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Middle Earth Adventures: A Family's Guide to New Zealand's Wonders and Challenges

One family's thoughtful approach to planning the trip of a lifetime

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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PHOTO: The author and her family enjoying Hobbiton. Photo: Gemma Alexander

Americans used to think of New Zealand as a remote, insignificant little country, if they thought of it at all. Then “The Fellowship of the Ring” hit theaters in 2001 and everyone discovered the fantastical real-life landscape that doubled as Middle Earth. Ever since, nerds and adventure seekers alike have dreamed of visiting the glaciers, volcanoes and beaches of that tiny nation in the southwestern Pacific Ocean.

Seattle and Auckland are separated by 7,000 miles of unbroken ocean. For families that struggle to get everyone out the door in the morning, the dream of crossing both the equator and the international date line to get to New Zealand may seem like an impossible one. But it is possible to take lifetime bucket list trips with kids in tow.

After making this trip with my own kids, here's what I discovered that makes traveling to New Zealand worth the effort, and a couple reasons it might be harder than you think.

It's family-friendly

Every time my family travels, I'm surprised by how much other places seem to welcome kids, and New Zealand was no exception. In New Zealand, most tourist destinations offer family rates that include two adults and two children for less than the price of four tickets. Nearly every attraction offers discounted child pricing and "child" usually refers to anyone younger than 16. I worried that my 15-year-old might be offended by being lumped in with the little kids. But before I could ask about it, they brought it up themselves.

"When we go places at home," they said, "I always feel like people roll their eyes like, 'Oh great, a teenager.' But here, I'm a 'child' and everyone is nice."



Let your teenager feel like a kid again in New Zealand. Photo: Gemma Alexander

There's something for everyone in every season

Summer is New Zealand's peak tourist season (December to February), but there's pleasant weather to be found and plenty to do in every season. New Zealand packs a multitude of landscapes into an area smaller than Arizona, leaving adventure seekers spoiled for choice: year-round swimming and surfing beaches; skiing and snowboarding from June through September; glaciers and caves to explore (go with a guide); helicopter and boat tours of fjords inaccessible by land; horseback riding and cycling. Hikes range from a paved trail through old growth in the heart of Christchurch to the 1,864-mile Te Araroa trail that takes four months to complete. Farm stays — such as this one that houses endangered penguins (<https://www.pohatu.co.nz/Farmstay.html>) — can be especially rewarding for families. Many of New Zealand's 80,000 native species are endemic, endangered, or both.



A nesting pair of endangered penguins looking adorable. Photo: Gemma Alexander

Located in the Pacific Ring of Fire, New Zealand is full of hot springs, volcanoes and geysers. The largest of these, Pohutu Geyser in Rotorua, erupts about 20 times per day, shooting water up to 100 feet high (equal to Strokkur in Iceland).

Although it is best known for its natural wonders, New Zealand is a satisfying cultural destination. Maori culture is alive and well in modern New Zealand. The Maori language is widespread (including a dedicated TV channel) and there is even a political movement to officially return New Zealand to its original name, Aotearoa. Beside the cultural performance centers, many tourist sites — such as the world-famous glow worm caves (<https://www.waitomo.com/>) and several whale watching companies — are Maori owned and operated.



The big geyser at the Te Puia geothermal area in Rotorua starting to erupt. Photo: Gemma Alexander

For Lord of the Rings fans, The Wētā Workshop and Hobbiton are must-sees, and there are numerous film site tours to choose from. Kids won't be as excited as parents about touring New Zealand's burgeoning wine country. But foodies of all ages will love the abundance of Asian eateries, fresh seafood, gastropubs and a robust café culture providing avocado toast in even the smallest towns. (If your kid hates trying new food, they do have Macca's – Kiwi for McDonald's.) Those who crave fine arts won't be disappointed either. Until recently, The Royal New Zealand Ballet was directed by former Pacific Northwest Ballet prima ballerina Patricia Barker.



Experience life on the Shire at Hobbiton. Photo: Gemma Alexander

It's clean and safe

New Zealand's government has a 100 percent renewable electricity goal by 2030, and they have already reached 87 percent. As a result, New Zealand ranks No. 6 (<https://www.iqair.com/world-most-polluted-countries>) in the world for air quality – the highest rank of any country with a population greater than 2 million. While the rest of the world debates the “30X30” conservation goal (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/protect-water-and-land/land-and-water-stories/committing-to-30x30/>), New Zealand already has more than 10,000 protected areas covering around 32 percent of its total land area (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/protected-areas/print>).

Compared to Australia, where everything wants to kill you, New Zealand is a garden of paradise. There are no large predators or snakes. There are a handful of venomous spiders, but they are uncommon and not deadly. The most dangerous creatures in New Zealand are found in the ocean – sharks, jellyfish and a poisonous sea slug. Encounters with them are so rare that even some Kiwis claim New Zealand has no dangerous animals.



Nothing but predator-free hills as far as the eye can see at Pohatu Farm. Photo: Gemma Alexander

Crime is on the rise in New Zealand, though – they've recently dropped to No. 4 (<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>) on the Global Peace Index that ranks 163 countries on risks from crime and conflict. (For reference, the United States ranks No. 132.)

It's easy

New Zealand's tourist infrastructure makes adventure easy. Everything is in English, and the currency is stable. Although ubiquitous timed-entry tickets cut down on spontaneity, they also prevent overcrowding, long lines and the disappointment of showing up to find something is sold out. Roads are generally much better maintained and signposted than here in Washington state. Domestic flights are inexpensive and frequent, allowing vacationers to cover a lot of ground in a short time.

As with their Aussie neighbors, people in New Zealand are remarkably laid-back and friendly. If you're used to the Seattle Freeze, asking for directions in New Zealand will thaw your heart. Even fancy restaurants won't bat an eye at your Pacific Northwest fleece and denim wardrobe.



The Auckland War museum, just one of New Zealand's tourist destinations. Photo: Gemma Alexander

It's surprisingly affordable

New Zealand is not a budget destination, especially compared to nearby spots such as the [San Juan Islands](https://www.parentmap.com/article/san-juan-islands-vacation) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/san-juan-islands-vacation>) or even resort towns such as [Puerto Vallarta, Mexico](https://www.parentmap.com/article/things-to-do-puerto-vallarta) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/things-to-do-puerto-vallarta>). Simply getting to New Zealand is expensive, and all those timed-entry tours can add up pretty quickly. But the exchange rate is favorable (about 60 cents U.S. to the New Zealand dollar), and for people used to Seattle's cost of living, prices are surprisingly affordable. My family was constantly suffering sticker shock – “What? \$25 for French toast!” – before remembering \$25 N.Z. is \$17 U.S., making breakfast cheaper than at Portage Bay Café or Watson's Counter back home. Many people dispense with lodging expenses entirely by road-tripping with a rented RV, but if you like your beds stationary, you can rent a hatchback for about \$20 a day.

Travel troubles

No place is perfect, and visiting New Zealand has some challenges. The biggest one is distance: It takes a lot of time and money to get there. There are no direct flights from Seattle, so it takes a minimum of 17 hours to reach Auckland. It is typical to spend 24–30 hours in transit and more than \$1,300 per ticket. An [airfare ninja](https://www.parentmap.com/article/secrets-airfare-ninja) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/secrets-airfare-ninja>) might get the price under \$1,000 with multiple layovers. If you have extra days to spare, you can break up the travel with stopovers in Hawaii or Fiji. But no matter how you plan it, you'll need some strategies to [help your kids through long flights](https://www.parentmap.com/article/flying-kids-tips) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/flying-kids-tips>).

As in the U.S., driving is the easiest way to get around New Zealand. But those cheap rental cars are smaller than they look on the website. Our “Corolla or similar” rental car could not fit one full-sized suitcase and three carry-ons in the cargo area. And don’t underestimate the learning curve of driving on the wrong side of the road if it’s your first time, especially with jet lag. Turning on the windshield wipers instead of the turn signal is only funny in retrospect.



Public transportation can help you get around the city in New Zealand. Photo: Gemma Alexander

If you don’t fancy driving on the left side of twisty mountain roads and city roundabouts, you can explore New Zealand without a car. Public transportation is available in the cities, which are connected by long-distance bus lines and three scenic railways. Day tours that include transportation can get you to tourist sites in the countryside. But traveling this way takes a lot more planning and will cost more than renting a car.

There’s no such thing as a hassle-free adventure, though, and the rewards of exploring New Zealand far outweigh the difficulties. Sure, you could wait until your kids are older. But if you have the desire and the means to go now – why would you postpone the adventure of a lifetime?



Get out there and make those memories today! Photo: Gemma Alexander

More inspiration for your next family adventure:

[Island Dreaming: Relax and Recharge With the Kids in Kauai](https://www.parentmap.com/article/kauai-vacation-things-to-do)
(<https://www.parentmap.com/article/kauai-vacation-things-to-do>)

[Destination Paradise: A Puerto Vallarta Travel Guide for Families](https://www.parentmap.com/article/things-to-do-puerto-vallarta)
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[San Juan Islands Family Kayaking: PNW Bucket-List Adventure](https://www.parentmap.com/article/kayaking-san-juan-islands)
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