

NZ Caravan Adventure

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On January 31 of 2012 Ann and I flew to Auckland, New Zealand, to join an international caravan traveling through the North and South Islands. After a day and night in Auckland we, and another American couple, were taken to the KEA RV factory to pickup our rental campervans, which were to be our homes for the next 48 days. That evening we joined the rest of the caravan in Rotorua, a hot springs resort town about 146 miles away.



There were 18 couples plus one single in our group, and, of the 19, 9 rented KEA RV campervans. While they were well made with many clever conveniences, we felt extremely cramped, and our own 25 ft. Airstream will seem like a mansion in comparison. The good point of these campers, however, is that they are built on the Ford 6-speed Turbo Diesel chassis, which is quite adequate for the twisting hilly roads. We toured the KEA factory in Auckland, which makes a variety of RVs, plus custom trailers.



Although I maintained a journal of our travels, presenting the results here would be a boring read for anyone but me. If you want to know about traveling through New Zealand, there is no shortage of positive information on the Internet as well as in many standard travel books. The descriptions are laden with superlative adjectives describing this or that unique place and the natural wonders.

Therefore, my WDCU Trip Report will be limited to topics with personal observations and perceptions as contrasted with living and traveling in the USA.

At some base level, it appears that the geography in our continental North America has everything one can see and do in NZ. However, NZ's rugged beauty and natural wonders are on two relatively large islands that cover an area about the size of Colorado (103,738 sq. mi.), and it has a population only a little bigger than Oregon. But if you want to see its indigenous populations of unique plants, animals and great scenery, it can be viewed best by visiting that beautiful country. And, once there you don't have to travel very far.



Agriculture: Driving around makes one think that the primary businesses are agriculture and tourism. We saw many vineyards, orchards of fruit trees, beehives, herds of cows and sheep and even great herds of deer, in addition to lots of roadside fruit and vegetable stands. Many sheep farms are being converted over into dairy farms for economic reasons.

Cities: The cities and towns appear to contain all the necessary supplies for the RV traveler, but that is often not true for smaller towns. Auckland was too big and busy for me, but Wellington, Queenstown, and a couple of the university towns are interesting and worth extended stays. Many small towns have interesting 19th century buildings with a nice mix of new and old architecture. The February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch resulted in the demolition or dismantling of historic structures, plus much stricter building codes. Some city residents have migrated away from the fault zones to what is believed to be more geologically stable regions of the country.

Itinerary: Our experienced and well-traveled ICA (International Caravan Association) leaders led us through some interesting roads and local places where most foreign tourists don't visit. (Might be good reasons!). I drove 6,259 km (or 3,900 miles) through both islands. We hit all the high tourist spots as well as some out-of-the-way vistas, towns and campsites. Also included were a gondola ride to the top of a mountain in Queenstown for lunch, boat rides, and several dinners at local restaurants.



Roads & highways: Just like home except they drive on the left. The majority of the road signs and rules are the same. I got to appreciate the multiple traffic circles or "roundabouts." They are efficient and smooth out traffic flow vs. four-way stop signs. Just remember to yield or "give way" to vehicles on your right. Big cities like Auckland and Wellington have rush hour traffic slow downs, but the rest of the cities were no problem. Max speed is 100 Km or 62 mph.

Our caravan traversed a few less traveled roads- -and that made all the difference. All, and not just some, of the mountain roads are naturally winding, hilly, curvy, and (IMHO) dangerous. But overall, they are well maintained. It would be better to have more guardrails, but that option might make drivers complacent.

Traveling and camping as we did with the knowledgeable New Zealanders had the benefits and opportunities to see and do things as the locals do. After driving from north to south and crisscrossing the islands, we were told that we saw more of NZ than many New Zealanders.



People: Everyone we met was very nice and considerate. Even the car and truck drivers are careful and courteous. Unusual? No, and maybe as a relatively new country that values fairness, that is just the way, decent society of people behave. Our group varied in number over the period as some joined or left as they intended. Usually we had 18 couples- -six from USA, five from the UK, and the rest were New Zealanders (or Kiwis as they call themselves).



Tourist: I assume a significant part of their GNP is tourist generated and the visitors come from all over. The majority are the sporty 20 and 30-somethings looking for a little adventure or the extreme sports. NZ has it all- -hikers, bikers, and campers. Trout and salmon fishing is excellent. There are many car, van, and RV rental agencies. I'm sure the younger tourists get the most out of all that NZ has to offer, whereas we seniors do the sightseeing, maybe take a few hikes and snap hundreds of digital photos. The tourist industry offers plenty of comfortable and overpriced tours, rides and day trips, but they are not necessary to experience NZ. We did just fine touring the country in a campervan. Since every night's stop was booked in advance, we were at liberty to drive off and explore anywhere we wished between campsites.

Shopping: The stores are very similar to ours and many have the same brand names, yet it's still interesting to shop for variations of familiar items. Some prices are a little higher, and the exchange rate was about \$.82 NZ to our US dollar. Beef is not as tasty as our corn-fed cows. Milk is high, but cheese and butter are very reasonable. Wine is almost a staple beverage. The whites from Hawks Bay and the Marlboro regions are great. Very good wines go for \$10 to \$12, or less.

Radio & TV: A bit like the mix or types of genre from our broadcast networks. I often tuned to stations that entertained us for hours with oldies from the 50's through the 60s. In fact some of the small towns look and feel like the peaceful America I remember from the 50's. It was pleasurable listening for us foreigners in this not-so-foreign country.

Weather: Our winter season is their summer season. But, as a result of el Nina, or whatever, summer never came to New Zealand this year. A few locals told me that they never experienced as much rain and cold weather in summer before. We made the best of it, but, naturally, the cold and wet days affected some outside events, activities and overall enjoyment. I guess we will have to go back.



Would we do it again? Our seven-week caravan was a great way to get an in-depth appreciation of the country. The ICA, just like the WBCCI, is an all-volunteer RV organization. The camaraderie with new friends was priceless. The ICA is open to owners of all makes of RV's, and has trips all over the world, and in North America. Some Kiwi's asked me about buying an RV in America and traveling for extended periods. Our WBCCI allows ICA members with non-Airstream RVs to join our rallies and caravans, so perhaps we'll be seeing some of them again.

New Zealand is among the healthiest places to live. It has a pollution-free environment and awesome landscapes. Plus, winters in the U.S., are summers in New Zealand so one could consider retiring there part time. If I traveled here again I would do it independently and perhaps rent a mini-van with basic picnic and camping gear--that would be good enough and very easy to do. There are plenty of reasonably priced accommodations for every budget and level of comfort. Freedom, flexibility and timing would be more important the second time. And if possible, I would make every effort to visit the wonderful New Zealand friends we met on this caravan.