



the *Other* SOUTHLAND

Exploring New Zealand's Enchanted South Island

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Countries are primarily bound by geography, language, culture and politics. We here in the U.S. share borders with two neighboring democracies; one is a largely peaceful northern margin where English reigns, and the other is a contentious southern margin where languages, if not citizens, commingle freely.

For me, the deadly 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, revealed deeper, regional affinities between two of my personal favorite places in the world—Southern California and the South Island of New Zealand. Like our English-speaking Kiwi cousins, we too live on unstable but idyllic terrain where beaches, mountains, moviemaking and vineyards converge.

Our political pasts reveal similarities too. New Zealand's indigenous Maoris and their struggle for civil rights echo our own struggle to understand how race and ethnicity define the term "Californian."

Because New Zealand is a long-haul flight, it took a little film series called *Lord of the Rings* for many SoCal residents to discover this sparkingly clean and green land where the entire epic was filmed. The infusion of Hollywood types was and continues to be a mixed blessing, as Americans bought real estate, brought cash and jump-started tourism in the wake of the franchise.

And with *The Hobbit* movie release now on the horizon, a second wave of fan frenzy has many thinking Kiwi all over again. For anyone passionate about national parks, outdoor adventure, incredible farm-to-table cuisine, stellar wines (you'd better like lamb and pinot noir) or luxury accommodations, a visit to New Zealand's South Island ought to be on your bucket list.

Travel time has often been a deterrent to Angelenos, who can surf and ski in their own backyards rather than fly for it. Thankfully, Air New Zealand now offers the only direct, non-stop service from North America to the "other" Land Down Under, and expedience is only part of the package. Added benefits include a complimentary in-flight concierge so you can relax and plan your itinerary in the sky.

From help with accommodations and connections to insider tips on where to eat and drink, Air New Zealand is leading the pack with generation-next benefits that go far beyond stale peanuts and some miserly frequent flyer miles. Business and premium economy fares also offer what is undoubtedly the most progressive wine-tasting program to be experienced at 30,000 feet. Somehow long flights go by faster when accompanied by world-class pinot noir, aromatic whites and, of course, the regions iconic sauvignon blanc. ([airnewzealand.com](http://airnewzealand.com))



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOURISM NEW ZEALAND AND OTAHUNA LODGE

Clockwise from top left: Horse riding in Marahau; another perfect day in Marlborough; kayaking on Milford Sound; springtime in Central Otago.

Once on the ground, consider exploring Christchurch and its environs. In the wake of devastation, tourist dollars matter mightily, as New Orleans (post-Katrina) and Southeast Asia (post-tsunami) so poignantly indicate. And if you're in the mood for splurging, there is no better place to do it than at Otahuna Lodge—yet another shining example of the America-Kiwi romance. This Relais & Chateaux property was built in 1895 and is one of New Zealand's most iconic buildings, now lovingly tended by a pair of dapper American expats from New York.

If you've ever experienced August rush hour in Manhattan, trapped in a stalled, sweaty subway station, you'd flee to Otahuna, Maori for a "little hilly place" too. It's a tiny slice of pure, luxurious heaven. Set up shop there for outdoor adventures like visiting Arthur's Pass National Park in New Zealand's southern Alps—a panoramic area that makes Europe's peaks seem quite tame.

Or do some fly-fishing, golfing or horseback riding—all readily available from Otahuna. If more genteel activities appeal, wander the estate's daffodil gardens before you savor a five-course tasting menu with local wines in front of a roaring fire. Yes, please! ([otahuna.co.nz](http://otahuna.co.nz))

A word on wine, by the way. If your palate is limited to California

wines and the occasional bottle of Cloudy Bay, you need to get to know New Zealand wine better. For those of us who work in the business, the South Island has been a fascinating case study. Many in the industry have doggedly clung to the mono-varietal business model, e.g., Australia's shiraz or Argentina's malbec, in which a single grape has become synonymous with an entire country.

For New Zealand, this has historically meant sauvignon blanc—crisp, green, acidic and widely available around the U.S. Frankly, while this style of white wine certainly deserves its place, it's the "other" grapes being vinted in the South Island that are exciting to insiders. From extreme pinot noir in chilly Central Otago to world-class white wines reminiscent of France's Alsace region, New Zealand's wine industry offers local treasures that you simply must taste in person to appreciate.

Not convinced yet? That's okay with me. When you travel, eat and drink for a living, you always inhabit a Venn diagram of overlapping personal and professional circles. For me, the South Island of New Zealand sits squarely in that central space. While I can confidently recommend it as a well-seasoned food, wine and travel expert, there remains something deeply resonant about its landscape, people and spirit that moves me privately. ●