

BY MARY LOU HOOK

On Monday, 11/21 Jerry and I left the Lucitano group at the Grace Hotel in Sydney as they were still snuggled under their warm comforters! On the way to the airport, our pick up driver told us to set our clocks back.... 20 years!

Day 1:

"Kia Ora" and we were welcomed to Christchurch, New Zealand! It was very chilly as they said a cold front just came in. How can that be? This is supposed to be "spring"!!! Christchurch is beautiful in the springtime, where days are getting longer and warmer. AND on average it only rains on seven days per month during spring... well we managed one of them. I read in one of the numerous brochures that we picked up that Christchurch is the gateway to the Antarctica! That should have indicated to me the possibly coldness. Isn't that where the south pole is? Christchurch definitely has spectacular scenery as it is situated near the mountains.

We had about three hours before the Barroses and Sequeiras joined us, so we went window shopping immediately as we would be flying out the next morning to Queenstown. Christchurch is known as the "most English City outside England" and we would find out during the evening and next morning that most residents had English accents! The city was planned around the Canterbury Cathedral, which is Gothic in design and built out of rough grey local stone. We were lucky that Bonnie booked us in the Copthorne Central Hotel instead of in one of the other Copthornes here. We were only 3 blocks away from the Cathedral which we thought we would explore later with the other 4. One of the Souvenir shops offered wine tasting and yes, our arms were twisted ever so slightly to taste Kiwi Wine (which was similar to a sauvignon blanc). Ventured to about 3 other souvenir shops and found similar merchandise in all. Shops here close at 5:30 p.m. Went back to the hotel and had a few cocktails and french fries with garlic aioli (this was lunch!) Checked email in the lobby, \$3 bought 15 minutes!! The others didn't arrive until 6:30 as they had a slight delay at the airport. We ate dinner at an English pub next to the hotel as we did not want to get caught in the rain and wind. Most delicious meal and wine. Here is where we started to learn the art of "layering clothes"!

Day 2:

After breakfast, we checked out and went venturing to the shops as we were to be picked up at 2:20 p.m. The Cathedral was as magnificent inside as on the outside. We bought a few souvenirs there. The square across the street had a few souvenir stalls and of course, we tried to help them out and bought some things to take home. Decided to cash a few travelers cheques and that convinced me to always carry cash instead! (and this from a banker!) We had lunch at a restaurant which served both Korean and Japanese food and of course wine, beer and sake! Decided to go back to the hotel where some of us would sit and relax with a glass of wine and some would ?? Good thing for us. It was only 1:45 and our driver was there and waiting for us for 15 minutes already! Someone got their wires crossed and we showed him on our itinerary that it wasn't us. Plus we were FMs and we knew we were right!! But he turned out to

be great and said he couldn't figure out why we would want to go to the airport so early anyway and gave us a nice tour of the city which included a drive through Mona Vale Gardens.

We flew to Queenstown at 3:50 p.m. on Qantas and to Fernanda's delight, we had an ice cream bar! We were taken to the Rydges Lakeland Resort and into deluxe accommodations which gave us a magnificent view of Lake Wakatipu. Legend has it that the lake "breathes" with a 3 inch rise and fall every 15 minutes. The surrounding mountains were awesome and some still had snow peaks. The hotel has internet for \$2 for 10 minutes and has a couple of nice massage chairs for \$4 for 10 minutes. We tried both! Hotel is going thru renovations. Fernanda and Humberto were on the Mezzanine floor and had a private balcony. The rest of us were on the 1st floor (which in reality is the 3rd floor) and we shared a balcony with all the rooms in that section. Meant we couldn't sleep with our drapes wide open!! Had a drink in Humberto and Fernanda's room before we all went walking to the center of town. About 15 to 20 minutes we arrived and looked in all the shops. Ate at PJ's Fish & Chips which informed us that the reason they serve Australian wines is because they were a British company. ??? We lost the meaning of that explanation and drank all the wine!

Day 3:

Breakfast on the 6th floor overlooking the lake. Picked up at 9:15 for a 3 hr ride on a genuine British Double Decker bus for a tour of Queenstown and Arrowtown. Oh, the scenery was magnificent! By the way.... Welcome to Middle Earth! Queenstown and the surrounding area with its awesome landscapes were perfect and became a key filming area for the trilogy of "Lord of the Rings." The commentary provided by our bus driver was excellent. We visited the AJ Hackett Bridge which is the world's first bungy! Moved on to the Gibbston Valley Winery where we had a choice of tasting cheeses or for \$5 the 6 wines of our choice. Bet you can't guess which one Jerry and I chose. The \$5 was then applied to our purchase of a great dessert wine. The stopover at historic Arrowtown was for 50 minutes and we explored the authentic Chinese goldmining village and the boutique shops. Here they have a Tolkien three hour personal guided walk around the Middle Earth film location but time prevented us from doing this. Upon return to Queenstown we asked to be dropped off in the square so we could continue looking around. We ate lunch at a food court in one of the shopping centers. Then as we were walking around we decided to walk up to the gondola center and catch a "ride". Walk, walk, walk never saw a taxi. Gondolas provided a great ride up the hillside. We walked back to the hotel and still never saw a taxi! As it was starting to rain, we decided to have dinner in the restaurant at the hotel. Here we found the inflexibility of ordering off the Fixed Menu or Ala carte. Everyone has to do one or the other according to the waitress. We can't order from both menus. Strange. Some of us ordered steaks in varying degrees of doneness. A few minutes later, the waitress informs us that the chef states all steaks come out the same way... no rare and no medium rare ... just "same". After a few drinks, we really didn't care how our steaks came to us! But they must have been good as our plates were wiped clean. We all tipped the same... no one different... Just \$3.50 per person, no more and no less as we didn't want to confuse them!

Day 4:

Breakfast very early to be picked up by Real Journeys for our Milford Sound day excursion. We would not return until 7:30 p.m.!! As our itinerary stated it would be a long day of unsurpassed scenery beginning with a drive along the shores of Lake Wakatipu continuing through lush farmlands to Te Anau, the Gateway to the Fiordland National Park. Travelled through the beech forests of the Eglinton Valley, entered the Hollyford Valley and descended through the Homer Tunnel into Milford Sound. There we participated in a scenic cruise out onto Milford Sound. We all enjoyed the great buffet style lunch on board the vessel. This was our Thanksgiving Day. The return trip to Queenstown found many of us sleeping only waking up for the "comfort" stops which occurred every 2 hrs. (thankfully) Arriving back to town Jerry and I returned to the hotel to do laundry and the others to roam around and each going separate ways for dinner. We ate at the hotel restaurant and had ala carte this time which was good and filling. The others ate at the Fish Bone, which they reported was "excellent".

Day 5:

Breakfast at 7:30 and all were packed to check out around 8:30 as we would be picked up at 9 a.m. Surprise! Driver came to get us at 8:15 instead of 9 a.m. for the flight to Rotorua. Flew on Qantas. \i Did we get another ice cream bar? \i0 Yes and yes, we did get set back 20 years! Here all the luggage was brought on on large luggage wagons and everyone had to find their own! Rotorua is the center of the thermal activity in New Zealand which makes it one of the world's great tourist attractions. On our way to the hotel, the driver had the window open which I thought odd but was glad later for some awful odors were in the van! Had some New Zealand beer and sat in the lobby. The afternoon was at our leisure so we ventured out but could not find many shops with souvenirs that we did not already have! We decided to have an early dinner and the hotel had recommended Freos or Five111 something. So we went to Five111 and they said being that it was 4 p.m. we would have to order off the lunch menu, which saved us a lot of \$\$\$. Four of us had the fish and wild rice special and two had the steak and potato special and of course our bottles of red and white wine too. Stopped at the wine store down the street for some bottles. Gathered in the Hook room to drink the wines and eat gouda cheese that Humberto bought at the Gibbston Valley Winery and chips and sesame sticks that I've been carrying around and needed to eat before going back through customs. The same odors as earlier came into our room and I couldn't open the windows for fresh air. By 9:30 all left to sleep for early pickup in the morning. During the night I woke up several times from these odors and made a mental note that I would complain to the receptionist about this. After all was there a dead body under my carpet emitting these smells??

Day 6:

Early breakfast. We all agree that we are getting very tired of scrambled eggs, triangle shaped hash browns, roasted tomatoes and pork and beans! I even had some porridge but it would have been much, much better to have some congee! I mentioned to the concierge the funny odors and he said "oh you must be smelling the thermals"! Well yes, I sure wish I had a pair of thermals to wear... but

realized that he was talking about the sulfur from the geysers. Glad I didn't mention the possibility of a decaying dead body! We were collected by our guide to take us to Roturua's "Must Do 3" attractions for our morning sightseeing tour. We did not have the voucher for this in our packet even though it was on our itinerary. He said he would straighten it out with the office and for us not to worry about the missing voucher. So onward we went!

Te Puia (formerly Te Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve). Our cute Maori guide was so expressive with her face and hands. Had us repeating words in Maori which we all probably forgot as soon as we returned to our bus. But "Kia Ora" will always stay in our memories as meaning "a greeting". Here we walked by dozens of shooting geysers, pools of boiling mud, crystal springs and hot mineral waters and richly coloured craters. We saw all of this from underneath our umbrellas (which they supplied us) in the cold pouring rain! But we were dressed in layers of clothing!!! and were still cold.

Rainbow Springs Nature Reserve. Our driver was also our guide through this beautiful and literal "rainforest" as it was still pouring down rain. We were so fortunate that they all had umbrellas for us. Here we saw many pools containing all sizes and varieties of freshwater trout. The water from the springs service the three houses on the property and is also bottled and sold. We were able to each taste a cupful of water which was cold and refreshing.

The Agrodome Sheep Stage Show. We visited the area where we could hold the freshly shorn wool and purchase the finished products if we wanted. But \$299 was still a little steep for us to pay for a woollen vest. We entered the seating area where hundreds of people gathered to watch the show. I believe that the six of us were the only ones from the U.S. Several other countries were represented but the majority were from Korea. The show was very entertaining to say the least as each of the 20 sheep knew their role perfectly! He demonstrated how to shear the sheep in under 5 minutes.

We returned to our hotel and the Barroses and Sequieras went to have curry for lunch down the street. Jerry and I went to put dry socks on and then had a light lunch in the hotel lounge. Checked out an umbrella from the concierge. We then went out to find the Kodak shop six blocks away to transfer our pictures to a CD. The Barroses decided to walk along with us and after the Kodak shop we decided to walk a few more blocks and found a store similar to WalMart where the locals shop!! Very interesting but nothing caught our eyes to buy. Decided to return and rest for a little before we are picked up at 6:45 p.m. Later we waited for Tamaki Tours and when a bus came and picked up one couple and closed the doors, Manuela noticed that the bus logo was Tamaki Tours. Lucky for us that she was so observant! The driver did not have us on his list but put us on his bus upon seeing our voucher. Later he found out that we were registered to be picked up at the Rydges Hotel. This day showed us the friendliest of guides who were very concerned that the tourists have a great time and positive memories of New Zealand. Maybe this was because we were using ATS Tours and knew all would be taken care of? Our driver, Nutter, was nuts! He introduced us by first names to the others on the bus. He gave us written instructions that we had to choose a chief for our bus and then how the chief and all of us were to behave and what the rules were when we arrived at Maori Marae, a

traditional Maori meeting place for our cultural experience. Jerry was extremely happy to learn that Jim from Houston "volunteered"! We picked up additional passengers and he proceeded to go through all the introductions again never forgetting a name! Also said that once we were there, we were only to address him as "Most Handsome Bus Driver"!!! On arrival at our meeting place, a traditional Maori wero (challenge) and powhiri (welcome) takes place. Then, a concert of Maori songs with dances is performed, including the fearsome haka and the rhythmic poi dance. During this the dancers both male and female make fearful facial expressions with tongues extended quite far to scare the evil intruders. This was exceeded by Nutter! Afterwards, we enjoyed an authentic Maori hangi (dinner), whereby well-wrapped food is steam-cooked in an underground pit. The meal consisted of wild pork, lamb, seafood and vegetables and desserts. We even listened to Nutter play the guitar. After boarding our bus, we were delayed as one of the 4 buses broke down. They divided the passengers up in the remaining buses and off we went! Nutter, proceeded to introduce everyone to everyone again. Can you imagine the remarkable memory this man has? He then asked us all to join in a sing along of songs representing every country that was represented on board the bus. To get off the bus at each hotel, the passenger had to touch noses with the Handsome Bus Driver two times! He cracked us up when a young adult girl was approaching him and he went into one of the Maori facial expressions with tongue rolling around! We all including the young girl, were in hysterics for a few minutes!

Day 7:

We packed our bags and all went to breakfast at 7:30 a.m. Checked out and were picked up at 9 a.m. by Great Sight. It seems that Rotorua has many local artists who are all registered with the film industry to be extras and have small parts in movies shot on location throughout New Zealand. We departed Rotorua for Waitomo and Auckland beginning by crossing the heavily forested Mamaku Ranges. We continued through the Fitzgerald Glade and over the countryside to Waitomo in the King Country. Our guide was a great narrator all the way. We visited the Waitomo Caves, which was discovered in the 1800's, with their fascinating limestone formations. We were shown many areas to view the glow worms. We thought the thread like green illuminations were awesome until we were told they were the glow worms' excrements. yuck! those of us with hoods on our jackets immediately put them over our heads!!! In the glow-worm grotto we took a boat ride silently along an underground river beneath a canopy of lights made by the minute larvae on the roof above us. It was pitch black with the only lights coming from the glow-worms. The guide then shone his small flashlight on his hands above his head which showed the rope that was guiding him along the way. At the exit there seemed to be crystal bushes and trees but upon getting close, it was just trees and bushes! We had lunch at the restaurant above the caves. Our driver then left us to take another passenger bus back to Rotorua and our new driver had just come with passengers from Auckland! We then departed Waitomo and travelled via the fertile plains of the Waikato District to the small town of Ngaruawahia. Then we proceeded to the Southern Motorway via the Bombay Hills, an area known for its light volcanic soils and very popular for market gardening. Finally, we drove through some of the sprawling suburbs of South Auckland and Manukau before arriving to Auckland City and our stay at Skycity Hotel. Wow, what a tower we were in. I felt like I was in a futuristic hotel. A few shops, casinos, restaurants and lots of

people milling around. Rooms were wonderful and felt bad that we were only staying one night! The other 4 would be here one more night. According to our brochure, Auckland is the "city of sails" and NZ's largest city with a population of over 1 million and situated on a narrow isthmus between two beautiful harbours. Auckland's Waitemata Harbour is aptly named by the Maoris as the "sea of sparkling waters" and has brought prosperity to the city. Besides being NZ's main shipping port it is also the main terminal for overseas traffic. The warm sunny climate with its generous and evenly distributed rainfall is ideal and there are beautiful parklands and garden reserves throughout. The favorite sport of Aucklanders is yachting. Fernanda checked with the hotel and they suggested eating at the Harbour City Lights restaurant which we did. Good expensive food with wine or cocktails cost about \$100 per couple. We walked along the harbor and found many other restaurants but who knows if their food was as delicious as what we just had. Found the ferry service to go to the two other islands with suggested wine tasting at the many wineries on Wiki Wiki.

Day 8:

Jerry and I were picked up at 6 a.m. and the weather was nice and warm. We were picked up by a private vehicle eventhough the hotel had airport shuttle service. The driver was on time but seemed not to be in a mood to talk. After a couple of questions, I gave up trying to converse. All the standard airline names were hanging at the airport as usual. As he got ready to drive away, he had an afterthought it seemed and said the Air New Zealand desk is on the right of the door. What did that mean? After all we were flying on United! Well after walking all around, we found out that everyone flies out of New Zealand on either Qantas or Air New Zealand no matter whether or not your ticket says any other name! Have to look at the departure screen with our United flight number and then it told us which ANZ check in gate to report to! After 5 minutes they found our names on the flight rosters and we requested that our bags go through to SF. Well we were informed that they didn't have a record of that request in the computer. So I asked if that could still happen, and they were agreeable. duh! Obtained boarding passes and had to go to the Bank of New Zealand to pay \$25 departure fee each which was stamped on the back of our boarding passes. We arrived in Sydney and the strangest thing happened at the security gate. Jerry was not searched as he generally is! We had a 5 hour layover. We could leave the terminal as we had a visa but... that meant requesting our luggage and taking it through customs. Then lug it around Sydney and come back and go through the entire security check in all over again. Well, we thought about that for 2 or 3 seconds and decided phooey! Using the 2nd day of our Two Day Sydney pass was not worth the effort!! But we would definitely NOT get a 2 day pass again in the future, unless we used both days before leaving.

The flight from Sydney to SF was long and long and long. It was a lot better than the flight from SF to Sydney as Jerry had an aisle seat! I think we really need to consider Business Class for the next long flight that we plan on taking!! Items of note: Screw on caps instead of corks! If you heard music, it was from the 60's and 70's. And last but not least..... Go visit New Zealand. It is a must for all. People were wonderful too!