

The secrets of the South Island of New Zealand, part 2 of a series

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Diane Covington-Carter

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West coast flights to New Zealand land at the North Island city of Auckland, the largest city in the country. Visitors can begin their tour there or catch a connecting flight to Christchurch, Nelson or Queenstown in the South Island, and then work their way back up to Auckland. For this article, we're going to start in the South Island.

There are so many diverse regions to explore in the South Island, the wine area around Marlborough, glaciers along the west coast, rugged coastlines and inlets like Milford and Doubtful Sound, vibrant cities and secluded beaches.

The New Zealand tourism website makes planning your trip easy. You can narrow down your route based on your interests—hiking, wine tasting, beach combing, adventure travel, shopping—or include all of the above.

<http://www.tourismnewzealand.com/>

Because I have spent almost two years in New Zealand, spread out over eight winters, I especially enjoy finding places that are less known to tourists. In those areas, you can get a better sense of the “real New Zealand” and catch Kiwi’s going about their normal lives.

So you’ll read a lot about the well-known parts of the South Island, the Royal Albatross colony near Dunedin or bungy jumping in Queenstown, and it is all wonderful and worth experiencing. But I’m going to focus on two places that are less well known to consider weaving into your itinerary. And to encourage you to discover your own special stops that are a bit off the beaten track.

Golden Bay, at the Northern tip of the South Island

Many tourists visit Nelson, known for fresh fish, excellent wines, an art and music scene and a bustling downtown, but then they head south. Our home is in Golden Bay, about a two-hour drive northwest from Nelson.

The first time I came over the crest of the hill and looked down toward Golden Bay, I felt like I was looking at Shangri-La, lush green rolling hills and fields, with the ocean sparkling beyond.

The tourism site for Golden Bay states, “Unless you’re a migrating whale, you don’t go past Golden Bay on your way to anywhere.” <http://www.goldenbaynz.co.nz/>

That is true, because you reach the top of the South Island and the road ends; you have to turn around and retrace your steps. But I prefer the saying, “Out of the way but out of this world...”

Golden Bay is known for its relaxed vibe and a sense of spaciousness, backed up by deserted white sand beaches and abundant hiking trails. A variety of accommodations on the beach, from campgrounds and motels to luxury lodges, cater to every budget.

The small town of Takaka, (population 1,200), pulses as the heart of the area, with restaurants, a health food store, a thrift store, a chemist, supermarket and petrol, all the basics. A Saturday farmer’s market in the summer provides local produce, artisan crafts and goods and live music.

Locals gather at the Mussel Inn, known for attracting international music groups. Before the music starts around 8 p.m., kids can play on the tire swing while adults sit around a fire pit and sip a local wine or one of the inn's own brews, and enjoy excellent fresh seafood. Their apple crumble, a version of apple crisp, served with fresh cream, is a must-have. <http://www.musselinn.co.nz/>

At Farewell Spit, a bird sanctuary at the very northern tip of the island, tour out to the lighthouse and learn about the gannet colony, which migrates each year back to the area. <http://www.farewellspit.com/>

Farewell Spit was the location of the whale strandings this past winter, which made international news. More than 500 volunteers showed up to try to help keep hundreds of whales alive until they could float back out with the rising tide.

Many renowned hiking trails, the Heaphy Track and Able Tasman and Kahurangi National Parks attract hiking and backpacking enthusiasts from all over the world.

<https://www.abeltasman.co.nz/>; <http://heaphytrack.com/>;
<http://www.newzealand.com/int/feature/national-parks-kahurangi/>.

The relaxed pace of life, the fresh salt air, the vibrant blue ocean and the variety of fun activities all make this a place to kick back, catch your breath and live like a local for a while.

For five star accommodations on Tukurua Beach, Adrift, <https://www.adrift.co.nz/>.

For a hotel/restaurant at popular Pohara Beach, Ratanui Lodge, www.ratanuilodge.com

The town of Wanaka on Lake Wanaka

When my husband and I passed through this town a few years back, we loved it so much, we stayed twice as long as we'd originally planned. We biked, hiked and then swam in the clear, fresh lake. We enjoyed the restaurants and shops in the bustling downtown. We browsed the farmers market and stocked up on fresh produce and sampled local chocolate and ice cream.

Wanaka, population 6,471, is often overshadowed by its glittering neighbor, Queenstown, population 28,224, famous for adventure sports and sophistication.

Wanaka, less than an hour from Queenstown, feels laid back and yet lively, and like its neighbor, also offers a sparkling, clear lake. And you won't find yourself surrounded by hordes of tourists. Prince Harry wowed locals when he paid a surprise visit a few years ago.

For beer lovers, Wanaka could be called beer heaven with six craft breweries. For wine enthusiasts, Archangel winery and Rippon biodynamic winery, one of the oldest vineyards in the area, are close by. Or if you favor the harder stuff, try Cadrona Distillery, a family owned artisan distillery, which produces single malt whiskey and vodka, orange liqueur and gin.

<http://archangelwines.co.nz/our-vineyard/>; <http://www.rippon.co.nz/>;
<http://www.cardronadistillery.com/>

On the food scene, Wanaka is famous for local ice cream, sourdough bread and ginger biscuits. At the Thursday farmers market, which runs all year, in addition to local produce and all the above-mentioned treats, sample artisan chocolate, preserves and more.

In colder weather, sip mulled wine and feast on roasted chestnuts after skiing at one of the five ski areas within an hour's drive.

The town is the gateway to Mt. Aspiring National Park, New Zealand's third largest national park, part of the Southwest New Zealand World Heritage Area. Whether you're interested in a short easy walk or tackling serious hiking, you will find trails for all levels of ability. Or you could enjoy it all from the air or lake, with a plane, helicopter or jet boat tour. <http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/otago/places/mount-aspiring-national-park/>

The lake provides so many varieties of summer activities, with kayaking, paddle boarding, fishing, boat cruising, sailing and, of course, swimming. You can find all types of accommodations, from camping and backpacking hostels to the four-star Oakridge Resort, where you can indulge yourself at their Sanctuary Day Spa. <http://www.oakridge.co.nz/>; <https://www.lakewanaka.co.nz>

So venture off the beaten tourist path and experience a bit more of the real New Zealand. There is so much beauty and wonder to discover.

To begin your tour of the North Island, you'll end your tour of the South Island in Picton, where you will take the ferry to Wellington, enjoying the beauty of Marlborough Sound. Plan to enjoy some wine tasting in Blenheim before you head onto the ferry.

Next time: New Zealand's North Island.

Diane Covington-Carter is an award-winning travel writer

www.dianecovingtoncarter.com