



*Mount Cook*

# A TRIP TO A LAND FAR, FAR AWAY



*Enroute to Milford Sound*

**O**ur family has always suffered from a serious travel bug. This wanderlust has taken us to distant lands including Scandinavian countries, interior Africa, and several other places in Europe and South East Asia. More recently, our longing to visit distant lands began to grow once again in the winter of 2012, especially since it followed a two-year abstinence from holiday travel and a tough relocation back into India after an international stint. Weighing several options, we decided to head down under to Lord of the Rings (LOTR) country, New Zealand!

### Planning for the trip

While we had made our decision on the country to visit relatively quickly, our planning had to be meticulous. This involved sorting through myriad flight combinations and selecting one which balanced the hole in the pocket with a better flying experience. Doing the flight bookings early was critical given the Christ-



mas and New Year rush. Cox and Kings took care of our travel arrangements including the visas. Packing for such trips is always tricky and check lists do come in handy. Although it was summer down under, we threw in a few jumpers after gauging the temperature on the internet. Then finally on December 28, we boarded the Qantas flight to Auckland with scheduled stopovers at Singapore

and Sydney.

### Kia Ora Auckland

After 16 hours of flying and another five hours spent in transit we arrived in Auckland, the city of sails. Located on the North Island it is New Zealand's largest and most populated city, with a third of the country's 4.5 million people living there. We explored the city over the next two days including





*Canterbury Plains*

having dinner with some friends, going on a ferry ride to the nearby Waiheke Island, and celebrating New Year's Eve at the landmark Sky Tower. The warm Kiwi hospitality made us feel welcome as we soaked in the sights and sounds of this vibrant city.

On day three we bade farewell to the city of sails and travelled south along the southern motorway across Bombay Hills in the south of Auckland, with its extensive market gardens. The Hills are so named after the ship Bombay arrived in Auckland, bringing settlers from Bombay in 1863. It was earlier known as

Williamson's Clearing. We then continued along the Waikato River to Ngaruawahia, the home of the Maori Queen. On the way we stopped to take a guided tour of the world famous Waitomo glow worm caves. Journeying across the forested Mamaku ranges we arrived at the 'Thermal City' of Rotorua, which is famous for its geothermal geysers. We spent a couple of action-packed days here, visiting the Te Puia geothermal reserve to view the boiling mud pools and the cascading Pohutu geyser. This was followed by a trip to the nearby Maori village and the agrodome for an entertaining

show of sheep shearing and cow milking. This is where I learned that New Zealand has a population of 35 million sheep, which is seven times its human population!

### **Captivating Queenstown**

On day five, we flew out of North Island to New Zealand's most picturesque city Queenstown. Located on the South Island the city lies nestled among glaciers and dramatic rugged mountain peaks, circled on its sides by the magnificent Lake Wakatipu. The natural beauty of this place is best enjoyed driving around in a car. So, we hired one and drove to the



*Head of the lake Wakatipu*



*up in the air...Paraglide*

nearby quaint Arrow town where we had a lazy lunch followed by a siesta in the park. And then, a lovely drive along Lake Wakatipu to the charming town of Glenorchy. En route, we stopped by the lake to wet our feet in its crystal clear water. Time stood still in the land of Hobbit, Aragon, and Gandalf. The mountains, lakes, and lush green countryside all combined to create a sublime experience which words cannot describe.

No visit to Queenstown is complete without a trip to the famous Milford Sound. The southern stretch of Lake Wakatipu took us to Lumsden and on to Lake Te Anau. The scenery changed dramatically from tussock-covered grasslands to glacier valleys as we entered the Eglington valley and made our way through the breathtaking manmade Homer tunnel to reach Milford Sound. A scenic cruise on the 'Pride of Milford' ferry took us around the fjord, under the Mitre peak and the cascading Bowen falls. The highlight of our Queenstown sojourn was jumping off the 5000 feet high Coronets peak on a hang-glider. Soaring high above the rugged

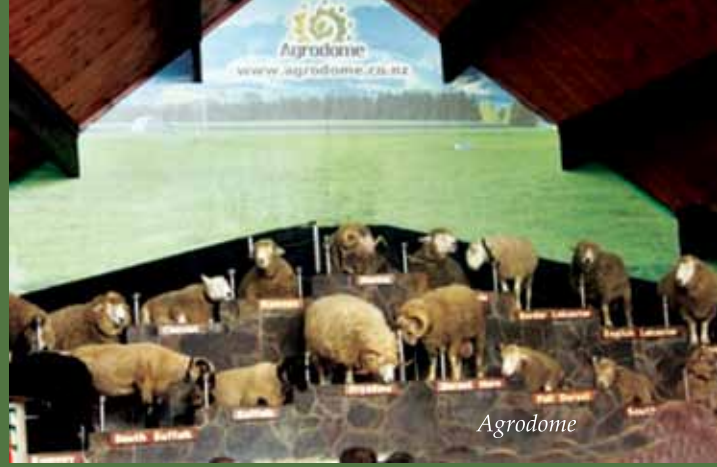
hills of Queenstown in a glider with Lake Wakatipu in the distance, I felt like a bird learning to fly for the first time. It was the experience of a lifetime.

### Change in plans

As is the case with most holidays, something always goes wrong. The famous Fox glacier was next on our itinerary. However, this did not happen as the weather gods turned hostile. Heavy rains up in the mountains put the glaciers out of bounds. This required a quick change in plans and then we were on our way to Mount Cook which is the highest peak in New Zealand. We spent the day hiking along the foot of the Tasman glacier and the night resting in the aptly named 'Hermitage Hotel'. We relished being so close to nature and so far away from the madding crowd, well almost, with the exception of a noisy large contingent of Japanese tourists!

### The Tranz Alpine

The next leg of our journey was



Agrodome

on board the Tranz Alpine train, rated as one of six most scenic train journeys in the world. We boarded the train at Greymouth, the largest town in the west coast region located at the mouth of the Grey River. We then ascended through lush beech forests, past the picturesque lake Brunner via the Alpine village of Arthur's Pass situated at 737 metres above sea level, before crossing the spectacular Southern Alps. The Tranz Alpine winded its way through massive viaducts, spectacular river gorges and the stunning Waimakariri river valley before arriving in Christchurch. Wow! This was one amazing railroad ride!

### All good things come to an end

Christchurch city, our last stop on this adventure, was in the throes of getting re-constructed after the devastating earthquake which destroyed most of the city centre and downtown areas. At the end of our 11 exhilarating days in Maori land it was time to say 'E noho rā (goodbye in Maori). We boarded the return Qantas flight to Sydney en route to New Delhi, with some additional baggage, and loads of wonderful memories from an amazing land far far away! ■



The author is Kaushik Mitra, CFO – PepsiCo India Foods



Vibrant Flora