



NEW ZEALAND IN 26 DAYS

Our ultimate Kiwi adventure

STORY & PHOTOS BY TONY LEIGHTON

A first hand account from one of our guests

Tony Leighton is a Canadian journalist who, along with his wife, previously travelled with Scenic Tours on our 15 Day Jewels of Europe River Cruise as an independent guest, writing about his adventures for a Canadian publication. We subsequently invited Tony to experience our '26 Day Ultimate New Zealand' tour in February and document his thoughts about experiencing New Zealand by coach with Scenic Tours. First-hand accounts are the most powerful sources of information and inspiration for travellers and we are thrilled to share Tony's 'Ultimate New Zealand Travelogue' with you.

Glen Moroney
 Founder and Managing Director
 Scenic Tours

A Country by Coach



The Journey



Coach tours have always suffered grievous disrespect. Affluent people tend to see them as tourism's bulk-carrier scourge, not for real travellers but the indolent masses. Well, I have news. Done well, a coach tour is, for me, now – and I am ready to say this in full view of my hard-bitten travelling friends – my preferred choice when covering a lot of ground. After years of self-reliance, of pridefully arranging my own itinerary, of congratulating myself on good deals uncovered and rip-offs dodged, I have reached the point where I prefer that others do it for me.

When Rod Harris landed us back at the Langham in Auckland on the 25th day, the coach had travelled 5,686 kilometres around the North Island to the even-more-dramatic South Island then back north again. The many points of touristic interest were stitched together by the rural charms of New Zealand - pasturelands populated by uncountable sheep, trees of expressive grandeur and semi-tropical abundance, and striking contours of the landscape, from rolling golden hills in morning light to sweeping valley vineyards as far as the eye could see, to layered mountain ranges in resonant variations of black and grey and steel blue.

Please enjoy this travelogue of our trip. It is gratitude exemplified, and high-end coach tours rightfully applauded.

Tony Leighton



Franz Josef

How many coach tours have I taken? One.

The one in this travelogue. In February of 2011, my wife Leslie and I spent 26 days on 'Ultimate New Zealand', a luxury tour offered by Scenic Tours, an Australian company we have developed an affection for because they don't compromise on quality. I can't imagine how it could have been better. We ate like sultans. We stayed in first-class hotels. We experienced New Zealand from top to bottom in 26 days of all-inclusive, fastidiously escorted, shamelessly pampered comfort.



Milford Sound



Walter Peak Station



Mountains above Lake Tekapo



Auckland's iconic Sky Tower

Was there anything we didn't like? No.

Not even the fact that we shared a coach with 42 people we'd never met. Many of them were older than Leslie and me. It didn't matter. Put 44 travellers in one of the world's most visually stunning countries, guide them capably at a gracious pace, take care of all the details and remove all responsibilities, and the pervading sentiment will be gratitude. In our case, group gratitude.

We were a happy coach. We laughed often.

We remained convivial for the entire month. We experienced pleasurable companionship with strangers, which was an unexpected pleasure for inveterate solo travellers.

Travel happiness, for me, also depends on good value. This tour was not cheap. There are plenty of downmarket packaged tours at two-thirds the cost. And New Zealand is crawling with camper vans driven by retired couples sleeping in their vehicle.



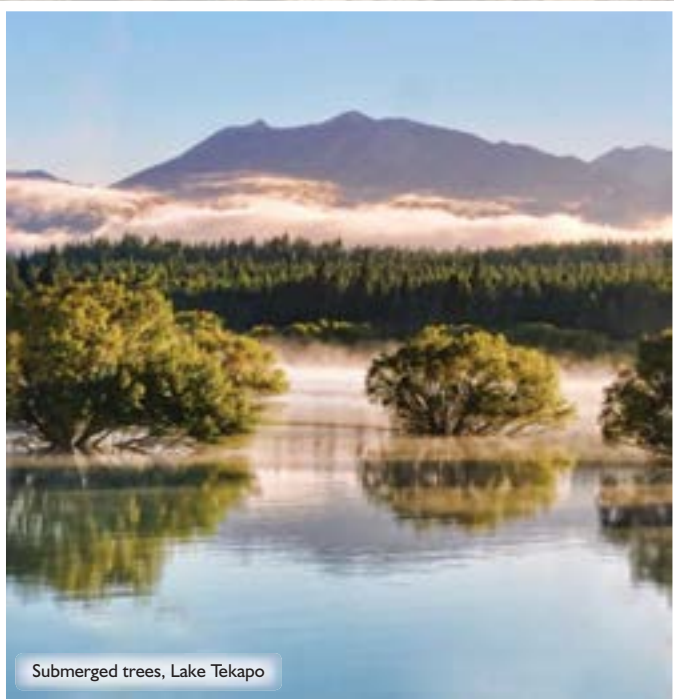
New Zealand's beloved silver fern explained



Fern grove



The Split Apple Rock in Abel Tasman National Park



Submerged trees, Lake Tekapo



On the hike to Taranaki Fall

But once we did the math, the value of our choice was glaringly obvious.

Other coach travellers suffer for having paid less. One day in Queenstown, members of our group met some sour Canadians (I'm Canadian) on a cheaper tour. They immediately launched into bitter complaining about mediocre accommodations, a burned-out Tour Director, and having to pay extra for everything. "It will end up costing us twice as much", said one scowling Canuck. Their once-in-a-lifetime dream tour was steeped in bile.

Valerie Francis, our Tour Director, told us about an accountant who took the 'Ultimate New Zealand' tour a few years ago. On the first day, he admitted being a 'numbers man' who wanted to add up all hotels, meals and excursions to determine value for money. Halfway through the trip, he informed her you couldn't match the package rate at more than twice the price if you did it on your own. Tracy, one of our fellow travellers did the same rough calculation and came to the same conclusion. "Two to three times the cost", she said. "And that doesn't include Valerie and Rod."

Both Valerie and our driver Rod Harris were Scenic's secret ingredients.



Volcano at Tongariro National Park



Hole in the Rock, Bay of Islands

Good guides are gold.

A Canadian from British Columbia, Valerie has been with Scenic for seven years and claims to never tire of being a professional shepherd. She tracked us assiduously, making sure we were counted and comfortable. She called ahead to rest stops and hotels so our arrival was heralded with plentiful food and ready rooms. She made sure our Scenic *FreeChoice* activities were booked and we always knew what the next day held.

Rod too was a gift. An avuncular Kiwi in his late fifties with an encyclopedic mind and a flair for storytelling, he spends half his year teaching children with special needs, the other half driving for Scenic. A dozen times a day he would activate his microphone to tell a story inspired by a sight along the road. He gave our tour context and texture, explaining everything: why the endless fields of sheep are so vital to New Zealand, the prevailing weather



Rod and Valerie



Bayview Chateau, Tongariro



Kelly Tartton's underwater world



Approaching the Haast River jet boat ride



Wild grasses at Tongariro

Of course, New Zealand is the ultimate backdrop.

I always assumed those Lord of the Rings landscapes with their pitch-perfect waterfalls, fiords, and layers of smoky mountains had to be corners of the country where things were truly majestic, assembled for the tourism brochures. But as it turns out, the whole country is majestic. New Zealand feels like the most dramatic parts of Canada - the Rockies, shorelines, forests, and plains - compressed into a compact island nation you can fit inside a Canadian province. It felt much like home half a world away.

The people charmed us.

Flying into summer from our winter, we landed in Auckland at an ungodly 5am and were warmly greeted by a shuttle driver. Despite the fact that 2.4 million tourists pass through New Zealand every year, we didn't meet a single disagreeable Kiwi. Their pervasive cheerfulness was inspiring.

Kiwis obviously love their country and it pays them back with an abundant outdoor life, outstanding wines (especially the Sauvignon Blancs and Pinot Noirs), glorious fruits (kiwifruit and apples), great cheeses, lamb of course, and wool.

Leslie and I indulged in all of it, including the wool. We came home with an gratifying bundle of Merino wool garments from the renowned New Zealand company Icebreaker, bought for about 75 percent of what we would pay in Canada.

In 26 days, you can see a lot of New Zealand, although as I peruse a road atlas I acquired there, it's clear we could have doubled our time and still not have done it justice.

patterns of Arctic and Pacific Ocean influence, DC3s and top-dressed fertilising, the extraordinary geothermal capacity of a country so close to the earth's heat, sheep dogs, brown trout, whitebait, possums and weasels, the shifting of tectonic plates, the morphology of trees, why Sauvignon Blanc grapes thrive in the Marlborough region, Abel Tasman, Captain Cook, Julius von Hasst, Maori legends, and the terrible Christmas Eve accident in 1953 when 151 passengers died in the Tangiwai rail disaster because a volcanic lake had unluckily burst its banks and taken out a bridge.

Rapt. We were rapt. How often does a driver double as a one-man entertainment centre? In coach touring, you live with the staff. Well hired, they amplify the pleasures. "It's pretty simple," said Rod. "Valerie and I love our jobs." Lucky for us.



Bay of Islands Lodge

The finer details of our ultimate New Zealand vacation unfold across the following pages. These were the unforgettable highlights.

- Starting and finishing at the 5-star Langham, Auckland's No. 2-ranked hotel, and eating far too much at 'Eight', a culinary journey through eight mini-kitchens of world cuisines.
- The black sand beaches near the Waitakere Ranges where big surf pounds the headlands.
- The breathtaking Tane Mahuta ('Lord of the Forest') a more than 2,000-year-old kauri tree that rises like a botanical skyscraper in the Waipoua Forest near Omapere.
- Bay of Islands Lodge – our sole upgrade – a tiny, classy boutique hotel cantilevered dramatically on a steep hillside high above the bay. The proprietors served us superb New Zealand wines and two dinners I might never forget. We slept above tree tops.
- A day trip to the volcanic Poor Knight Islands, 20 kilometres offshore where we snorkelled in wetsuits as five million seabirds soared around us.
- Rotorua, the geothermal capital of the country, where we stared into furiously boiling hot pools, bubbling mud, and steaming sulphuric vents; hostile and beautiful evidence of the earth's crust at its thinnest point.
- Wellington, the nation's capital with its yacht basin harbour surrounded by hillside homes, many of them spectacular. We happily discovered the city's vast Botanical Garden.
- Hiking to the crumbling blue-ice base of the mighty Franz Josef Glacier.



Auckland's Langham Hotel's seafood grill



Roast lamb lunch on a farm



Poor Knights Islands



T.S.S. Earnslaw, Lake Wakatipu



NZ Parliament, Wellington

- Jet-boating 32 kilometres up the glacial-fed Haast River, skimming at high speed through the shallow, silty blue waters into the thickly-forested mountains of the Southern Alps.
- Eating lamb shank pie with locally brewed beer in Queenstown at a lakeside pub after discovering Merino wool shirts miraculously on sale.
- Being rewarded after a long ride into Milford Sound by its utter majesty.
- Opting for the no-extra-charge 'homestay' and sharing the elegant hilltop home and five-hectare garden of David and Trudy, a 6-star experience that made us the envy of our group.
- Hiking to the top of the world's steepest residential street in Dunedin, no small feat, and being cheered by our coach mates upon our victorious return.
- Walking the woods above Hamner Hot Springs along a secluded trail among tall trees, treasured by locals.
- The remote white sand beaches of Abel Tasman National Park.
- A four-winery tasting tour around the fertile peripheries of Nelson that kept us jolly for hours. We ate, we drank, we learned much about wine.
- The wildness of Tongariro National Park with its cone-shaped volcano, moor-like fields of scrubby wild-blasted terrain, and grand château-style hotel.



Haast River jetboat



Gibbston Valley wine tasting



The Agrodome shearing



The Lord of the Forest

It's hard to describe the feeling of standing before a 2,000-year-old living thing. Tane Mahuta (left) is the largest remaining kauri tree in New Zealand. We felt humbled and honoured to behold this giant, especially in light of the fact that vast tracts of kauri forest were wiped out to send lumber back to Europe in the 19th century. Tane Mahuta is part of the protected Waipoua Forest not far from Auckland on the North Auckland Peninsula. Revered for centuries by the Maoris, the tree was apparently discovered by westerners in the 1920s when the first highway into the region was being surveyed. Tane Mahuta's huge arms, just visible at the top of the photo, cradle a colony of other vegetation. A worrisome virus currently killing kauri trees has thusfar spared the Lord of the Forest.



The Maori's Story

Our time in the Bay of Islands included a tour of the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, where the famous treaty between Britain and the Maori people was signed in 1840. The British, worried about unruly settlers, unhappy Maoris, and the French eyeing annexation of New Zealand, hastily drew up the document, which was debated for a day and night by about 500 Maoris. Forty chiefs signed the next day, followed by hundreds more in the months afterward. While the treaty has always been contentious, it established an uncommon equity between indigenous peoples and their colonisers. Maoris are partners in New Zealand society. The majority of the country's place names are Maori words. An enthusiastic Maori guide (above right) boarded our coach to tell us the Waitangi story. The war canoe (right) is at Waitangi.



In the Lap of Luxury

While the hotels on our tour were all first class, we took one opportunity to upgrade for two nights at Bay of Island Lodge. The owners, Peter and Glinnis built their luxury guesthouse in 2002 on a hillside site no one else had the courage to tackle. The open kitchen is the centrepiece. From it issued two fabulous dinners prepared by Peter. On night two, we started with prawns in a sweet-and-sour sauce with a beautifully spiced rice patty, salad, and chunky guacamole. The main course was rack of lamb with a lamb reduction gravy on a bed of mashed potato and cauliflower with green beans. Four fine wines were poured liberally. Dessert was a kiwifruit and blueberry-laden pavlova with passionfruit sauce. The elegant infinity pool was beside our room, enabling a discreet late-night skinny dip as cicadas trilled in the trees.



Lamb Lunch

Lunch was always a treat, this one more than most. Longlands Farm and Restaurant is owned by Kerry Simpson, a third-generation New Zealand farmer, and his German-born wife Silvia. We enjoyed a roast lamb lunch on the large patio of the Simpson's home (left).

Toilet Art

This public toilet (right), designed by the famous Austrian painter and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, is probably the most photographed privy in the world. Hundertwasser spent part of every year at his second home in the Waikino Peninsula. In 1998, the local community council in the village of Kawakawa wanted to upgrade a 40-year-old public toilet. Hundertwasser offered to design a work of art. Ceramic elements were prepared by art students. Bricks came from a demolished bank building. Old bottles embedded in the walls emit light. The roof is planted with grass and a tree grows through its centre. Kawakawa was transformed by the fanciful toilet into a 'must see' mecca for Hundertwasser devotees worldwide - plus endless buses full of eager bathroom users, ours included.



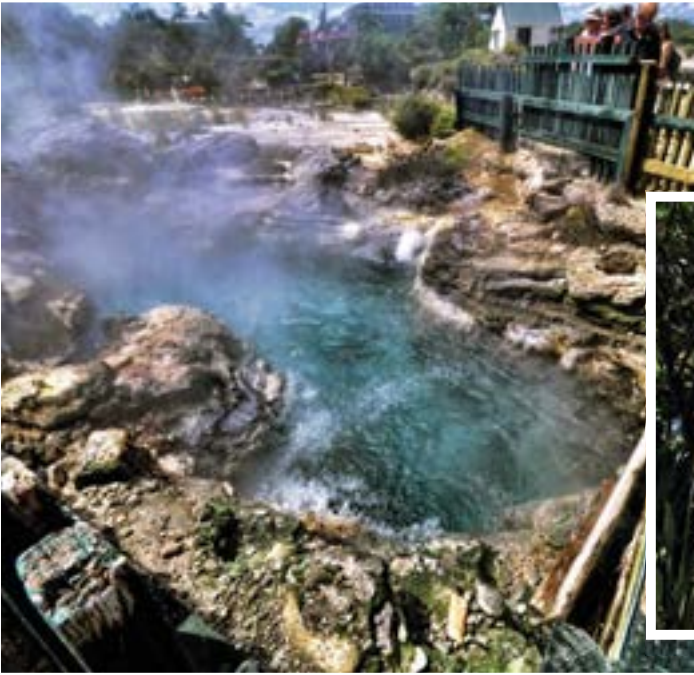
In Good Hands

You wouldn't think that 44 adults would rely like a class of children so completely on their guides. But we did. It must have been the pampering. Once you fall into the tempting mode of voluntary dependency, the transition tends to be complete. Rod Harris (right) our Driver navigated us capably for 5,686 kilometres. He also stowed every suitcase under the coach at every stop then un-stowed them again that night. A born storyteller and proud patriot, Rod told us all about the countryside as we passed through it. Valerie Francis (above) was our unflappable and heroically helpful Tour Director. She took complete control from our first briefing in Auckland until each one of us had been taken care of for the flight home. Valerie smoothed the path. Rod navigated it brilliantly.



Hot Attractions

The Whakarewarewa thermal area in Rotorua has hundreds of hot springs and geyser vents. Many vents emit hot gases only but several geysers are active. The ground is spookily warm. Sulphur pervades the air. The earth sputters and complains.



Carving History

Throughout New Zealand you continually see the swirling decorative motifs of the Maori culture, often tattooed on arms and legs, and occasionally on faces. The Maori have used this symbolic language for centuries, carving it into their buildings, war canoes, and sculptures. At the National Carving School (right) - part of the Te Puia New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua - full-time students study for three years under master carvers. Founded in 1967, the school is an important way to preserve Maori cultural identity. The fierce masks glare down from large beams that surround the entrance to the Te Puia complex. Our tour included the carving and weaving schools and several acres of geysers, vents, and one large pool of hot, sputtering mud.



Wellington's Charm

Wellington was our favourite New Zealand city. The spectacular view (far left) is from the balcony of our hotel room (The Copthorne) opposite a picturesque row of small boathouses below. A walk around the harbour is mandatory, as is a cable car ride from Lambton Quay (Central Business District) to the top of the Wellington Botanic Garden, 25 hectares of protected tree and plant collections. You walk back down a winding, well-marked path, through the Garden's layers of botanical exuberance and eventually through Bolton Street Memorial Park, the city's original burial ground, a tombstone reader's delight. You'll pass the architecturally adventurous 'beehive' parliament building and this highly-photographed statue of 19th century city father John Plimmer with his loyal dog, Fritz (left).



Living Well

Wellington's inner core is arrayed around forested hillsides that rise steeply from the harbour. Clean and prosperous-looking, the city exudes the privilege of a capital. One gets the feeling that Wellingtonians love their city and know how to enjoy its amenities.

Bolder to the South

We were told by our guide Valerie that the South Island is "much like the North Island only bolder and more dramatic". Our first taste came during the ferry crossing of Cook Strait when mountainous islands came into view. The 92-kilometre crossing takes about three hours and can be rough. Ours was flawless, made better by special lounge privileges that included a full breakfast courtesy of Scenic. We took the Tranz-Alpine train across Arthur's Pass, ascending through spectacular gorges and river valleys of the Waimakariri River towards the Southern Alps. After much photo taking, we re-boarded our coach and drove through a canyon as steep as anything I've ever passed through in a vehicle. It was unnerving fun.

Franz Josef

Franz Josef is one of only two glaciers in the world that drop from alpine heights into a rainforest, and one of the few that's actually advancing not retreating. Some of our group flew over in planes. We hiked toward the base (note the tiny figures, right) to capture this shot.

Milford's Magic

Anticipation grows as you approach Milford Sound (below and right), as if entering the Hall of the Mountain King. You are rewarded with thickly forested mountains that plunge into the sea and dolphins that leap out - as it was when the Maori arrived more than 1,000 years ago.





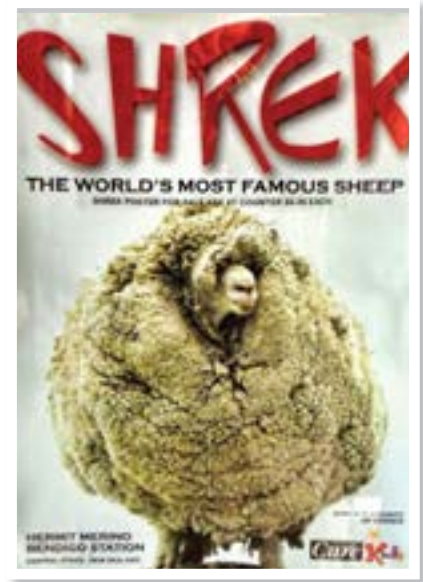
'Homestay' in High Style

Scenic's 'Ultimate New Zealand' tour includes an optional homestay with local hosts. Only three couples of 22 opted for it, including us. "I have a feeling that most people are reticent to do a homestay because they fear they'll be sleeping in the barn and milking the cow," said our host, David Stewart. Nothing could be further from the truth. David and Trudy designed their own art-filled home and five-hectare garden on the top of a hill overlooking a sweeping valley near Dunedin. We walked the garden for over an hour, astonished at its scale and beauty. Our hosts served fine New Zealand wines from the moment we arrived, followed by canapés, a roast lamb dinner and erudite conversation. We slept soundly under a thick duvet and awoke to a lavish breakfast. Thank you, David and Trudy. Our finest day.



A Sheep Called Shrek

After six years on the run, apparently having hidden in caves, an escaped New Zealand Merino sheep was finally captured in 2004. His coat, which normally would have been shorn annually, had grown to massive proportions. Nicknamed 'Shrek', after the fictional giant, the sheep became a beloved national icon. His accumulated wool was shorn in 29 minutes on national television and weighed 27 kilograms, enough to make 20 mens suits. In 2004, Shrek met then-Prime Minister Helen Clark. On his tenth birthday, he was shorn again on an iceberg floating off the coast of Dunedin. Shrek apparently commanded appearance fees as high as \$16,000. He died in June 2011 at the advanced age of 17 after a comfortable retirement in his own barn at the farm he avoided returning to for six years.



Miles, Master of Pies

Te Anau, a small town on the shore of Lake Te Anau, New Zealand's second-largest lake, is famous as a hub for the great Fiordland hikes along the Milford, Hollyford, and Kepler trails. And for glowworms. The worms live in the ceilings of caves snaring their prey with gooey strands of mucous while glowing like tiny green fluorescent diodes. More interesting was the long cave itself carved out by rain water and glacial melt. We picked our way along an aluminum catwalk supported by I-beams bolted to the cave walls, just a few feet above the roaring water. The man in the photo (right) is the third famous attraction of Te Anau. Miles of Miles Better Pies likely makes the finest pies in New Zealand. I had a flakey, moist, warm pastry pocket with a golden crusted exterior, full of lean wild venison chunks in rich gravy - \$6.



Hanmer Hot Springs

Hanmer Springs, a small town between Christchurch and the West Coast is best known for a hot spring produced by a fracture in the Hanmer Fault. A number of our coach companions swam in the pools of the resort-like water complex. Leslie and I found a trail through a conservation forest above the town and hiked amongst glorious tall trees. Dinner at the hotel that night was especially memorable: broiled blue cod, a flavourful pumpkin soup, mixed vegetables, and moist, dense English toffee cake with butterscotch ice cream. At our tea stop the next morning in Murchison, a tiny hamlet 90 minutes from Hanmer Springs in the Lewis Pass, we enjoyed good strong coffee and world-class bran muffins full of walnuts. Road food, even in the smallest places in New Zealand, is made with uncommon care.



A Day of Wine

We toured four wineries around Nelson, starting with lunch and tastings at Wiamea Estates then on to Golden Hills Estates, Stafford Lane Estate, and Brightwater Vineyards. All of them produce a variety of wines. The Sauvignon Blancs stand out.

Tongariro National Park

Just when we felt New Zealand couldn't be more beautiful than the places we'd seen, the tour drew to a close in one of the most beautiful of all: Tongariro National Park. A remote alpine terrain favoured in winter by skiers and ice climbers and in summer by hikers and rock climbers, its three active volcanos - Ruapehu, the conical Ngauruhoe, and the broad-domed Tongariro - form the southern edge of the Pacific Ring of Fire. We stayed in the ornate Bayview Château Tongariro, an 80-year-old grand dame being restored by a new owner. Awaiting us in the resplendent red-tufted lounge when we arrived were tea, scones, and crustless sandwiches. We hiked well-maintained trails through low scrub bush to Taranaki Falls (left) which tumbles 20 metres over a 15,000-year-old lava flow.

Surface Tension

At Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland the planet appears to be revealing its insides. Champagne Pool (below) is crusted with arsenic and sulphide, layered since its creation 900 years ago. The mighty vent above belches sulphur which congeals gruesomely on its rim.



Companionable

A culture develops on a coach shared with 42 others for a month in a beautiful place, and I am assuming from the experience of only one coach tour, this one, that coaches generally breed beneficence. Ours did. Our fellow travellers, almost without exception, were well-mannered, even-tempered, uncomplaining, quick with a joke or a smile, open to chiding, and eager for the next adventure. Andrew, a recently retired English dentist, spoke for us all on the final approach to Auckland when he commended Rod and Valerie for their professional devotion to our wellbeing - the glue that bound the culture. If, for reasons of geography, we won't see our newfound friends again, we certainly enjoyed their companionship for four weeks of good fun and shared spectacle. And of that, lasting memories are made.



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