

### **To travel is to live, even if it is living in a van**

I woke up in a cold, humid van and looked out my window to see the white-capped mountains and Kowhai trees around me. These had to be the most dramatic-looking mountains to exist, and I couldn't believe I had just spent the night underneath them. As I looked around the campervan to my three friends sleeping, I noticed the card deck we used to play Kings Cup and left-over vodka sauce pasta left out from last night. I wondered if it was too soon to wake them up so we could explore the skyscraping peaks, snowy rivers, and glaciers of Mount Cook. As I stepped outside the van, I laughed to myself at the thought that I am traveling around in a bright purple and green van that had the words "Juicy" in bold on the side.



I was 8,503 miles from home but had never felt less homesick.

I chose to study abroad in New Zealand during my junior year of college. I knew very little about the country before deciding to spend four months there but quickly discovered its incredible views, laid back people, and quaint towns. Growing up in the Midwest, I thought Michiganders were some of the nicest people with so many of the people I knew were family-oriented and religious. Then I realized they could be considered unfriendly in comparison to the

unconditional kindness that Kiwi's show. New Zealand has this small-town charm to it that encourages a culture to respect and appreciate all walks of life.

The biggest city in New Zealand is Auckland. Auckland has a population of about 1.6 million and 200 different ethnic groups. It is one of the most diverse cities in the world, which is interesting because the rest of the major cities in New Zealand are made up of locals. Auckland does not have the same charm that the other towns do, but it is a must-visit place. It is also known as the "City of Sails" and is a hub for international cuisine, music, art, and culture.



Southeast of the major city, I went tramping (aka hiking) with a local Kiwi named Annie in a Kaimai-Mamaku Forest Park. The forest was subtropical and contained well-marked hiking tracks. The plants in this forest and New Zealand as a whole are very ecologically diverse as 85% of all their flowering plants appear nowhere else in the world. I will never forget her reaction to me leaving a carrot on the trail. She explained to me how important it is to Kiwi's not to leave

any traces behind. It was a refreshing perspective due to how different this mentality was to the states. Kiwis have so much respect for their country and the earth and was a consistent theme for my travels around New Zealand thought back to the United States and how careless Americans can be about littering and respecting the earth. It is easy to understand due to how beautiful and rich with life this country is.



When I arrived in Queenstown, I did not believe a place like this could exist. The town sits on the shores of Lake Wakatipu against towering mountains. It is a hub for tourism and is known as the adventure capital of the world. This is very apparent when you walk through the busy streets that are filled with advertisements for skydiving, bungee jumping, hang gliding, whitewater rafting, canyon swinging, and jet boating. This town gives off a spirit of adrenaline and excitement as everyone who visits feels compelled to participate in one of these activities. Many of the people I met were either friendly locals or seasonal workers who flocked to Queenstown for its unique extreme culture. When I visited the popular restaurant Fergburger, probably one of the best burgers I have ever eaten, it was interesting to be able to hear all the

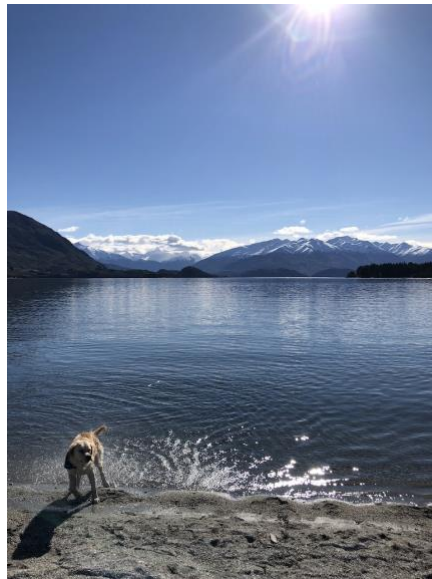
different accents of the workers and how many of them just seemed happy to be there. It is not hard to understand who would love to be in a town surrounded by a crystal-clear lake, dramatic mountains, and hiking trails.



Not far from this adventure capital is the Wanaka, a resort town that is set on the southern end of a lake and surrounded by jagged snowcapped mountains. New Zealand could take an award for having the best mountain and lakeside towns. Unlike Queenstown, Wanaka is quite peaceful and seemed like an ideal vacation home destination for Kiwis. The surrounding lake contains a crooked tree that stands 10 feet from shore as the water glistens around it. I visited, I hiked one of the famous trails in New Zealand: Roy's Peak. Roy's Peak begins with a dirt trail surrounded by purple wildflowers and mountain sheep as background music. The bottom of the trails can

be hot, and many tourists sweat buckets at the bottom but as they reach the top are regretting getting rid of their top layer. The view from the top is endless lakes and surrounding peaks of Mount Aspiring. It is rated difficult as far as trails go but you feel as though you are on the top of the world when you reach the top. Everything surrounding you is so blue and mountainous.

Its beauty is sparkling around you and is an untouched masterpiece of nature.



The earth has been standing still for some time now as people are dealing with racial injustice on top of a global pandemic. The earth seems to be healing but there is one place that has always been untouched and untamed. Before I visited New Zealand for the first time, the only

image that came to mind when thinking of the country was the one that was portrayed in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. The little country is a mystery to most as it doesn't even appear on some global maps. But alas it is the first place I recommend visiting when the world begins to move again.