

New Zealand 5: From Glaciers to Sandy Beaches

Our next major stop was Fox glacier. This is a giant glacier near the west coast of the South Island that, together with the neighboring Franz Josef glacier, welcomes tourists onto it. These are the two most famous glaciers among the many that are found in NZ. I think that they are the closest glaciers anywhere to the equator as well as to a sea. The popular ways of seeing either of those glaciers is a hike on them, or a heli-hike. The first option involves a hike to the glacier and then walking on it, near its edge, with the appropriate gear. The second and much more expensive option involves a scenic flight above the glacier, landing on a high point on it, far from its edge, and taking a hike there. One day before arriving at the glacier, we weighed both options and tried to decide which option should we choose. After some hesitations and deliberations we decided to adopt the "it's-only-money" approach combined with the "as-long-as-we're-here" doctrine. In other words, I called the 0-800 number in one of the colorful brochures with pictures of elated and content people smiling from a helicopter above a snowy-white glacial surface and surrendered my credit card number in return for two seats in the noon ride-of-joy for the next day. Less than 3 seconds after hanging up on the cheerful heli-hike representative and informing Jaffa of the successful spending of our funds, we were both self-convinced that this had been the wisest decision of our lives, in a textbook demonstration of inverse psychology.

The next day we woke up in the Fox Glacier village to what was supposed to be one of the most magnificent days in our trip. Apart from the heli-hike, we planned to drive that morning to the near-by Lake Matheson that is famous for its reflections of New Zealand's highest peaks - Mount Cook and Mount Tasman. That tiny lake is well protected from the wind, whence its waters are often incredibly still and they provide a perfect reflection of the mountains. But that morning God was not on our side. It was overcast and the mountains were covered with a thick blanket of clouds. The ultimate photo was downgraded to a nice photo, no more. On top of that, when we came to the heli-hike office they told us that the flight had to be canceled due to the poor visibility. So we had to give up the heli-hike for a simple pedi-hike. Oh, the pain of disappointment.

At 15:00, with sturdy socks and boots, heavy rain coats and crampons we got on the bus that took us to the starting point of the hike. It did not rain all day. Alas, the minute we got off the bus it started raining heavily for exactly 5 minutes - the standard time to completely soak a pair of heavy jeans inside and out. Jaffa and I looked like puppies that were left in the rain. Our despair was so high that Jaffa suggested faintly and semi-seriously "Why don't we just stay here? This is ridiculous!" I looked up to the skies and asked God "What next?" The answer came immediately in the form of strong freezing winds that plastered the wet jeans to my wet shaking skin. The fun never stops. Of course, some of you may wonder at this point what-the-hell were we doing in such a hike with jeans and without the rain-proof pants that we got especially for such purposes. The answer is- "because we're idiots!" I should add to my defense that I interviewed three guys that came back from an earlier hike, and their descriptions suggested that we were properly dressed. But at that point in our trip I should have known better not to trust the traitorous South Island weather.

To cut a long story short - that turned out to be one of the best afternoons in our trip! The minute we started climbing the steep hill next to the glacier, we began to warm up. After less than an hour, atop that hill, the pants almost dried-off and we were able to inhale the sight of the majestic glacier and the amazing valley in front of it that had the classical U-shape of valleys that were carved by glaciers. We then began our descent towards the glacier. Putting on the crampons and taking a walking stick in our hands, we then began our long and most satisfying walk on the glacier's surface. I am no stranger to glaciers; I have seen more than few around the world; I like them and I think that they like me too. But this was the closest encounter I have ever had with a glacier, seeing from a close distance all the crevasses and caves and all sorts of glacial terms that I can't spell nor pronounce. Needless to say that at the end of the tour we were totally pleased with the way things turned out, with the hike that we took, with our fantastic guide and the interesting people that we met on our group. Heli-hike? What were we thinking!??

We then continued up north. I will skip the pancake-rocks, the seal colony and Nelson Lakes national park (quite impressive, hardly impressive, very impressive) and tell you about the last major attraction of the South Island: Abel Tasman national park. It is renowned for its golden beaches, sculptured granite bush-covered cliffs, and its coastal track. The tramp along that track takes 3 days, but one day is more than enough to get the idea. We were there for two days. In our second day there we hiked along the second-day portion of the track. A "sea-taxi" drops you on shore in the requested starting point and comes to pick you up in the end of the day from wherever you wish to be picked up. This bush-walk is like "Route number 1" of tracks - a scenic curvy track that goes along a rugged shore up and down shapely cliffs, where every now and then it offers vistas and access to beautiful Bahama-style sandy beaches. I loved this "warm" tramp that came right on time after all the "cold" alpine tramps that we did.

In our first day in the park we kayaked along another portion of the track. We took a guided tour: a guide in a single-kayak and four couples in double-kayaks go on a kayaking journey in the sea, from one bay to another. That trip didn't start too well for us. A series of misunderstandings with Rob, the guide, created a poor first impression. Here is an example of a pathetic dialog between him and me. I needed to park our car at the end point of the trip. So here's how it went:

Me: So, where should I park the car?

Rob: Drive all the way down this road and park there.

Me (recalling that I saw two parking lots over there): In the parking lot on the left side?

Rob: Right.

Do I really need to tell you what happened? Abbott and Costello couldn't have done it better.

Later on, it became clear that the Tel Aviv team is the weakest link. While the Amsterdam, Portland and Norfolk (UK) teams paddled gracefully and fast as though they were born on sea, we were somewhat lacking on both the grace and speed columns. Think of the old charming song of Rachel Atias "RAK CHAIM'KE SHELI" in order to get an idea ☺. Rob understood that we are his challenge of the day. But very fast, after developing conversation and exchanging few cynical remarks, we became Rob's favorite team.

The trip itself was quite hard, as it involved paddling for 15km in open sea, but it offered great views and lovely moments like that time when two shags (sea-birds that are very graceful despite their strange four-letter name) crossed our path just two meters in front of us, flying very close to the water. During the day Jaffa and I developed noticeable paddling skills and during the last kilometer we paddled so fast that Rob, who was way behind near the Dutch kayak, had to shout to the English kayak to call the American kayak who were nearest to us to give us a signal to stop. Rob was very amused that the only thing that made us finally paddle fast was knowing that this is the end.

We left Abel Tasman on a beautiful Saturday morning and drove to the port town of Picton. There, we returned the car and boarded a ferry that took us to the capital Wellington on the North Island. That significant south-to-north transition marked the beginning of the end .