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We're on a plane headed for Melbourne, Australia after 13 days of exploring New Zealand. This part of the Adventure started in Auckland with a group of 28 travelers plus Scott and me. Auckland is New Zealand's largest city by far - nearly one third of the population of the country live in greater Auckland. The central business district is more difficult to identify as "kiwi-land" - the influx of immigrants, particularly Asian, has changed the feel dramatically since I was last here four years ago.



Guide, Terry, leading us through Cornwall Park

An introductory walk through Auckland, starting in Cornwall Park, got the kinks out of our legs after 12+ hours of flying and trying to work out how you can lose an entire day simply by crossing an imaginary International Dateline. Our walk started nearly on the opposite side of this narrow isthmus, allowing us to see both sides at one point up on Mt. Eden. One of the city's numerous volcanic cones, the Mt. Eden vantage point allowed us to take in both the Tasman Sea to the west and the Pacific to the east. Cattle and sheep are still grazing in paddocks in some of the city's domains (parks), adding a pastoral flavor to this city of 1.6 million.



Descent off Mt Eden

As we crossed the playing fields of one of Auckland University's campuses, we also got a quick primer in the quintessentially English pastime of cricket from our guide, Terry. He confided to me later that he gave us the proverbial drop in the bucket of cricket rules and strategy. A game that can last 5 days must be difficult to explain to a bunch of Americans in 5 minutes or less.

Our second walk started with a ferry ride across lovely Hauraki Gulf to wine producing Waiheke Island. Waiheke is a new walk venue for WAI. Scott and I had investigated it during our pre-tour planning and, though we had to reject a few of the trails offered by local partners (amazing coastal walks with uber-challenging grades and long staircases), we were very pleased with the result of our research and happy to share it with our group. A very doable section of the coastal trail was followed by lunch at one of the top local wineries, then a vineyard to vineyard walk which ended with a stroll on a lovely and nearly deserted white sand beach.



Waiheke Island walk

Kiwi Dundee was on our schedule for Day 3. Doug Johansen has been building a legacy in the Coromandel Peninsula for four decades. He delights in showing visitors the hidden wonders of the Coromandel – our first introduction to New Zealand’s hundreds of species of ferns, glowworms in an abandoned gold mine shaft, practical jokes involving the huge, cricket-like wetas, a majestic 700-year-old kauri tree, and a stroll out to a sun-kissed Pacific beach where the nearest land mass across the Pacific is Chili – the longest span of landless ocean on planet.



Darren & Susan taking it in

Day 4 started from the Maori cultural capital of Rotorua. A lakeside walk around Lake Tikitapu was followed by a fun and farcical introduction to sheep farming in New Zealand at the fabled Agrodome sheep show. The highlight of the day was probably the walk through Waimangu Thermal Valley - a geothermal wonderland created in a single day in the late 19th century. This 17-kilometer rift in the earth's crust developed violently, with no warning, on June 10, 1886. It is the only geothermal system on the planet that can be traced to a specific date. For four kilometers, our guided walk wound between hot pools and spouting mini-geysers. At this point along the Ring of Fire, the crust of the planet is only about 10 kilometers thick, compared to an average of 22 kilometers.



Waimangu Thermal Valley

Our final North Island walk was one of my favorites. Spring water that has filtered for 50 to 100 years through the Mamaku Mountains percolates up at Blue Spring. The waters of the Te Waihou Stream are clear as crystal with strong hues of blue, rimmed in many places by massive tree ferns, and home to a variety of bird species and trout, clearly visible through the glass-like surface.



Te Waihou magic

We flew to the South Island from Rotorua just a couple of hours after finishing the Te Waihou trail. It's always been my impression that the South Island is even more beautiful than the North, but after the last five days, I'm going to have to be re-convinced.

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