

The Ultimate New Zealand Self Drive Tour Itinerary: Road Trip of a Lifetime

Many years ago, I bought a car in Christchurch and did my own self-drive tour of New Zealand. The trip lasted four full months and was easily the best trip of my life. And I've been to a lot of places in this world.

What made this trip so good? Well, first of all, New Zealand is an easy place to travel by car thanks to the first-world infrastructure and modern roads. But there's also an excitement factor thanks to the wild feel of the backroads and lesser-visited areas. Everywhere you go people are friendly but the less-visited areas, only accessible by people with their own transport, are also the most welcoming.

I'm a fan of independent travel and driving allows me the freedom to structure my travels exactly as I like. Take it from a well-seasoned traveller and someone who knows New Zealand very well, there's no better way to see the country than by self-drive tour.

What to Expect

There are a few things to be aware of if you're visiting from overseas. Driving in New Zealand is like driving in the USA and the UK with some adjustments. The biggest of which is first on the list:

1. In New Zealand, **we drive on the left**. That means the steering wheel is on the right side of the car. If you're from the UK you'll be right at home. But be aware that the windscreen wipers and indicator levers might be on different sides of the steering wheel. Visitors from the US will have to adapt to driving on the other side of the road. But don't let this dissuade you. It really only takes 30 minutes of careful driving to get accustomed to driving on the left. The key is to take your time and focus. Once you've become comfortable with it, you won't notice the difference.

2. In New Zealand, the legal way to park your car at the side of the road is with the car pointing in the direction the flow of traffic. Remember that most people abide by the rules so just follow the general direction that other cars have taken. But if you park your car the wrong way around (facing the oncoming traffic) you risk a fine.

3. The open roads are very inviting and speeding can be a problem. Don't give into temptation and put your foot down. There are many speed cameras in every part of the country. Speeding is dangerous. And it's also costly.

4. Everyone must wear a seatbelt. And that means everyone. Backseat passengers please buckle up!

5. Don't overtake on continuous yellow lines. You're playing a risky game when drivers on the other side are not expecting overtaking cars to approach them head-on.

6. To drive in New Zealand you'll need a valid driver's licence from your own country in English. An international driving licence permit is only required if your document is not in English. If you plan on spending longer than a year in NZ you will have to take the local driving licence exam.

What to Take on Your New Zealand Road Trip

You can pick up a lot of the items on this list in most towns around the country but there's a chance the item you need won't be in stock. It might be more expensive in smaller towns. Buy what you need in a major city and you won't need to worry about finding essential items later on.

Essentials for a long trip:

- Flash light
- Suncream/sunscreen
- Sunglasses
- Hat
- Long-sleeve shirt to protect your arms from sunburn even through the windscreen - the sun in NZ is strong.
- Can opener
- Bottle opener
- Large bottles of water
- Maps - print maps. Don't rely on cellphone coverage or your phone battery lasting.

Self-Drive Tours

Why self-drive tours? Not everyone will agree but sometimes the freedom to choose your own destination, driving pace, stopping points, rest durations, and routes makes a road trip far more enjoyable. Once you have a clear idea of where you want to go, a tour guide dictating every minute of your day can feel restrictive. New Zealand is an easy country to navigate. It's a very safe country and the infrastructure is modern and well maintained. Why not be adventurous and set your own pace?

Of course, there's no reason why you'd have to follow our suggested itineraries to the letter. And that's the beauty of self-drive. You choose where to go and how long to stay.

Keep in mind that we've done our fair share of driving in NZ so you might want to start with a suggested plan and then mix it up with your own preferred style. Whatever you do, we can assure you that your trip will be unlike any you've ever experienced. New Zealand is a unique country in a special part of the earth. As the last major landmass to be populated, New Zealand is as close to the final frontier one can get.

There's a beautiful land of mountains, thermal springs, lakes, valleys, strange flightless birds, wonderful people and world-class cuisine just waiting for you to drive by.

New Zealand North Island Self-drive Tour Highlights

The north island is where most people start their journey in New Zealand. Unfortunately, many people skip the entire island in favour of exploring the more "obvious" attractions of the South Island. We reckon that's a big mistake. New Zealand's second biggest island is quite different to the larger southern island. It doesn't have the Southern Alps, Milford Sound, Mt Cook, and many of the typically popular tourist attractions that NZ is known for. But it does have a lot going for it. 3 out of every 4 New Zealanders live up north so there must be something good.

Auckland International airport is the gateway for most visitors and this is the logical place to start a self-drive tour. Auckland is New Zealand's biggest city. It's also the most culturally diverse and, for many people, the most exciting. We'd suggest a day or two in Auckland to experience the coastal drives and beautiful harbour.

If you have the time **Northland** (north of Auckland, funnily enough) is a wonderful part of the country to visit. The sub-tropical climate and relaxed way of life will give you that holiday-mode feeling. The Bay of islands should be on any traveller's itinerary. And having your own vehicle has a number of advantages here. Pick a hotel outside of town to suit your style and budget and don't worry about getting into town. Tour groups will unload in the centre of the town and scramble for the nearest available hotel. Public transport is a bit thin on the ground, with no local buses and only a handful of taxis. But you won't need to worry about that.

Rotorua, near the centre of the North Island, is a tourist hub well worth visiting. The town itself is nothing special but the Rotorua area

offers geysers, thermal mud pools, and lakes aplenty. The area is a centre for Maori culture, mountain biking, hot springs & spas, and adventure sports. If you find yourself feeling bored in Rotorua you're simply not trying.

Wellington, at the bottom of the South Island, is the capital city, and a fine one at that. It's a relatively small place for a capital (400,000 people) and the weather can be a little wet and windy, but Wellington has plenty of character. There's plenty of cultural attractions, cafes, live music, and easy access to some of New Zealand's beautiful coastlines and mountains. From Wellington you can take a car ferry across to the South Island and continue your journey

New Zealand South Island Self-drive Tour Highlights

The South Island has a bigger landmass than the north and takes a bit more time to experience. There are fewer people down here so the road network is not quite as extensive as up north. However, getting around the main towns and cities is easy. The main roads are modern and traffic is light.

At many points along the coastal roads of the South Island, you'll find yourself driving the Southern Ocean or the Tasman Sea to one side and the **Southern Alps** on your other side. It's time to take out your camera. But a word of caution: Don't stop at any random point along the route. The local authorities have put specially designated rest-stops, picnic areas, and lookout points all along every road (including motorways) in the country.

If you see some Instagram-friendly sights, you can be sure that there's a safe stopping point closely. Be safe. Use them!

The **Nelson Lakes** area, near the top of the South Island, is a favourite for hikers, campers, kayakers, and fishermen. There's also skiing in winter at the Rainbow ski area. Head to St Arnaud, situated about 1 hour and 30 minutes from Nelson, to begin your visit to this lesser-known gem.

Heading down the east coast from Nelson, Blenheim, or Picton (the ferry terminal gateway to the North Island), most people will spend at least a half-day in **Kaikoura**. The drive from Picton takes about 3 hours. Kaikoura is famous for the whales that visit the shores here year round. Sperm whales and other species can be seen at any time of year and if you're visiting in winter (roughly June-September) you might also see migrating species such as humpback whales. This is one of the biggest draws for visitors to New Zealand so don't miss it.

Christchurch, the South Island's biggest city is about 2.5 hours drive from Kaikoura. Even if you're not a fan of cities you'll find Christchurch an easygoing, pretty city with an old-England feel. Check out the botanic gardens, the International Antarctic Centre where you can experience arctic conditions in a simulator, and the arts centres and art galleries throughout the city.

Queenstown is, for most people, the place to be for adventure sports and excitement. (See below). It's a buzzing town set in one of the most beautiful parts of the country and should be on every visitor's checklist.

Fiordland has probably been used as a backdrop for more advertising and publicity photos by the New Zealand tourist board than any other place in the country. Fiordland, near the bottom west corner of the country, is a magical place of waterfalls, wildlife, peaks, and spectacular ocean inlets. It's hard not to expect dinosaurs to wander around a corner or some prehistoric animals to emerge from the sea. This is one of the last great wildernesses in New Zealand, and in fact, the world. Milford Sound

is where most visitors will experience the beauty of Fiordland. It's the only fiord here with road access but despite the accessibility, you'll feel like you've driven into an ancient land.

The Most Scenic Roads in New Zealand

If you enjoy driving along open roads with beautiful scenery and light traffic then you're in for a treat. Even for us Kiwis, long distances aren't driven at speed. There's just so much to see. For overseas drivers used to long stretches of boring motorway drives, New Zealand will be a spectacular change. Take it easy and take it all in!

1. The Great Coast Road - Westport to Greymouth. Resembling the Californian coast at times, this part of the country is lightly populated with people but bursting with wildlife and natural attractions.

2. Marlborough Sounds. The Queen Charlotte drive is a relatively short route of 40km at the top of the South Island. It's not the first choice of touring visitors but trust us, the scenery is awe-inspiring.

3. Crown Range Road. The road that connects Queenstown and Wanaka takes around 90 minutes to drive at an easy-going pace. Allow for 2 hours to take some photos and stop occasionally. Equally good in Summer and Winter (but with a little more caution required when it's icy), the Queenstown-Auckland road takes you up over both towns with fantastic views on either side.

5. Te Anau to Milford Sound. This is probably the most remote road with the wildest scenery that you'll see on your trip. It's one of the most beautiful road trips in New Zealand with one of the country's top destinations at the end. Our advice is plan an early start to avoid the crowds on this route.

6. Mt Cook Road. The road into Mt Cook National Park is so beautiful we can't describe it. So we won't You have to see this one for yourself. Start at Twizel and follow the signs to Mt Cook. Make sure your camera's batteries are fully charged.

7. Tauranga to Napier. One of the lesser known routes but a favourite ours. The Bay of Plenty and Hawke's Bay

Golf-themed Self-drive Tours

New Zealand is a golfer's paradise. We're not afraid to tell you that you'll be blown away by the quality and value-for-money of the courses all over the country. Many of the best courses are situated on the North Island and Auckland/Northland in particular so I'll concentrate on these areas.

The top course in the country is the **Tara Iti Golf Club** course, which is reckoned to be one of the most exciting and enjoyable courses in the world. Even non-golfers will marvel at the sandy masterpiece with Pacific Ocean views.

Don't miss the **Kauri Cliffs golf course**, also located in Northland, a spectacularly situated championship course ranked in the world's top 50. Prepare for a long 18-holes as the ocean views visible from almost every hole will keep you occupied.

Another great option is the **Cape Kidnappers** golf course in Hawke's Bay on the North Island. The course is built beside sea cliffs which create a stunning view for players.

The Titirangi golf club, west of the city of Auckland, is over 100 years old, and was redesigned by the famous course designer Alister MacKenzie. Well worth a visit if you're going to be spend any time near

Auckland.

Adventure Themed Self-drive Tours

New Zealand is like a big playground for adults and children alike. There are endless possibilities for adventure in this beautiful, uncrowded land of natural and man-made attractions.

With a huge coastline, and countless lakes and rivers, New Zealand is paradise for water-sports enthusiasts. Head to **Northland** for sub-tropical sailing adventures and warm-water swimming. Auckland's harbour teems with boats of all shapes and sizes. The area around the viaduct can look like a boating convention at any time of year. The natural harbour and volcanic islands dotted around make for some awesome boating trips.

Surfers will be happy to know that New Zealand's breaks get as big as anywhere at times. Luck plays a big part in catching the biggest swells but year-round waves can be found near the North Island's **Raglan**, **Tauranga**, and **Gisborne**, as well as the world famous **Piha** near Auckland.

Surfing the South Island is for surfers more accustomed to colder water but wear a wetsuit and you'll be out in some of the most pristine, uncrowded surf spots in the world. Great surfing breaks can be found near **Dunedin**, **Kaikoura**, **Westport** and **Christchurch**.

Many of the more popular spots will also have surf shops where you can rent a board and wetsuit. If you plan on catching some waves at less-frequented breaks you might be better off with your own gear. Get a car with a roof-rack or a longer vehicle to store the surfboard. Roof racks will also come in very handy for carrying mountain-bikes, snowboards, skis, and any other type of sporting equipment you might need.

Mountain Biking Tour

Mountain bikers are in for a treat. New Zealand boasts of the best trails and parks in the world for mountain biking and many overseas visitors come here just to get some two-wheeled action.

Here are our recommendations for the ultimate MTB self-drive tour

1. Start in Auckland and head over to **WoodHill**, a 45-minute drive from the centre of the city. With over 100km of trails you'll need a lot of time to explore this place. There's a bike rental area here so all you need to bring is water and some snacks (and the park fee, which is very good value).

2. Next stop is Rotorua, arguably the best place in the country to mountain bike. Rotorua is around 3 hours drive (on motorway for the most part) from Auckland and the amazing **Whakarewarewa** (Whaka for short) forest mountain bike park is a 10-minute drive from there. Once you enter the forest trails you'll feel like you've landed in mountain-biking heaven, miles from any major city. What forest is a world-class mountain bike park catering to cross-country, downhill, and stunt riders.

3. Wellington's **Makara Peak** Mountain bike park is around half the size of either WoodHill or Whakarewarewa but it packs a punch all the same. The park is an easy drive (15 minutes) or cycle (25 minutes) from the capital and all trails are impeccably maintained and signposted. Makara peak offers some 'expert' level trails so this is a good spot for the more technically advanced riders.

4. Christchurch might not seem a likely spot for mountain biking (it's completely flat) but the **Port Hills** just out of town is a great place to spin

the wheels. The drive to the trailhead from Christchurch takes less than 15 minutes and once you've ridden to even a modest elevation, you'll be rewarded with some spectacular views over Littleton harbour. This part of the country sees a lot of sunny days in summer so you should be able to see for miles across the hills and down the coast. The mountain bike trails may not be steep but they make up for that in beauty and a strong element of fun.

Crazy Only-in-New-Zealand Adventure Tour

New Zealanders are decedents of immigrants that built their own houses, farmed their own lands and fended for themselves at the edge of the world. This resourcefulness matched with a love for the outdoors and a keen sense of fun has prompted entrepreneurial Kiwis to invent some truly adventurous activities.

The bunny jump, Zorb, and Jet-boat were all developed in New Zealand. Other wacky sports and activities such as white-water rafting, skydiving, sky swings, canyoning, ice-hiking, and canyoning have been welcomed by Kiwis with open arms and pushed to their limits.

If you love the feeling of adrenaline pumping through your veins, this is the place to come.

Rotorua will be your main destination again on the North Island. The world's first Zorbing site was built here in 1994 and continues to attract fun-loving tourists and locals. White-water rafting is very popular here also and there are a number of tour groups that can take you down the frothing rivers. You can also do a bunny jump, skydive, and do a canopy tour in and around the town.

The main activity centre for extreme sports in New Zealand has to be **Queenstown** on the South Island. Many people say this small town is the adventure capital of the world. In Queenstown, you can tick off every one of the activities on the list above, as well as much more. Stand anywhere in the town and look around. Don't forget to look up. You'll most likely see someone jumping off a hill with a parachute, riding down a slope, jet-boating on water, kayaking, running, cycling, or skydiving. There's also the other extreme-sport of relaxing, which Queenstown does very well. Bars and coffee shops are abundant so you've got plenty of places to chill out after some adrenaline activities.

Driving time from **Rotorua to Queenstown** is around 20 hours (including a ferry trip). This might not be the ideal way to travel if your goal is to only visit these two adventure centres. Queenstown has an international airport and flights from Rotorua or Auckland are plentiful. Once you've arrived in town you'll definitely need a car to visit all the attractions in and around Queenstown. The beautiful town of Wanaka (sometimes called a mini-Queenstown) is just an hour away and is definitely worth checking).

Getting to New Zealand from the USA

Flying from the United States to New Zealand will involve one of the longest flights on the planet. It's not a quick stopover so we'd recommend at least a couple of weeks in the country. And don't let the long flight put you off. It's worth every minute.

Some things to remember if you're heading down south from the US:

1. The seasons are reversed. Summer in the United States is winter in New Zealand, and vice versa. Summer down south is popular with visitors from the Northern Hemisphere that like to escape the cold of their own winters.

2. The time difference is quite big as New Zealand is one of the first places in the world to experience each new 'day'. The US is one of the last. Midnight in New York is 6 pm the next day in Auckland. Mid-day on Monday in New York is 6 am on Tuesday in Wellington.

3. American Airlines, Air New Zealand, United Airlines, Hawaiian Airlines, and Continental Airlines fly direct (and with connections in hubs such as Los Angeles and Houston) to Auckland.

4. Allow for a period of jet lag after the long flight. Plan for a day of relaxing and minimal activity to let your body acclimatise. We don't recommend driving (on the other side of the road) directly after a 12-hour flight.

And most importantly, be aware of the road rules and differences in driving in NZ (see the "what to expect" section)

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Driving in New Zealand is all about the journey, not the destination. That's not to say you won't thoroughly enjoy the place your travelling to. But thinking about the actual journey as an important part of your travel experience will make your trip much more enjoyable.