

New Zealand Travelogue 2004

Installment six: To the sea

March 14-19, 2004

15 March 2004

Leaving Queenstown I was a little wistful, as I knew the adrenaline-rush part of this journey was over, but I also looked forward to the wind-down, relaxing portion, too. I initiated my new, relaxed mode by leaving Q'town a little late. It was 9:45 AM when I started the car and pulled away from my downtown hostel to head into New Zealand's hinterlands for the long drive to Kaikoura.

Just outside of town, I took in one final vicarious thrill. For there was A. J. Hackett's original bungee jump site (OK, not counting the publicity stunts at the Eiffel Tower, etc.). I pulled in to view a few jumps before waving the thrill ride behind for good. Wouldn't you know it, the person next up to jump was from Portland! An Intel employee on sabbatical. His wife and sister-in-law were chewing their nails in anticipation - even though they had already made the 43 meter jump themselves. He jumped, and down, down, down into the canyon he went - and splash! His head and shoulders submerged into the icy river water, and he bounced out whooping like a Maori warrior. It seemed to be the in thing to do here, as several jumpers in a row did the same thing - some of them, leaving the platform backwards for an extra rush.

Back on the road about 10:30, I hadn't gone far before I picked up a Kiwi hitchhiker originally from Wellington, a tiler whose name I forget now. In fact it was far less interesting of a ride than I expected. He was sort of nervous, alternatively asking me to slow down or suggesting that this next turn is one best taken slowly, etc. What he should have been nervous about is that I was constantly second-guessing which side of the road I belonged on. Or maybe he was. He didn't ride long, asking to be let off on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, saying he had been down this road many times and always wondered what it looked like on the other side of those hills. Ya. Right. Good on ya, mate.

The landscape evolved from Queenstown's craggy, steep peaks into rolling hills covered in greenish-brown tussock, or "snow grass" as my hitchhiker had called it, and golden low grasses, and the occasional mountain lake or stream, until finally flattening out into dry plains with the hills receding into the background, reminiscent of eastern Oregon. Around 12:15 I stopped for refueling and a quick lunch on the shore of beautiful Lake Tekapo, a finger lake in the center of the island. Hopefully it's my last PBJ-and-apple out of the trunk sort of lunch on this trip. By 3:00 I was in Ashburton and was able to confirm my bookings for the morning, very key. I got through Christchurch by 4:30 and was on my way to Kaikoura. When this long peninsula of rocky hills and pebbly beaches pulled into view about 6:15, I was ready to be out of the car. But it's a long peninsula, winding and windy, and the street signs were only slightly less vague than my map, so I didn't find the Dusky Lodge - a very welcome sight - until 6:30.

Dinner was a quick spaghetti and ragu-esque sauce and the start of a very good bottle of that Montana wine I had bought over a week earlier, a passenger for nearly a full loop of the South Island. I shared with Sandra, a fellow solo traveler from England, over stories of our travels, before retiring to the spa to soothe my tired back. A group of Brits in the spa had the right idea - working on their third bottle of wine and waiting for their friend Amanda to show up with the fourth. I added mine to the mix and we stayed until closing, at one point joined by two French women, one of whom decided that underwear made a fine bikini. I agreed. I only wish I could have remembered some French.

Acting on a hot tip, I found a store nearby that was still open and sold the essentials - beer and potato chips - so the party continued in the Brits' room, Amanda and Claire and another guy and gal whose names now escape me, as well as two Swiss sisters who were trying to quit smoking. My attempts at reengineering the room's lighting resulted in a blown fuse, so we relied on flashlights for what little luminescence is required for sucking down twelve beers among 7 people.

Eventually I found my room, well past time. I had a big day tomorrow.

16 March 2004

Understandably groggy, I packed my stuff into the car and wolfed down some corn flakes. It was 8:20, I was already late and I still hadn't left the hostel. Luckily, Dolphin Encounters was only 4 minutes away, i.e. clear across town. Kaikoura is no metropolis.

A few dozen other tourists and I slid on wetsuits, something I was getting quite used to now, and were fitted for hoods, fins, masks, and tubes before climbing on buses for a brief ride to the pier. We were assigned to specific boats by name, 13 to a boat, 3 boats, a strictly enforced maximum. The boats sped out into the bay along the peninsula framed by deep blue skies and wispy white clouds. About 30 minutes out, our guide told us to get ready to dive. On went the gear, and we sat along the back end of the boat, waiting for the signal. The horn blared, indicating it was OK to dive. Into the water we splashed and focused our attention down into the water.

Dolphins! And not just one or two, but hundreds of them! As our guide had suggested, we "called" them by diving, swimming in circles, and singing to them. The dolphins came, clearly entertained by these awkward land-lubbers splashing around clumsily in their home. They circled, jumped, cavorted, and played. They came from all sides, but their favorite was from behind or underneath, zooming up in front of our faces to surprise us. Their lips seemed locked in a permanent smile.

Dolphins swim all the time, and they swim fast. Humans don't. I was exhausted within minutes, but somehow kept on going - chirping, diving, minnowing through the water until the horn blasted to reboard the boat. The pod was moving on. We did too. Ten minutes later we were back into another pod of 300 or so of these magnificent mammals. On this dive, my underwater disposable camera ran out of film, and I focused entirely on just playing. We enjoyed a third dive a little later, then peeled off the wetsuits and warmed up with a hot water hose and hot cocoa as the skipper found yet another pod, this time for a photo shoot. My camcorder whirled and the

snaps flew as the dusky dolphins performed merrily for us - single jumps, tandem jumps, even a triple; somersaults and back flips; and sometimes, just swimming along the boat, taking advantage of the easy swimming caused by its wake. I traded stories and digiphotos with Zenia and Maddy, 20-something Brits hitchhiking their way around Kiwiland, before heading off to the next adventure.

That was three hours later: Whalewatch Kaikoura. Once again, we boarded a bus to our speed boat, this time a larger one that seated some 40 or 50 people. Once again, the lone travelers stuck together, this time Patricia from Vienna (well, it was coming up on St Pat's day, so that's appropriate). We tag-teamed on photos, and good thing, as hers came out much better than mine, except for my awesome video (IMHO) of a sperm whale's dive, its tail lingering over the surf, then gracefully arching into a powerful swoosh for its downward plunge. We spotted four different whales, watched them spout and catch their breath for their next 30-40 minute dives, and then jetted to the next site. The boat's technology was amazing - able to detect and track the presence of the whales and predict their next surfacing - with near pinpoint accuracy. We saw three of them surface while we watched, one with a tail-splash as it came up, a rare treat.

Patricia joined me for dinner at The Rock, overlooking the lake, then she went on her merry way to her campsite as I headed to the Internet Outpost e-café. The staff there recommended the pub next door, and it was a good choice. Friendly staff and patrons kept the beer flowing, and I tried my hand yet again at pool, with my new best friend, Bruno from northern Italy. He and I played alternatively as teams or opponents, but only embarrassed ourselves when we were teammates. Steve and Steve from Britain were our final challengers, and Linda, one of the men's wife, their cheering section. That must have been our downfall. No cheering section.

17 March 2004 - Christchurch

The change of pace toward relaxation rather than thrill-seeking continued... for a bit. And evidence that I've been spoiled emerged, as I drove nearly bored to Christchurch through countryside that three weeks ago would have planted my awe-gaping chin on my chest. An hour after arriving, I was touring the Canterbury Brewery and Heritage Centre with a Scottish couple on their last holiday before retiring to Spain, and twelve business school students with their proctor on a field trip: seven Chinese, four locals, and a Fijian. The tour was a St James Gate-style wax museum tour, and appropriately, this Guinness subsidiary was brewing the legendary stout on St Pat's day. The tour ended with the obligatory tasting of a light lager, a lighter lager, and a coppery pale ale, poured by the aspiring future executives of the hospitality industry.

Wandering Christchurch, I landed at Cathedral Square, munching hot chips while watching chess challenges on the giant game board built into the pavement, with 3-foot chess pieces lugged around by the competitors for easy viewing by spectators. Then it was time to begin the serious St Pat's beer drinking, at Bailie's, right next to the cathedral. Never mind that it's an Anglican church; everybody's Irish Catholic on the 17th. It was the most international St Pat's I've ever seen. I met people from NZ, US, Germany, Luxembourg, and Finland, among others.

Miriam from Finland decided to join me on a pub crawl, and we went next door to the hostel where my old pal Becky from Taupo had instructed me to meet her. But Becky decided to bag

the crawl and just set out drinking on her own. Miriam and I talked each other into a spur of the moment 25-minute walk to Jade Stadium, the rugby field. Not for rugby, mind you; for the last-ever live performance of Meatloaf, in concert that night in all his 70's glory, accompanied no less by the Auckland Philharmonic.

How long had it been since Meatloaf first performed? Miriam was born the year "Bat out of Hell" was released - 1978. But nobody can put on a rock anthem like Meatloaf, and he performed all the classics: All Rev'd up and No Place to Go; You Took the Words Right Out of my Mouth; Couldn't Have Said it Better; Two out of Three Ain't bad; a great cover of Warren Zevon's Lawyers, Guns, and Money; and the finale, Paradise by the Dashboard Light, acted out by Meatloaf and his duet partner dressed in the obligatory 70's short skirt and bleach-blond wig. For the encore, they played Anything for Love (if that's the right name) and their signature song, a 15-minute version of Bat Out of Hell. They played their hearts out and it was exhilarating.

On exit, we met up with some folks we'd had beers with at Bailie's, so back we went for more stout. The group grew and shrank and grew again as the night went on, and eventually I was drinking with Nelly from Germany and Carl from Luxembourg, who had no connection whatsoever to the original group. Many pints later, we walked Nelly to her hostel, and Carl and I headed back to the YHA where we both were staying.

18 March 2004

Determined to change the pace, I outlined a plan for Thursday that was dubbed by Carl over breakfast as "Arts and Culture Day." A leisurely walk through the City for some coffee finally landed me at the new Canterbury Arts Museum, a gleaming, modern structure just a few steps from the City's large and beautiful Hagley Park. Two floors of New Zealand and European art, principally oil paintings, watercolors, and sculpture ranging from the 17th century to the present, took about an hour and a half to browse. Most of it was unknown to me, but there were a few European masters such as Rodin and Jan Steen represented. Particularly local and modern was the "Making Tracks" exhibit by an apparently well-known Kiwi artist, essentially arrangements of found objects (mostly beach items like shells and driftwood) over large floor spaces in dark rooms with precision lighting to provide an eerie effect.

Next I toured the nearby Arts Centre. Formerly the home of Canterbury Christ College (which has since moved about 1/2 km away to a much larger campus), where the recently late William Pickering studied before venturing to Cal Tech and fathering our space program, the Arts Centre is a compact set of mostly Gothic style buildings now populated with art galleries, craft shops, fancy restaurants, and live performance theatres. The focus was principally on wool and other fabric items, wood carvings, and jade and bone jewelry, although there were some painting and photography studios too.

Feeling the need for nature again, I ventured a few more steps into the famous Christchurch Botanical Gardens, a sweeping collection of fauna and flora situated along winding walkways, now well-lit by a soft, warm afternoon sun. The gardens are lush and varied, with all kinds of plants from all different climates, although the focus was New Zealand natives. The rose garden is one to rival Portland's, in quality although not in size. There is also a rock and heather garden,

a miniature New Zealand rain forest, and stands of grand trees such as eucalyptus and giant tree ferns. The green house is hot and humid, home to tropical plants, with a dry room dedicated to various cacti as well.

The evening was also arts oriented, this time live theatre, as I went to a performance of "Geezers," a semi-improvised story of London east end incompetent thugs trying once more to accomplish a job for a local mob boss. The story structure is planned, but the dialogue is improvised based on a series of audience suggestions obtained at the start. Two actors played 14 different characters, differentiating them simply by changing hats, voices, and occasionally a cloak. Much of the humor was obtained by the way the two actors integrated the suggestions into the plot - for example, one mob boss became Slovenian (my suggestion), and the object of their discovery was the Duke of Wellington's boots, hidden in a cave, guarded by potato crisps - all audience suggestions.

I hit the recommended Loaded Hog for a pint of dark, frothy brew, waited a bit for some no-shows, then abandoned for the Grumpy Mole across the street. There I ran into one of the Steve's from Kaikoura - it was fun catching up on our adventures since we'd last met. Then he was off to meet up with a girl, and I struck up a conversation with two Kiwis at the bar and Elizabeth the bartender, a student at the college. The Kiwis concocted an elaborate story about me being a CIA agent, which I decided would be fun to go along with. My cover was blown when 6 American 21-year-olds out for a girls' night of fun, celebrating one of their group's birthday, explained to them that nobody ever *admits* to being "in the agency." It was too late to claim that I worked for the state department. The two fellas then decided we'd have a mission anyway. They were going to find me a nice kiwi girl for the night. They didn't succeed, but I admired their efforts.

19 March 2004

My last day in New Zealand! I decided I needed some sea air and sand, so I headed to New Brighton, about 15 minutes from Christchurch, for a walk along the beach. First I strolled out on the pier, a nice walkway jutting out a few hundred yards into the sea in the middle of the town's coast. I sat and read my New Zealand novel and witnessed the capture of a tiny fish by an old Maori man. It is a sunny day, and it felt good to relax, something I'm not very good at normally.

I then walked along the shore, reminiscing about all the great people I'd met on this trip, the adventures and thrills, and the magnificent scenery. I knew I would miss it, but I also long to see my friends, family, and home again. And of course Beauty! While she has been in good care all this time, still I miss the old girl and can't wait to walk in the park with her again.

Walking along the beach, I noticed a number of sticks partially buried upright in the sand, as personal monuments to the sea, or maybe to this country. I found the perfect stick for me, a curved, partially burnt piece of firewood, and wedged it about 4" into the sand, guarding a fresh heap of seaweed washed up by the tide. The curved portion was pointing randomly to the ocean, and that didn't feel right. I pointed it over the horizon, toward north-northwest, along the coast of the barely visible north island, and beyond that, to Oregon.

Home.