



OUR NEW ZEALAND TRIP - by Connie Willis

This spring I went with my husband and daughter to New Zealand for two amazing weeks, crammed full of sights and adventures. So many, in fact, that I've got to divide this account into three parts:

Part 1. We Saw All Kinds of Stuff

Part 2. Primeval New Zealand

and finally,

Part 3. Middle Earth.

LORD OF THE RINGS was, of course, the primary reason we went. Our daughter was part of a Lord of the Rings costume-and-musical-skit group which performed at ComiCon and the Lord of the Rings Oscar party. Consequently, Richard Taylor saw them and said if they were in New Zealand, they'd give them a tour of WetaWorks. She promptly took him up on it and embarked on a trip that included Deer Park Heights where Eowyn and the Rohan refugees encountered the wargs, the tree

where the hobbits hid from the Black Riders, and the remains of the set of Hobbiton, which at that point was mostly plywood circles set in a hillside.

That was eight years ago, and ever since she's been wanting us to go with her to see all her favorite Lord of the Rings sights--and everything else New Zealand had to offer.

PART 1: WE SAW ALL KINDS OF STUFF

Even though the motto on the Flight of the Conchords' New Zealand poster is "Don't expect too much, and you won't be disappointed," New Zealand exceeded our expectations in every way. Here's some of the stuff we saw!

1. Milford Sound. It's called the most beautiful place in the world, and you won't get any disagreement from me. A winding fjord, vertical rock faces with waterfalls streaming down them, seals sunning themselves on the rocks, vistas of blue on blue on blue. But it's not just the Sound. It's the getting there. I hadn't expected to be all that impressed with the mountain portions of our trip--I do live in Colorado, after all--but we don't have anything like this!



2. Pancake Rocks. These fascinating rock formations were made by a combination of the uplift and weathering of limestone rocks, which resulted in bluffs and towers and arches that look like stacks of pancakes. The ocean splashes around and through them, sending up showers of spray and making an assortment of noises ranging from whumps and crashes to artillery booms.



3. Napier. In 1931, Napier was a beach resort sort of like Brighton. Then a massive earthquake destroyed it. This proved to be both a disaster and a blessing, because when they rebuilt the town, it was the height of the Art Deco craze, with the result that the entire town is done in Art Deco, with its beautiful geometric shapes, leaded glass, and polished wood. There are dozens of gorgeous buildings downtown and others scattered throughout the area.

My favorite was the Halsbury Chambers. Courtney's was the National Tobacco Company building, and Cordelia loved the music store with the free-standing wooden display cases in its lobby.



4. Waterfall-o-Rama. I am a waterfall junkie. Just ask the staff at Locus, who had to put up with me stopping every five minutes in the Columbia Gorge, or Nancy Kress, who had to put up with me at Niagara Falls. I never imagined I'd actually ever get my fill of waterfalls--and I didn't--but New Zealand was close, from veils of water drifting down bare gray rock faces at Fox Glacier to the roaring blue-green cascades of



as a National Park in Colorado.

My other favorite was one of the thousand or so along that wooded mountain road, set back in a hidden cranny flanked with ferns, and plunging into a pool you expected Tinuviel to be bathing in.

5. Sheep. And more sheep. New Zealand describes itself as "New Zealand: Land of one million people and ten million sheep." This is a serious underestimation. The sheep, I mean. It should be one million New Zealanders, sixty million Japanese,

Huka Falls near Lake Taupo, to a winding mountain road with waterfalls at virtually every turn, plunging into carved-out rock canyons or disappearing into forest-lined pools. And they were all made even more beautiful by the water, which is from glaciers and is all a clear, pale, arctic turquoise.

One of my favorites was on the way to Taupo, marked only by a sign that said, "Scenic View." We stopped expecting just that, a long vista of the wooded hills, and found instead a waterfall that would qualify



Norwegian, and Australian tourists (and this is the off-season) and at least a trillion sheep. They're everywhere, covering the hillsides, looking blankly up at you as you pass--this trip did nothing to alter the opinion of sheep I expressed in Bellwether: they are really, really dumb--and crowding up to the fences to be fed by the tourists. But there are also lots of cows--and deer, which are raised for venison. We saw fields full of them, too, grazing peacefully.



6. Wedding Dresses. We spent a rainy day in Wellington at Te Papa, the National Museum, where they had a travelling exhibit from the Victoria and Albert Museum of wedding dresses from the last 200 years. These ranged from the elaborate (a Victorian wedding dress with silk, velvet, beads, tucks, ruffles, ribbons, ruches, lace, and passementerie) to the bizarre (a black, gold, and jewel-encrusted thing with a black veil that looked like it had been made for Snow White's stepmother's wedding.)

My favorite was a 1920s medieval-style dress and Cordelia's was a 1960s silver minidress, white coat, and go-go boots number, but the most interesting one, hands down, was a 1930s gown with a twelve-foot train covered with appliqued and beaded



starfish, which was amazing not so much for the dress as for who wore it: Margaret Wigham, who seems sort of an odd person to showcase in a wedding exhibit. For one thing she was married twice (presumably the second time in a different dress from the starfish one), had lots and lots of romances, and was involved in a spectacular divorce case from her second husband.

For another, her slogan was, as she said, "Go to bed early and often." When the Duke of Argyll divorced her, eighty-eight correspondents were named, the judge pronounced her "sexually voracious," and a number of photographs were put into evidence, including one of her completely naked except for her

signature three strands of pearls, and another of her equally naked doing something or other to a gentleman (also naked) whose head had been discreetly cropped out of the photo, but who may have been Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.--or the Minister of Defence. Or Werner von Braun's brother. So much for the much-vaunted sanctity of marriage. And of wedding dresses.

7. Rotorua. This is New Zealand's Yellowstone, complete with its own thermal pools, mudpots, terraces, and geysers. But there are definitely differences. For one thing,



it's true that the Lady Knox Geyser goes off every day at 10:15 a.m., to an audience of camera-clicking tourists, but they use soap to set it off. Otherwise, it would be on a 26- to 36-hour schedule. (They claim this is not cheating since the geyser was discovered in the first place through a bar of soap. Seems a hundred years ago prisoners were working on clearing the area for a national park and had the habit of washing their clothes in the hot spring. And then one dropped a bar of soap down the spring, and whoosh!)

But the main difference is the surroundings. You're going through a dense green forest and suddenly come across a steaming sulfur-lined chasm or a bright lime-green pool.



The town of Rotorua has steam rising from various points within it, and the city park has several thermal pools, fenced off for the moment, but the hot water from them meanders through the grass, the flower beds, and the playground.

Rotorua's greatest thermal attraction, though, is the one we didn't see, though we sure heard a lot about it. Virtually everywhere we went. And we saw pictures. Well, lithographs, actually: the Pink Terraces. Because nobody's seen them since 1886.

The Pink Terraces were thermal terraces sort of like Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone. They were huge and gorgeous (and pink) and considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World. Then, in 1886, Mt. Tarawera erupted and they were buried in ash and submerged beneath the new crater lake the eruption had formed.

New Zealanders have never gotten over it. Every place we went there were references to them and how "if you think this is cool, you should have seen the Pink Terraces." And while we were there, they discovered that instead of being destroyed, they were still in existence, though unfortunately you'd have to dive through 200 feet of water to see them, since they're now at the bottom of Lake Rotomahana.

The only thing talked about more (aside from the latest political scandal--an MP forced to step down for giving a friend of his a cushy job) was the new "give-way rules" which were to go into effect the day we left.

These had something to do with a change in who got to go first at certain intersections, and there were reminders posted everywhere, heated discussions on radio and TV news shows, and dire warnings about the chaos the changes were going to bring. But here's the thing, in all this discussions, NOBODY ever mentioned what the new rules were--or the old ones, for that matter. And nobody we asked knew.

8. A Safe Return. In spite of all this, we managed to get safely to the airport and home. We were glad. Our daughter has often threatened to put us in a nursing home in New Zealand since, as she says, it would be perfect. We would be too far away to annoy her, and it would give her a nice excuse to go to New Zealand again. And when Dame Edna announced her retirement while we were there, and her intention to enter

the "maximum security twilight home for the bewildered," Cordelia got a troubling glint in her eye, and we hastily checked our airline tickets to make sure they weren't one-way.

They weren't, and we survived the 384-hour plane trip back to California and the two and half hour one home, though not without regrets. New Zealand would make a lovely place to retire. And we'd be with Dame Edna!

Connie Willis