

TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

Make the most of winter
with a brisk British walk p.12

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TRAVEL



New Zealand with (extra) wow factor

Make sure you don't miss the must-sees – and for ultimate bragging rights, do them in style, says Sarah Baxter

New Zealand is magnificent. Who doesn't yearn to visit this Land of the Long White Cloud, with its riotous geology, movie-set looks, scrumptious wines and opportunities for adventure?

Be you foodie, hiker, biker, birder, backpacker, retiree, culture buff or adrenalin-junkie, the country is likely to be near the top of your bucket list.

But it's also on the other side of the globe – and a big commitment in time and money. Chances are, you won't go twice (well, never say never...). And if you are going to go, you want to do it right. You don't want to risk returning from your

once-in-a-lifetime trip and being asked "Oh, did you do such-and-such?", realising too late that your dream holiday was actually missing something even more extraordinary.

For starters, allow time. "You are travelling a long way so ideally you need a minimum of three weeks," says John Lightwood, director of specialist Silver Fern Holidays (silverfernholidays.com).

"As a rule of thumb for first-timers, spend a third of your time on North Island, two thirds on South Island. And allow two to three nights in each location to give you time to explore."

▲ On the right path: New Zealand has some of the most spectacular walking territory in the world, much of it overlooked

While New Zealand isn't huge – just a little bigger than Britain – trying to cram too much in will mean less satisfying experiences.

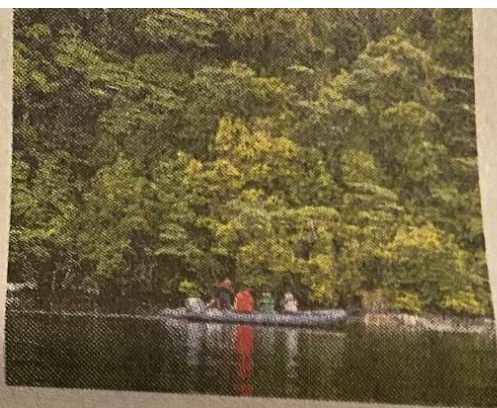
Then figure out what you're into. There are a bunch of obvious "must-dos", from marvellous mud-bathing in Rotorua. But Milford Sound to more left field options, plus experiences you can only have in New Zealand, like paddling a Maori waka (canoe) or running down the side of a volcano (kaitiaki.co.nz/guided-tours).

"New Zealand is a 'wow' destination, offering an abundance of 'wow' experiences to match," says

Emma Maidment of Audley (audley.co.uk). "But we encourage clients to see more private experiences, whether on an overlooked walking track or on one-on-one tours or simply choose a region that receives less footfall. You won't be able to do everything with careful planning (see over) you'll brag about for years. Or at your second 'once-in-a-lifetime' trip."

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10 DAYS MADE IN



into Auckland and spend a week or more travelling south via inland highlights such as Tongariro National Park and the Southern Alps, using one-way car hire or a mix of tour buses and NZ's scenic trains.

Another option is incorporating a short cruise into a longer overland trip for the best of both worlds. Heritage Expeditions offers a five-day voyage, on its intimate 18-passenger yacht, exploring Fiordland's Doubtful and Dusky Sounds – some of the country's most isolated and pristine reaches, only reachable by boat (from £2,675pp).

To cruise or not to cruise?

With 15,000km of coast – the ninth-longest shoreline in the world – New Zealand should suit cruising. A circumnavigation will unveil the variety of its awesome edges, from deep fiords to plunging sea cliffs, golden sands, surf beaches, archipelagos and wildlife-rich marine reserves.

That said, most NZ cruises are roundtrips or one-ways from Australia. These can be great value – for instance, cruise.co.uk is currently offering an 18-night Princess Cruises Ultimate New Zealand voyage in February, in and out of Sydney, from £2,499pp, including flights. Other itineraries combine New Zealand with the South Pacific or even sub-Antarctic isles.

For a 100 per cent New Zealand cruise, try local-based Heritage Expeditions, which offers an array of itineraries aboard its 140-berth expedition vessel. For example, the 15-day Best of New Zealand trip, which sails Queenstown to Auckland, explores much of North, South and Stewart islands, and includes all shore excursions, such as visits to Abel Tasman National Park, Dunedin, Napier, the Canterbury winelands and offbeat Great Barrier Island. From £5,500pp, excluding flights (00 64 3365 3500; heritage-expeditions.com).

Many country highlights are accessible from the sea, especially if you take full-day excursions from your ports of call. But if you are worried about missing out on the hinterland, tag on extra time before or after your cruise. For instance, if your cruise begins in Queenstown you might fly