



New Zealand's SOUTH ISLAND

EXPLORE THE
INCREDIBLE
GEOGRAPHIC
DIVERSITY
IN THE LAND
OF THE LONG
WHITE CLOUD

Text & Photography
By James Kay

When Polynesian explorers first spotted land rising above the roiling waters of the South Pacific Ocean in the far southwestern corner of their vast oceanic empire more than 750 years ago, they called it Aotearoa—the “land of the long white cloud.” Today, most of us simply refer to it as New Zealand.

Mount Pollux above
Wilkin River Valley in
Mount Aspiring National Park.
Canon EOS 5D Mark III,
Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM.



A pause in the storm above Lake Te Anau viewed from the Kepler Track on the flanks of Mount Luxmore. *Sony DSC-RX100 IV.*



Granite rock formations along Tasman Bay in Abel Tasman National Park. *Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 16-35mm f/4L IS USM.*



Sunset in the Fox River Valley near the town of Fox Glacier. *Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L IS, Gitzo tripod.*

I discovered these remarkable islands for myself a mere 30 years ago when I traveled there on assignment to photograph helicopter skiing in the Southern Alps, something those original Maori explorers could never have imagined. My wife, Susie, accompanied me on that trip, and we immediately fell in love with the place. We've returned more than a dozen times over the years to explore and photograph its wondrous landscape, most recently for two months earlier this year to finalize details for our upcoming photography workshop tour.

As the last large piece of temperate land on Earth discovered by humans, New Zealand still offers a glimpse of what the world looked like before we subdued and homogenized it. While the pristine landscapes the Maoris first experienced have been dramatically altered over the centuries, it still feels a bit like Conan Doyle's *Lost World*, especially with all those tree ferns right out of the Jurassic.

From the glacier-draped summit of

Mount Cook to the turquoise waters and golden-sand beaches of Abel Tasman National Park, what makes New Zealand truly unique is that few, if any, places on Earth have such a tremendous diversity in landforms jammed into such a small chunk of real estate. You can walk on a glacier beneath towering seracs in the morning and then drive a few hours north in the afternoon to photograph sunset on a sandy beach beneath a canopy of palm trees.

At roughly 60 percent of the size of California, New Zealand is composed of three main islands: North Island, South Island and Stewart Island, all arranged in a northeast-to-southwest line stretching across 1,000 miles of the South Pacific Ocean off the east coast of Australia. While North Island has a mostly sublime agrarian landscape with modest mountains, a few snow-capped volcanoes and a sub-tropical climate at its northern tip, South Island is where most of the landscape drama occurs with its 5,000 miles of surging coastline, 10,000

square miles of national parks, sparkling glaciers, ice-capped peaks, glistening lakes, thundering waterfalls, bottomless fiords, lush rain forests and exotic birdlife. This tremendous natural diversity provides an irresistible magnetic attraction for landscape photographers and usually puts it right at the top of their bucket lists.

As soon as America introduced the idea of national parks to the world back in 1872, the people of New Zealand began protecting vast swaths of their magnificent country. Today, 13 national parks protect almost 12 percent of the total land area compared to 3.4 percent here at home. If you consider just South Island, with its rugged, mountainous terrain and nine national parks, the total land area protected equals 16.6 percent.

The Southern Alps, named by the first European explorers of the region because they reminded them of their Alps back home, form the backbone of South Island and stretch for 300 miles with 17 summits over 10,000 feet. The most dramatic



Cloud reflections in the waters of Glenorchy Lagoon in the Dart River Valley. Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM.

section of these mountains rises straight up from the edge of the Tasman Sea to form one of the most imposing mountain walls on earth.

It's this wall of mountains rising from the ocean that creates both the world-class scenery and the wild weather for which New Zealand is renowned. With the storm-generating powers of Antarctica to the south and nothing to intercept the prevailing westerly winds except for the southern tip of South America half a world away, South Island is exposed to the full fury of the storms that rage around the far southern latitudes of our planet. This onslaught of storms, mostly during the winter season, slams into the Southern Alps after crossing thousands of miles of open water and dumps epic quantities of moisture.

While the mountains out my back door here in Utah receive around 450 inches of snow in a typical winter, parts of the Southern Alps can receive 450 feet! This creates enormous glaciers that descend to within 1,000 feet of sea level on the island's west coast. During the

peak of the last ice age 20,000 years ago, an enormous ice cap smothered the entire mountain range with only the tips of the highest peaks protruding above the ice. Glaciers radiating out from this sea of ice gouged deep valleys throughout the Alps and formed enormous basins along the eastern edge of the range, which are now filled with glistening turquoise lakes.

PLANNING YOUR NEW ZEALAND ADVENTURE

Now that I've made the case for why New Zealand should be at the top of your bucket list, the only remaining questions are how do you choose from all those locations, and what should you bring?

Equipment. Planning a trip like this requires more effort than your average domestic photo destination. For major overseas excursions like this, I always prefer to travel light, so I'll usually opt for one main camera body with an equivalent backup plus a small point-and-shoot such as Sony's RX100 series. For lenses,

I'll bring a 16-35mm, 24-105mm and a 70-200mm, along with a 1.4 teleconverter so I don't need to bring a big, bulky 300mm.

Tripods are also big and bulky, but I always bring one; lightweight is good, but stable is more important. I don't bring a traditional camera pack on these trips and prefer instead to use a North Face Terra 35 alpine pack. I'll stuff my camera body and lenses into it along with other essential items I wouldn't want to lose. This pack then serves as my camera pack in the field. Putting camera gear into checked bags can be risky for many reasons.

Locations. When it comes to choosing where to go, I've spent more than one year of my life photographing across New Zealand, but I feel like I've only scratched the surface. If you're planning your first trip, here's a short list of places you wouldn't want to miss:

- Mount Cook National Park, with its tremendous mountains.

- Fiordland National Park, with its stunning auto route from Te Anau to Milford Sound. Fiordland is also home to New Zealand's world-renowned Milford and Routeburn Tracks with their excellent backcountry huts.
- Don't miss Westland National Park with its enormous glaciers and huge mountain backdrops.
- On the west coast, Wanaka and Queenstown with their proximity to Mount Aspiring National Park and Paparoa National Park.
- If you have more time, also check out Abel Tasman & Arthurs Pass.

When To Go. As I mentioned earlier, weather is always a major consideration when traveling to New Zealand. Remember that its seasons are the reverse of ours. February is like our August, and April like our October. Here's the scoop: August is the most settled weather period where your chances of being stormed out for two straight weeks are nil. You'll still have a good mix of sky conditions, however, as the storms just keep rolling through. The snow-capped peaks of winter (July and August) are glorious, but it tends to be quite stormy and you'll have difficulty accessing any high-mountain terrain unless you're skiing or snowshoeing.

Both autumn (April and May) and spring (October and November) can have long stretches of unsettled weather, which can be challenging. Keep in mind that while the trees do change color in April, none of the native ones do; only those introduced, and they mostly occur around towns and cities and other developed areas.

January, February and March are the busiest months due to the predictable mostly settled summer weather, but that's also the busiest time of year, so you'll need to book well in advance. Keep in mind that busy in New Zealand is nothing like busy in Europe or the USA, but you might want to avoid Queenstown around the Chinese New Year—it can be crazy.

A short list of other New Zealand travel considerations:

1. **Electricity: We use 120V and they use 240V.** While most laptops and phones use dual voltage, make



Morning mist burns off along Milford Sound with the peaks of the Arthur Valley in the background. Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM.

sure all your other plug-in items do as well. Even with dual-voltage electronics, you'll still need a wall plug adapter.

2. **Make sure your passport is current** and plan way ahead if you need to renew before your departure date.
3. **New Zealand has very strict customs policies due to its agriculture industry.** The soles of your hiking boots, the bottom of your tent and the tips of your hiking poles all need to be spotless, with no dirt or mud that could introduce foreign soil bacteria, fungus, etc.
4. **The flight from San Francisco to Auckland is 13 hours long.** Make sure you're well hydrated before and during the flight to prevent blood clots, which can be fatal. I should know; I got one once. I don't think it was fatal, though. Get up and walk around during the flight to keep the blood moving. Compression socks aren't a bad idea.
5. **Before taking any photographs once you're there, reset the time zone in your camera** so it will record the correct time in the image metadata. Most cameras have the time-zone choice of Wellington, New Zealand's capitol.

6. **Regarding airlines,** I'd highly recommend the services of Air New Zealand. They do an excellent job. Most airlines allow at least one free checked bag and two personal carry-ons. You'll pay a hefty penalty if your checked bags exceed 50 pounds each, and some airlines only allow a max of 15 pounds for each carry-on. Check online to verify.
7. **If you want the convenience of using your mobile phone** while traveling, call your provider to sign up for a temporary add-on for New Zealand. My carrier charges \$40 per 100 minutes.

If you're reluctant to organize a trip like this on your own, a workshop could be a good choice, as you'll maximize your time at the best locations at the right times. If you'd prefer to go on your own, however, everything is well-designed for traveling on an independent basis. The English-speaking locals are very friendly, and there's a wide range of excellent accommodation and food choices. You need to be careful, however, because if you're like us, once you go, you might find yourself addicted. OP

See more of **James Kay's** work and learn about his workshops at jameskay.com.