



MY CHRISTMAS IN PARADISE IN NEW ZEALAND

Sue, our reservations manager's recent active Outdoor Travel holiday in New Zealand



Perfect, sunny weather greeted us when we arrived into Nelson, soon followed by a dinner of perfectly rendered confit duck and venison fillet, with great local wine, which set the scene for a sensational Christmas holiday in New Zealand. My husband Karl & I had run away from home to spend our festive season walking in the Abel Tasman National Park, on a five day guided tour staying at comfortable private lodges.

The lodge bags and detailed packing instructions delivered to our Nelson hotel for pre-packing gave us a taste of the clever logistics that make local kiwi operator, Wilson's, guided walks such a pleasure to do. It was all about what to take, or more importantly, what not to. Being a fully catered affair, valuables, wallets, extra luggage, excess clothing & gadgets were all locked up and left behind, as we headed into the National Park with just a pared-back clothing list, hiking essentials and a credit card for the lodge bar tab. Mobile phones served more for photos than calls. It was a very liberating start to a holiday.

The first morning we and other guests were collected by coach from our hotel and taken to the office in Motueka for a briefing, to meet our guides, handover of daypacks and storage of luggage. Receiving our own mug for billy tea along the way was a nice touch. We then set off to meet the launch at Kaiteriteri for the scenic cruise the length of the Abel Tasman National Park. Plenty of time to eat the first of many tasty packed lunches and learn about the Park from the commentary aboard. On arrival at Totaranui we farewelled our lodge bags (which would be waiting for us at the first lodge) and set off on a comfortable 7km walk through the forest and along the beach. There was a 'wee hill', which is Kiwi guide-speak for something challenging, but otherwise it was pleasant undulating paths, meandering around bays and through quite beautiful wooded landscapes, including impressive stands of palms, ever-present ferns and Rata trees. The day ended with boots off, reef sandals on and a delightful knee deep wade across the estuary to the first of our lodges, Meadowbank Homestead.



Meadowbank Homestead came complete with an amazing Wilson family history and had been thoughtfully re-built to offer comfortable, modern ensuite rooms but still with more than a nod to the past in the interior design. We were treated to not only a briefing on the walking we would be doing but also some remarkable and entertaining stories of the past. We were very lucky to be staying there for two nights which gave us a chance to explore and enjoy lounging on the wide verandah and taking in the beautiful ocean views. The food was sensational and plentiful, certainly suiting the appetite of walkers. Dinners were three courses, showcasing local ingredients and a modern, innovative cuisine. There were always plenty of regional wines and beers to choose from.



Our second day offered lots of optional walks and activities, which our enthusiastic guides were keen for us to do, however there was an overwhelming vote to try out the sea kayaks, so we headed out early to explore the estuary. Time and Tide are a big deal in the Abel Tasman National Park as the tide is measured in metres, so often an early start was necessary. The relaxed yet clear instruction from the guides soon had us all paddling along in an effective fashion and the crystal clear water, peace and tranquillity of the estuary were absolutely sensational. Back to Meadowbank for a relaxing afternoon lounging around or swimming, before a delicious dinner. It was the perfect place to enjoy a low-key Christmas Day.

The third day was the longest and most taxing of the walking days, due to taking the high tide route. The day totalled over 20km of undulating terrain, estuary crossings, beach picnics and the occasional 'wee hill'. There was the option of a water taxi from the beaches back to the lodge, for those who wanted to shorten their walking day. The bird life was prolific and we were fascinated to learn of the breeding programme and reintroduction of the large, forest-dwelling Kaka parrot to the Abel Tasman National Park.

There was much discussion as to the merits of hiking boots versus lightweight, technical, hiking sandals, especially the convenience of not having to switch footwear for water crossings, as well as the inevitable walker's commentary on blister treatments. It was a warm day and while the path was well graded, there were long stretches of shady forest and the scenery was absolutely spectacular all day, we were all very glad to take our boots off and make the last beach crossing of the day, to the scenic, coastal-themed lodge at Torrent Bay.

Torrent Bay Lodge was spectacularly located on the beach, tucked in behind the frontal dune out of the wind. A modern take on a beach house, the front rooms and upstairs balcony offered amazing views of the ever-changing moods of Torrent Bay. From stunning sunrises to backlit sunsets, tidal shifts allowed access to the bay's island, then rolling incoming tides filled the bay and brought the crystal clear waters all the way up to the lodge. Rooms were comfortable and the front lounge area was full of squishy couches and wide picture windows, with more lounges and umbrellas out on the front deck, just begging you to sit with a cool drink and relax.



The Lodge was also a base for sea kayak day-trips and was well set up to cater for all the logistics and paraphernalia associated with paddling. Our party included some dedicated sea-kayakers, who were smug at their easy drifting paddle on the first day while we hiked up hills, only to find themselves dragging their kayaks the full width of the bay's exposed mud-flats at low tide, as the walkers strolled along the beach. The camaraderie of the group was a high point of our holiday, with kayakers and walkers happy to meet up during the day on beaches and keen to share tales of the day's adventures over dinner and drinks at night. The fourth day offered a variety of activities, from serious hiking up to lookout points to leisurely strolls out to the island at low tide. Most of the group opted to try their hand at canoeing up the estuary and then walking in to the pretty, hidden waterfalls and lagoons at Cleopatra's Pool. It was well worth it, with the pool offering crystal clear water surrounded by warm rocks to dry off. The natural waterslide was a hit with the adventurous. After our return for a BBQ lunch, some opted for an afternoon in a comfortable chair with a good book or went for a swim, while others took a wander off down the beach and into the nearby marshland to hand feed some 'tame' eels.

Our last day heralded a high tide and a weather change, still with clear, sunny skies, but a definite pick-up in the wind. This favoured the walkers who had 15km of high tide route to walk and welcomed a cooling breeze, but did mean the sea-kayakers had to be clever to dodge the increasing headwind, with their experienced guide taking them close to sheltered bays and around islands. Either on foot or on the water, the green and gold beauty of the Park was certainly on display. Some of the group opted to skip both and have a relaxing morning at the lodge, before taking a scenic ferry cruise back to Kaiteriteri to meet the group at the end of their day.

Be it walking, kayaking or cruising, the last glorious day in the Abel Tasman National Park was a thoroughly enjoyable day for all. It was a tired and happy bunch who swapped their day packs for suitcases and were dropped back at their hotels in Nelson by day's end. It was a holiday with different choices each day, to be strongly recommended. Certainly a uniquely Kiwi Christmas, to be remembered for many years to come.

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