

## New Zealand 6: The North Island

Wellington, the capital city of NZ, welcomed us with a well-tempered Saturday afternoon. After disembarking the ferry and collecting our luggage and the new rented car, we still had plenty of daylight time to explore the city. Wellington is situated in a beautiful harbor at the southern tip of the North Island, in proximity to the geographical center of the country. It is widely spread on the hills that surround the harbor, and from atop Mt Victoria (it is always Victoria...) you get to see a stunning 360-degree view of that city. The splendid location between hills and water, and the way it is constructed (few high-rises; mostly low buildings with bright-colored wooden facades and large windows that usually face the water) made it look like a combination of Seattle and San Francisco. However, as charming as Wellington may be, it doesn't have enough of that special thing that makes Seattle a wonderful city and SF a great one.

We paid our respect to the famous buildings in the civic center of the city. The prominent ones were the modernist Beehive (the executive wing of the Parliament), the old Government Building (one of the largest all-wooden buildings in the world) and the Neo-Gothic styled National Library. As for the Beehive - a building that became the architectural symbol of NZ, it is a fine example of horrific pseudo-sophisticated piece of architecture. It looks like a first draft (and an ugly one) of the Agam water jet in Dizengoff circus in Tel Aviv (a lovely masterpiece in its own right, I should add for the benefit of my non-Israeli friends, who surely understand that I'm being cynical). The next day, a rainy Sunday, we dedicated a whole morning to the excellent Te Papa museum - a national pride and rightly so, that presents everything you ever wanted to know about NZ and its inhabitants, a whole afternoon for sleeping, followed by an evening of good dining (Thai, what else) and a stupid Hollywood movie of the sort that one sees only in vacations.

Our next highlight was the Tongariro Crossing trek. Often billed as 'the best one-day trek in NZ' (and our last 'best' trek in this trip), it passes over varied and spectacular volcanic terrain and offers active volcanoes and craters, lava flows, steam vents, emerald-colored lakes and a general feeling of walking in a lunar landscape. It is breathtaking, in both meanings of the expression, especially in the white setting that was arranged for us. The day we walked this trek was the first beautiful day after something like two weeks of cold weather and snowstorms. Hence, the color that dominated our day was virginal white, with patches of reddish-brownish-blackish volcanic soil. Thank God, no green! (At least until the most unexpected spin at the last hour of the trek that goes through a bush). Seeing pictures from the same places without the white coating, we realized how lucky we were. Alas, this white was also the fly in the ointment: walking most of the day on fresh snow and ice, without crampons or walking sticks, was hard and dangerous.

The trek takes something like 8 hours. Its best part begins after a terribly steep and slippery climb towards a huge wide crater. That crater was the only flat part in the entire trek, but nevertheless it was still not too easy to traverse due to the layer of icy snow. That crater is situated just next to Mount Ngauruhoe, a mountain whose majestic cone shape is documented in more than dozen of pictures that we took already in the preceding day and during the first half of the trek. Then came another excruciating

climb towards the red crater - an active reddish crater with steam vents where sitting on the ground offered a pleasant warm-up to our behinds (true, it could have been even more pleasant if it wasn't wet). From that point we could look down to the other side and see the superb emerald lakes, smell the familiar sulfur stench (I love this rotten-egg smell), look at the near-by Mount Tongariro and, most enjoyably, look back at the tiny distant people that were crossing the wide flat crater, feeling content for completing one mean climb and unaware of the fact that the next climb is no better. Indeed, the view from that point was dreamy, probably one of the best that NZ has to offer.

After the completion of the trek, and a nice cup of coffee at our guesthouse, we drove north to the lovely resort town of Taupo. We were going to stay that night with a lady called Chrissy, from the HIT organization. HIT is an organization of mostly Christian Kiwis that admire Israel and host Israeli travelers for just a small donation. We took advantage of that noble enterprise in three places: in Christchurch, upon landing in NZ, with the lovely Margaret and Croydon; then in Taupo, with Chrissy; and finally in Auckland with Margaret and Paul. We found lovely people, most kind and helpful, with fascinating life stories, that proved to be valuable sources of information and did every possible effort to make our stay in NZ as memorable and pleasant as possible. They all maintain photo albums of all of their Israeli guests. All Israelis look so beautiful, happy and wonderful in those pictures that one can only wonder what a terrific people we could have been if only we were lead by Moses to NZ instead of our current location. And the way that those HIT hosts speak fondly of their Israeli guests is amazing: they are in love with us! Yes, I do speak of the same people that cut you on the freeway, that speak loudly on their mobile and have only one question to ask in the bank - us.

The minute we entered Chrissy's house we announced that we could look much better than the way we did (not shaved (me), bad hair day (Jaffa), no hair day (me again), torn pants (yes, me), rugged and color-incompatible clothes (both of us)). Chrissy laughed and welcomed us into the kitchen where she was working with two Israeli girls on frying donuts and latkes for Hanuka. The house was full: Chrissy, her brother who came from Auckland, her two kids, two of their friends and no less than 9 Israelis! That evening was the first evening of Hanuka. I blessed and lit the candles. It was a most memorable Hanuka, mainly due to the eyes of the four kids that were mesmerized by the blessings and the singings in our odd language. The next morning we decided to prolong our stay for one additional day of leisure and relaxation.

From Taupo we drove up north to Rotoroa. This is the hottest touristy spot in the North Island, and it seems that almost every other building there is a hotel or a motel. Rotoroa is popular among tourists because of its location in the most thermally active region in NZ. The NZ equivalent of Yellowstone, called "Thermal Wonderland", is only a short drive from Rotoroa. This is an awesome national park. It is quite weak on the geyser side (it has only one active geyser, and even that one has to be triggered artificially every day at 10:15AM by pouring soap powder into its mouth in front of dozens of tourists with their fingers ready to click). However, when it comes to colors, it looks like one giant pallet with an amazing variety of colors. Parts of that park looked almost identical to the magical Huanglong national park in the north of Sichuan (China), of which I wrote last year. The setting here was not as mysterious as it was there, but on the bright side, we didn't have to push our way through the one percent of Chinese population that visited the park in the same day as we did back then.

Apart from that we went to one of the ten best spas of the world (nice, but in that case also Hamat Gadder should appear on that list), ate one of the best and fattest meals of our trip (fried chicken and fried fish with tons of chips - that was one of the most aggressive inward liposuction procedures I have ever performed) and attended the local 'must': an evening of Maori folklore. Regarding the latter activity - here's my advice to you: Don't! I knew it would suck, and it did! If you want to have a Margaret Mead experience, go elsewhere.

Our last station was Auckland. This is a waterside city that is located on a thin stretch of the North Island and is surrounded by the sea from almost every possible side. Auckland has a pulse of a real metropolitan and it offers everything that appears in the checklist that defines a "city". But we were tired. In both nights that we spent in that city we returned to the house where we stayed at 10PM and had a civilized chat with our hosts. We were ready to pack our stuff and go back home.

Cheers mates (and stay tuned for the photos),  
Tamir