

Heading South

Exploring New Zealand’s picturesque South Island by car is both rewarding and relaxing.



WORDS RHONDA OXNAM

HOW DO YOU reach a happy compromise when one person wants an overseas adventure and the other would prefer a more relaxed break?

You head to New Zealand with no real preconceived plan of where you are going or what you will do when you get there.

A quick four-hour flight and we have landed in Christchurch ... a perfect starting point for our ten-day driving holiday.

As we weren’t sure of the condition of the roads we would be on, we chose to hire a four-wheel drive (and even though we didn’t need them it was comforting knowing we had opted to include the snow chains as well).

The Virgo in me had insisted we at least pre-book the first night’s accommodation so we set

off to find the Chateau on the Park, a tranquil, Tudor-style property boasting a moat and a beautiful rose garden.

Having seen Christchurch before the earthquake hit, it was heartbreaking to witness the devastation caused by the 2011 disaster.

But they are slowly rebuilding and there are certainly parts of the city that are worth a visit.

We spent an enjoyable afternoon wandering through the Botanic Gardens and watching people punting on the Avon River.

The cool, crisp weather and clear blue skies were a very pleasant change from the heat and humidity at home.

From Christchurch we headed across to the western side of the island via Arthur’s Pass.

As with every leg of the trip, the roads were very well maintained and the scenery spectacular.

So many times we just had to stop to take in the surrounds ... and while I snapped hundreds of photos it is very hard to capture on film.

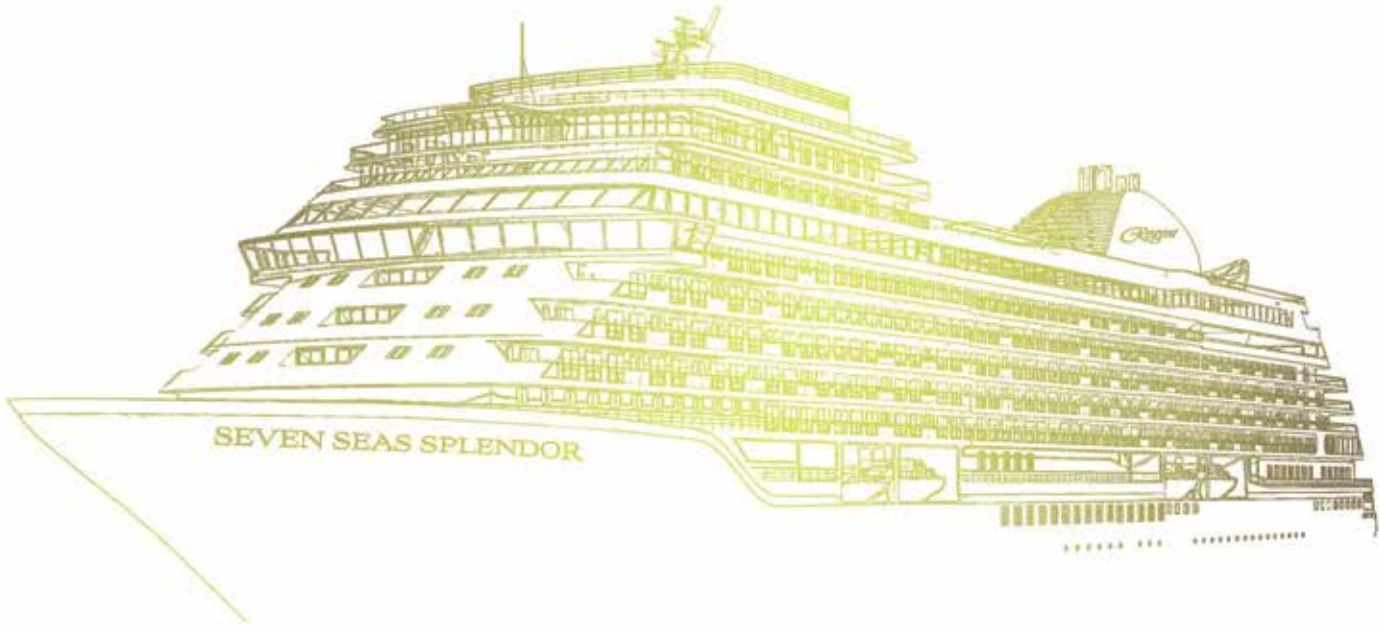
A couple of warnings ... all this sightseeing slows down the journey so allow a little extra time to reach your destination. Also, there are no big service stations in New Zealand like we have here so be sure to keep an eye on the petrol tank and fill up whenever you can.

Our target for that evening was Franz Josef ... a quaint township named after the nearby Franz Josef Glacier and well known for its adventure tourism ... think heli-hiking, guided ice walks, kayaking, etc. >>

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The chalet we had booked online the previous evening was charming if a little daunting given the steepness of the stairs. (Don't tell anybody but we ended up sleeping in the little attic room with the door locked and the stairwell light on so we didn't take a tumble in the middle of the night.)

The following morning we set out to explore both Franz Josef and nearby Fox Glacier.

Not for the fainthearted, the tracks wind through rocky riverbeds and over slippery terrain. While we didn't quite make it to the top of either, the stunning views from our vantage points were still incredible.

Next stop was the highly recommended Lake Matheson, just a short drive from Fox Glacier.

Accessed via the Clearwater River suspension bridge, the walking track around the lake takes about one and a half hours to complete (be sure to pack a decent set of boots) but is certainly worth the time and effort.

The dark brown waters of the lake create a mirror-like surface and the reflection of New Zealand's highest peaks – Aoraki (Mount Cook) and Mount Tasman – framed by the lush green trees was simply breathtaking.

After spending more time than anticipated there we made our way inland to Wanaka.

Wrapping around a lake and surrounded by snow-capped mountains, we found a town built for lingering, with great views, great people and great coffee.

But this was a road trip ... and we had pre-booked accommodation ... so after one night it was time to hit the bitumen again. Destination Queenstown.

This cosmopolitan city is a tourist Mecca.

In our magical few days there we went jet-boating on the Shotover River, ate, caught the gondola up the mountain to take in the stunning views, ate, took a side trip to the historic township of Arrowtown, ate ... >>

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Aside from the delicious food and to-die-for ice cream (did someone mention Mrs Ferg Gelateria) the highlight would have to be the day trip we took to Walter Peak High Country Farm on the *TSS Earnslaw*.

Kids and adults alike were fascinated by the workings of the beautiful old steamship which can be observed from a viewing platform in the engine room.

Once on shore we fed the animals, watched a sheep shearing and working dog demonstration and enjoyed a delicious high tea in the original farmhouse. A great day out and one that all the family can enjoy.

Of course no visit to the South Island would be complete without a trip to Milford Sound so we made our way to Te Anua, which was to be our gateway to the iconic fiord.

Again located on the shores of a lake, this charming little village treated us to one of the most spectacular sunsets we have ever witnessed.

And although the following day was quite overcast, the cruise around Milford Sound certainly lived up to the hype.

With its sheer cliffs, majestic waterfalls (which left those of us game enough to stand on deck completely drenched) and calm, clear depths, I can only image how breathtaking it would be if the sun was shining.

We also saw some amazing sights on the drive back including the aptly named the Mirror Lakes (the reflections of the mountains and foliage in the still waters were once again awe-inspiring) and The Chasm, a series of powerful waterfalls where thousands of years of swirling water has sculpted shapes and basins in the rock.

However, we missed others because, despite my earlier advice, we simply did not have enough time in our schedule.

After a second night at Te Anua we made our way to Lake Tekapu via Mount Cook.

Unfortunately it was still quite cloudy so the peak itself was not visible but the journey there was very pretty and it was another item ticked off the bucket list.

As the name suggests, Lake Tekapu is nestled next to a wide expanse of water and was the perfect spot to break our journey.

We spent time wandering the croppy foreshore and exploring the little sandstone chapel built on the lake's edge before heading to the local pub for dinner.

The following morning we meandered back to Christchurch, where we had just enough time to enjoy one more night and a delicious meal at the Chateau on the Park before flying home.

And given how much we both enjoyed our time in New Zealand, it's safe to say we will be returning to the land of the long white cloud very, very soon. ●

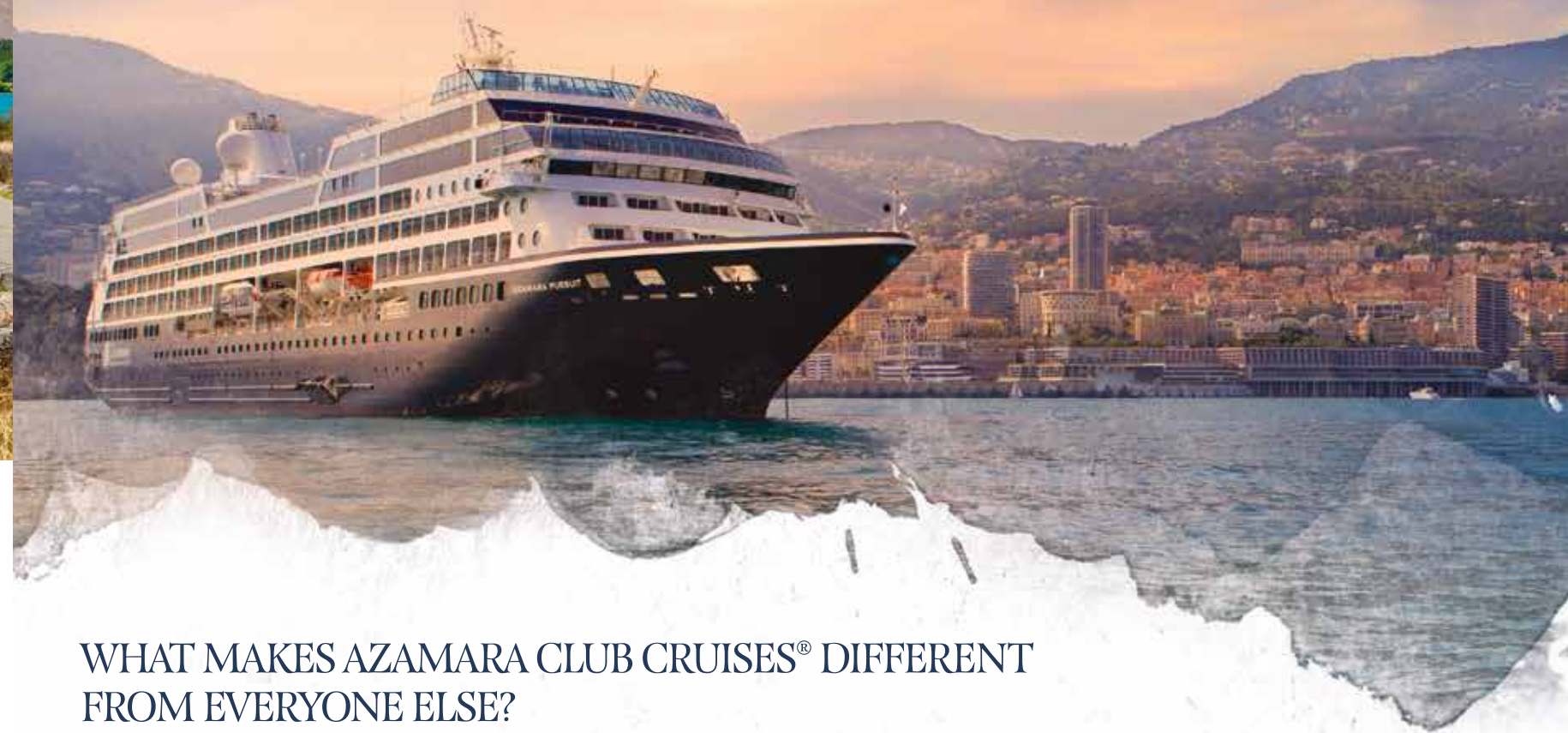


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