

CITY INSIDER HOBBIT-FREE AUCKLAND

BY PETER NOWAK
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Most travellers to New Zealand make a beeline right from the airport to *Lord of the Rings* landscapes. But it's a shame to give the country's cities a pass. Auckland — New Zealand's biggest city and its international hub — is an exploding metropolis well worth a few days' visit.

With a flood of immigration over the past few decades, first from the Pacific Islands and now from Asia, Auckland has become a multicultural hot spot on par with London or Toronto. The city hosts a diverse range of restaurants, cultural and arts events.

It's also known as the City of Sails, not a surprising moniker considering its position sandwiched between two harbours. And Aucklanders are suitably mad about boats, especially since New Zealand's 1995 America's Cup victory.

It was in preparation for the defence of that cup in 1999, in fact, that the city learned how to party. Along with the development of the Viaduct Harbour, an enclave of bars and restaurants sprung up that are now hopping all night long on weekends.

What's coming up

About 25 per cent of Auckland's 1.2 million residents are either Maori (native New Zealanders) or from other Pacific Islands. That makes Auckland the world's largest Polynesian city — and is a perfect excuse to host one of the largest parties in honour of the Pacific Islands. The annual **Pasifika Festival** (www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/whatson/events/pasifika) kicks off with an opening concert March 10.

The next day, Western Springs park and stadium are transformed into eight villages with art, food and crafts in honour of participating islands — Samoa, Tonga and Fiji among them. The festival is also a great opportunity to take in some of New Zealand's burgeoning hip hop scene. Previous performances have included rappers such as Scribe, Savage and The Deceptikonz.

Waiheke Island, a 30-minute ferry ride into Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, is known for two things: wine



BRENDON O'HAGAN/REUTERS

Aucklanders are suitably mad about boats — especially since New Zealand's 1995 America's Cup victory.

and jazz. The island is home to a small community of vintners and artists and every Easter weekend it hosts the **Waiheke Jazz Festival** (www.waihekejazz.co.nz). About 30,000 aficionados are expected this year for acts including Australian Dan Barnett and his Big Band, and Orange Kellin's New Orleans Blues Serenaders.

Diversions

If you're absolutely itching for scenery, the best option is to take a 20-minute ferry ride over to **Rangitoto Island** (www.rangitoto.org). The location of Auckland's newest volcano, which last erupted about 600 years ago, the reserve offers unspoiled access to large patches of black volcanic rock. For hardy types, hiking trails also include an hour-and-a-half path to the summit.

There probably isn't a better collection of Maori and Pacific Islands cultural relics than that found at

the **Auckland Museum** (64 9 306 7067; www.aucklandmuseum.com). Sitting on top of a hill in Auckland Domain park, the giant neo-classical building houses a huge assortment of artifacts ranging from clothing to weapons to canoes.

There is also an entire floor devoted to the country's geology, with one particularly unnerving exhibit recreating what a present-day volcanic eruption in Auckland might feel like. If wildlife is your thing, **Kelly Tarlton's Antarctic Encounter and Underwater World** (23 Tamaki Dr.; 64 9 528 0603; www.kellytarltons.co.nz) is the place.

Where else can you ride in a Snow Cat and look at penguins, then walk through a glass tunnel surrounded by sharks and stingrays? A free shuttle runs regularly from the city centre.

Where to stay

Jutting out from the end of Princes

Wharf into the harbour, **The Hilton** (147 Quay St.; 64 9 978 2000; www.hilton.com) is Auckland's most upscale stay. The rooms are huge and well furnished, and most have large balconies with killer views. Doubles start at \$235.

A step down from the Hilton — in price, if not opulence — is the **Sky City Hotel** (64 9 363 6000; www.skycity.co.nz). On the corner of Victoria and Federal streets, it's right next to the Sky Tower, New Zealand's version of the CN Tower and the southern hemisphere's tallest building. To keep you entertained, there are also 10 restaurants and bars and two 24-hour casinos nearby. Doubles start at \$120.

Given that New Zealand and Australia pioneered the concept, there's no shame in staying at a hostel if you're on a budget in Auckland. In fact, some hostels here are better than many North American hotels. **The Fat Camel** (38 Fort St.; 64 (9) 307 0181; [\[mel.co.nz\]\(http://mel.co.nz\)\) is one of the city's newer places, with doubles starting around \\$40.](http://www.fatca-</p>
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Where to eat

Since New Zealand exports so much of its good lamb, a good rump can be hard to come by in Auckland. That makes the roasted lamb with gnocchi, sauce provençal and black olive tapenade at **The Grove** (Saint Patrick Square; 64 9 368 4129; thegroverestaurant.co.nz) all the more delicious. Just reserve ahead: this Bon Appetit-approved restaurant is usually busy.

Mai Thai (Albert and Victoria Streets; 64 9 366 6258; www.maithai.co.nz) is also a perennial favourite. The award-winning restaurant serves up delicious Thai favourites from roast duck with curry to king prawns with garlic. And don't forget to try some of their inventive cocktails either — the Bangkok Slammer (a mix of rum, Galliano, orange, pineapple and lime juice) packs a pleasant punch.

As for local cuisine, no trip to New Zealand is complete without sampling the country's famous meat-filled pies. **Ponsonby Pies** (288 Ponsonby Rd.; 64 9 361 3685) is the undisputed king, with more than 30 different types at around \$2.30 each.

After dark

A good number of bars and clubs — particularly around the waterfront Viaduct Harbour — keep the young and good-looking swinging until the sun comes up. Pubs such as **Fox's Alehouse** (85 Customs St. W.; 64 9 358 2767) and **Danny Doolan's** (204 Quay St.; 64 9 358 2554) host live bands, while clubs such as **Provedor** (201 Quay St.; 64 9 377 1114) and **Float** (Shed 19, Princes Wharf; 64 9 307 1344) bounce all night to DJ-spun tunes.

Ponsonby Road is also a hub for bars and clubs, although the venues here are somewhat more mature and sedate. **The Whiskey** (210 Ponsonby Rd.; 64 9 361 2666) is dark and cozy, with a good cocktail selection. Just down the street Irish pub **Pog Mahones** (108 Ponsonby Rd.; 64 9 360 4500) features live music and televised rugby.

Peter Nowak has been living in Auckland for the past year.

To read and share tips on touring Auckland, visit the City Insider discussion board on Travel's website at globeandmail.com



LONELY PLANET BLUE LIST

It's a good thing the introduction to this compilation of the 618 best things to do in the world stresses the subjectivity of the picks. How else to explain head-scratchers like placing Death Valley ahead of Antarctica and Nunavut in a list of the "most remote places on earth?" Sure, it's hot and rugged. But Death Valley is two hours from Los Angeles on a paved highway and has a golf resort with a swimming pool. As for Canada, the Rockies, Montreal and the Cabot Trail are among the few places that make Lonely Planet's top lists.

Lonely Planet Blue List: Raincoast, \$24.95.

— Laszlo Buhasz

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CARIBBEAN (from Galveston)	7	\$749 ^{AD}
CARIBBEAN (from Florida)	7	\$749 ^{AD}
CHINA	12	\$1869 ^{AD}
EUROPE (Northern or Western)	10	\$1988 ^{AD}
HAWAII	15	\$2369 ^{AD}
MEDITERRANEAN	12	\$2488 ^{AD}
MEXICAN RIVIERA	7	\$749 ^{AD}
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