Not All Who Wander Are Lost—A Trip to New Zealand

by Nancy Bestor

You say “Wow!” a lot in New Zealand. “Wow, look at that mountain range!” “Wow, look at how blue that river is!” “Wow, we’re having lobster for lunch!” The lobster was served aboard the Southern Secret as we drifted in a light breeze, surrounded by the towering mountains, lush flora, and lively fauna of Doubtful Sound.

It’s not easy to get to New Zealand’s Doubtful Sound, but boy is it worth the trouble. There is no direct road access, and the population is extremely sparse. But if you can spare the time and money for a tour, I guarantee you won’t be sorry. Our overnight boat trip on the Sound—on the southwest coast of New Zealand’s South Island—required a three-hour drive from Queenstown to the town of Te Anau, on the edge of the Fiordlands. We left our rental car there and hooked up with our tour transportation, which started with a 15-minute van ride to a boat dock on the eastern side of Lake Manapouri. From there we took a ferry across the lake (about 45 minutes), then got into another van for an hour long ride on a dirt road over the Wilmot Pass. Once we reached the dock at sleepy Deep Cove, at the edge of the Sound, we were more than ready to board our boat.

Our tour was aboard the 12-passenger Southern Secret, manned by Captain Clint and his handy assistant, Jen. After assigning cabins to the 11 folks on the tour this trip, Clint got the boat in motion while Jen prepared lunch. And what a way to

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Charge It!!!
The Best Travel Perks from Credit Cards

by Nancy Bestor

There are so many choices when it comes to credit cards. And with the competition so great, companies have come up with all kinds of enticements and reasons why you should choose their card over their competitor’s. You’ve got sign-up bonuses, cash back, and a dizzying array of rewards. Some of the more interesting rewards we found include a day of fighter pilot training (aerial dogfight included!) from Wells Fargo, a wedding officiated by an Elvis impersonator from Bank of America, and a trip to Rock ‘n’ Roll Fantasy Camp from CitiBank.

But whether it’s free hotel stays, airline upgrades or companion tickets, we figure that most of our readers are not looking for

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Travel Smart & Look Great with these Top Products of 2016

by Ember Hood

We’re delighted to call out some great new favorites in our ever growing line of products offered at Travel Essentials. Whether you’re looking for a smart and stylish shirt to wear on your next vacation, or even around town, or a sophisticated suitcase and matching purse, messenger bag or briefcase, we’ve got you covered. Here are some highlights.

Desert Pucker
The Desert Pucker from Royal Robbins ($59.95) has been our best selling men’s shirt since the beginning of time (or since we started carrying it). The “Puck” boasts a sand-washed finish that is ohh-so-soft. It’s also quick-drying and resistant to wrinkles. It features a classic breast pocket with a pen slot and straight side seams. Simple, tasteful, and comfortable, the Desert Pucker makes a great addition to any man’s travel and everyday wardrobe. Customers return year after year to choose

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start—our lobster lunch had been caught fresh that very morning by the previous tour group.

The sights on Doubtful Sound are nothing short of spectacular. And with the number of tour operators on the Sound limited to five, it feels like you have the whole place to yourself. We saw one other boat, way off in the distance, the entire time we were out. With Clint at the helm, we explored the nooks and crannies of the Sound, including Crooked Arm, where we spied seals sunning on the rocks, and a pod of more than 20 dolphins swimming and frolicking in the water near our boat. We also ventured close to the open water of the Tasman Sea, where the fish were biting. Bob is competitive by nature (he never wanted to let our young daughters win when he played them in Candyland), and enjoyed vying with another much younger passenger in that day’s fishing derby. He caught five fish in about an hour. But the younger set won out. (Sorry Bob, but maybe this was payback for Candyland.)

Dinner included some of the fish Bob caught served as sashimi, as well as lamb, chicken, Asian salad and roasted vegetables. Dessert was warm chocolate cake and cream. All this food was prepared by Clint’s handy assistant Jen, who somehow found the time to cook when she wasn’t helping with navigation, or baiting fishing lines, or cleaning, or assisting passengers in a myriad of ways.

Early the next morning it was our turn to get some lobster. Jen took the wheel and nosed the Southern Secret into position while Clint hauled up his three traps, bringing aboard 10 fresh lobsters for the next trip. After yet another delicious meal at breakfast, it was time to head back to Deep Cove. Sadly, our trip on the Sound was over, and we made the seemingly much longer journey back to our car and Te Anau.

While our boat tour was a highlight of our visit to New Zealand’s South Island, it was far from the only “Wow!” of the trip. So many of the stops on our two week journey were both fabulous and fun. The sites and sounds of this beautifully rugged locale that is a 17-hour flight from home left us in wonderment that such a small island could boast so many natural wonders.

Other highlights included an overnight in Punakaiki, on the north western coast, where we hiked amid the Pancake Rocks, and their fascinating limestone formations and powerful blowholes. We also hiked a wonderfully historic trail in the old gold rush town of Ross that included mining tunnels and caves, as well as a few spots where the mining tracks still stand.

When booking our trip, our initial plan was to hike one of the South Island’s many glaciers. Little did we know that New Zealand’s glaciers have receded so much from our Earth’s warmer weather that a glacier hike is no longer an option, unless you’re willing to get there by helicopter. While this was disappointing, and more than a little frightening, we still managed to catch site of three stunning glaciers, Franz Josef, Fox, and Tasman. Franz Josef was the most popular with our fellow tourists, likely because the car park is quite close to the viewing platform. It was also our least favorite. Although the glacier is beautiful, the small viewing platform is very far away, and as many as 100 people were crowded into the area, peering through binoculars and taking pictures. We moved on fairly quickly.

Fox was our second glacier stop, and it requires a much longer hike that is mostly uphill, and crosses several streams via rocks, to get to the viewing platform. It is definitely for the more agile, and thus was much less populated. The viewpoint is also quite a bit closer to the glacier, so it was well worth the time and effort to get to it.

Our favorite glacier visit however, was at Mt. Cook National Park. The views of the Tasman Glacier from both the superb Mt. Cook Visitor Center, and from our hike along the Tasman Glacier View Track, were marvelous. Tasman Lake even has icebergs still floating in it, although they are quickly melting.

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Bowling for Dollars (or Beers)

by Robert Bestor

We didn’t knock. We didn’t yell out “Is anyone around?” We didn’t ask permission. And we didn’t say to ourselves “Well, nobody’s here so let’s maybe come back later.” Nope. Instead we just walked right in to Dunedin’s St. Clair Bowling Club. Heck the gate was ajar, slightly.

About thirty yards down a narrow walk, Nancy and I came upon a couple of pristine bowling greens. Two men were having a match, so we sat down nearby (but not too closely) in a couple of available lawn chairs, to soak in the atmosphere. The playing surface was immaculate and the two competitors were deep in concentration. Each taking measure of their positions and ever so delicately rolling their biased balls, known as bowls, and watching intently as they made their way in slow, elegant arcs towards their targets. As a man who loves all sorts of games—from corn-hole to ping-pong and from darts to pool—I was smitten.

Soon a head popped out from the building behind us. “How are you?” asked a kindly woman named Carolyn in a wonderful Kiwi accent. “We’re fine thank you,” we answered. And a short pleasant conversation ensued during which we discussed where we were from, how long we’d been in New Zealand and how much longer we’d be staying. After wrapping up this short chat we went back to watching the match.

A few minutes later the same head popped out and asked “Would you like to come in for a pint?” At this point I’d like my college-aged daughters to know that strangers offering alcoholic beverages. But on this gorgeous weekday afternoon, in beautiful Dunedin, at the increasingly magnificent St. Clair Bowling Club, there was only one answer, and it was “Yes!”

We came to learn that on a normal Tuesday afternoon, the club is closed. But earlier that day, they had hosted a tournament, and several of the day’s volunteers were wrapping things up over a few beers. Greetings and handshakes went around as Carolyn introduced us to the group, and we were strongly urged to have a seat at their table.

Rex, Carolyn, Ray, P.J., et al, were gracious hosts, and soon there was a pint of Dunedin’s very own Speight’s Gold Medal Ale in front of each of us. We covered all the usual topics. They wanted to know why we chose to visit New Zealand, where we’d been, where we were headed next, and if we were having a good time. We asked about their families, their jobs, and what life was like on just about the southernmost spot on the south island of this country, located deep in the southern hemisphere.

And it wasn’t long before there was another pint in front of us. While I certainly welcomed this second beer, it meant I’d missed my chance to reciprocate by buying a round. Which meant another beer would have to be consumed when I finally did get the chance to insist that it was my turn to buy. It also meant that I’d definitely be reaching critical beer mass well before dinnertime. Oh well, we were on vacation.

We also talked about their organization. The St. Clair Bowling Club is no elitist, country club enclave. Nobody was wearing Wimbledon whites. Everyone’s dress was perfectly casual and comfortable, and the atmosphere made us feel the same. Our new friends were plumbers, construction bosses, bookkeepers, shopkeepers, and the like. An annual membership is $135 NZ ($91.16 US). New Zealand currently has over 650 such clubs in a country of 4.5 million people.

Back home it was the day of the Iowa Caucus. They had a big screen TV on for the local news and that was one of the top stories. Our new friends were of course quite well versed in our country’s presidential politics. They knew Hillary Clinton, they admitted to having no idea what to think about Donald Trump and they knew Bernie Sanders was a long shot who, from their perspective, came from nowhere.

Did we in turn know anything about their politics? No we did not. Could we at least name their President? No we could not. (As it turns out, the head of New Zealand is not the President, it is the Prime Minister. Strike three.) Were we really just another couple of self-centered, know-nothing Americans on the road, reinforcing the stereotype of our international ignorance? Yes we were. Nevertheless, the beer continued to flow.

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Travel Smart & Look Great—Top Products...

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Luci Light
The Luci Light Solar Lantern ($14.95) is our favorite new travel accessory this year. The inflatable light fully charges in just seven hours of sunlight, and then offers 12 hours of light. The Luci Light offers three lighting modes – two levels of brightness and a flashing “emergency” setting. It’s waterproof, it can float, and it collapses flat for easy storage when not in use. Pack one for your next adventure and let there be light!

Lug Puddle Jumper Shoulder Bag
Whether you need an organized overnight bag or a roomy under-seat carry-on for longer flights, the Lug Puddle Jumper ($114.95) might just be the answer. The Puddle Jumper offers three easy carry options: tote handles, a detachable shoulder strap, and a slip panel for stacking on top of your favorite wheeled luggage. A myriad of storage options including an organizational panel, water bottle pockets, a mesh shoe section, a small slip pocket perfect for a phone, and more, are certain to keep your travel gear in order. Durable, organized and easy to pack, the Puddle Jumper is ready for your next trip.

Kinzie Street Luggage
Briggs & Riley’s new Kinzie Street Luggage ($229 - $399) is a smart and sleek collection of bags that focus on protecting and organizing your travel technology, while offering packing space for clothes and more. The Kinzie line includes shoulder bags, backpacks, and an international rolling carry-on spinner. Each bag has specifically designed pockets and compartments for laptops, tablets, phones and accessories, making it easy to protect and organize your electronics when you’re on the go. The Kinzie Street bags are constructed with a durable, moisture resistant, and fashion-forward textured “Tartex” material. And, like all of Briggs & Riley’s quality bags, the Kinzie line is covered by their “Simple as That” lifetime warranty, which covers everything including damage caused by the airlines.

RFID-Blocking Neck Stash
The RFID Blocking Neck Stash ($19.95) is a simple and effective way to protect yourself when you’re traveling. Not only does it give you an easy and convenient way to safeguard your cash, credit cards, passports, and other travel documents from pickpockets, but with RFID blocking, you’ll be sure the bad guys won’t be able to skim your personal information and data from your RFID chips. The RFID Blocking Neck Stash

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Stash is also easy to use with convenient organization that features two zip-secure pockets, a mesh divider in the main compartment, and an ID window on the front.

Lonely Planet Fast Talk
Lonely Planet’s Fast Talk Phrase Books ($5.99) are pocket-sized dynamos that quickly and simply present the essentials of foreign communication for travelers. Headed abroad and don’t speak the language? Fast Talk offers you all the most common and important words and phrases with an easy-to-read pronunciation guide. Small enough to fit in a pocket or purse, Lonely Planet’s Fast Talk Phrase Books are the smallest, most travel friendly phrase books on the market. Available in the four key travel languages, French, Italian, Spanish and German, carry one with you on your next trip to make sure nothing is lost in translation.

Indicator Cable Lock & Heavy-Duty
A lot of people don’t know that you can lock your checked luggage as long as you use a TSA approved lock. These specially designed locks allow TSA to open your bag without ruining them. Both the Indicator Cable Lock ($14.95) and Heavy-Duty Indicator Cable lock ($15.95) are TSA approved and each has a red-indicator button that pops out to let you know if the TSA has used their master key to access your bag. Both are straightforward three-dial locks that are a snap to set and easy to use with flexible cables that slip through your zippers smoothly. The Heavy-Duty lock uses the same locking mechanism but features a thicker braided steel cable for extra protection.

Sport Mesh Underwear
ExOfficio has been making the best travel underwear for years, and now, amazingly, they’ve out-done even themselves. Their brand new Sport Mesh line ($22 - $30) might be proof that you can improve upon perfection. It’s just like their classic collection, only better. Sport Mesh is lighter weight, quicker drying and even more comfortable, with a silky feel and improved stylings that offer an excellent fit. And of course, they still pack small and are still perfect for any and every type of adventure. With fun colors and styles for men and women of all shapes and sizes, every suitcase, backpack and duffel bag can use a few pairs of ExOfficio Sport Mesh Travel Underwear.

Osprey Daylite
Osprey’s Daylite Daypack ($50) is easily one of our favorite bags. It offers a big bang for your buck with an excellent combination of technical functionality, comfort, and style, all at a great price. The Daylite’s padded mesh shoulder straps, waist strap, and structured mesh back panel are all designed with cool comfort in mind. It also features large side exterior pockets that are perfect for water bottles, umbrellas, and other quick access items. On the inside you’ll find plenty of packing space and a small pocket that’s perfect for organization. And if you’re into advanced hydration, there’s a pocket that is designed for a Platypus bladder. Osprey’s Daylite Daypack has it all to keep you comfortably organized, hydrated, and looking sharp.

Pocket Travel Towel
No one wants to pack a towel in their luggage – towels are bulky, heavy, and take up far too much precious packing space. Fortunately that’s not the case with the Pocket Travel Towel ($14.95 - $29.95). Available in four sizes, these compact and versatile little wonders are more absorbent

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“The grass is not, in fact, always greener on other other side of the fence. Fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greenest where it is watered. When crossing over fences, carry water with you, and tend the grass wherever you may be.” — ROBERT FULGUM
A visit to New Zealand is really all about the great outdoors. The Kiwis make it easy too, with lots of knowledgeable outfitters, excellent signage, and iSite tourist offices in just about every small town, with friendly staff who are ready and able to assist in any way they can.

All this amiable infrastructure makes it easy to find adventure. We took stunning walks along well marked New Zealand “tracks” to the Hokita Gorge, around Lake Matheson, and along Gillespie Beach. We rented bikes and rode (and rode and rode and rode) from Queenstown to Arrowtown and (finally—31 miles later) to a winery in Gibbston, where we had thankfully arranged for a pickup. We took a boat ride in a pitch black cave to see glowworms in action. And we watched blue penguins waddle up the beach at dusk as they came home to roost from the wilds of the southern Pacific Ocean. (More on all of these activities in our monthly email newsletter!)

Our trip was superbly capped off by a night’s stay at Lake Tekapo, which is ranked as one of the best spots in the world for stargazing and has been designated as an International Dark Sky Reserve. At midnight, Bob and I walked from our rental house to a nearby open field, where we laid down in the grass and pondered the universe. The night sky was ablaze with stars, including the Southern Cross constellation, and more beautiful than I’d ever seen it. But I expected no less from a country as lovely as New Zealand. My words and our accompanying photos do not do this country justice. It is definitely best seen for oneself.

Notes:

• Our overnight Doubtful Sound boat tour cost 1430NZD, about $970 for two of us. This included all transportation to and from Te Anau, as well as three meals. I cannot speak highly enough of the Doubtful Sound, the Southern Secret, and its crew. www.doubtfulsound.com

• Food in New Zealand was nothing to write home about (other than the delicious meals on the Southern Secret), save for the inexpensive and quite tasty meat and vegetable pies found at bakeries and taverns. Our favorite by far was Sheffield’s Pie Shop, along the way from Christchurch to the West Coast, via Arthur’s Pass. The many pies we sampled during our two weeks included butter chicken, moroccan lamb, thai chicken, and leek & cheese, to name just a few.

• We stayed at a mix of traditional hotels, home rentals via Airbnb, and pub hotels, which were my favorite. By far the least expensive, the pub hotels we stayed in had a great deal of character, and were quaint and unusual in their own right. We visited in the height of tourist season, and arranged all of our accommodations ahead of time. This proved to be prudent, as lodging was quite booked up everywhere we visited.

• We toured the South Island by rental car, although we know lots of people who have gone the RV route and camped their way around the country. There are hitchhikers galore in New Zealand—all young kids camping and hosteling their way around—and (much to our daughter’s surprise), we even picked up a couple on one short leg of our journey. I don’t see us picking up hitchhikers in any other country, particularly our own, but it just felt right in New Zealand.

—Nancy is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. She has never seen The Lord of the Rings movies, but after visiting New Zealand, she gets what all the fuss is about.
**Charge It!!! Best Credit Card Travel Perks...**

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fighter pilot training, but instead are looking for the best travel benefits at the best price. So how do you determine which card that is?

The best way to start might be by asking yourself a few questions. First—does the credit card you are considering have an annual fee? If so, will you make enough purchases on that card to accrue benefits that will outweigh the cost of that annual fee? In other words, if your card costs $100 a year, and it takes you four years to earn an airline ticket, that “free” airline ticket actually costs you $400.

Once you’ve made that determination, there are a few other questions that will help narrow down the type of card that is best for you.

- **Do you want airline miles, and if so, are you willing to have them limited to use on a single airline?**

- **Which airlines service the airports you most often use?** Here in Ashland, Oregon, United and Alaska are the two biggest carriers flying in and out of Medford’s Rogue Valley International Airport. Thus it wouldn’t make a lot of sense for us to have a credit card that accrued miles exclusively on American or Delta.

- **Do you want points that can be transferred to a wider array of rewards (ie: hotel, air, etc)?** Or do you want some sort of upgraded access or service like United Club?

We travel a lot, and are fortunate that we can also charge many personal and business items to our mileage accruing credit card. This year we upgraded to the Club Card from United. The annual fee is $395 (as a sign-up bonus, the fee was waived for the first year). The fee on our old United Mileage Plus card was $90 — so we are paying an additional $305. We are, however, accruing 1.5 miles for every dollar spent on this card, and two miles for every $1 spent on United tickets, as opposed to one mile for every dollar spent on the old card. In addition, we chose to upgrade to the Club Card for the included membership in the United Club. At all airports, we now have access to the United Club lounge, or the United affiliate club lounge. The lounge has free food and beverages, as well as free speedy internet. Some lounges are much nicer than others, but even the less than ideal lounges are not too shabby. In the six months that we’ve owned this card, we’ve easily saved $100 on airport food and drink. Our card also gets us priority boarding, no foreign transaction fees, and free checked bags on all United flights. Again, we travel a lot, and also charge significant dollars onto our credit card. Thus the high annual fee is worth it to us, but that might not be the case for everyone.

What our card doesn’t give us access to is miles on another airline. United has many foreign carriers in their Star Alliance Network, and the mileage program does work for these partners. But we cannot use our miles on other US airlines. This is when credit cards with “points” might make more sense for some travelers. A relative in our family is a member of the rewards program at American Express. By using his American Express card, he earns points that can, among other things, be spent on tickets on a large number of airlines in the US and abroad. There are, however, many points cards on the market. Fortunately, there are several websites that will help you choose the credit card that offers the best travel benefits based on your individual needs. Two of my favorite sites are [www.nerdwallet.com](http://www.nerdwallet.com) and [www.thepointsguy.com](http://www.thepointsguy.com).

A few other important credit card considerations are to make sure that when you’re traveling, you’ve got a credit card that:

- doesn’t charge foreign transaction fees
- covers you for car rental insurance in most countries
- provides a chip and pin for European travel

And remember, Visa and Mastercard are still the two most widely accepted cards in the world. American Express has great benefits, but many merchants don’t accept AmEx because their merchant fees are higher.

Finally, you’ll get the best interest rates and the best offers if you pay off your credit cards in a timely manner and have a good credit score.

**Travel Smart...**

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than your average full-sized cotton towel, are perfect as wraps and cover-ups, and the biggest sizes make excellent picnic blankets too! The fabric is a silky-smooth and odor-resistant blend of polyester and microfiber that gets the job done. Finally, each Pocket Travel Towel comes in its own handy, zippered, ventilated, and compact storage case. So this summer toss one in your beach bag, backpack or suitcase, and you’ll be ready for anything.

—Ember is just back from a hot trip to Thailand, where she tried many of these products firsthand!
Bowling for Dollars (or Beers).....

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When it finally came our turn to buy, I announced my intention to pick up the next round and headed to the bar. That was when P.J., who had been sitting next to me, jumped up, hustled around the counter, and helped me himself. The place is self serve and run on the honor system. There was a cash drawer for change and I ran my credit card myself. I would have poured the beers too if P.J. hadn’t been so graciously helpful.

While quaffing beer number three, Rex asked if we might interested in rolling a few bowls. “I thought you’d never ask,” I replied. “Ray, why don’t you take ‘em out and show ‘em how it’s done,” Rex said. And that’s how I found myself in a very casual game of lawn bowling with a man who turned out to be a five-time club singles champion.

Nancy rolled a few too, but was soon distracted and then it was just me and Ray —the five-time club champion. He gave me a few pointers and then proceeded to perfectly roll his first bowl to within inches of the jack, which is the target, about 35 yards away. Ray was uncanny. Each time I rolled he knew almost instantly where my shot would end up. “That’s a bit heavy.” “That’s a bit light.”

Soon enough the end came. The shadows were getting longer, and folks had homes and families to get to. Hand shakes and even a couple of hugs were exchanged. Nancy and I had our picture taken in front of the club logo. And then a few of the guys insisted that we all had to take a picture together. But what they meant was that they wanted to take a picture with Nancy. It’s OK. I’m used to it.

The St. Clair Bowling Club website states “A friendly welcome is assured for anyone wishing to have a go at lawn bowling.” A friendly welcome indeed—truer words were never spoken.

—Since returning from New Zealand, Robert, the co-owner of Travel Essentials, has been found stepping off his backyard, to see if he can fit a lawn bowling green within.