

SPECIAL REPORT | NEW ZEALAND

Natural highs of the South Island

When **Judith Chalmers** and husband **Neil Durden-Smith** fulfilled their vow to return to New Zealand to visit Mount Cook and the Franz Josef glacier, their 10-day Alpine Circle tour exceeded expectations

Six years ago we visited the tiny Church of the Good Shepherd on the shore of Lake Tekapo and looked across the water at Mount Cook. Christened Aoraki – meaning “cloud piercer” – by the Maoris, at 12,316ft this snow-covered peak is the highest in New Zealand. Regretting that we didn’t have time to visit the mountain or the Franz Josef glacier, a spectacular river of ice in Westland Tai Poutini National Park, we vowed to return.

The second time around, determined to see as much as we could in style, we covered 1,500 miles over 10 days in a luxury coach with enormous picture windows. There were 22 of us on the Alpine Circle tour – a mixed bunch of ages and nationalities, including Americans, Australians, Canadians and Britons.

The maximum number on any Australian Pacific Touring (APT) Premier Plus escorted tour is 30, and the coach can take 48, which gives you an idea of the space and comfort we enjoyed.

We all met in New Zealand’s lively capital city of Wellington, at the southern tip of the North Island. It is well worth taking the Wellington Cable Car, actually a funicular railway, up to the hilltop suburb of Kelburn for an impressive view of the harbour. A visit to Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand, is also a must if you have time, as it offers an excellent introduction to the nation’s history and culture.

The next morning we boarded the Interislander ferry for the three-hour trip across the Cook Strait to the South Island, marvelling at the breathtaking

beauty of the Marlborough Sounds and the sea-drowned valleys at its north-eastern tip, before arriving at Picton, situated at the head of Queen Charlotte Sound. Journeying

south in the coach, we found a natural high around every corner. At the heart of the Marlborough wine-growing region, peppered with orchards and vineyards, is Blenheim, home to many wineries with familiar names: Cloudy Bay, Villa Maria, Wither Hills and Stoneleigh. Our route continued through gorges, alongside lakes and across farmland full of sheep, cattle and deer – two million red deer are farmed in New Zealand according to our guide. Driving along the craggy coastline of the Tasman Sea, where the forest clings to the cliffs, we admired magnificent trees, particularly a great variety of pines, against the ever-changing backdrop of the Southern Alps.

The first evening we overnights in Nelson, the coastal city known as New Zealand’s sunshine capital, and had a *teppanyaki* dinner (a Japanese meal cooked on an iron griddle) served with athletic flamboyance in Miyazu, one of the two fine-dining restaurants at our hotel, the Rutherford. The hotels generally were of a very good standard; we particularly liked the Sofitel in Queenstown, and Te Waonui Forest Retreat in the village of Franz Josef.

Here we boarded a helicopter to the glacier we’d missed on our previous trip. It was a brilliant, crisp morning and by 8.30am we were walking on crunchy, sparkling snow beneath the towering summits of Mount Cook and Mount Tasman.

Another highlight was speeding down the emerald waters of the Haast River in a Hamilton jetboat

and being treated (scared to death is nearer the truth) to four “Hamilton spins” – 360-degree wheelies at top speed.

In the sparsely populated West Coast region, towns hark back to the gold-rush days of the 1860s, when would-be miners from all over the world arrived to seek their fortunes. Arrowtown, Hokitika, Charleston, Greymouth and the settlements around the Clutha river all offer a glimpse of those heady settler days.

After stopping off at the lakeside town of Wanaka, we arrived at Queenstown, where we had our only two-night stay. Set on Lake Wakatipu, below the dramatic mountains of The Remarkables and Coronet Peak, it is known as the adventure capital of the world, with heli-skiing, jetboating, river surfing, bungee jumping, white-water rafting and skydiving all available at the drop of a dollar.

One of the benefits of travelling with APT is its Freedom of Choice Touring feature, which allows you to choose your included activity from a range of excursions in certain locations. In Queenstown we opted to visit several of the locations used by director Peter Jackson for his *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, including Twelve Mile

Delta, where we panned for gold. Later we took the cable car to dinner at the Skyline restaurant, perched above the city, with two new Australian friends, Roy and Prim from Victoria. Most nights we ate with different members of the tour, an ideal way to get to know people. APT’s Dine Around Dinner – another way it enables clients to suit their own tastes – offered a choice of 15 restaurants in and around Queenstown.



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One other option enjoyed by some of our fellow passengers was a sailing along the lake on the vintage steamship TSS *Earnslaw*, to Walter Peak High Country Farm, for a carvery dinner. We also had a memorable evening at Pier 19, a waterfront restaurant expertly run by Adam and Will – two entertaining young Brits who have made Queenstown their home.

The next morning we headed for Milford Sound, described by

Rudyard Kipling as the eighth wonder of the world. A cruise along the length of this nine-mile fjord gave us ample time to appreciate the soaring rock faces and snow-capped peaks reflected in its serene waters, and the dramatic waterfalls cascading into them.

Milford Sound was a must-see, but at Dunedin, in the south-west corner of the South Island, we were again offered a range of excursion choices. We decided to visit the albatross colony at Taiaroa Head on the Otago peninsula, where we were enthralled by these unique birds with their three-metre wing spans. We also spent time at Oamaru,

a former port town notable for its Victorian and Edwardian buildings, including the newly refurbished opera house, before proceeding north towards Mount Cook.

The mountain that had inspired us to revisit New Zealand lived up to all expectations. A scenic cruise on the Tasman Glacier Lake proved to be an unforgettable experience, taking us up close to spectacular icebergs, some of which were created when the earthquake that hit Christchurch in February displaced 30 million tons of ice from the Tasman Glacier.

That evening, with Charles and Christine from Melbourne, we savoured more stunning alpine views while dining at the award-winning Panorama restaurant at The Hermitage, our hotel near Mount Cook.

Towards the end of our tour we were driven up to Arthur's Pass at the centre of the Southern Alps to catch the TranzAlpine train down to Christchurch. Arthur's Pass is the midway point on a scenic coast-

to-coast rail journey that is rated among the best in the world. Large panoramic windows framed ever-changing vistas as the train snaked through mountains, valleys, gorges

and finally lush farmland on its descent towards Christchurch. An open-air viewing carriage was great for capturing it all on camera.

Thanks to meticulous planning and the expert guidance and care of our tour manager, Nev, and cheerful driver, Rhys, we boarded our UK-bound Air New Zealand flight, satisfied we'd made the most of every opportunity afforded by the tour to explore the South Island.

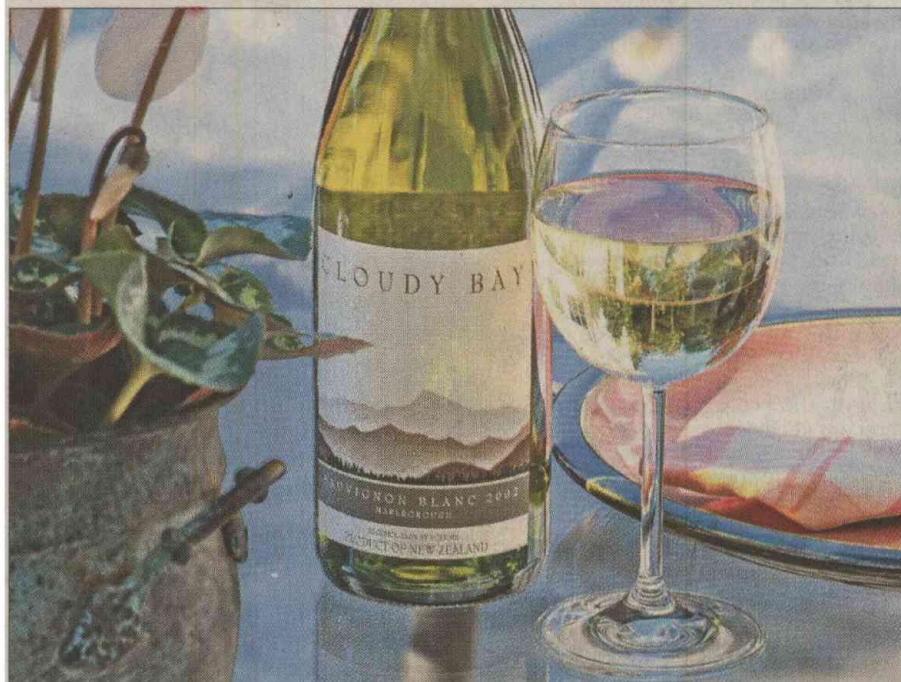
A few words of warning though: if you are considering a tour of this kind, travel as light as possible and give yourself enough time every morning to board the coach at the appointed hour – with so much to see and do, being late is almost a criminal offence.

© **Travelbag** offers this 10-day Alpine Circle tour between September 1 and December 4, 2011. **From £3,699pp**, including B&B accommodation and all flights. (0871 703 4240; www.travelbag.co.uk)

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A shore winner: clockwise from above left, the Wellington Cable Car on its way to Kelburn; Judith and Neil; Mount Cook; a helicopter landing on Fox Glacier; Cloudy Bay, a wine from the Marlborough region