

Pottertons New Zealand and Adventure

by Rob & Jackie Potterton,
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Whilst most nursery folk were breathing a big sigh of relief, after reaching the end of the season last Autumn, Jackie and I were boarding a plane at Manchester airport, on a flight to the other side of the world, to visit New Zealand.

Eighteen months earlier, I had been contacted by Steve Newall, on behalf of the New Zealand Alpine Garden Society to visit and present several lectures, to groups in their society and to garden groups on the South Island. I had previously visited New Zealand 35 years ago, before joining the family nursery business and thoroughly enjoyed this stunning country; a chance to revisit was an easy decision although it would take a great deal of preparation to organise business and family, to get the agreement of Lisa & Heather who work with us to run the nursery whilst we were away and for our teenage children to survive. And hopefully without too many wild parties!!!

Our adventure started on Sunday 20th October, leaving Manchester Airport for Dubai, Sydney and finally arriving in Christchurch on the South Island of NZ, mid-afternoon on Tuesday 22nd, after 29 hours of flying.

We had a week to recover from jet lag and tiredness from being awake for 49 hours. We booked a nearby hotel for two nights and on the third day travelled in a hire vehicle to the resort of Hanmer Springs to acclimatise further and to get out into the mountains to see our first NZ alpins. Driving in NZ is much the same as UK, they drive on the same side of the road as us and are generally considerate, careful drivers. The big difference that you notice immediately is a lack of traffic.

The South Island is mostly a mountainous area of spectacular scenery with more than 100 mountain peaks over 8000 feet. There are relatively few alpine plants in NZ, they are all endemic and it was an absolute joy on our first full day driving along a dusty, pot holed track to finally see them in their native habitats. On our first outing we were overjoyed to find Helichrysum, Raoulia, Hebe and Celmisia. Following a 20 mile drive, botanising along the

way, we abandoned the trip when reaching the 5000ft / 1500m pass on Gertrude Saddle due to the extreme cold and gale force wind. The following day we returned to the same spot, in better weather, to walk up the extensive scree to rocky outcrops and find the beautiful cushions of Raoulia eximea. On the highest, most exposed outcrops the wind suddenly appeared again and we cowered behind the rocks for shelter, at the same time marvelling at the ability of these plants to thrive in such conditions. I remember sitting there and laughing in the face of the howling gale, such was the joy of the moment



We spent another 4 days at Hanmer. One day travelling 350 miles on a circular route, north towards Murchison then north west to Blenheim, south down the coast and then back inland. The roads continued to be deserted, with many sights to see, native forests, spectacular waterfalls and rivers and in the Wairau Valley on Highway 63, we drove past vineyards continuously for 20 miles. In the forests we walked trails and listened to the native birds, the Tui is a most tuneful example, once heard never forgotten. After our time in Hanmer we sadly left our holiday home, back to Christchurch and then flew down to Dunedin, where Steve met us at the airport and took us to his home, an hour further south in Balclutha on Wednesday 30th October. Here Steve handed us the keys to his Subaru, loaded us down with a projector, talks equipment and final details of our itinerary.

And so, two hours later we were off, heading to the first talk, an evening appointment in Waikouaiti, 15 miles north of Dunedin. When we arrived in good time at our hosts, our jaws dropped, a stunning house beside a large lake and an amazing garden, that was thoroughly explored for two hours the following morning. Liz treated us to a beautiful Japanese meal before the talk. The evening went well, must admit I was feeling slightly nervous and an audience of 35 enjoyed the talk. We sat late into the evening chatting away with a mixture of relief and tiredness.

The tone was set. Over the next 4 weeks we travelled throughout the South Island of NZ, visiting 10 groups, giving 11 talks and travelling over 3,500 miles. To get to one venue, Nelson, in the north of the South Island we had to take four flights on the return trip. We felt quite accomplished travellers by the end. In the second week, the Alexandra gardening group organised a special evening, I presented two talks with a dinner served to the audience of 95 in between and with one lady flying from Auckland in the North Island for the event. Our hosts for each talk were always most generous with their hospitality and time, Steve had briefed them well and invariably a can of cold Stella was waiting for me upon arrival.

At the end of our talking engagements we extended our holiday in NZ by another 4 weeks, hiring a campervan to tour around another 2000 miles of this beautiful country, revisiting some areas we never had time to explore whilst presenting the talks. A country we would recommend for all travellers to visit. There were so many highlights, here are just a few; walking along the Hooker Valley Trail near Mount Cook and finding many stunning plants of

Ranunculus lyallii, in Fiordland finding our first Celmisia verbascifolia flowering at the start of the Gertrude Valley Trail, seeing Ranunculus crithmifolius on a mountain scree, a plant I fell in love with 30 years ago, and visiting beautiful Curio Bay to watch dolphins play in the surf.

We encountered nothing but friendly, hospitable people who were keen to listen to us and equally keen to share with us their gardens and plant knowledge. Many new friends were made. These experiences, plants seen, people encountered, mountain scenery, coastlines, forests, walks and so much more will be presented in a talk later this year.

Thank you, New Zealand.



Mount Cook



Curio Bay