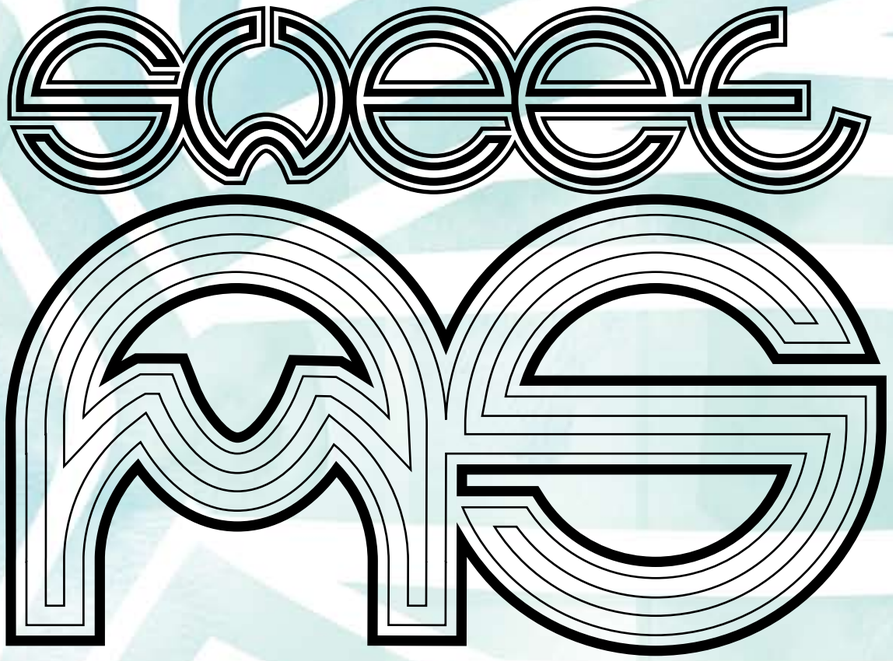


IN WHICH WE TRAVEL VERY FAR AND LEARN TO LOVE NEW ZEALAND BY JUMPING OUT OF AN AIRPLANE

SCOTT INDRISEK: TEXT

JOURNEY TO ANOTHER DIMENSION

New Zealand is on the bottom of the world, which means the seasons are backward and upside down, toilets flush the opposite way they do here in the Land of the Free, and flying there will literally cause you to travel through the space-time continuum, depending at which angle you skip over the International Date Line. The country—which is not, repeat not, some sort of Puerto Rico-style annexation belonging to Australia—is also home to Peter Jackson, a dude who made weird, obscene art house fare before bringing the CGI treats of Hobbiton to the silver screen. It's also lung-ticklingly, heart-thankingly *clean*, i.e., the act of breathing feels like huffing pure, unadulterated oxygen, so it comes as no surprise that the official Kiwi public-relations slogan is "100% Pure," with its intimation of the virginal and ecological.

Under the rampant generosity of New Zealand's board of tourism and Air New Zealand, creative director/EIC Dustin Beatty and I boarded a massive winged bird for the twelve-hour Los Angeles-to-Auckland flight (what I'd refer to as "a breeze" when you factor in business-class bed pods, gourmet grub and borrowed sleeping pills). The transition, to be fair, is something of a colossal, albeit pleasant, mindfuck. For example: As I'm writing this sentence, it is 11:32 a.m. on Saturday in New York, which means it is currently 3:31 a.m. on Sunday in New Zealand. A scientific, technical mind might be able to parse this sort of thing; for me, it results in a lot of slack-jawed stumbling around.

We arrived in Wellington, the diminutive (population around 160,000) Kiwi capital, the downtown of which rings the harbor. Our hotel (Museum Hotel de Wheels) had literally been picked up and moved across the street thanks to some feat of pulleys and genius engineering in the year 1993—they relocated the place to make room for the Te Papa museum, Wellington's cultural center, which focuses on local, mainly Maori, history.

In a far too constrictive nutshell: the Dutchman Abel Tasman came to New Zealand in 1642, followed by the intrepid Captain Cook in 1769. While interaction between the Maori and the new arrivals was never easy, the following years weren't nearly as gross as what happened to our own Native Americans (not to mention the Australian treatment of the Aboriginal population, technically a genocide, thanks to their charming habit of kidnapping and re-educating children). Maori culture has left a wide stamp on the current face of New Zealand, and not just in those vaguely off-putting, Epcot Center-style "cultural re-enactments." It's in the place names (Waitara, Rotorua, Taupo), and there is a genuine atmosphere of respect, sprinkled with a healthy amount of guilt. One in seven Kiwis are Maori.

The Te Papa museum enshrines this vibe of cultural tolerance and throws it all together into a densely informative, interactive, multi-floor superdome that would probably change your life forever if you visited it on psychedelic drugs. There's a marked emphasis on Fun for Kids, which means a virtual sheep-shearing exhibit, a virtual bungee-jumping machine and a big, incredibly freaky animatronic baby donated by Peter Jackson. (The latter has absolutely nothing to do with Maori OR New Zealand. But it will haunt your dreams.) Factor in a comprehensive survey of national art, historical artifacts and enough charts/graphs/timelines to satisfy the wonkiest history nerd, and Te Papa is one hell of a schizoid, overstuffed fun zone. Highly recommended.

Wellington itself is a cozy, semi-insular enclave whose central business area can be mastered in an afternoon. The main action revolves around two streets—Cuba Street and Courtenay Place—the former having a more (for lack of a better word) "alternative" flair, as opposed to the latter's distinct yuppie-thug vibe. Dustin and I had mixed success chasing the midweek Kiwi nightlife (the crapulent Gomez, on tour at the amazingly named San Francisco Bath House; a mix of mellow Elvis and early Fugazi on the stereo at the inevitable low-lit hipster spot, Mighty Mighty). Unlike in our mutual home bases of New York and Los Angeles, the Kiwis appear to do the sensible thing, i.e., work during the week and save their drunken debauchery for Friday and Saturday. (We went out on "student night," which evidently means getting insulted for wearing tight jeans, and received some obscure slurs involving My Chemical Romance.) Dustin and I were met with confused stares when we tried, a few times a day, to explain the bicoastal Yankee habit of getting soused and dancing like a lunatic on a Tuesday, leaving the weekends for the B&T set (in Kiwi parlance, see BOGAN).

12,000 FEET OF SOLITUDE (EXCEPT FOR THAT GUY ON YOUR BACK)

The traditional way to journey between the North and South Islands of New Zealand is to take a ferry from Wellington to Picton, roughly a three-hour trip. For the sake of doing things differently, Dustin and I liaised with the staff of Skydive the Sounds at the Wellington Airport, where we were suited up in skydiving gear and packed into the belly of a small Cessna airplane. I hadn't done this before—i.e., been thrown out into thin air 12,000 feet above the ground while latched to another human male—but I can firmly say that if you're keen on exchanging cash for the right to risk your life, there's few better ways to do it. The Cessna banked through an absolutely bumpless half-hour trip, coasting over the Marlborough Sounds (themselves dotted with dozens of mini islands) before reaching the South Island, with its lunar terrain of uninhabited, ghostly mountains.

At a certain point, of course, we were flung into the thin-air void for a fifty-second free fall. What was it like? It was like jumping out of a plane, I suppose. Better yet: Go do it yourself. Then do it again.

Tourism New Zealand had orchestrated a punishingly beautiful Friday, in that we went right from the landing pad to the small waterfront town of Picton. The idyllic weather held, and we paddled our way along the coast westward, getting an eyeful of local fauna (including indigenous birds, who sort of sat there, and a fat seal, who nearly attacked). A van came to pick us up at and drive us back along one of those thin, winding, "one wrong move spells carnage and death" roads that are so quaintly, characteristically Kiwi.

ONE NIGHT IN BLENHEIM: ALONE IN THE KINGDOM OF *HUH*?

After a few nights in Wellington and our skydive/kayak doubleheader, we somehow found ourselves in a sleepy urban hamlet on our first Friday evening, booked into a suspiciously "romantic" bed-and-breakfast in the middle of the Marlborough wine region. (Dustin had the "Merlot Room." I was stuck with the "Kuba"—not a typo—and I'm still a bit lost when it comes to determining what my theme added up to.) Still, we were determined to bring the fun—after all, *we are from motherfuckin' New York and motherfuckin' L.A.*—almost duty-bound to plumb the depths of p.m. debauchery in this strange nation. Thankfully, the locals didn't disappoint. Dustin and I left our hotel and bumped into a group of free-

spirited lasses in their early-20s, celebrating a birthday or a divorce or someone's parole. To commemorate the occasion, they were all wearing whimsical cartoon hats depicting tits and dicks. Gloriously foul-mouthed and beautifully sloppy, these ladies of the Lady Sovereign mold—while not, mind you, representative of archetypal Kiwi femininity—were a clear sign that *Blenheim liked to party*. (For the sake of space, I'll condense the evening into the following overlong sentence: We left tits-and-dicks at the café, where we absconded with a 17-year-old brainiac and poetry aficionado who joined us for whiskey at a vaguely Irish-themed bar populated entirely by horny, drunk dudes rave-dancing with each other beneath flashing lights, after which we hit up Kokomo ("Where You Want to Go"), a club whose questionable awesomeness was driven home by a bloody-nosed thug being forcibly thrown out the front door for, apparently, hitting his girlfriend or sister or daughter, who was already wearing a cast on her arm.

We drove out of the Lynch-ian force field of Blenheim, still scratching our heads in bemusement, and went to drink some wine at the Grove Mill vineyard. Next time you're perusing the international shelves of your local booze depot, remember that NZ's Marlborough region is renowned for its sauvignon blanc. Grove Mill makes one with a respectable balance of sweetness and dryness, and they're also leading the battle for sustainability that is oh-so Kiwi (see "Green Scene" in this section). It's always comforting to know that you can get totally sauced on a case of white and still be *environmentally* conscious, at least.

WE CONVERSE WITH SHEEP WHILE DRIVING FROM MARLBOROUGH TO NELSON

Random sheep: You guys are only here for a week? Isn't it a bit presumptuous to jet on over to our country for, like, seven days and then go home and pretend like you know enough to talk about What New Zealand Is Like?
Us: Oh, yeah, totally. Totally presumptuous.
Random sheep: That's such a typically American attitude.
Us: And it's typically New Zealand to allow the frickin' sheep to badmouth the tourists.
Random sheep [bleating]: You're going to badly injure yourself on a mountain bike. We're going to make that happen. Beware.

The Simply Wild adventure company was started by a few entrepreneurs who decided that they'd like to leave the corporate world and begin leading heli-bike tours of the mountainous countryside around Nelson. This, I think, was a good idea, which is obvious to anyone who's ever ridden in a helicopter before. I was amazed to discover that flying in a real helicopter is exactly like, say, being in an IMAX theater and watching a movie in which a chopper flies over amazing scenery with a degree of verisimilitude that makes your stomach flip. It's like that, except exponentially more awesome, because *it's really happening*.

The fact that the ride we partook of was billed as being "for amateurs" leads me to believe there's some truly psychotic single track lurking in Nelson's higher altitudes. I managed, within the first ten minutes of climbing on our dual-suspension steeds, accidentally to fall off the side of the mountain (taking care to exquisitely smash each leftmost part of my body on a rock, for the sake of completion). From an outsider's perspective, it probably looked like I, a retard with an inexplicable death wish, simply piloted my own bike off into thin air. To this I would answer, grimacing and clutching the ribs that were not-broken-but-seriously-punched-up, "Dude, please." And then I'd apply another daub of Bengay to my pitiful American frame.

After the initial flirtation with grievous bodily harm, our ride was "smooth sailing," if by that you mean a pounding, invigorating, 12-km downhill whose closest analogue would be found in a video game entitled ***Extreme Kiwi Bike Fiasco***. While the trail remained a constant, more or less (very thin, made of dirt, flanked on one side by a steep drop onto various Sharp and Hard Things), the sheer variety of scenery was a few light-years beyond what I'd been used to in, say, New Jersey. And the brilliant part about taking a helicopter to the top of the mountain is that you get all the downhill enjoyment without the corresponding uphill slogging, a form of laziness which is worthy of infinite applause.

THE ODDLY DISDAINED NON-CAPITAL OF NEW ZEALAND

Upon our arrival in Auckland, it became quite obvious why the rest of the country seems to hate it. There's tall buildings, for one, and a lot of people, and what appears to be a thriving, New York-style economy. Fashion-wise, the street scene's not a far cry from the Lower East Side or Echo Park. "It's pretty funny, really," says Nick Johnston of Auckland post-punk act Cut Off Your Hands! "I think it's obviously to do with the nature of Auckland as a metropolitan city versus the rural areas around the country. Farmers like to have a dig at the nancy types in town..." (Johnston also rattles off a laundry list of his favorite scene mainstays, leading me to believe that Aucklanders are pretty damn good at creatively naming their bands: Kill Surf City, Whitebirds and Lemons, The Coshercot Honeys, Eyeless in Gaza...)

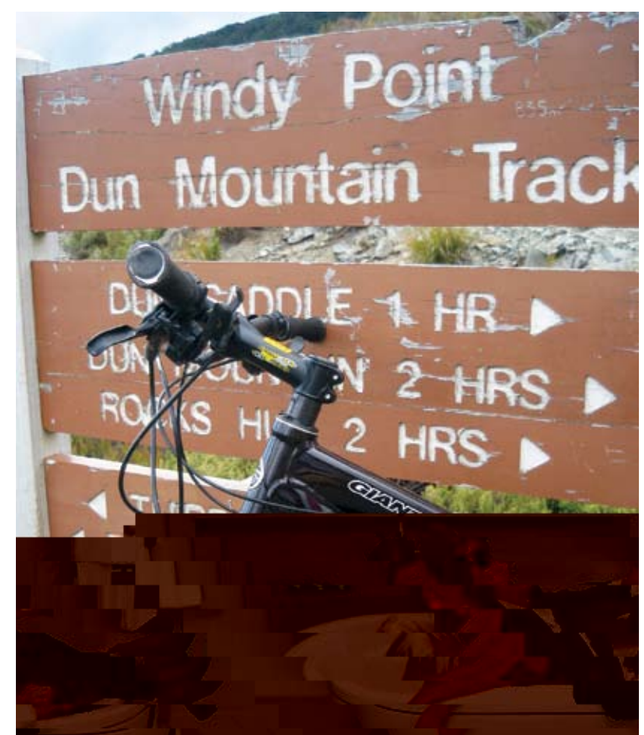
We met up with the inimitable Olivia Hemus, model and full-time fashion photographer, whose work graces the pages of this very section. Then we did our best to make a dance party dubbed Time to Get Dumb! but took the name too literally and ended up half-comatose in a banquette after some overly eager pre-game festivities. In order to fully plumb what it is that makes Auckland tick, we decided to turn to **People Who Actually Live There** for an insider's perspective.

"It's because the rest of New Zealand is full of bumblefuck pussies that can't deal with Aucklanders because we're so amazingly good-looking and rich," offers Christopher Sharland of *Vice* NZ, regarding the national disdain for city residents. "Auckland is the only actual city in New Zealand anyway, as Wellington is one earthquake away from being the new Atlantis, and the only thing to do in Christchurch is shoot up methadone and kill hookers. Real cities have things like traffic and mean people that hurt your feelings."

Showroom 22 fashion publicist Murray Bevan agrees with the image of Auckland as a national piñata, albeit in less hyperbolic terms. "Auckland has generated a raw reputation with people living outside it due to the city's perception as the Los Angeles of New Zealand," he says. "Some Wellingtonians have this notion that they are the nation's underdogs, and that everyone hates them, and Auckland has all the money and power, and that to make any difference they have to stick together and band as one. What a load of shit."

Personally, I wouldn't want to go out on a limb and say that all the anti-Auckland prejudice is the result of outsider jealousy, so let's just say instead...well...that the anti-Auckland prejudice *might be* the result of outsider jealousy, stemming from Auckland being a wealthy, fashionable, culturally vibrant slice of urbanity.

But what do we know? We're just ignorant Americans who like to eat cheeseburgers while contemplating the expansion of our empire.



DO IT YOURSELF!

Air New Zealand: Daily flights from L.A. (New Yorkers will have to fly westward and then transfer). It ain't cheap, but neither is jet fuel, and from California to Auckland it's 6,500 miles. We did uncover some October 2007 value fares for less than $800 in economy class (remember that our winter is the New Zealand summer, and vice versa). Tall people might want to splurge for an upgrade. Rich people (and businessmen) will find that $3,000+ buys the equivalent of an in-flight concierge, complete with fully reclining beds and endless booze. Sweet as, indeed. www.airnewzealand.com

Simply Wild (Nelson): Pre-planned, daylong heli-biking adventures along with personally designed itineraries. We did the Dun Mountain heli-bike trail, located in Mount Richmond Forest Park and ending back in downtown Nelson. If your CEO uncle happens to be footing the bill, hit him up for the 4,900 NZD Journeys at the Edge tour: four days of biking, kayaking, rafting, hiking and wine. www.simplywild.co.nz

Wild About Wellington Beer Tour: A few hours of controlled decadence, and a hell of a lot more intriguing than similar wine-based tastings. Our host waxed poetic about hops and fermentation while we got politely plastered and ate some amazing grub, weaving from one bar to another. The same operation also runs health-and-beauty tours for pretty ladies and recovering alcoholics. www.wildaboutwellington.co.nz

Skydive the Sounds: You + Cessna + flight over Marlborough Sounds = the best opportunity to leap out of a plane from 12,000 feet, ever. Sure, you can do this in the United States, but you'd be missing the CGI-quality scenery that makes New Zealand such a delicious, prehistoric-looking paradise. www.skydivethesounds.co.nz

Marlborough Sounds Adventure: Take a break from extreme sport and give your arms an old-fashioned workout, starting from the town of Picton. Simple and peaceful on a cloudless day—just watch the grumpy seals who might be lurking on the coastal rocks. www.marlboroughsounds.co.nz

The Quadrant: Auckland's rendition of L.A.'s Standard or NY's Tribeca Grand is a modernist treat, offset by the charm of the elevators playing cheesy pop-music videos 24/7. It's directly across from the university and walking distance from a handful of shopping districts. Oh, and staying there will make you feel like an incredibly sexy person. Trust us! www.thequadrant.com

Grampian Villa: This friendly B&B up the hill in Nelson also doubles as a motorcycle touring outfit under the operation of the Fitzwater family. Most of their business comes from the States, and there's a range of personalized options available. www.grampianvilla.co.nz, www.gotournz.com

A Perfect Day in and around Auckland: Rebecca Lawson of Showroom 22 recommends trekking out to Devonport, an outlying area on the waterfront, and perusing vintage shops and the Hard to Find used book store. She also suggests Piha Beach, a forty-five-minute drive from downtown, for its scenery and fabled fish and chips. ("There's nothing like walking down Piha beach surrounded by the vast Waitakere forest and the ocean—perfect for clearing the head.") Olivia Hemus points to the Silo Theatre, an independent space hosting work by the likes of Neil LaBute and Tom Stoppard—and after the show, a slab of meat at the upscale Jervois Steakhouse. Murray Bevan lays out a full itinerary: "Get a late breakfast at Dizengoff on Ponsonby Road. Visit the newly refurbished Auckland Museum, Auckland Art Gallery, New Gallery and Michael Lett Gallery. Visit the shops in High Street and O'Connell Street. Go to dinner downstairs at Dine by Peter Gordon, then visit SPQR and Orchid on Karangahape Road for drinks."