

Feel the Zeal

Katie McGonagle ticks off
New Zealand's top sights
on an APT escorted tour

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Forget feeling the wind in your hair, this was more like a full-force gale, as we sped across the water at full throttle, zipping through narrow channels, dodging boulders and brambles with surprising ease, then launching into a series of stomach-lurching 360-degree spins. Bracing, to say the least.

It might sound like a rollercoaster ride, but this was altogether more thrilling for the fact that there wasn't a theme

park or a track in sight – just the natural beauty of New Zealand's South Island stretching out in every direction. Sure, the Shotover Jet edges the adrenaline level of your average sightseeing cruise up a few notches, but it's still the rugged canyon rocks, the tree-lined banks just starting to change colour for autumn, and the view of the Remarkables rising in the distance that give this ride its real thrill factor.

It's also the answer to offer any client who thinks an escorted tour must mean spending all their time getting on and off coaches or on sedate sightseeing tours. This thrill-seeking experience is among the Freedom of Choice options – where guests can tailor their tour by picking from a range of included activities – on APT's luxury tours of New Zealand.

Between delving deep into underground caves, ducking

in to tiny hobbit holes, coming face to face with frozen glaciers or trailing between bubbling mud pools and gushing geysers, the agents on APT's latest fam trip Down Under certainly saw the benefits of packing in the sights on an escorted tour – and *Travel Weekly* joined in on the adventure.

▶ SOUTH ISLAND

“Put this in your mouth and chew,” said our guide, ripping →

RIGHT:
Queenstown

FAR RIGHT:
Champagne
Pool, Wai-O-Tapu

BELOW:
Milford Sound

PICTURES: TNZ/JULIAN APSE; CHRIS MCLENNAN; ROB SUISTED



AGENT
OPINION

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Lynne Hammond,
cruise and long-haul
specialist, Marion
Owen Travel, Hull

New Zealand exceeded my expectations, which was down to the knowledgeable drivers and our incredible tour guide. APT has a fantastic reputation – I was ushered through the restaurant for breakfast just because I was wearing my APT name badge. I felt like a VIP. The whole itinerary was outstanding – the TranzAlpine train is a must-do, and the Shotover Jet ride was such a thrill. The tour would appeal to a range of people. They mix the seating on the coach each day, so you get to talk to everyone, which is particularly good for single travellers and helps the group gel from the start.

➔ off tiny pieces of a dark-green leaf he'd just picked fresh from the forest of Mount Aspiring National Park. Gamely, we gave it a go, and within a few seconds, the innocuous-looking leaf had released a chilli-like heat – not unpleasant, but certainly unexpected. “It’s the New Zealand pepper tree,” he explained, used by Maoris as everything from insect repellent to a cure for toothache.

Just minutes before, we'd been taking in panoramic views of the Dart River Valley by jet boat – a gentler journey this time, more scenery and sightseeing than high-speed spins. That still left time for a drive past Lake Wakatipu – a regular contender on lists of the most scenic journeys in the world – and a walk through the nearby national park, where it takes only moments to feel like you're deep in the heart of the forest. And that was just a morning's activities.

Then again, that's New Zealand, where scenery, culture and soft adventure come together in a

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compelling mix, with the added bonus of good food and wine, and comfortable accommodation for clients who don't fancy roughing it.

Even dinner can be an adventure, with everything from a cruise across the lake on coal-fired steamship the *TSS Earnslaw* to dine at Walter Peak High Country Farm, to a trip up on the gondola to the dizzying heights of Skyline Queenstown for a sumptuous buffet with a side of city views and stargazing.

It's the glacier-carved landscapes that are the real star here, though,

with every bend in the road revealing another towering mountain or vast, glassy lake. A cross-island journey on the TranzAlpine train from Christchurch to Greymouth shows the scenery off at its best, allowing passengers to gaze at misty mountains and into deep-cut gorges. Though a cruise through the serene fiords of Milford and Doubtful Sounds – a feature of almost every escorted tour – must be a close contender for the title of the country's most beautiful view.

▶ NORTH ISLAND

For such a small nation, the terrain varies hugely from South to North, with the latter shaped by its volcanic activity. Nowhere is that more visible than at Wai-O-Tapu – which means ‘sacred waters’ in Maori – near Rotorua. It's a centre of geothermal activity and a favourite of photographers for its brightly-coloured, sulphur-rich pools, the most striking of which is the Champagne Pool, a steaming hot spring that bubbles constantly ➔



➔ with carbon dioxide, and is rich with minerals – including millions of dollars' worth of gold, no less. Look out, too, for the emerald-green Devil's Bath, the ever-bubbling Inferno Crater – the sound of which doubled as Mordor's Mount Doom in *The Lord of The Rings* films – and the other-worldly valley filled with fumaroles venting steam into the air.

If that leaves visitors open-mouthed at the mysteries of Mother Nature, descending deep into the Waitomo Caves (home of the famous glow worms) will complete the picture. It's one of New Zealand's oldest tourist attractions, drawing travellers for 125 years and, like Wai-o-Tapu, owned and run by the Maori people of the area.

The first level down is impressive enough – all smooth limestone walls, dwarf-like stalagmites rising from the ground and stalactites hanging from the ceiling like grotesque chandeliers. When our guide stopped at the cave's highest point, the 13-metre-tall cathedral, to sing an echoing version of Maori song *Pokarekare Ana*, it was enough to send chills up the spine.

Yet the best was still to come in the water-filled depths of the cave. Filing onto boats in complete silence (any noise can agitate the gnat-like creatures and force them to expend unnecessary energy), we looked up to see the glow worms shining overhead like a ceiling of stars. The clusters of



PICTURES: TOURISM NEW ZEALAND/SHAUN JEFFERS; SARA ORME



Filing onto boats in complete silence, we looked up to see the glow worms shining overhead like a ceiling of stars

tiny white pinpricks of light – some strong enough to be reflected in the water around us, others gradually dimming into the darkness – are yet

another reminder that New Zealand's natural assets are still its biggest selling point.

The man-made attractions have their own appeal; the touristy but brilliantly-executed Hobbiton movie set, for example, draws hundreds of visitors each day, but manages to stay charming rather than cheesy, entertaining with behind-the-scenes stories of filming and a chance to step inside one of the specially-built hobbit holes. Yet it's the epic scale of these tiny islands that really sticks in the memory, proving a trip here need not be adrenaline-filled to feel like an adventure.

Getting there: Singapore Airlines has four daily flights from Heathrow to Singapore and seven services a week from Singapore to Auckland. Economy fares start at £1,015 from London to Auckland, for bookings by March 31. singaporeair.com

Book it: APT's 26-day New Zealand Splendour tour travels from Christchurch to Auckland (or vice versa), including stops at Lake Tekapo, Dunedin, Milford Sound, Queenstown, Franz Josef Glacier, Wellington, Napier, Rotorua and the Bay of Islands. Prices start at £6,795 per person based on a May 2 departure, and includes flights, accommodation, transfers and 37 meals. Highlight experiences include a stay at Te Waonui Forest Retreat, a journey on the TranzAlpine train, a wine-paired dinner, Maori hangi feast and a catamaran cruise to Cape Brett. aptouring.co.uk



ASK THE EXPERT



Angela Waite, head of sales and commercial, APT

For a small country, New Zealand certainly packs in lots to see, do and experience. Its distance from the UK often warrants it 'once-in-a-lifetime' status, so travellers inevitably want to cover as many sights as possible. To help clients get the most out of their trip, make sure you're clear on the important things they want to experience. They may not come to you with the intention of booking an escorted tour, but if they want a great-value, hassle-free holiday that combines culture, nature, the great outdoors and good food and wine, with the chance to travel with like-minded people, then it's going to have high appeal.



ABOVE: Waitomo Caves
LEFT: Hobbiton