsular with Dave acting as tour guide (Anne was at one of her painting workshops). The spectacular views along the coastline were well worth seeing and we found out so much more about the area from Dave's input. The following day we left for Rotorua, but not before Dave had taken us up for a flight over the area in the two-seater plane he has a half share in. To be precise it was two flights as being a two-seater he could only take us one at a time! That was something quite different and an experience to be remembered.

We arrived at Rotorua late in the afternoon and stopped at the i-centre in the centre of town where we booked a motel and a Maori cultural evening with traditional hangi meal. That left us with just an hour to find and check into the motel before the coach came to pick us up for the evening. We were taken to a Maori settlement where we were treated to a display of their culture before settling down to the meal. A hangi is where the food is placed in pits containing hot stones and covered over until cooked. The next day we visited a local park in Rotorua, which Dave had told us about, where there were some hot pools and mud baths. This is the town renowned for its smelly sulphurous odour, but in actual fact it wasn't too strong and you soon got used to it. We then carried on towards Lake Taupo stopping at a thermal site called Orakei Korako on the way. That was another of Dave's recommendations and an excellent one. It was a very interesting site accessed by a short boat ride across a river and well laid out with board walks throughout. It was quite hilly and we spent more than two hours there but did manage the full round tour. The colours were very interesting and I took plenty of photos and Val video.

When we arrived at Taupo that evening we realised why we had been wise to book what had appeared to be one of the few motel rooms available when we had checked online the day before. A big amateur cycle event was taking place that weekend and most accommodation was full of riders and their bikes. Some roads were closed in the town centre too but thankfully our motel was a little way out along the shore front. That evening we enjoyed a relaxing half hour in the motel's thermal outdoor swimming pool at 38°C which was most welcome. The next morning on our way out of Taupo and heading for Napier, we stopped at Huka Falls, a spectacular waterfall bright turquoise in colour.

Napier is an art-deco town, rebuilt in that style after a devastating earthquake in 1931. The motel we stayed in was modern but built in that same style. There is a headland close to Napier, called Cape Kidnappers where the largest accessible mainland gannet colony in the world is situated. This consists of 10,000 gannets but there are also three other much smaller colonies on nearby rocks. I had read about these but we had not realised that you had to pay to get to them, \$60 each (that is about £30, the exchange rate being around \$1.95 to the £) and that was after a modest \$5 pensioner discount. We decided to go and thoroughly enjoyed it. Access to the colony is through a large secure private estate with a very exclusive lodge hotel and golf course. It is apparently the haunt of celebrities who can at, a price, book the entire place for their own personal use. To get through to the gannets you have two options. The first, which we took, is to go on the trip with the one company that can take you through the estate and right up to the colony. The second, if the tide is right (which it wasn't the day we were there) is via a cheaper (\$32) tractor ride along the beach but that ends up with one hell of a climb up a cliff track to actually get to the colony. The estate

has also been set up as a nature reserve, with gated entrances and miles of secure fencing to prevent unwanted wildlife entering. A number of "at risk" species have been introduced into what is now a safe environment. The trip through the estate to the colony took almost 2 hours in a small 4-wheel coach over some narrow and steep tracks in places. Throughout the trip the driver kept up a very informative commentary on the surroundings and the history of the reserve. When we finally arrived at the biggest and most accessible of the four gannet colonies we were literally parked on a large grassy area near the cliff top with the gannets only a few metres away. The only thing between us and them was a low rail about a foot high which we were not allowed to cross. We stayed there for about an hour and were supplied with tea/coffee and biscuits as well. Needless to say we took loads of photos and video of the birds in the air and on the ground. Quite tricky to get them in flight but if you fire off enough shots you will end up with some decent ones. Gannets are a beautiful colour with peachy coloured heads and bright green stripes down their legs and onto their feet. They are big with a 2 metre wingspan but as we were not considered a threat to them they just ignored us.

We had made contact with Josie's friends in Wellington and had arranged to visit them as our next stop was to be two nights in Wellington. However when we phoned them we discovered that the day we were going there was also the day of the "Hobbit" premiere. As a result we spent half an hour in the i-centre in Napier until they eventually they found us a motel with a vacancy, in a seaside resort called Paraparamau some 50Km North of Wellington on the West coast. The motel was fine and there was a great bakery over the road from it which did some really good pies and sandwiches. The town itself though was dead. The first evening there we ate at a restaurant recommended by the motel owner. It was a carvery run by a family of expats. They were very friendly and had been there over 23 years. The food was good and excellent value for money but it was about the only place open in the town after 4:30pm and we were the youngest customers in there by far. It was a popular place and most of these other customers were obviously regulars as they and the owners all seemed to be on first name terms with each other. The next day we spent in Wellington about a one hour drive away. We parked at the top of the cable car station and took a ride down into the town. Although we did not have too much time there we saw the impressive parliament buildings and grounds and passed many shops that Val (not me) was disappointed not to have time to enter! We had a pleasant evening and meal with Josie's friends too. They live in an amazing house which they built at the top of the plot of land on which their old house stands. They split the plot and sold the old house at street level, retaining a drive width on which they park their car and from where you climb a very steep and long, unpaved, zig-zag footpath up the side of a hill to the new house with views out over a valley. We could even see as far as South Island from their dining area. The following day we were booked on the 2:30 pm ferry to South Island, a good job we had not booked an earlier one given how far out of Wellington we were staying. We had time to stop at a couple of places along the coast on the way in and also to go to the top of Victoria Peak which gives fabulous 360° views over the city and harbour. When we arrived at the docks we were told that the ferry was running an hour late.

We landed on South Island on the 29th November after a three hour crossing via the fiord of Marlborough Sound. It was very cold and windy on deck as we tried to take in what should have been splendid views, although for us it was rather grey. A couple of short breaks in the cloud allowed for photos which make the weather look better than it generally was. We got to our motel in Nelson around 8 pm, not a bad run and fortunately someone on the ferry advised us not to take the 'short' route we had planned from the map because it was very narrow and winding and was a really slow road. We pottered around Nelson town centre the next morning and had a ride around the surrounding area in the afternoon. The following day we set off towards the West coast and Greymouth. The first and greater part of the journey was inland and we had our first views of snow-capped mountains. We reached the coast around mid afternoon and by 5pm we had reached the Punakaiki Pancake Rocks and Blowhole. I had found out a little about them when researching for the trip but they covered a much larger area and were much more interesting than I had expected. It is an area of limestone rocks made up of very thin horizontal layers which have eroded over time to produce weird and wonderful shapes. They lie adjacent to the main road in a well designated enclosed area with hard surfaced paths and viewing points. There was no entry fee either and we spent more time there than we had expected to. Probably not a bad thing as Greymouth lives up to its name. Not the sort of place we could imagine spending more than a night in, en route to somewhere else. We found an Indian restaurant, a bit basic and more like a café yet with prices similar to other more up-market places we had come across elsewhere. The food was OK but nothing to write home about.

The next day was somewhat on the grey side too with low cloud along the coast. We had initially planned to stay at one of the glacier towns along this coast but decided instead to just view them in passing and had already booked a motel at a place called Haast which was where the road turned South and away from the coast. That effectively gave us an extra night later in the trip. It turned out to be a good move because of the weather. Although we did get a view of the Fox Glacier, we could not get that close without a long walk, and the mist kept rolling down and hiding it. A full zoom photo shot of the glacier revealed people walking on it who were not visible to the naked eye. The motel we had picked in Haast (there were only two) was not the best choice. The free wifi allowance was the lowest during the whole trip and there were no bedside lockers so I improvised by removing two of the flat fronted deep drawers from the kitchen and standing them on edge at each side of the bed! Finally we found that the single pleated curtain that covered the large front window and sliding patio door was a couple of inches narrower than the window. I solved that one with a pair of scissors by unstitching a couple of the pleats thereby widening the curtain.

The next day we hit glorious sunshine as we drove through the Haast Pass, past more snow-capped mountains including to our surprise, Mount Macfarlane, and on to Wanaka and Arrowtown. We enjoyed lunch at Wanaka, a lovely little place on the edge of a large lake which reminded us very much of Switzerland. Arrowtown is a really quaint old gold mining town which has been well preserved and looks like the sort of place you see in cowboy movies. It is not far from Queenstown, which was where we had planned to stay. However I had been chatting to a New Zealander in the next room to us in Nelson and he recommended Arrowtown as a much nicer place, another piece of really good advice. As our accommodation was just off the end of the main street we had enough time in the evening to stroll up and down it, window shopping and bought excellent fish and chips for two for only about £4. The following day we went into Queenstown, which is certainly worth visiting, but we were so glad not to be staying there as it is quite large and touristy. We took the cable car up to the top of the peak which gave us great views over the town and lake and later we did a bit of souvenir and Xmas shopping. On the way back to our motel there was a lovely sunset and we were able to stop at a small lake and get some good photos. Val had spotted a patchwork and quilting shop in Arrowtown the first evening we were there so we paid a visit to it before we left the next morning and ended up with quite a selection of colourful New Zealand fabrics showing the flora and fauna.

Next place on our agenda was Te Anau, described as the gateway to Milford Sound which is a beautiful fiord about one and a half hours away from there and with only one road in. The plan was to drive there and take a boat trip on the sound. By all accounts it is a spectacular drive there. Unfortunately because of recent rain the road was closed due to a land slip. Although the slip seems to have happened some weeks previously and the road was passable at times, whenever it rained it was closed because of the likelihood of further slips. The evening did turn

out a bit brighter so we saw some of Te Anau and its picturesque lake and harbour but the next day it rained heavily and the road to Milford Sound remained closed. We did drive around a bit in the morning but the rain was quite heavy and we did not see a great deal. The only thing on offer by way of consolation was a film being shown in the local cinema every afternoon which had been taken by a local helicopter pilot showing the beauty of the area. It was a good film, no commentary just set to music. We treated ourselves that evening to a venison meal in a local restaurant. There is a lot of deer farming in that part of New Zealand. It was an excellent meal and the restaurant was busy so clearly a popular venue. We had worked out that if the road to Milford was open the next day we could manage to stay another day but sadly after another night of rain we were not surprised to find that it was still closed.

So we left and headed towards Dunedin on the East coast. As the weather was still murky we took the direct route rather than the scenic one. We had not tried to book a motel in Dunedin because of the possibility of staying on in Te Anau. As we drove into Dunedin we noticed that all the hotels/motels we passed had "No Vacancies" signs up and discovered that it was graduation day for the university there, plus a golf tournament and there were no rooms available anywhere. In fact we found out a couple of days later that some people had booked their hotel for the graduation three years in advance! We had no choice but to continue Northwards up the East coast until we found somewhere to stay. This turned out to be a motel and tavern about an hour up the road. The chalet rooms were a bit old and dated but clean. Food was served in the bar and we spent the rest of the evening chatting with the family who owned and ran the place. Val wanted to go back to Dunedin the next day but I felt that having got this far North we would waste a lot of time retracing our route. The guy who owned the place was of the same view, but he did have some quite strong views on a lot of things and was quite a character. Anyway Val was eventually persuaded that we should just carry on, particularly after we had been told about places up the coast where we could see seals and penguins. As it turned out this was another good choice. We spent most of next day covering quite a small distance with detours to headlands where we got close up to seals, a seagull colony with loads of chicks, another headland with young swallows and where we eventually spotted three penguins a few yards from us in the undergrowth on the other side of a fence. These were yellow-eyed penguins that generally spend the day out at sea feeding, coming ashore at dusk. These were obviously a few who had not gone out to sea that day so we were very lucky to see them. It was quite tricky photographing through the fence as the undergrowth was very overhanging. It was necessary to get the camera very close to the ground which was all on the slope. My new camera has a fold-out, rotating rear screen so I was able to get the camera really low down and still see what I was photographing, something I could not have done with my SLR. A few miles further up the coast we stopped at a beach to see the Moeraki Boulders. These are large spherical concretions that started to form 55 million years ago when lime started building up even layers around a pebble or shell on the sea bed. Eventually the sea bed rose and the soft mud around the spheres was eroded exposing these boulders. All in all, although we did not cover a great distance this day, we saw a lot of interesting things. That evening we ended up in a place called Oamaru, a reasonable sized Victorian town where we just turned up at one of the many motels and got a really good large room for \$95 (we had typically been paying \$110 - \$125 for most of the trip) in a modern motel. There was also a very good restaurant on the site where we treated ourselves to a T-bone steak that night. The next morning, Sunday, we walked around the old part of the town near the harbour including a Victorian street that was full of good quality craft shops and markets and with street entertainers. A popular tourist spot but set out in very good taste. We picked up some hot pies and cakes in a local bakery and headed to the local botanic gardens where we had a picnic before walking around the various themed gardens which were excellent. Unfortunately we had to tear ourselves away sooner than we would have liked as we had to be in Christchurch that evening as we were flying out the following day.

Christchurch is in a sorry state after the earthquake two years ago. The square in the city centre where the cathedral once stood is still closed off. There are diversions all over the place and many of the office buildings that are still standing are closed off as dangerous and with walls missing. The damage extends over a much wider area than we realised, as most of the publicity at the time seemed to be about the severe damage to the cathedral and the sudden collapse of the CTV building nearby which killed so many people. What I found weird was that you could drive down a residential road in the suburbs and find some houses boarded up and fenced off, with "no entry hazard" signs outside, yet a house next door would have lights on and a car in the driveway. Roadworks are everywhere as repairs are presumably being made to the underground infrastructure, drains, cables etc. Our motel was on a main road and we were a bit put out when we got back late in the evening, after eating out, to find that there was a gang with several large trucks busy with a pneumatic drill in the middle of the road outside our room. Shortly before midnight however they packed up and all was quiet again. The next day we had an internal flight to Auckland at 3pm followed by the onward flight to San Francisco. We were not too far from the botanic gardens there and as they were pretty well unaffected, other than the fact that the cafe and large Victorian glasshouse were closed and fenced off. We spent a couple of hours in the gardens before dropping the car off at Christchurch Airport. The flight to Auckland was fine and we had good views of snow-capped mountains and volcanoes. The timing was good too and we did not have to hang around in Auckland Airport for too long before picking up the San Francisco flight.

So we did New Zealand in three weeks but did we really do it justice? On balance I think we gave it a good shot. We covered almost 4500 kms in the hire car, which served us well. We were thwarted by the weather at the Northern and Southern ends of our trip, i.e. the Bay of Islands and Milford Sound but overall we only had about four bad weather days in total out of the three weeks. The rest of the time it was warm and sunny and just right for sightseeing. We had a number of highlights including the flight in Dave's little plane, the thermal area near Taupo, the gannet colony and the seals and penguins too. Val will remember New Zealand for the wonderful array of flowers growing wild everywhere. These range from verges in the North littered with larkspur (red hot poker) and agapantha to pampas grass and masses of lupins of every colour and shade as we travelled south. Added to that were golden mountains from the extensive covering of gorse. It is a long way to go but I have told Val that if we have a big win on the lottery we will go back for a longer visit, business class, spending more time at some of the places we only had a quick view of due to arriving in the evening and leaving the next morning (Greymouth excepted!). We did not get to see Mount Cook in South Island close up as we went round the coast and not through the centre and we did not cover the Marlborough area between Christchurch and Picton (the ferry port).

We crossed the international dateline on our way to San Francisco and thus enjoyed a week with two Mondays as it is 21 hours behind New Zealand. From a body clock viewpoint there was only three hours difference, which was good, but date wise we were flying between Christchurch and Auckland on Monday afternoon and then after a 12 hour flight we were walking around San Francisco also on Monday afternoon!

We stayed at the Sheraton Hotel in Fisherman's Wharf that we had booked through the travel agent on a four nights for the price of three deal. It is an excellent location as we could walk to the nearest point on the water front in five minutes and it was only a few minutes longer to Pier 39. Val has a cousin, Diane, who is ten years older than her and lives about 90 miles from San Francisco. She married a GI and emigrated to

California in the early 1960s, although she divorced and re-married a long time back. She and her Texan husband, Jerry, visited us in Telford many years ago on one of her visits back to the UK so she was keen to catch up with us when Val first contacted her in the summer to tell of our planned trip. Unfortunately by the time we left the UK she had been diagnosed with cancer and was starting chemotherapy so we were not sure whether she would be well enough to meet up after all. When we contacted them from New Zealand Diane told us that they hoped to see us and would phone us at the Sheraton. Soon after checking in there Diane called to say they would join us the next day having booked a room in our hotel.

On our first full day we went down to Pier 39 in the morning, saw the sea lions and wandered around some of the shops there. We returned to the hotel after lunch and Diane and Jerry arrived in the afternoon and were booked into the adjacent room for two nights. We spent the rest of the afternoon chatting before going out in the evening for a view of the city by night. That included driving over the Golden Gate Bridge and back. We ended the evening with a seafood meal on Fisherman's Wharf, the second time in two days for us and another chance to taste traditional clam chowder. The following day in winter sunshine and blue sky, which was my 65th birthday, they drove us over the Golden Gate Bridge once again so we got to see it from various view points in perfect weather and then we headed off down the coast towards Monterey. The intention was to take us on the 17 mile drive which is a private coast road that passes through the Pebble Beach golf course but by the time we got there it was getting dark so we did not get to do the drive. We stopped on spec at an Italian restaurant on the way down and had a nice meal to celebrate my birthday. The next day Diane wanted to take us into Union Square where we got into the Xmas spirit with piped carols, a giant Xmas tree and skaters on the temporary ice rink. We went into Macy's for a lunchtime snack at the Cheesecake Factory on the top floor. The snack was a sandwich, made of brioche bread about an inch thick, filled with bacon and egg and accompanied by hash brown. It was really good and amazingly filling. In the afternoon we directed Jerry to drive us to some mosaic steps that Josie had wanted us to see. They were very impressive, a series of around 130 steps, running between two roads that went around quite a steep hill in a very interesting residential area. All the risers of the steps were mosaic tiled to give a picture running from top to bottom. It was very colourful, organised by the local residents to brighten up the area and containing many small personalised tiles for local businesses and individuals. Jerry and Diane dropped us back at the hotel late afternoon and they headed back home. The following morning we had a bit of time to spare before checking out so we walked along to Hyde St. Pier where there is a maritime museum. We did not have time to go on to any of the boats but just walked along the pier taking photographs. It was then a case of back to the hotel for mid-day to check out and get a shuttle bus to the airport for the flight home.

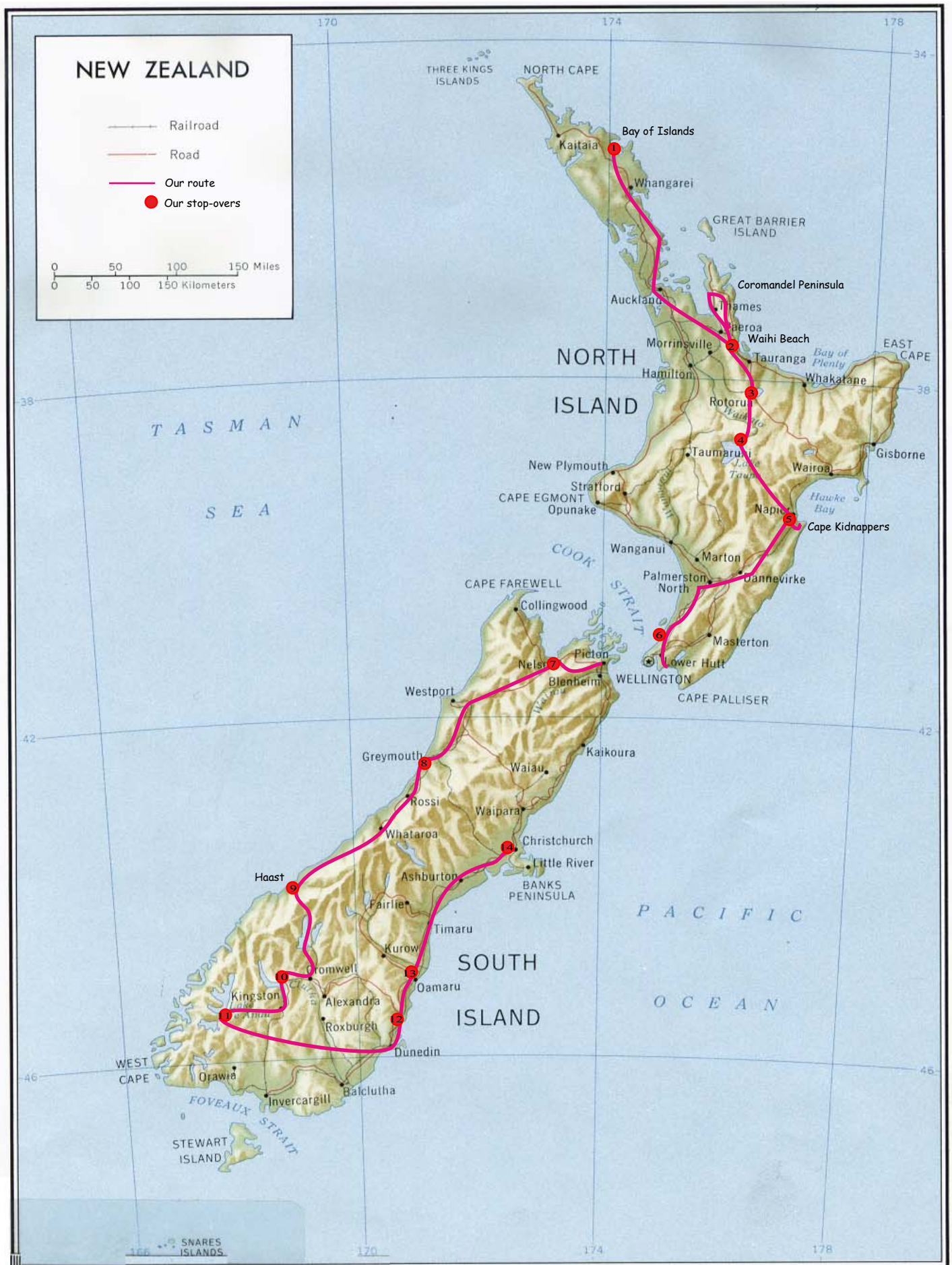
This final leg of our journey was with Virgin Atlantic whom we found to be the worst of the three airlines we travelled with on this trip. The seats were the narrowest, perhaps reflecting the fact that it was a Boeing 747, the jumbo jet which has been around for many years and is getting a bit dated compared to newer aircraft. The food was by far the worst of the trip, the evening meal main course being mainly potato. The breakfast was a cardboard box with half a muffin, a small cereal bar and a small carton of orange juice! We were not impressed.

Finally the good news is that we have recently heard that the latest scan results show that Diane is now clear of cancer.

1 - Paihia, Bay of Islands, 2 nights
 2 - Waihi Beach, 2 nights
 3 - Rotorua, 1 night
 4 - Taupo, 1 night
 5 - Napier, 2 nights

6 - Paraparamau, 2 nights
 7 - Nelson, 2 nights
 8 - Greymouth, 1 night
 9 - Haast, 1 night
 10 - Arrowtown, 2 nights

11 - Te Anau, 2 nights
 12 - Waikouaiti, 1 night
 13 - Oamaru, 1 night
 14 - Christchurch, 1 night



Australia - Caversham Wildlife Park



Australia - Mandurah and surrounding area



New Zealand, North Island



Coromandel Peninsula



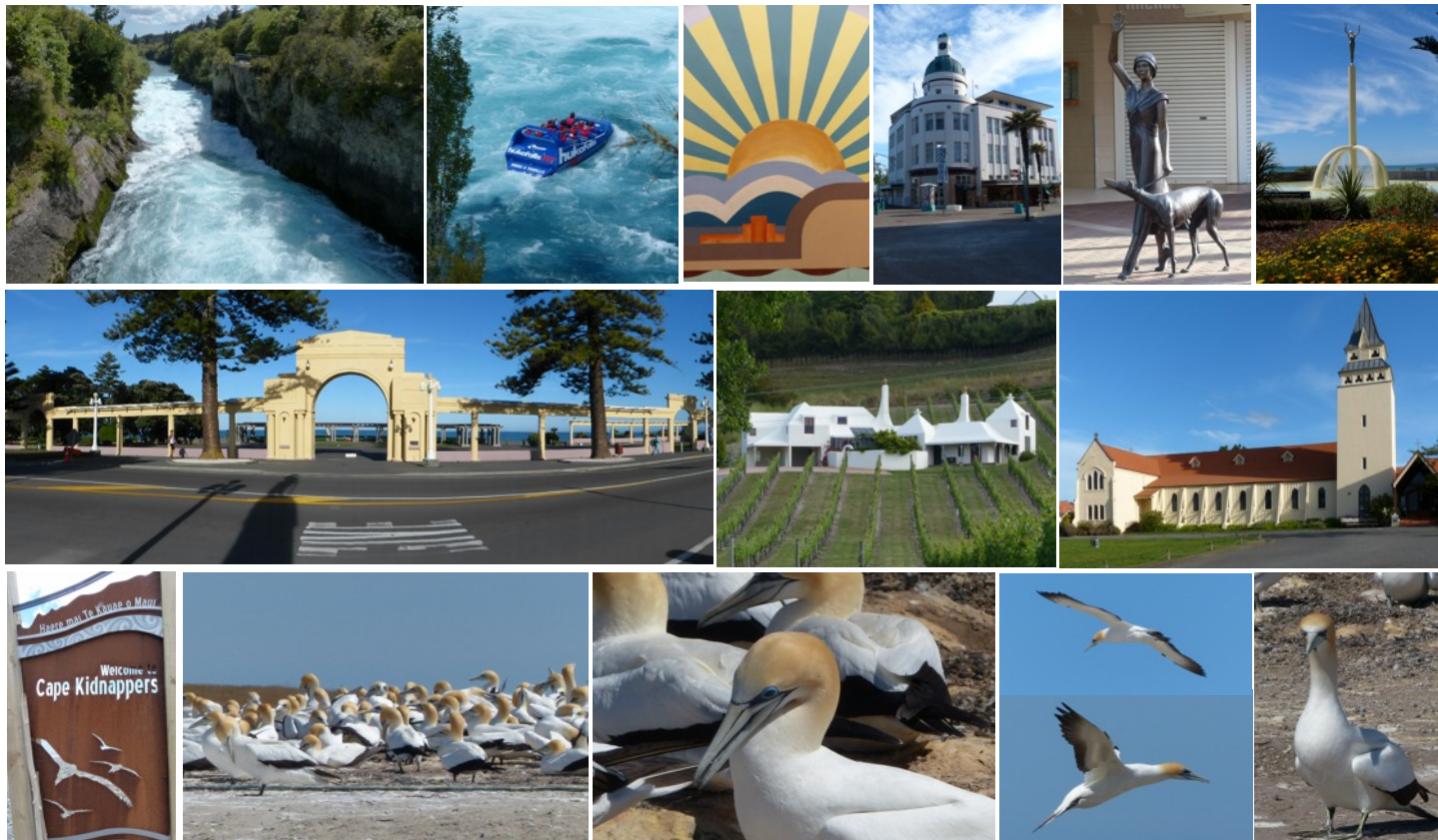
Waihi Beach



Lake Rotorua



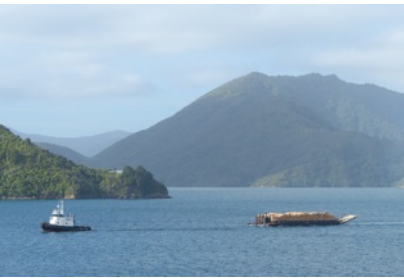
Huka Falls (Taupo), Napier and area



Wellington and surrounding area



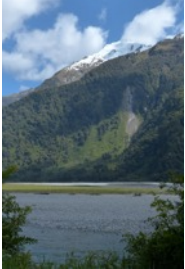
New Zealand, South Island



Nelson



Punakaiki Pancake Rocks



Mount Macfarlane



Arrowtown



Queenstown



Queenstown



Wildlife and scenery between Dunedin and Oamaru



Moeraki Boulders and Oamaru



San Francisco

