

New Zealand 1: It doesn't get much further than this

"I want to go somewhere with green", said the Jaffa. She and I knew that this "somewhere" could not be EMEK IZRAEL nor the Galilee, and that it must involve a phone call to someone who is certified as a travel agent. After 24 hours of geographic deliberations, a daring decision has been made. It was then, in the hot Israeli summer, that we decided to take part in the wintry summer of New Zealand. So, finally, after more than two decades of devoted service in the tourism industry, I am finally here in the fifth continent.

The journey began at the central train station in Tel Aviv. From the same station where I used to go south to Beer Sheva every Monday in the last year, I began a southbound journey that took me a little bit further south. My overseas friends may not be aware of the joyous event that took place here a week earlier. After mild delays in both time and money dimensions - the new terminal of the Ben Gurion airport (that so naively boasts the number 2000 in its title) was finally opened. It is spacious, modern, pleasant, a paean to duty free shopping, and you can get straight to the terminal by train. Was Meir Ariel's song ("I love you terminal") prophetic?

We began our trip to New Zealand by having two SARS in 24 hours. Don't be alarmed - we visited Hong Kong (HK) and Macau, two Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of China. We landed in HK in the afternoon and spent the rest of the day and night doing the essentials. I, with my fresh memories from last year's visit to this amazing place, served as an "and-on-your-left-you-may-see" guide to the perplexed Jaffa. HK is indeed a striking place, offering first class street scenes, powerful urban views, people watching and nocturnal vistas.

The next morning we took a jetfoil to the neighboring Macau. Macau was rented by China to the Portuguese in the mid 16th century, and it was returned to Chinese hands in 1999, in wake of the China-UK agreement from 1984 to handover HK to China. The history that took place in between is quite fascinating and does not resemble the HK story at all. Today, it is part of China under the same principle that defines the HK-China relations: "One country, Two systems". Like HK, this principle will hold for 50 years from the handover. Unlike HK, Macau's residents are citizens of both China and Portugal. Macau's economy is based on gambling and tourism. It is the only place in China where gambling is legal, and trust the Chinese that when they took over Macau they cleaned it from the organized crime that took place there. The plan now is to develop Macau into a local Las Vegas, with all the implied buzz .

Macau's Portuguese origins are seen through the language ("Bem Vindo a Macau", "Rua", "Avenida"), through many European buildings, mostly painted in pink (a color that, so it seems, the Portuguese like), the churches, and Portuguese faces in the streets (few, but detectable when you hear them speak). Portugal was neutral during WW2 and hence, unlike HK, was not attacked nor invaded by Japan. This is why all buildings remained intact. In short - an interesting short trip to a European and Christian island in Asia.

We continued with a second red-eye long haul flight from HK to Auckland, New Zealand's main city that is located in the North Island, and, as if that was not enough, took a third and last flight (for now) to Christchurch, the main city in the South Island. Already

from the flight towards Christchurch it was obvious that we came to the right place. Jaffa wanted green and she got it big time. Beautiful green meadows, heaths and fields, organized in perfect geometrical shapes and dotted by thousands of sheep. Since that part of the southern island is flat, the land looked vast and infinite. As the sun was setting, every tree and every sheep was quintupled by its long shadowed image. The low hanging thick blanket of clouds that floated near by added a dramatic touch to this beautiful view.

After landing we went to the house of Margaret and Croydon, two Israel-lover Christians in their 60s, Amish-looking, that host Israeli travelers for practically nothing (they are part of an organization, called HIT, that consists of such benevolent people). That was a great way to start our visit and relax from the long journey. The next morning, Sunday, Margaret almost begged us to let her drop her husband in church and then take us to the car-rental office after a guided tour of town. What can I say - we are good people so we let her. The town has superb places that made me wander in my thoughts to perhaps arranging sabbatical opportunities there (the minute I uttered my thoughts out loud, Margaret turned the car towards the local university). At 11AM, after a calm and pleasant morning, and absolutely jet-leg free, we arrived at the car rental company, picked up our car, thanked Margaret, got behind the wheel and prayed to God that we shall survive the driving left-right shift. We began driving west towards our first destiny - Mount Cook.