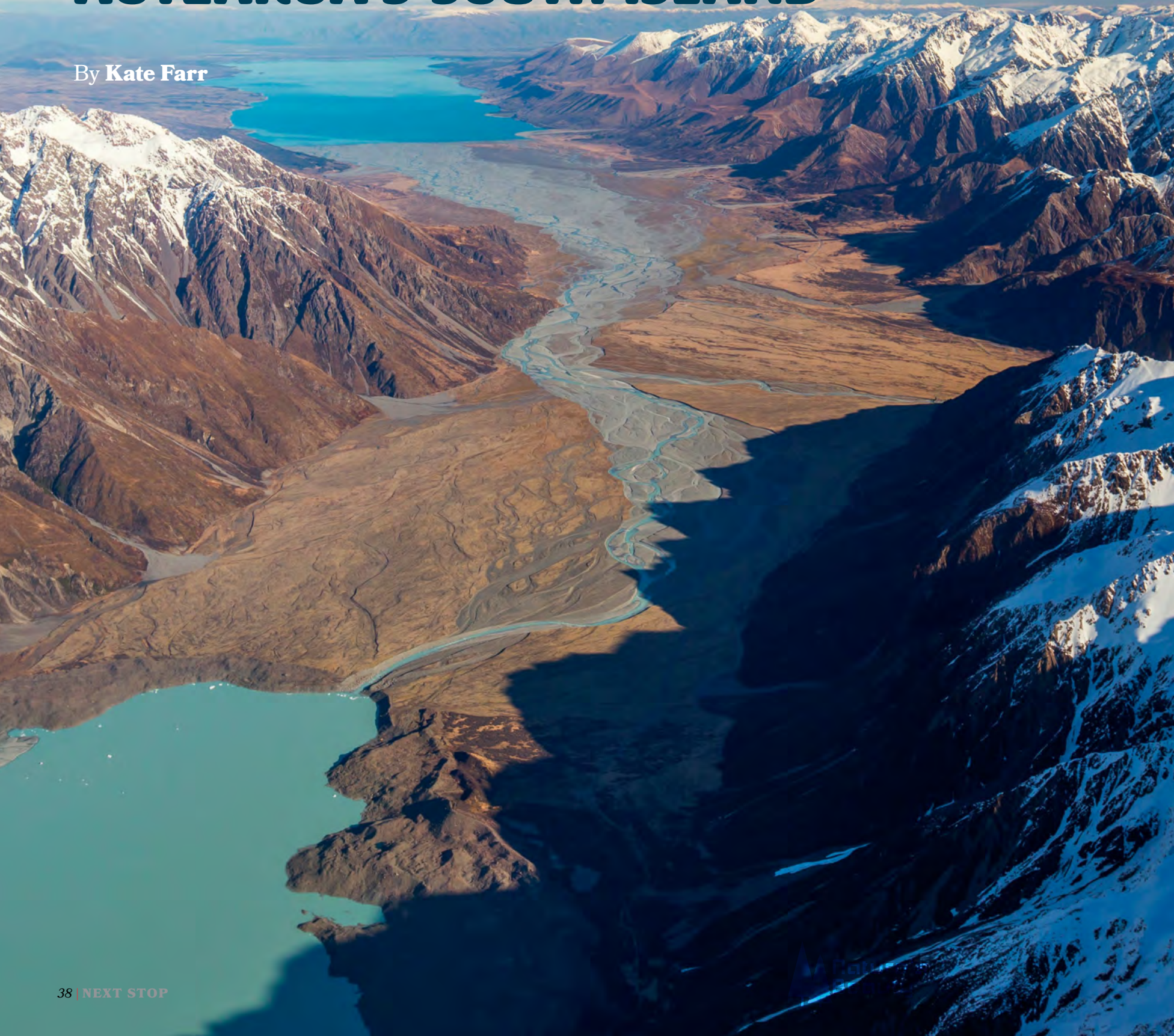


# DRIVE NEW ZEALAND : A ROAD TRIP AROUND AOTEAROA'S SOUTH ISLAND

By Kate Farr



When you think of New Zealand, I'm guessing that the All Blacks, sheep and Lord Of The Rings feature high on the list of first impressions – but this beautiful remote country has so much more to offer than Hobbit clichés and a great lamb roast dinner! Having toyed with a trip to the country known in Māori as Aotearoa for many years, my husband and I took six weeks to explore the land of the long white cloud on an epic road trip throughout the Kiwi winter, starting in the country's South.

Arriving in Christchurch, the capital of the South Island's Canterbury region, we immediately felt at home as a pair of visiting Brits. This green and extremely scenic city takes its name from the Oxford University College that colonial city founder John Robert Godley attended in the 19th Century. Canterbury Museum is a great starting point to learn more about the region, boasting the world's largest collection of Antarctic artefacts and a wealth of information about New Zealand's rich Māori heritage.

You may also be familiar with the city for the series of earthquakes that took place between 2010-2012, during which 185 lives were lost and many parts of the city were damaged – including Christchurch Cathedral, which lost its spire during the tremors. Since the disaster, the city has been quick to rebuild, and Christchurch's centre is once again a thriving place to visit and the ideal gateway to explore the rest of the region.

A short drive from Christchurch lies Akaroa and the Banks Peninsula. The main attraction here is the opportunity to swim with the Hector's dolphin, the world's smallest – protected within a designated marine park in Akaroa Bay. Donning thick wetsuits against the frigid Kiwi winter, we headed on-board our tour boat and before long, found ourselves surrounded with these tiny, playful and curious creatures. Entering the icy water, we watched and marvelled as they played and swam all around us, unfazed by our presence but still completely wild and in their element. This was an experience that will stay with me for years to come, and one that I would recommend to anyone visiting the South Island.

Next on the itinerary was a stop at Kaikōura, home to much of New Zealand's native whale population. Unusually, you can spot Giant Sperm Whales in the nutrient-rich waters year-round, making it a popular tourist destination well served with guesthouses and restaurants. As well as sperm whales, you'll easily spot other whale species, as well as dolphins, fur seals and seabirds including the Royal Albatross, making Kaikōura the best place in New Zealand to view marine wildlife in its natural habitat.

Heading south, we passed through the stunning lake regions of Pukaki and Tekapo, whose bright blue waters run straight from the glaciers of the towering Mount Cook and beyond. We hiked around Tekapo, marvelling at the silence, taking in the remote Church of the Good Shepherd and the bronze statue of a New Zealand collie nearby, built to acknowledge the indispensable role of the sheepdog in this rural region's ongoing success.

It was then onto Timaru, home of the aptly-named little blue penguin. These tiny creatures are the smallest penguin in the world, and the sight of hundreds of them jumping from the sea onto the beach at Caroline Bay at dusk is almost unbearably cute! We watched in wonder as they waddled up the beach, squawking and flapping, oblivious to the crowds of admirers just behind them.

Taking our time to savour our drinks, chat with the winemakers and admire the vineyard views, we reluctantly bade the beautiful South farewell as we headed to Picton and our ferry to Wellington, New Zealand's capital city and the gateway to the North Island. ▶





More of these flightless birds – this time, yellow-eyed penguins – can be viewed just outside the city of Dunedin, a pleasant university city in the far south of the country. A peaceful spot, we happily explored the city by foot, calling in for a tour (and perhaps a taste or two!) at the famous Speight’s Brewery before trudging wearily up Baldwin Street, the world’s steepest, at a maximum gradient of nearly 1:2.

While you can travel between Dunedin and Queenstown on what must be one of the world’s most scenic railways, we drove for three-and-a-half hours to New Zealand’s adventure capital, where my husband wasted no time at all in fulfilling all of his wildest bucket list fantasies. From white water rafting to jet boating and skydiving to skiing, Queenstown caters to the adrenaline junkie like no other place on earth. Widely regarded

as the birthplace of bungee, watching my husband launch himself off “The Ledge” 400 metres above the city remains one of the most petrifying moments of my life! We had initially aimed to try our hands at snowboarding at one of the city’s many ski schools, but unfortunately the snow was late that year, so, adventure itch scratched, we continued on to a more peaceful spot.

The stunning fjordlands of Milford Sound rival anything that Norway has to offer, and it’s here, surrounded by mirror-still waters and towering craggy peaks that you can imagine yourself deep in the heart of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. The scenery is truly breathtaking, and the absolute best way to explore the Sound is by cruise boat.

Travelling up the west coast, we entered the Mount Cook National Park, where we took

the opportunity to don crampons and boots and hop aboard a helicopter for a guided heli-hike of the Franz Joseph Glacier. Both Franz Joseph and the neighbouring Fox Glacier are tens of thousands of years old, and the creaking ice caverns and steep inclines made for an otherworldly experience that is forever imprinted in my mind. On our visit we came across a newlywed couple, still dressed in gown and tuxedo, celebrating with what has to be the best-chilled glass of champagne of their lives!

Speaking of a welcome tippie, our final stop on our tour of the stunning south was the Marlborough region, famed worldwide for its deliciously crisp Sauvignon Blanc wine. With many of the region’s wineries offering tours, who were we to refuse the chance to sample some of the world’s finest wines at source? [FC](#)

