

Navigating the Land of Adventure

TOURING NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND



A Shotover Jet boat speeds up the narrow, winding canyons of the Shotover River, north of Queenstown. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Aerial view of Queenstown, which rims an inlet on Lake Wakatipu, New Zealand's longest lake.



FROM OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: A hang glider catches thermals above Queenstown, the South Island's adventure-sports capital; dusky dolphins frolic in the waters off Kaikoura, on the island's northeast coast; a hiker stops to admire the view on the Otago Peninsula, near Dunedin.

QUEENSTOWN calls itself the Adventure Capital of the World—a sign at the city limits announces this—but there is no need for bungee jumping or jet boating to get your thrills on New Zealand's South Island. You'll have plenty without ever leaving the car, especially if you find yourself driving through

the mountains on a misty night. For the most part, roads and highways are narrow and unlit, often hugging rocky cliffs, twisting unpredictably, and offering drop-dead views around every corner.

If navigating all this from the left side of the road isn't enough to keep you on your toes, there are the New Zealanders themselves, that hardy breed who invented extreme sports. Let's just say their sense of adventure extends to highway driving.

Once you get the hang of it, you'll be grateful you skipped the bus tours. Driving is the only way to really explore this beautiful place. South Island is small enough to circumnavigate in four weeks, three if you plan well. If you have two weeks or less, limit yourself to half the island or you will find yourself rushing around, spoiling the laid-back ambience that's such a crucial part of a South Island vacation.

There is plenty to do and see on New Zealand's North Island as well, but the South Island is less developed and perfect for a scenic driving tour with frequent breaks for wilderness adventures. If you fly in, your starting point will be Christchurch on the island's east coast, where you can rent a car and buy or rent outdoor gear. If you plan a multiday trek along one of the island's famous hut-to-hut trails, known as the Great Walks, you'll need a sleeping bag, backpack, provisions, and some good all-weather gear. It gets chilly in the mountains, and the fjords can be nearly as damp as they are gorgeous.

South Island weather is generally moderate, lacking extremes of hot or cold. Summer (December and January) is peak

tourist season—best avoided if crowds aren't your thing. Winter (June through September) can get chilly and wet. Fall (March and April) and spring (October and November), on the other hand, offer moderate temperatures and smaller crowds—the best times to plan a visit.

For a landmass measuring about 125 miles wide and 500 miles long, the South Island contains a remarkable variety of landscapes. Fjordland and Alps-like mountains and glaciers sit tooth-by-jowl with a craggy coastline resembling California's Monterey Peninsula. That topographical variety becomes evident within an hour of Christchurch, when SH73—one of the island's typically winding, two-lane highways—ascends from farmland through the surrealistic rock formations of Kura Tawhiti and into the rugged highlands of Arthur's Pass, where a grueling three-hour climb to Avalanche Peak is rewarded by 360° mountain views.

Forty miles downhill and you're on the west coast, where you can book a cottage in the rain forest of Punakaiki, explore the dramatic coast around Pancake Rocks, then head south to the glaciers. South

Island is home to two of the most accessible glaciers in the world. An unusually low altitude keeps the air comfortable atop the Fox and Franz Josef glaciers, balmy enough for the guides to wear shorts. Even in the cooler months, the sun can shine brightly on the snowy peaks as the valley below is soaked with rain.

The warmth also means the glaciers are receding rapidly. Two huts perched atop Franz Josef a few years ago have crumbled due to glacial melt. Ice caves form and vanish so quickly you can find an entirely different topography from one week to the next. Expect to squeeze through crevasses 13 feet deep and at least one ice cave, all of which look like they were carved from polished blue chalcedony.

Start early for an all-day climb to the top or, for about US \$190, hire a helicopter to fly you and a small group right to the blue ice for a guided tour of crevasses and pinnacles. The chopper ride affords breathtaking views of icy peaks, waterfalls, and a river winding to

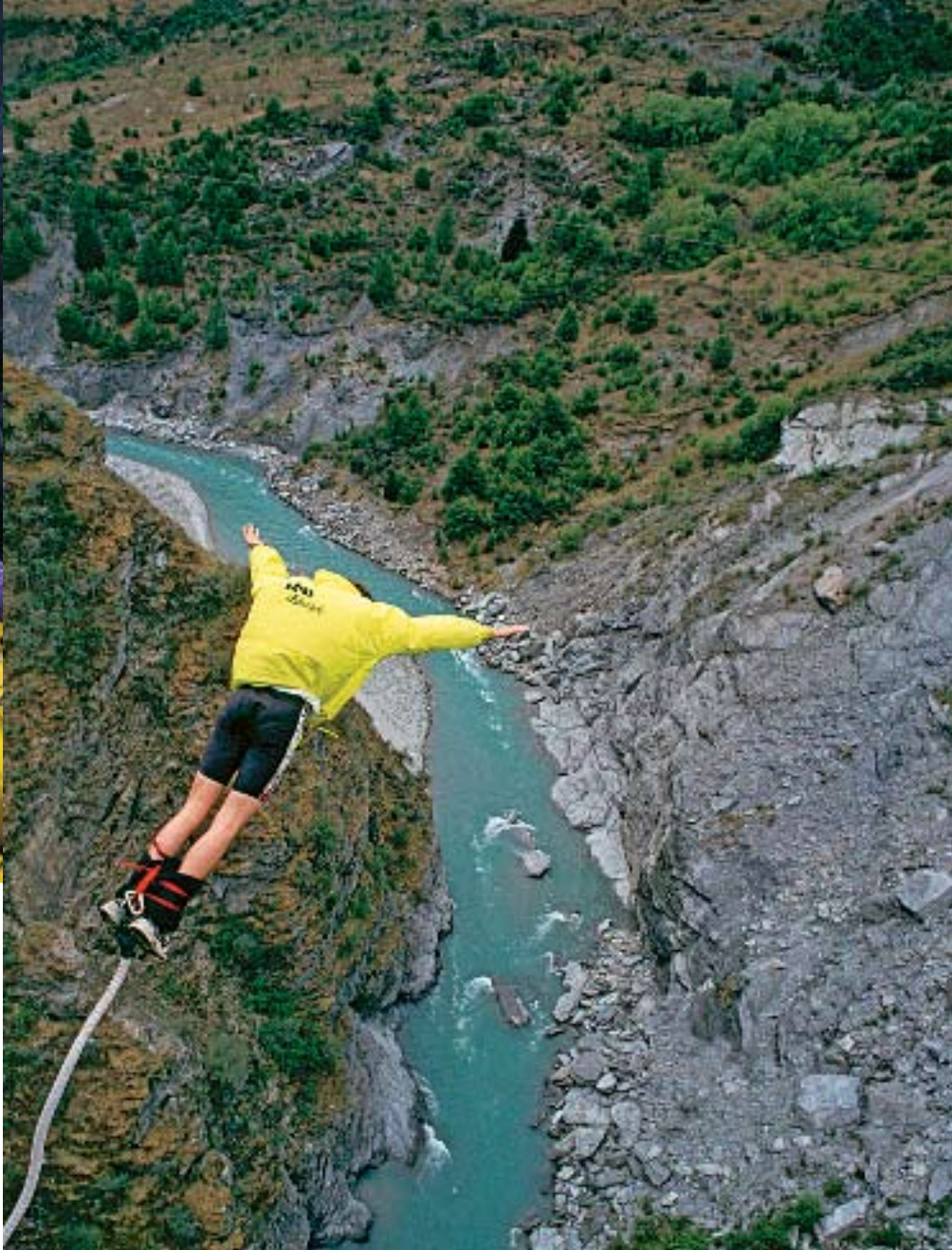


Previous spread, left: Glen Allison/Getty Images; right: Photodisc/Getty Images; this page, left: Brown Cannon

Top middle: Kim Westerskov/Getty Images; top right: Marita Lamonica



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Kayakers on Milford Sound, a 12-mile-long fjord lined with 4,000-foot sheer rock walls; a bungee jumper at Pipeline Bridge on the Shotover River near Queenstown; a view of Milford Sound, one of the South Island's most remote, yet most visited sites owing to its almost surreal natural beauty.



Left: Cathleen McCarthy; right: ©AA World Travel Library/Alamy



For a landmass that's about the size of Illinois, New Zealand's South Island contains a remarkable variety of landscapes.

the coast, not to mention cheap thrills courtesy of the pilot, who will slalom between cliffs, laughing when you squeal.

Hikers are given crampons to strap to their boots, mandatory for making your way up the ice steps carved by a guide. Ice picks are also distributed among the hikers but rarely used, as the guides supply the heavy labor along with fascinating natural history lessons.

No visit to the South Island would be complete without checking out Queenstown, a five-hour drive from the glaciers, to try—or at least watch—some of the extreme sports for which it's famous. Popular activities include jet boating, white-water rafting, hang-gliding, and paragliding. Invariably, there's also some wacky extreme-sport flavor of the month, such as the locally invented zorbing (bouncing and rolling down hills in a giant,

air-cushioned ball) or Fly by Wire (shooting through the air in motor-powered rockets strung on cables). If nothing else, visit the Kawarau Suspension Bridge, 14 miles from town, which is the hallowed cradle of bungee jumping. The first crazy Kiwis to jump off the Kawarau bridge didn't pay a dime. Now the 140-foot plunge costs 150 New Zealand dollars (about US \$110 at recent exchange rates), which buys you a t-shirt, a certificate, and a short raft ride back to shore after your descent. Jumpers take turns stepping onto a metal stage, where a burly New Zealander clamps their legs together and gives them a friendly push, after which they can opt to swan dive, topple over backwards, spin, somersault, cling to another person, bob above the water, touch the water, or dive straight in. You may prefer to watch from the lookout deck—plenty thrilling in itself.

A scenic eastward drive takes you to Te Anau, landing pad for Milford Sound, a 12-mile-long fjord surrounded by vertical walls that tower 4,000 feet above sea level, with trees miraculously clinging to their mossy surfaces. You can ferry across the sound, but better to join a group of kayakers for a more intimate look at the coral, seals, and birds that dwell in this shadowy world. Paddling across Milford Sound, it becomes clear why the Maori call New Zealand the "Land of the Long White Cloud." Be prepared to get wet: The mean annual rainfall here is 268 inches. After a downpour, temporary waterfalls cascade thousands of feet down the cliff walls.

The surrounding Milford Track, New Zealand's most famous trail, is fairly crowded even in the off-season; but, if the weather holds, it rewards with awe-inspiring views. Routeburn and Greenstone tracks also offer ample natural beauty and comfortable, nicely spaced huts. Two of the five huts along the Routeburn Track can be reached in an all-day hike that will get you back to the car by nightfall.

If you have time for one last adventure, make it a dolphin swim at Kaikoura,

on the island's eastern shore. Call ahead to book a trip with Dolphin Encounter, then stop along the Catlins Coast to check out Curio Bay, a 180-million-year-old fossil forest visible at low tide. Waters off the shores of Kaikoura can be bracing, even in supplied wet suits. You'll forget any discomfort the minute you spot those fins bobbing in the waves. A 10-minute boat ride takes groups to the spot where wild dusky dolphins herd and feed, then lets everyone off with mask, fins, and snorkel to play in their midst.

These dolphins are not the tamed bunch you find at SeaWorld, but they're friendly and curious just the same. They will swim right up and engage you in an underwater pas de deux you won't forget. You will quickly find yourself competing for their attention, trying to twirl and dive as nimbly as they do. A \$100 trip lasts about an hour and includes four or five "swims" that will leave you exhausted, yet euphoric and longing for more. **A**

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RESOURCES

- **TOURISM NEW ZEALAND**
General information on getting to and traveling in the country. www.newzealand.com.
- **THE HELICOPTER LINE**
Guided hikes and helicopter rides to the Franz Josef and Fox glaciers. US \$130–\$250; www.helicopter.co.nz.
- **KAWARAU SUSPENSION BRIDGE**
Bungee jumps near Queenstown. US \$110; www.ajhackett.com.
- **DOLPHIN ENCOUNTER**
Offshore swims with wild dusky dolphins offered year-round. Adults US \$95; www.dolphin.co.nz.