

We spent 2 weeks in New Zealand, and as usually, I am writing my impressions after the trip.

Located on the "other end" of the Pacific Ocean, the flight is very long and tiring, but definitely worth it.

In countless movies, when the producer wanted to choose an exotic place with unparalleled beauty, he chose New Zealand.

There are two large islands, with 4.5 million people living on them, and many small islands, mostly uninhabited, around the two large islands.

The North Island is more populated, has several metropolitan areas, South Island is less populated, it is the place where the above mentioned filming took place.

The next stop after the South Island would be Antarctica. Because of the extreme southern situation of this island, during the summer (December-February) there is light until 10.30 in evening and the sun begins to shine at 4.30 in the morning.

It just seems like you fall asleep during the day and wake up to light also, like there was never a night.

On South Island, at sea level, in summer it is 50-70 degrees Fahrenheit during the day, and in winter day (June-August) it is 30-45 degrees during the day.

The Southern Alps are over 12 thousand feet in height, and have permanent snow, glaciers on the top.

To the West are the well-known New Zealand Fjordlands, where the mountains start at sea level, at times with very steep cliffs.

If you stand at the base of the cliff, in the boat, it is 70 degrees, you are looking at vertical walls that are almost 5000 feet, with permanent snow on top.

At the base of the mountain are palm trees, but if you move on a bit, you'd be close to the top of cliff, where there are pine trees, and on the very top there are no longer trees, only alpine vegetation, then permanent snow, all within 300 feet of moving horizontally.

From these glaciers start spectacular waterfalls.

There are always big waves, strong winds and ocean water is very cold.

When the continents were formed, 80 million years ago, New Zealand was separated from the rest of the world and the evolution of the vegetation and the fauna was totally different from the other lands.

Mammals, large predators have not arrived here, the evolution of animals did not include land-based mammals.

The vegetation is different, exotic birds have evolved differently. Many birds have lost the ability to fly due to lack of predators.

The first people arriving here were the Maori, around year 1200 or so, coming from the Pacific Islands.

They met this peculiar fauna, found here the Moa bird of a quarter of a ton, the biggest eagles that have existed on Earth, seals, penguins.

But these animals did not have the ability to defend themselves. Within 200 years of their arrival, many of these species disappeared from the face of the Earth.

The Kiwi bird, which is one of New Zealand's symbol, has remained one of the only relics of the past. Related to the Moa, it survived by feeding only at night.

After 500 years came the Dutch, the English, the Scots.

Today New Zealand is an independent country, of course, made up 15% of Maori (normal people, as Maori say), and the rest (like the Maori say).

"The rest" are mostly descendents of the English, the Scots, but in recent years, 10% of the population are of Chinese and to a lesser degree of Indian origin.

Maori are quite easily recognizable, they have straight dark hair, a wide face, with eyes just a bit elongated, with muscular and bony bodies and large hips.

While initially the Europeans have tried to assimilate them, during the last 15 to 20 years they have been trying to revive the Maori culture, traditions and language. There are many bilingual inscriptions, kids mandatorily study both English and Maori in schools. There are also schools that only Maori children attend, where all classes are taught in the Maori language. There are TV programs, radio channels in Maori language.

But generally there is a discrepancy in the level of education, income, and crime between the two groups.

There is some animosity between those of Maori origin and those of European descent.

Those of European origin do look like Brits are Scottish, they are blond or with red hair, some with freckles, fair skin, thin lips.

Everybody seems in excellent shape, the majority are very athletic.

Although they complain of obesity problems in recent years, I assume that they don't know the real problem of obesity as it is in the US.

Many are hikers, bikers, running daily through the woods for miles.

We thought we are in good shape when we arrived to the top of a mountain after three hours of hiking through the forest, but we saw locals that were not going fast, but literally running, passing us.

I saw women with very wrinkled faces, running as if they were 20 years old.

Another way to recognize the natives was to see how they were dressed. At 45 degrees Fahrenheit they were in shorts and t-shirts, while we had 3 layers of clothes, and hats.

People in New Zealand are very, very polite.

I used to say that Americans are polite, but these guys beat them.

If I wanted to fly my drone somewhere where it was banned, the locals felt bad asking me to stop. On the contrary, Americans passing by asked me to stop.

Locals trust you, they try to accommodate all of your needs.

If an Eastern European is asked the same question twice, he will yell at you the second time. An American looks irritated after the third time.

You can ask locals here 5 times the same question, they will respond with the same smile 5 times.

They have a leftwing political system, health and education are almost free.

They do seem far less focused on money than Americans or even Europeans. It is the only place in the world where I was informed that no one is expected to give tips. Tipping is not a custom in restaurants, at the hairdresser, taxi, the tour guide. No one is expected to give or to receive.

At the restaurant you pay before eating. The services are good, everywhere is clean, but everywhere looks the same. Whether you go to the bathroom at the restaurant, at the hotel, at the gas station, it's the same everywhere. It seems like they are provided all the basic needs, and no one wants excesses. The cars are all 10-15 year old models, Toyotas, Hondas, VW, I have not seen any Mercedes, BMW, Lexus, Audi. The houses are ok, but not luxurious. Even if the location is fantastic, the house is simple.

In the U.S. that house would be torn down to build a three million dollar house in its place. There would be companies who would gain from the construction, sales, the loans. In Romania a small businessman would buy the land and build a vacation home and park a Mercedes in front of the house so that he can show off to the neighbors. People here don't care about any of this. As long as they can leave work at 5, can drive a car that would take them from point A to point B, to have the child at school for free, being able to see the doctor for free, they are pleased. When I was driving around the city, I had the impression that we are in the 80s-90s in Romania. There is "internet cafe", "laptop store". Shops close at 5, all of them. Restaurants no longer serve after 9-9.30, none, in a large student city.

The food is very good and cheap, pretty much the same at any restaurant. Bread, lamb are very tasty. Everything is at half price compared to US or Western Europe.

The good thing is that you get the impression that you are served food out of the goodness of their heart, compared to the rest of the world where you feel as if you are monitored continuously, they are trying to guess how much you will tip at the end.

The bad is that if you don't rush, they will close. Hopefully it is not a holiday because then everything is closed anyways.

In the rest of the world "if you pay, you sit in the front." Here "everyone sits in the middle." The local people with whom we talked in New Zealand agreed with my conclusions except that they say what I described, it used to be like this 15-20 years ago, but lately the

discrepancy between rich and poor has grown, they are more capitalists now. I argue that they are still socialists, at least in their mindset.

There are a lot of farmers, there are about 20 sheep per capita.

Everywhere people grow sheep, cows, deer, stags for export. Indeed the lamb from any store in the U.S. is from New Zealand.

Tourists were Dutch, Germans, Japanese and Finnish 20 years ago according to the locals. Now 50% are Chinese, the rest are Americans, Australians, Indians, few from Western and Northern Europe and some Russians.

In conclusion, for me this is the most beautiful country in the world, even ahead of Switzerland. As islands I place New Zealand even before Hawaii.

People are very polite, relaxed, clean, healthy, they are not stressed by money. But the political system and the mentality is different.

In New Zealand safety is given by the fact that you know that almost every important decision you're going to make today, someone will still take care of you tomorrow, and they will make sure that you have the minimum required. In the U.S. every choice you make daily can change your life 180 degrees, but these are your choices, no one will impose anything.

For me personally, the possibility to have choices in life makes me feel safer.

My grandmother used to say:

"The way you prepare your bed, that is how you will sleep."

That being said, I'd go back in vacation to New Zealand tomorrow.