

Two of the world's best: Visiting the highlights of Australia and New Zealand

by Fred and Karen Eckert

New Zealand is such a pleasant and lovely land with so many plusses and next to no minuses. No snakes. No poisonous insects or plants. No dangerous wildlife.

"But we do have three pests," our Kiwi guide told us on the first day of our 22-day Goway tour, "and all three were introduced here from Australia. The rabbits are a bit of a nuisance. So are the possum. But it's the third pest that really bothers us."

THE SYMBOL OF SYDNEY - The Sydney Opera House, with its white, sculptured sails, stands on a point that extends into the city's magnificent harbor. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. RETURN TO SENDER - At a cultural show near Cairns, an Australian Aborigine demonstrates the proper way to throw a boomerang. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. MAMMOTH MONOLITH - Uluru, formerly known as Ayers Rock, is reportedly the largest monolith in the world and a sacred site for Australian Aborigines. It is in a remote area of the Outback known as the Red Center. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A BEAR? - A koala is one of many unusual creatures found only in Australia. Many people wrongly call them koala bears. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. TO THE TOP OF NEW ZEALAND - Mount Cook, the largest mountain in New Zealand, is a focal point of one of the most scenic areas in the country's extraordinarily scenic South Island. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. ROADBLOCK - You don't run into many traffic jams in the sparsely populated South Island of New Zealand, but when you do, it might look like this. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. CULTURAL CUSTOMS - Maoris, New Zealand's indigenous people, have a rich Polynesian culture. Rotorua, where the city's population is 40 percent Maori, is a great place to watch a Maori cultural show. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. Of course someone promptly asked what the third pest was.

"Australian rugby players," he replied.

Kiwis and Aussies delight in such good-natured put-downs of each other and each other's country, but they truly like each another - and each other's country. There is so much to like about each of them.

Anyone who hasn't visited either Australia or New Zealand is missing out on two of the world's best destinations. A great way to experience some of the finest each country offers is to take a roughly three-week

tour that takes in the highlights of both. The best one we've seen when it comes to quality and value and visiting all the right places is the one we recently took, Goway's "Waltzing Matilda" tour. In Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, home to nearly one-third of the country's population of 4 million, our city tour included an evening harbor sail, a visit to the top of Mount Eden for a panoramic view and shopping time in Parnell Village, a mile-long historic area and now-upscale little oasis known for its maze of stylish boutiques.

At Waitomo, we marveled watching thousands of Waitomo glowworms, found only in New Zealand, radiate luminescent light above as we glided through a dark grotto on a slow-moving boat.

Rotorua, just a short and scenic ride further southeast, welcomes you with whiffs of sulfur, since this small city is one of the world's few sites of erupting geysers. Here we enjoyed two truly outstanding tourist shows. The Agrodome Sheep Show turns such Kiwi farming activities as the shearing and herding of sheep into showbiz that is fun and educational for all ages.

Tamaki Maori Village, an evening cultural show of song, dance and story-telling about life in pre-European New Zealand, includes a hangi, a delicious traditional Polynesian banquet of foods cooked over hot rocks in an earthen oven.

ABUNDANCE OF ASTONISHING BEAUTY

A short flight brought us to the South Island's resort town of Queenstown, sited on a spectacular spot: an inlet at the north end of a long, finger-shaped lake with spectacular views across the water of the nearby mountain range aptly named The Remarkables. At the bottom of the South Island, we took a cruise on the 10-mile-long Milford Sound, one of the most scenic places in this land renowned for scenery.

Breathtaking scenery is something New Zealand has throughout - and in remarkable abundance. No other country in the world offers so many feasts for the eyes so close to one another. But even more amazing, and what distinguishes it from so many other scenic places, is that not only does it have such an astonishing abundance of spectacularly beautiful sights, but it also has an acute shortage of unattractive ones.

We ended our New Zealand visit in the South Island's largest city, Christchurch (population 370,000), taking in the sights of what is so often called its garden city and the most English city outside England. On the way there from Queenstown, we savored still more of the beauty of this lovely land, soaking in vistas of lakes Tekapo and Pukaki and stunning views of Aoraki/Mount Cook and the mountain range called the Southern Alps.

ON TO AUSTRALIA

First stop in Australia was Cairns (population 98,000), far up north in the state of Queensland. Visitors come to Cairns for the R and R - the reef and the rain forests.

We spent a day not far offshore viewing the Great Barrier Reef, and the next day we traveled a scenic railway further up north, where we went into the rain forest on land, on water aboard an Army duck amphibious vehicle, and from above, riding a skyrail. We also visited a butterfly sanctuary; saw kangaroos and koalas and other wildlife indigenous to Australia; and took in an Aboriginal culture show, where we even had a chance to test our skill at throwing a boomerang.

Next stop was a place both sacred to Aborigines and an icon of Australia - Uluru, once known as Ayers' Rock. It's almost dead center in the country in a Northern Territory area the Aussies call the Red Center. Uluru is purportedly the largest monolith in the world. It is huge: 2.2 miles long by 1.5 miles wide, shaped much like an oval. Its top towers 1,100 feet above the surrounding desert plains.

The experience of watching the sun set against the giant monolith is near magical. Slowly the color changes, and then quite suddenly and very dramatically it intensifies and radiates. For a few minutes you would almost think the great rock was emitting a fire from within as the rays of the setting desert sun seem to spray it with a blazing orange-red glow.

To some, another nearby massive geophysical formation is nearly as impressive as Uluru. Kata Tjuta, formerly The Olgas, means "many heads" in Aborigine, and that's pretty much what it looks like - lots of huge, head-shaped rocks scattered among gaps and gorges.

Following a brief visit to Alice Springs, immortalized in books and films as the quintessential Outback town, we flew to Adelaide, one of the nicest, best-planned cities anywhere. It stands up against the base of the Mount Lofty Ranges, in a fertile area known for its wines, close to the Murray River valley and less than 10 miles inland from Australia's southern coast, which gives it a Mediterranean-like climate.

Next we were off to Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city (3.1 million), and ended our tour in Sydney, the country's largest city (3.5 million). Melbourne has a bit of an Old World look and charm to it, due partly to the architecture of some of its buildings, partly to the fact that it drew so many of the country's post-World War II European immigrants, and perhaps more so because of the streetcars that are almost a symbol of the city. Like all other large Australian cities, it contains many parks, and like most others it has a river running through it. Our tour took in all its major sights.

EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY AMERICANS LOVE SYDNEY

Sydney is a great place to either begin or end a fine tour. In the reader-ratings surveys of a leading travel magazine, this is the city that for the past several years has pretty consistently beat out all others as the favorite of American travelers.

It's easy to understand why - just board a local ferry or a tour boat and feast your eyes on its magnificent harbor. Then ask yourself if you can think of another that compares.

When you are in a great Australian city such as Sydney or Melbourne or Adelaide, it is difficult to

realize that this country/continent that is as large as the United States, minus Alaska and Hawaii, has a population only equal to Florida. Of course, that is not at all difficult to realize when you are in the Outback.

And when you spend some time in New Zealand and Australia, especially if you do so on a first-rate tour such as the Goway one we took, it is very easy to see why so many people - us among them - rank these two countries as two of the very finest, not-to-be-missed destinations in the world.

IF YOU GO

For information on Goway's "Waltzing Matilda" tour and their other tours of Australia and New Zealand, and to order brochures, click on www.goway.com or call 800-387-8850.

Cost: From \$8,299 to \$8,879, depending on season, double occupancy. The luxury train journey aboard the Ghan from Alice Springs to Adelaide is an extra, starting at \$807.

Best time to go: Seasons are the reverse of ours Down Under, remember. But for this particular tour, which covers such a diverse climate area, for our tastes anytime of year is a good time to go.

Safety: Australia and New Zealand are generally considered to be two of the safest travel destinations in the world. Both Kiwis and Aussies are also considered to be two of the world's most hospitable and friendly people.

Entry documents: U.S. citizens do not need a visa for New Zealand but do need one for Australia. Goway handles that for you.

Fred and Karen Eckert are freelance travel writers.

Â© Copley News Service

Two of the world's best: Visiting the highlights of Australia and New Zealand by Fred and Karen Eckert