

The most beautiful country on earth!

Have you been to the most beautiful place on earth? I have. And no amount of photography or superlatives can be an exaggeration to its splendour in reality.

You would think it would be difficult to isolate any one place in the world as the most beautiful, as beauty tends to lie in the eyes of the beholder. Also, circumstances and your own state of mind tend to have a huge impact on your experiences. But I have absolutely no qualms in stating that if sights could speak, they would speak volumes in favour of my most beautiful country in the world – New Zealand.

I am yet to hear anybody's account of a trip to New Zealand that involved anything negative. That itself is saying something, isn't it? But here's my story.

Our first stop in New Zealand was Auckland, and not only had we transited through Brisbane, but Auckland felt like a little part of Australia — in a smaller and plainer package. There was something about the airport and the city itself that spelt out the last stop in that direction. The buck stopped at the end of the world and the street fashion, the air about the people, everything said it was unaffected by the rest of the world. For all the fans of *The Hobbit* or *Middle Earth*, the *Hobbiton* remains open in Mangaotaki, Piopio. The cliffs, unusual limestone rock foundations and the forest look as if they were created to form the backdrop of *Middle Earth*. But this is not the only filming spot in the country to make you feel that the film and its imaginary locations were unbelievably inspired from real life. Wait till you reach the South Island!

It had happened to me once in Istanbul when I booked an accommodation trusting the photos online and it turned out several things, including the

view and the roof, had been photoshopped! Judging by the photos posted by my host on Airbnb, I was sceptical. But when I arrived in Queenstown and we drove up to our home for the next few days on the newly rented SUV, my mouth fell open. I looked across to my husband in the driving seat to see it mirrored on his face—the gobsmacked, giddy expression that was surely on mine! And henceforth, we never quite recovered from our dream-like state.

There are mountains in Australia too you know, where I have spent a majority of my life. But there is something about the South Island with its 20:1 sheep to human ratio – that's right, New Zealand is home to 3 million people and 60 million sheep, where the sheep outnumber people by far – that makes you philosophical with the realisation that this is a tapestry no man could have woven.

There are some amazing activities to do at the Queenstown city centre like the cable car and luge ride. Don't be surprised if people come along and give you random hugs just because they are happy – it's perfectly normal in this magical town. The vibe is unmatched.

I recommend spending a good amount of time here that may or may not include Ferburger – the most famous burger joint in the world. The veggie option is amazing too. Says your most humble, vegetarian travel guide!

Glenorchy is the *Lord of the Rings* trail, and one, if you miss on this trip, will make it difficult for you to justify my

claims as to why this is the most beautiful place on earth. This was the first of our many stops on this road trip in paradise. On one of our detours from the main road, we set off on a hiking trail that took us to what actually felt like the end of the world. I saw water so clear and blue, like it did not belong in this world. Like it really was paradise!

Milford Sound ought to be another unmissable item on your list. I remember standing on the precipice of a cliff, where the view before me cleared to reveal several waterfalls tumbling down to intertwine and become one. I was so stunned I cried!

Tip: All cruises follow the exact same route and the vessels are structurally similar as well, so opt for the cheaper option without any hesitation.

Around five hours north from Queenstown is the Glacier city, with two main towns Fox and Franz Glaciers. At the end of the trip, we were torn between this and Queenstown. While Q-town was amazing as a hub, the glaciers were secluded hiking and trekking adventures and some of the best locals I have met in my life! I recommend the standard trails to see the glaciers but opt out of getting any guided tours. They are easy enough for beginners. I have heard very good reviews of the scenic helicopter flight to the glaciers too, so if budget allows, go for it.

I made a friend for life on this trip. It was with a beautiful soul called Lizzie. She happened to be a proud Maori, one of the vibrant indigenous peoples of New Zealand. While describing my experience of the country to her, I had said, "It felt like coming home!"

By Naaz Fahmida
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