Ten reasons to appreciate New Zealand

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SNAPSHOT: Although there are many more, these offer a convincing glimpse

JANE MUNDY

Thermal lake Champagne Pool is located at Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland near Rotorua. — GETTY IMAGES

There's more likely 10,000 reasons to visit New Zealand, but I was only here for 10 days. Chances are you've met a kiwi or two and you've probably seen Lord of the Rings — the country's friendly population and breathtaking natural beauty is reason enough to visit. But if you still need convincing, here are a few more reasons.

Safe and Easy

Sure, New Zealand is far away but a direct flight from Vancouver is only 13 hours. Air New Zealand conveniently leaves early evening from Vancouver so after enjoying dinner and NZ wine, a movie or two (or several hours of The Hobbit), and a snooze, you're in Auckland. No vaccines or visa is required, no foreign phrases to brush up on (although kiwis have some weird expressions). And it's one of the safest countries in the world. You won't see police with machine guns and there's no venomous snakes, nasty biting insects or dangerous animals. There's not even security checks on domestic flights!

It's Not Crowded

Excepting Auckland, there's not much traffic and driving two-lane country highways is easy-peasy. It's about the same size as the U.K. but with 60 million people less (population 4.4 million), so you don't have to queue.

Hobbiton

Lord of the Rings fans go bonkers for the Hobbiton movie shire, starting with a video about how Peter Jackson found Middle Earth here and ending with a brew at the Green Dragon Inn. It's still a working farm with spectacular views across to the Kaimai Ranges from the farmland's gentle green hills, just a short drive from Rotorua. (I lied about crowds: try to visit here first thing or evening to avoid the bus tours.)

Art Deco in Napier

In 1931 a disastrous earthquake struck Napier. The town was levelled and hundreds were killed, but it was quickly rebuilt in the style of art deco and Spanish mission, and only a few other structures have been built in the downtown core since.

After checking into the art deco Masonic Hotel (where many celebrities and dignitaries have stayed), I strolled across the street to the Art Deco Centre. Brocky chauffeured me around town in a 1938 Packard and we stopped at the theatre with original art deco sconces, lights, seats and more.

Unique Fauna and Flora

Because New Zealand split from a land mass that once joined Australia and Antarctica about 85 million years ago, bird and plant species found here exist nowhere else in the world. Forests like Jurassic Park overflow with towering ancient kauri trees and ferns. On a "Wild Food Tour" with Chef Charles Royal, I picked kawakawa leaves used in Maori medicine, tasted edible fern (not only fiddleheads), and the Piripiri vine tastes like asparagus.

At Cape Kidnappers in Hawke's Bay — with no humans in sight — I perched two feet away from the biggest gannet colony in the world. Near Dunedin is the Otago Peninsula, known as the Wildlife Capital of New Zealand. I spent several hours at the excellent Royal Albatross Centre, the world's only mainland breeding colony of this magnificent bird. And every evening from a viewing platform you can see the world's smallest penguins waddle from a day at sea to their burrows and chicks. It's unforgettable.

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Cape Kidnappers in Hawke's Bay has unforgettable views. — PHOTOS: JANE MUNDY

Lord of the Rings fans go bonkers for the Hobbiton movie shire.

New Zealand is home to the largest gannet colony in the world.

New Zealand offers a magical tour for its visitors

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Geothermal Springs and Rotorua

Rotorua is hot springs central. First things first, a wallow in hot thermal mineral waters at the Polynesian Spa. The acid waters are known to relieve aches and pains — and jet lag. And mud bathing at Hell's Gate Geothermal Park is purportedly good for the skin. (Geology buffs might want to take the guided tour: a few scientists on my tour were impressed.) Five minutes out of town, Te Puia sits on a 60 hectare Geothermal Valley with more than 500 springs, boiling mud pools and the mighty Pohutu (Big Splash) geyser — New Zealand's geology is rather boisterous.

Culture

Rotorua is also the hub of Maori culture. Te Puia is a kind of cultural theme park and evening tours include an authentic Maori welcome ceremony, warrior's challenge and the demented yet fascinating eye-popping and tongue-poking kapa haka war dance.

Wine

Besides world-acclaimed wineries, Hawke's Bay has spectacular scenery, fabulous food, art deco architecture and easy cycling tours to see it all.

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Takaro Trails in Napier cycles to Urban Winery tasting room that happens to be in the art deco National Tobacco Building. On the way to Cape Kidnappers is Elephant Hill winery, another stunning building from this decade.

Food

To accompany the wine is superb dining around Hawke's Bay, coined New Zealand's food bowl. Besides Elephant Hill's superb restaurant, not to be missed in Napier is Pacifica Restaurant where Chef Jeremy Rameka leads the food scene with New Zealand's best offerings: freshest and organic produce, sustainable seafoods and meats.

The town of Napier was rebuilt after a disastrous 1931 earthquake into the style of art deco and Spanish mission.

Natural Beauty and History

New Zealand abounds with astonishing landscapes, such as Te Mata Peak, nearly 400 metres above sea level with panoramic views stretching to Cape Kidnappers and the volcano Ruapehu. At the summit I met Ike, with Waimarama Maori Tours. He told the story of creation and the heavens and then downhill to Hastings where we saw carved totems and learned about his ancestors. What a magical trip it has been.

The writer was a guest of Tourism New Zealand, which neither reviewed nor approved this article before publication.