

New Zealand's Wild West

By Tammy Burns

T+E

THERE ARE DINOSAURS ON NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND

My guide for our south island tour, Mike, tells me this as he drops us off at the Pororari River trailhead in **Paparoa National Park**. I assume he's referring to scenes from the movie *Jurassic Park*, but no, those were filmed much further south, amidst the craggy vistas of Fiordland National Park. Instead, he tells me about the time he and a fellow guide stumbled upon cardboard cut-outs of dinosaurs scattered along this very trail—it was the set for a Korean video game shoot. And to be fair, it's not a far stretch to imagine giant lizards running amok here. The park certainly looks prehistoric, with towering, rocky cliff faces smothered with dense, droopy vines. As we tramp through the bush, a part of me honestly expects to see a velociraptor emerge from behind a palm tree.

The south island's weird and wild west coast is popping up on a lot of must-visit lists for travellers in search of rugged adventure with a hint of romance. Google named New Zealand its top-searched honeymoon destination in 2013, and the west coast in particular is ranked as one of **Lonely Planet's** top travel destinations for 2014, alongside other hard-to-access spots like Australia's remote Kimberley region, culture-rich Hokuriku in Japan and the tropical islands of Tonga. And while the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movies has already pushed New Zealand to the top of many travel bucket lists, it's the pure isolation of the west coast (along with the fact that two western trails in the country's massive **Nga Haerenga** cycling network will be completed this year) that makes it the most enticing slice of New Zealand for intrepid explorers. Remote and rugged, the thin stretch of land—a mere 50 kilometres across at its widest—bordered between the Tasman Sea and the Southern Alps is what you imagine the world must have looked like before humans ever came along.



Only some 31,000 people inhabit the entire western coastline. Cell phone reception is non-existent in many parts, and when you can find WiFi, it moves at the speed of molasses. The land rules here, and as we drive the Haast Highway past seemingly endless expanses of verdant rainforests, Mike tells us how years ago, the farming industry tried to move in to make use of the fertile soil — but had to retreat shortly afterward. The land proved too powerful for industry, and efforts to tame back the wild foliage eventually failed as the rainforest swept across farm fields and reclaimed the west as its own.


Perhaps nowhere is this nature-run-wild phenomenon as apparent as it is amid the jagged peaks of **Fiordland**. The craggy islands of Fiordland make up the foot of the western south island, which is one of the wettest places on Earth, receiving close to seven metres of rainfall a year. This heavy precipitation has created a real-life science experiment in which sea creatures normally only found at low depths live close to the surface. The intense rain pours into the sound through rivers and waterfalls, picking up plant matter along the way and turning the fresh water dark. As the stained rainwater settles atop the ocean, it darkens the salty sea below, luring dark-dwelling creatures to shallower depths.

Travellers can explore sections of Fiordland such as Milford Sound (the most famous of the sounds) and **Doubtful Sound** (the deepest of the sounds, and recognized as the “Sound of Silence” for its eerie quiet that hovers between the cliffs) by tour boat or, if you want to get closer to nature (and those deep-sea creatures), **by kayak**.



Snow and gusty winds prevented us from kayaking through Doubtful Sound, but even aboard the larger tour boat, we spotted crested penguins and felt the raging winds that whip across the ocean from halfway around the globe (the next piece of land at that latitude is all the way in Argentina.)

The northern end of the west coast feels a bit closer to civilization, with the town of Picton acting as the gateway for ferries headed across the windy, rolling waters of the Cook Strait to Wellington on the North Island. Yet, the sense of romantic isolation remains strong, with a distinctive South Pacific vibe — head to **Abel Tasman National Park** and you'll be greeted by forested hiking trails and secluded rocky beaches that spill out into turquoise waters (tropical in appearance, if not temperature). Soothe your hunger with a fresh fish burger overflowing with slaw at **The Fat Tui** food truck in Marahau, then hop on an aqua taxi to spend the night in a **floating hostel** perfectly tucked away in one of the Tasman's glittering bays. (And while you're there, *do* join everyone in a daring jump from the boat's roof — even if the water's chilly, like it was for me in October, there are hot showers to soothe the shock.)

It was fantasy movies like *The Hobbit* that put New Zealand on many tourists' maps, but the real thing is even more than the stuff of dreams. Although, whether it's along the dark waters of Doubtful Sound or in the impenetrable rainforests of Paparoa, I wouldn't be surprised to hear that dinosaurs really do roam free. 

QUEENSTOWN ACTIVITIES FOR ADRENALINE JUNKIES

Of course, the biggest draw for visitors to New Zealand's south island hasn't traditionally been going off the grid, but rather, scaring yourself silly.

Queenstown, located in the southwest, is the original home base for thrill-seekers, with stunts like **bungy** jumping and **canyon** swinging, and is generally recognized as the adventure capital of the world. In fact, there's a running joke that the town is designed to enable tourists to part with as much of their cash—and a fair amount of their sanity—in as short a time as possible. Storefronts selling everything from jumps and swings and jet boating to skydiving gear line the main drag of Queenstown, and by night the town turns into a raging party with every pub offering its own version of a happy hour special.

It's wild and raucous and, truth be told, filled entirely with tourists. Don't expect to find local culture





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