New Zealand In A Nutshell
(Apologies to Bill Bryson)

What do New Zealanders do to get to sleep at night? Well they don’t count sheep; too many of them do that for a living anyway. There are seven sheep for every human, or is it ten? Similarities between New Zealand and the UK are often noted, the land areas for example, but there is one very clear difference; there are less than one tenth of the number of people. Driving about the place, this is obvious.

The other one is the sheer remoteness of NZ; it is a 13-hour non-stop flight from LA to Christchurch. While it is a mere 1000 miles south east of Australia, on the other hand Australia is also a long way from anywhere (depending I suppose on what you think is somewhere).

NZ was discovered by the Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1642 but he left quickly after some of his crew were killed and eaten. The first proper survey was done by Captain Cook in 1769. Of course humanity was already in NZ, the country being occupied by Polynesian Maoris from about 800 AD onwards. They were a brave and spirited people, but prone to tribalism and civil war, and so were willing to sign the Treaty of Waitangi with the British in 1840, a score draw in which both parties opted for some peace and quiet. There were still a few nasty wars before things settled down though.
Today the population is 72% NZ European, 15% Maori, 7% Pacific Islanders and 6% Asian, but only about 4 million people altogether.

Okay, they are thin on the ground and far away, but they do have nice weather don’t they? Aha….! Up to a point…. What they don’t tell you, when they show you the beautiful pictures of Milford Sound, is that it has eight metres of rain every year (yes, that’s about 26 feet). So pick your moment; in the far southwest it rains four days out of every six. Take your Gortex.

In general though, you have, compared with the UK, a climate out of Camelot. Sunnier but just as green as England, warm when it rains, winds without a chill factor and mostly low humidity. In winter, while they have frost and snow like England, there is also the sun to cheer you up. They do however spend a lot of time grousing about the weather like we do.

It’s a pretty good place for gardeners unless you’re the sort of person who only approves of indigenous species. Most pollination in NZ takes place at night by way of moths, which are colour blind. That means the plants can reproduce without having to evolve much in the way of coloured flowers. If you want colour there is plenty; but its Mediterranean transplants like mimosa, bougainvillea or hibiscus and especially English garden plants which do very well there. There is plenty of rain, warmth and sun so they grow well, especially the lupins, which are enormous and wild all over South Island.
What does the place look like? South Island is a bit like Scotland, but a better version in which the sky is usually blue, the mountains bigger and more jagged, and the lochs a milky blue not black. The corries in NZ are often filled with dazzling snow topped glaciers. North Island is like a celestial England, hilly, green and bright, with bigger cattle and sheep, and more of them. Only the volcanoes tell you that you are in a different world.

A really neat aspect of getting about NZ is that it is menace free. Unlike Australia or Canada where every bush, wood, pond or river can contain a very nasty surprise, there is NOTHING dangerous in the woods. Yes that’s right there are no snakes, crocodiles, toxic insects, mountain lions or bears. So you can hike and get lost to your hearts content. Okay there are the sand flies and the birds steal your sandwiches but really, compared to the crocs….

When you have got yourself out of the woods then a really good thing about NZ is that eating out is cheap. Yes, each serving can be enough for three normal people, but the value is terrific, at just about half of UK restaurant prices. Same for the petrol, about 50p per litre and they don’t even have an oil field. Anyway it’s a small place so you don’t use up that much gas.

Girls, don’t go there with the idea of shopping around for new dresses and things. There are a lot of small boutiques and dress shops but no M&S, John Lewis or similar. For that, the New Zealanders go to Sydney. On the whole it’s not a shopping experience.

People often think NZ is pretty culture free but not really, nowadays
anyway. It must have been a pretty drab place before satellite TV, personal computers and the Internet. Twenty years ago you might have had a problem getting coffee but now there are tea and coffee shops everywhere. Thanks to immigration you don’t have to go far for Greek, Indian, Chinese or Vietnamese restaurants. Maori dishes are good if you can put up with the hullabaloo and ceremonial that goes with them.  

Famous New Zealanders? Kiri of course. Rutherford the great scientist, for whom a vast memorial exists near his birthplace, Nelson. Maurice Wilkins, the third man of DNA came from NZ. Edmund Hillary practised on Mt Cook. There’s Katharine Mansfield, Jane Campion (The Piano) and Jonah Lomu. And of course Lord of the Rings, which was made using most of the scenery of NZ, has almost single handedly brought tourism close to agriculture in economic terms.

Europeans think history has passed NZ by. Well they don’t agree; in the First War one in three of their men folk between 20 and 40 was killed or wounded in a cause that must have seemed in every sense so very far away. That’s a higher proportion than we in England suffered. Wisely or not, NZ troops were involved in the Second War, Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia. Sometime I think they must wish history really had passed them by, but nowadays they seem to specialise more in peace keeping and disaster relief than fighting.

Although it’s a welcoming country, NZ must depend very much on
prosperity in the industrial world and that disturbed state over the rest of the planet which encourages westerners to visit. In that and the further development of efficient and longer range aircraft lies the future of this remote country.

Peter Craig
Issue 270
March 2005