

MARIN

EXTRAORDINARY LIVING

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FEATURES

GARDEN [True To It's Roots](#)
HOME [Is Marin Worth It?](#)
JOURNEY [New Zealand](#)
WINE [Summer Nights](#)

DEPARTMENTS

GALLERIES [Sense of Place](#)
Play [Diving Into Marin](#)
CALENDAR [08-06](#)

COLUMNS

[VIEW FROM MT. TAM](#)

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GUIDE

SPA RESOURCE



GUIDE

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STORY & PHOTOS ROBERT KAUFMAN

Crammed into a four-seat gondola climbing precariously on what is said to be the steepest lift in the Southern Hemisphere, I gazed at the vista unfolding beneath me—a magnificent sweep of the city of Queenstown, the deep blue stillness of Lake Wakatipu, and beyond, the jagged uplift of the Remarkables, mountains whose name aptly describes New Zealand itself.

As we approached the 2,600-foot summit of the Skyline complex, my stomach felt intact, until I witnessed a daring mortal take a leap of faith and step into 1,300 feet of thin air strapped to a bungee harness. "Holy Kiwi," I thought to myself as the needle on my adventure meter raced into the red zone, and I felt quite content to stay right where I was.



Still, that aerial thrill-seeking is just what epitomizes New Zealanders' adventurous spirit. After all, it was a Kiwi (A.J. Hackett) who opened the first commercial bungee-jumping site almost 20 years ago. It was a Kiwi (Sir Edmund Hillary) who was the first to summit Mount Everest. It was a Kiwi (Jean Batten) who, in 1936, piloted the first-ever direct flight between New Zealand and England. Considering the New Zealand penchant for soaring to such heights, it's ironic the country's national bird, the kiwi, doesn't even fly!

After jetting 13 hours through double-digit time zones from San Francisco on an overnight Air New Zealand flight, resulting in a missed day and an entire lost season (departed in spring, arrived in fall), I arrived for a 12-day New Zealand marathon visit rested and pumped with adrenaline.

As a multiseasonal destination, "the land of the long white cloud" offers a plethora of heart-pounding activities—from kayaking to skiing, parachuting to mountain biking—to suit anyone's cardiovascular condition and fear threshold. How apropos to greet this remote corner of the world with the dawn of a new day.

New Zealand and California have a lot in common. They are about the same size and share much of the same geographic diversity—including a susceptibility to earthquakes. There are literally two islands that make up New Zealand. The North Island is characterized by rolling hills, steaming geothermal pools, a volcanic plateau, and of lush dairy pastures. The South Island displays remnants of the ice age in its Southern Alps, and 3 million acres of jagged fjords carve up its coast, one of only two places in the world they can be viewed. Both islands share another intoxicating correlation with California: A microclimate that provides ideal conditions for growing grapes and producing wines.

With only 4 million Kiwis on the islands and a third of those living in the largest city, Auckland, there's a wealth of fertile terrain in which to spread your wings. But you'd better appreciate sheep. They outnumber the humans ten to one, and they have the right of way, as I found out during my drive to Cape Kidnappers Golf Course in Hawkes Bay. Nearing the entrance, I encountered roughly 800 woolly creatures stampeding along the country road toward my car. As they were being shepherded from one paddock to another, all I could do was stop the car and enjoy a spectacle that turned out to be the worst traffic jam I had to endure during my journey.

New Zealanders generally seem to greet this and other such daily vicissitudes with a congeniality exceeded only by their neighborly hospitality. Fortunately, I was the recipient at many different levels. In Kaitaia, the country's northernmost town, Mark Rose, manager of the Carrington Resort and Karikari Estate Winery, waited three hours for my late arrival at the airport's only landing strip. A trip with Fernz Eco Tours to the Kauri Rain Forest included a stop at Fern's home for afternoon tea. David (former chef for Rod Stewart) and Jan Rayner, my hosts at the McHardy House bed and breakfast in Napier, indulged me with a glass of wine before I could set my bags down. My adopted New Zealand family (courtesy of a local Kiwi friend) in Christchurch provided me with a bed, home-cooked meals, and a tour of the countryside.

My ultimate Kiwi indulgence, though, was being allowed to masquerade as one of the handful of royalty and celebrities who have occupied the secluded four-bedroom Owner's Cottage at the acclaimed Huka Lodge in Taupo on the banks of the Waikato River. I'm sure the locks have been changed by now.

GETTING THERE

From San Francisco to New Zealand
 Air New Zealand: airnewzealand.com
 United Air Lines: ual.com
 Qantas Air: qantas.com

From Los Angeles to New Zealand
 Air Tahiti Nui: airtahitinui.com

General travel information
 Tourism New Zealand:
newzealand.com

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