

We arrived on Sunday the 22nd at app. 7:15 AM. A nice Maori family took pity on us, standing there in the "arrivals" area at the airport looking very lost, and let us borrow their phone to call Pam and Roger Murray to come get us. Roger was an engineer, now does "maritime maintenance"--mostly mechanical and electrical. He has a Farr 10 meter sailboat, and will "give us a call" about a day on the water. (Bruce Farr is a famous NZ designer -- winning designs for America's Cup, Round the World, and others). Pam does maid service for the Parsonages, and will for us. We're worried about that: the apt. is frighteningly neat, even the cans in the cupboard lined up.

The apartment is on the 27th floor, the NE corner overlooking the harbor. It's on Albert St., one block over from Queen St., which is the central street of Auckland. It's "modern" in design and furnishing, nothing but the best -- digital TV and home theatre sound system, internet connection, top-of-the-line kitchen gear, and nice furniture. There are three bedrooms, one of which is full of the Parsonage's goodies and locked (although they left some things in the closets, including Geoff's "captain's gear" -- uniform and jackets from the Kiwi Cup challenge and his one-time charter boat business). The MBR, living room, and kitchen with eat-in area are on three sides of a 2 m. x 3 m. balcony, with doors opening from each onto the balcony. All bedrooms have windows, as does the kitchen and the living room looks out through the balcony. Two nice bathrooms, a dining room, and a small hall/entry (laundry off) complete the inventory.

We wandered around a bit Sunday afternoon and again this morning (Monday, our first full, relatively non-jet-lagged day). Within about three blocks are several shopping areas (small malls), and at least two indoor "food alleys" with 10-15 primarily Asian shops: Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Indian, Indonesian, Korean and so on. Great places for good/cheap meals. In addition to these concentrated areas, there are literally dozens of restaurants, pubs, coffee shops, many of them on the waterfront with nice views of various activities. If we starve to death here, or get bored with the food, it will be because we simply run out of money or imagination.

Yesterday we explored the apartment and took naps and showers, then got the BMW 5-series (4 doors enclosing luxury and zoom-zoom) out of the car park and drove out to a grocery store. Lots of dairy, meat, fish, good stuff -- Carolyn wants to go back and do it again. Then home again (didn't kill anybody or dent anything, and even parallel parked on the left!) and crashed (we did, not the car).

Today we were up early, but messed around nicely and soon went shopping for "stuff:" an adapter for our computer, toilet paper, a foam pad for Carolyn (the bed is hard!), and other stuff. Mission accomplished at the "mall" just down the street, we returned and sorted that out, then sallied forth for exploration. We spent much of the afternoon watching the America's Cup race in which Oracle eliminated One World (One World led for three legs, then blew it by going to the wrong side of the course and failing to cover). We can see the course from the apartment balcony, and can see the boats racing -- but you can see a lot more on the TV, especially in one of the several places where they have huge screens and lots of software. So we went down on the America's Cup docks to the Telecom shed (three blocks -- can see it from the balcony) and watched Oracle win. Then we strolled a couple of

blocks more to look at the super yachts (120-180 feet of congealed wealth, with slaves polishing the brightwork) and watch both Oracle and One World towed in to their "houses" and put to bed. The yachts in the dock all blew their air horns -- quite a nice reception.

I'm sitting now on the balcony, drinking a little NZ chardonnay and nibbling on some nuts. Carolyn is puttering in the kitchen and reading the paper. Before me is Auckland harbor and part of Hauraki Gulf, under a sunny sky with about 12 knots of breeze. The ferry dock is directly in front of and below us. To the left is the Viaduct harbor, where the America's Cup boats and various super yachts are housed. Around the docks are many nice cafes and pubs, at one of which we had a beer after watching One World and Oracle brought in to dock. To the right, starting a block over and going on for perhaps a mile, are the working docks. We are now watching four container ships load or unload. Directly across a kilometer-wide channel is a peninsula, with houses, a small naval dock, etc. The harbor is perhaps two kilos across, at the wide spots, and beyond it is Huaraki Gulf and the islands. Rangitoto Island is closest -- an old volcano only a few hundred feet high, all green, a nature preserve. The America's Cup course is to the north and west of Rangitoto, easily visible with our binoculars. Several other islands are nearby, including a couple that are bird preserves and others that are suburban areas. Falling off the far edge of the earth is a range of low but impressively mountain-like hills (1,000 meters or so high) on the Coromandel Peninsula, and another range on the Great Barrier Island in the hazy distance.

The harbor is full of boats of all kinds. Team New Zealand's two boats were just towed by, back from training. A three-masted square-rigger just sailed into the Maritime Museum dock, two blocks over. Larry Ellison of Oracle tootled by in "Katana," his 200-foot floating palace. He'll probably be partying tonight: "Oracle" now goes against "Alinghi" (Swiss, but with a renegade NZ skipper, former Cup winner for NZ) next month in the Louis Vuitton Cup, and the winner of that goes against the Kiwi's for custody of that ugly chunk of sterling called the America's Cup.

So far, so good. Once Carolyn takes some pictures we'll send them on. We find the local Unitarians are doing a candlelight Christmas Eve (it is still light here at 9 PM, but they're starting then anyway) so we're going to that. For Christmas Day (which is, remember, your Christmas Eve) we'll probably pack a lunch and go for a drive in the country. We'll think of you, and wish you well and a Merry Christmas. Then we'll laugh, and wonder what we're doing here?

Winston Churchill, who said so many wonderful things, once observed that the US and Great Britain are "two countries divided by a common language." Part of the fun of travel is seeing the cultural differences. While perched on other branches of the English tree we can almost forget that they are different from the American branch, but then one sees the strangely different colorations of life. There are some oddities of language that we've all heard, such as the term "bisquit" used by speakers of the King's English to mean what Americans call a "cookie." And we all know that many Commonwealth countries, like the UK, drive on the "wrong" side of the road. "Wrong side driving" really is a problem, by the way. Shortly before we left Tampa a tourist from England hopped in a rental car there and took off up the Skyway Bridge -- driving on the left, as all good Englishmen do. If

I remember correctly, three people died in the crash. Earlier this week we read in the biggest NZ paper that a judge ruling on a serious auto injury case opined that the Government should not let tourists drive in NZ: too many "wrong side" crashes kill and injure Kiwis. When I nearly pulled out in front of some cars this morning (Carolyn did her job: screamed "stop") I thought of that. The problem will continue.

But it's the less serious items that are fun. In our B&B stay this past couple of days we had fun with the hostess debating The Great Toast Question: shall toast be buttered and stacked tightly together to keep it warm, American style, or shall it be carefully racked dry and separated to keep it crisp, English/Kiwi style? Commonplace phrases such as the American use of "issues," as in "I have issues with caffeine" are not heard here, but in NZ many things are "worth a:" a movie is "worth a look," a museum or a restaurant is "worth a visit." It's not that such words/phrases aren't used in both countries, but how they are used, and how often, that catches one's attention. And for an American, surely one of the most unusual-and attractive-things one sees here is the constant politeness. A notice on a beach says that if one does certain not-nice things, "police attention may be invited." As in England, a man arrested with a bloody axe amidst the dismembered bodies of his family is said to be "assisting the police with their inquiries." I don't remember hearing Sipowicz use that phrase on "NYPD Blue."

And of course there is sports, which Kiwis take at least as seriously as Americans. For Christmas Day we did what most Kiwis do: we took a blanket, an "Esky" (Eskimo cooler, or ice chest), some beer and other drinks, some snacks, and went to the beach. There we saw Kiwis of all descriptions (various kinds of paheke--white guys--and Maori, plus quite a few Asians of various national origins) playing games with balls of all shapes and style: big and little spheres (soccer, softball, volleyball, tennis), prolate spheroids (i.e., rugby or "football" shape), and lots of colors. The TV has several channels of rugby (NZ's "All Blacks" are a national treasure), soccer, cricket and even occasionally bowls (lawn bowling). There are a lot of golf courses but they don't show up much on TV. It's the team competitions. They get very excited over cricket tests (games), and I'm getting scared: I think I'm beginning to understand this very odd game. Would you think a national hero might play a position called "silly mid-off?"

We've been enjoying the Kiwis, and their beautiful country. This is what California would like to be. No matter where you are the coast is less than 100 km away, and coastal scenery varies greatly. This past week we were some 150 km. north of Auckland in a bay which looked a lot like something from Bora Bora or Fiji. Further south looked like Pensacola beach. In between, Oregon beaches. Inland areas vary from rolling hills and meadows to steep ridges and folds, all well-treed. Hobbits should love it, and apparently do. Rivers, lakes, ocean inlets complicate the geography and make travel scenic. Also scary at times: Kiwi roads analogous to US Interstates (that is, "main high speed roads") are usually one lane each way with narrow shoulders and no obvious right of way along the sides, very twisty in mountain areas, and with access not especially controlled. Some still go right through towns, with roundabouts and traffic lights. It makes for very interesting driving, especially since Kiwis seem to think that anything less than the speed limit is an insult. Though few exceed it, they

get right on it. I'm glad I'm driving a BMW, and even then Carolyn gets rather white knuckled at times. Cameron won't like these roads -- he's used to that flat, fairly straight Florida boredom. (By the way - remember this is all done on the WRONG SIDE!)

And the trees! Several English or North American varieties -- oaks, pines, cedars, sycamore-- were introduced at various times. There is even a number of large sequoia, esp. on the South Island. But the native trees are delightful. The king, a giant like the redwood in the US, and like the redwood sadly depleted, is the kauri. It grows (or grew) to heights of 150 feet or so, but is most notable for great girth and its habit of shedding branches as it grows so that there may be 50 feet or more of absolutely straight and clear trunk that -- in the old growth giants -- might be 20 feet or more thick. Kauri makes beautiful furniture and great building material, which is why there's so little left. But they also have other beautiful furniture-grade trees, and the older furniture is likely to be the prettiest. Many of the trees have flowers. Right now the pokuhutawa (Maori names are used even more than Indian names in the US) is in flower: roughly the size and shape of a live oak, covered with feathery thistle-like flowers a dark crimson in color.

Flowers and vegetation generally grow well. The spider lily and canna lily seem to be "weeds" here. Hibiscus and roses are everywhere. And ferns -- is a fern that is 20 feet high and 15 feet across the fronds, with "fiddleheads" the size of a saucer, a "tree" or just a fern? There are hundreds of varieties of fern, including the "silver fern" that is the Kiwi national emblem -- look at the side of the Kiwi boat in the America's Cup to see it displayed.

The delightful part of all this is that you can wander the forests and fields without worry: there are few insects to bother you (we've yet to see a screened window), only one rare and shy poisonous spider (an import from Australia, where everything tries to kill you), and no snakes or animals big enough to hassle you. Assuming, that is, that you avoid the farmer's bull or guard dogs.

And the Kiwis as people have been delightful. Everyone has been very pleasant, helpful when needed, but not bothersome. On a rugby field your life and limb might be at risk; on the street you couldn't ask for nicer folk. I think of that famous Australian "cult" movie starring Mel Gibson, titled "Mad Max." If it were made in New Zealand it would have to be called something like "Annoyed James."

So we go along. Over New Year's we drove north about 150 km. to a small town called Waipu, where some 900 Scots led by a mad preacher settled 150 years ago. The term "mad," in the sense of one who believes himself blessed by god with a mission, was used by one of his descendents who sat next to us at a ceilidh -- pron. "kay-lee," a Scots music festival. (Why do people put some of these "God told me" guys in the asylum and make others founders of great religions?) They were celebrating this occasion with a Highland festival: men walking around in public in skirts, strangling cats (or was that a bagpipe?), and engaging in sports that, as Carolyn said, made contests out of real life farming activity: tossing the sheaf (with a hay fork over a bar, as onto a high pile); "field clearing" sports like shot put with a stone, stone throw (with a handle/chain), tossing the caber (flip something like a small tree for distance), and a "farmer's walk" in which one moves the max. weight in stones over a given distance in a

given time. No bashing with old Scots claymores (the great broad swords) or axes -- wouldn't be polite. But everyone had a fine time at the events, eating Celtic sausage, drinking beer and other useful drinks, watching the dancers and hearing the cats die painful deaths. Carolyn thinks she has Scots ancestors. No proof yet, only family legend, but she's talking about doing some genealogical research now that she's seen all those guys in skirts.

Now we're back in Auckland, still alive and undented despite my best efforts. It happened that the B&B hostess was also a masseuse, so we both had a good rubdown and are ready to face the challenges of our luxury condo and all these good restaurants and bars. Be cheered by the knowledge that these two good Americans are here defending the honor of the country, despite the efforts of George II, who shall be known to history as "George the Clueless." We'll keep you informed.

Jack and Carolyn Salmon