

Last Minute Stuff 2

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Home Again

It really feels good to be home. We've been back for just over a month and I'm still sort of catching up. It didn't help that Suzanne and I both got sick as soon as we got home. Good thing SARS hadn't made it to New Zealand when we left or I'd have been pretty worried. As it was, being out of commission for a couple of weeks made it hard to get back in the swing of things.

Suzanne has a long list of projects we need to do in the yard before it gets too hot and she's even managed to con me into helping with some of them. Somehow our little strip of grass in front of the house has grown into something like a real lawn.

Then there are the 22 or so rolls of 3D slides I shot in New Zealand and need to get mounted. I want to try to put together a slide show for the 3D convention we are helping put on the end of July.

New Zealand

The trip to New Zealand was fun, educational and very tiring. We did see a good part of both islands and got to meet a lot of interesting people. It's an extremely diverse place. You can be walking on a warm beach then get in your car and drive for 30 minutes and be on a glacier having driven through a rainforest in the process.

The people are mostly white Anglo Saxon types with a small percentage of islanders, mostly Maori, and a small but growing Asian population. It was strange to go for days without seeing anyone who wasn't white. Sort of like living in a Fifties TV sitcom.

Sheep

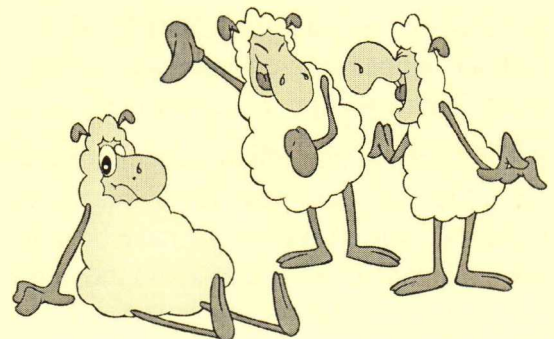
Did I mention the sheep? There are about 50 million sheep on the two islands. That means there are roughly 12 sheep for every person. When we went there I knew very little about sheep and now realize that was a fortunate state. Sheep, it turns out, come in a lot of different breeds each having it's own preferred habitat and feeding preferences. Some like to live on hills because they have to keep their hooves dry are they rot off. Others have fallen out of fashion due to having too high a fat content for modern diets. Then there are the ones who are noticeable smarter then the rest and actually figure out how to escape from the paddocks. Those, our guide informed us, are called "dinner".

Lots of interesting facts about sheep surfaced on various tours. Like who knew that sheep wear out their teeth from eating grass growing on soil that's to abrasive? Or that each farmer breeds his own variety of sheep to the point that they can tell which sheep are theirs just by looking at them.

I know, fascinating stuff!

Jade

I spent a fair amount of time looking for Jade, called "green stone", whenever we were near a river or a beach. It's a lot like





looking for gold out west: way too much trouble, way too much work and you can buy it a lot easier. I guess there's just some kind of kick to finding something of value produced by Mother Nature. I did find a small pebble that may be green stone. I'll find out when I have time to polish it up.

We think of jade in terms of jewelry but the Maori used a lot of Jade in the production of weapons. It has a lot of properties in common with metal and can be worked into pretty fearsome edged weapons. I saw one club like thing; it had the general outlines of a club but a razor sharp edge, almost 4 foot long. That sucker could have ruined anyone's day.

The Maori

You can't really talk about New Zealand without mentioning the Maori people. They got there from somewhere, no one knows where they came from since the Maori name for the place translates as "that other place", a few hundred years before the Europeans showed up. They didn't waste a lot of time when they got there.

First they killed off every member of the tribes that were already on New Zealand except a few who escaped to a remote island. Then they wiped out a couple of giant flightless birds, these things were as much as 12 feet tall!, by hunting them into extinction.

I guess you could sum up their culture by saying that all it takes to make a Maori happy is someone or something to kill.

Oh, the Maori do have one neat custom: They always give precedence to women. The Maori women are always the first to enter any abode or go through any gate. They are also the ones who always welcome visitors. Respect for women you're thinking? Well no. It's so the men will have time to get to their weapons while hostile visitors, or hosts, kill the women.

Wine

The wines are wonderful! New Zealand has only recently gotten into large-scale commercial wine production but they are learning very fast. We tried a lot of wines and they compared with the best California or French wines. Best of all they are cheap.

Bottles of a quality that would cost \$50 in the US sell for the equivalent of \$15. Also nice was the way restaurants don't mark up the price of wine very much. Here at home you can expect to pay 2 to 3 times the retail price for a bottle of wine in a nice restaurant. There it was more like a 20% markup.

Food

Food was cheap and good. Mostly what I think of as "English" dishes with a lot of seafood tossed in. Fish and chips replace hamburgers as the universal fast food and was very good almost everywhere we went. The real surprise was the cost.

When I got my first bill at a decent restaurant my reaction was, "This is real close to prices back home." Then I remembered that New Zealand dollars trade at about 56 cents to the US dollar. So that made the bill about half what it would have been in Atlanta. Combine that with the fact that tipping is pretty rare, not expected unless it says so on the menu, and you have really cheap restaurant food.

How good was the food and wine? Well I gained over 10 pounds in the month we were there! Now I'm slowly working it off.

Roads

New Zealand is roughly the size of California but only has a population of about 4 million. This means there are not a lot of people to pay for infra structure like roads. So they make a few compromises.

The one-way bridges on major roads take a little getting used to. There you are driving down a nice modern highway and suddenly you come to a one-lane bridge. They do have signs that indicate which end of the bridge has the right of way but that's about it for traffic control. We were told they have very few accidents on the bridges but I'm not sure I believe it.

The other noticeable compromise is road width. In some places the "sealed" roads, their word for paved, are too narrow for two cars to pass. Much less a car and one of the large buses or timber trucks. Again they claim very few accidents.

The real traffic hazard is tourists who drive on the "right" side of the road New Zealand being a "drive on the left" country. It's very easy to lose track of which side of the road you're supposed to be on when you drive across a one-lane bridge or on road only one lane wide. We saw at least one accident caused by a tourist coming over a one-lane bridge and then driving down the wrong side of the road.

Kill a Possum and Save the Forest

That was a road sign we saw in several places. The history of New Zealand's ecology is one long battle to survive yet another stupidly imported species. For example, to start with there were no mammals, except for a small bat, on the island. That's why most of the birds are flightless; they had nothing to fly away from. Then settlers introduced fox, for sport, rabbits, for food, and various stouts and weasels just for the fun of it. Now almost all the native birds are on the endangered species list.

Everybody who's ever visited New Zealand seems to have brought along something to attack the native ecology. Possums are one of the worst pests. Imported from Australia to raise for fur back before we all got so PC about animal cruelty, they were allowed to run wild and breed to their little hearts content. Now they are destroying large areas of forest by eating all the young green shoots, stripping the bark off trees and eating the seedlings.

It's a real dilemma for the eco freaks. Do you defend these poor, and quit cute unlike our North American possums, animals at the cost of the rain forest or save the rain forest by eradicating them?

Americans

They like us in New Zealand. We happened to wander into a major anti war demonstration in Christchurch and several of the people I talked to went out of their way to make it clear it was America's polices they objected to not Americans. I think the main thing most of them were worried about was our invading a country without the sanction of the UN.

One old gentleman we talked to was outraged by the demonstration. He was a guide at the Royal New Zealand Air Force museum and had served in a pathfinder squadron in WWII. His opinion of people who did not support the US was very low and bluntly stated. I tend to forget that the US Navy saved New Zealand from a Japanese invasion in WWII, but they don't.



New Zealand and Australia had sent almost their entire army, navy and air force to fight in England before the Japanese got into the war and that left them defenseless. We fought a major battle in the Coral Sea and turned back the invasion fleet that would have easily taken the islands.

Used Japanese Cars

At one point I noticed a huge automobile transport unloading in Auckland and realized the cars coming off the boat all looked used. I couldn't imagine why anyone would be shipping used cars in such quantity. One of our guides explained it.

He said the Japanese have a law that requires cars over a certain age be taken off the road regardless of their condition. We ran into this in Singapore so it's believable. They do it to prevent traffic problems due to breakdowns and, I suspect, keep tax revenue up on new car sales. Since many of the cars taken off the road are in great shape, they ship them to other countries and sell them.

Air New Zealand

This was the first time I've traveled on Air New Zealand and I was very favorably impressed. Of course the fact that they have a few extra inches of legroom in coach goes a long way to making me like them. The service was good, the food was excellent and the flights ran on time.

Other Stuff

Well that's enough about New Zealand. I'll be putting a real trip report through sometime as well as an issue of *Traveler's Tales* dedicated to the trip.

Matrix 2

Boy is this movie bad! We went to see it on the big screen at the theater in Canton because I needed a little mindless escape and I certainly got the mindless part. I'm still appalled at the complete lack of plot and the seemingly endless, pointless, fight sequences. Then there was all the heavy-handed semi-mystical crud and the whole, silly, wild party sequence in the hidden city.

I think boring sums it up pretty well. They are releasing the "conclusion" to the movie in November but they aren't going to get any ticket money from me. Well maybe if it comes to the drive-in. There you can laugh at stupid movies and talk about them without offending the other patrons.

SF Conventions

We won't be at DSC this year since it's the same weekend as the 3D convention we're working on but we are planning on making it to New Orleans for Crescent City Con. It's right after the National Stereo Association convention so we're planning on driving straight from Charleston to New Orleans. OK maybe with a day or two stop along the coast somewhere to wind down.

We almost decided to go to WorldCon in Toronto but the timing is real bad and would have been hard to arrange.