

Portable...

The Styles Page

Paradise Enow?

by Peter Hannaford

ARROWTOWN, NEW ZEALAND -- What is it about New Zealand that makes Americans who visit it go into raptures of praise when it is mentioned? Granted, my survey is not scientific, but if the views of a dozen or so friends over the last three or four years are any indication, the island country Down Under casts a magic spell on Americans who go there.

We decided to see for ourselves and have concluded that there are three reasons why New Zealand is so highly praised by U.S. visitors:

(1) It is stunningly beautiful. Water, mountains, clouds, and fields are in a constant interplay that reminds one at one moment of the English countryside, at another of the Scottish Highlands, at another of the central California coast, and yet another of the mountains and deserts of the interior West. You can experience them all in a single day's drive from Auckland to Wellington on the North Island and from Christchurch to Queenstown on the South Island.

(2) It is filled with friendly, unself-conscious people. Those in service businesses will accommodate any reasonable request, and do it with a smile. Any "Customer Service" on the telephone brings a polite response that is friendly but -- unlike the U.S. -- not overly familiar.

(3) It is not the United States. No 24-hour-a-day shouting-head TV networks; no armies of axe-grinders storming the capitol every day; no adolescents dealing with their growing pains by shooting up their schoolmates; no endless arguments about abortion; no Clinton scandals. Some say it

is like the U.S. before the Sixties, before a segment of the children of privilege decided to up-end college campuses, install left-wing intolerance in place of academic inquiry, and claim some sort of moral high ground founded on marijuana.

On examination, that comparison of New Zealand doesn't quite hold true. This country is not the U.S. of forty years ago. It has state-of-the-art communications. It has a well-organized (though not flamboyant) tourism business. Its roads are well-built and well-maintained. With clean air and water, it is sensitive to universal environmental concerns without forgetting that conservation of natural spaces must co-exist with agriculture and forestry.

For example, the New Zealanders have a common-sense attitude toward deer. More than one million of them are in farms (venison is on most restaurant menus and deerskin products are plentiful). Those in the wild are considered pests and subject to liberal hunting laws. If only U.S. suburbs would abandon their Bambi-inspired reluctance and adopt similar policies, it would drive the PETA folks wild, but solve the exploding deer population problem.

Visitors come here to enjoy themselves, not to immerse themselves in others' problems. Nevertheless, unless one never reads a newspaper or turns on television here, one cannot escape the fact there are problems. Yet, by U.S. standards, they seem relatively small and manageable. There is crime; just enough to keep the newspapers from having to lay off their crime reporters. There is currently some concern that electric transmission towers cause cancer (a worry disposed of in the U.S. some time ago).

Then there is the Treaty of Waitangi. It was signed in 1840 by several Maori chiefs and the British, ostensibly to deal fairly with property rights. The Maori, however, considered land to be communal, whereas the British thought in terms of deeds. The possibilities for misunderstanding were nearly limitless. Now, 160 years later, there is constant discussion, argument, and negotiation about what it all meant -- and should mean today. One gets the feeling that the Kiwis -- as all New Zealanders are called -- will work it out.