

Have You Been to a Land Down-Undah?



A guide to Camper Vanning through New Zealand

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When it comes to travel destinations, behind North America and Europe, Canadians most enjoy the islands of the Kiwi bird as an exotic destination. The comfortable fellow commonwealth nation of New Zealand is particularly enticing as English is the dominant language, and the small population and island nature make for a low key, slower pace of life experience. However, the best reason for going to New Zealand is to witness its majestic landscapes.

As New Zealand becomes more and more popular with travelers, the motorhome industry has also grown to give the adventurer a better quality experience exploring this great country.

How to pick the proper Camper Van

There are an exhausting number of companies in the country eager to offer you the convenience of a vehicle with sleeping accommodations. There is a vehicle available for any budget or convenience; from rusty old Toyota Vans with nothing more than a plywood bed in the back, to full luxury-catered motorhomes equipped with everything one could ask for. Camper vans are particularly useful, as New Zealand roads are narrow and there are few passing areas. So something with better performance than a house on wheels is ideal.

As in Canada, there are good and bad companies to deal with, so it's important to do some research to ensure your trip doesn't turn into a nightmare. The most useful tool I found in my planning was rankers.co.nz. This website allows customers to rank companies and give a full account of their experiences. On the top of the camper van category was Wilderness Motorhomes (wilderness.co.nz), a company with a 98 percent approval rating, which offered the ideal camper van.

Wilderness' BaseJumper 2 was the vehicle that ticked off everything we were looking for. It had a queen-sized bed, fridge, stove/oven, shower/toilet, and heater. It was diesel-powered, and a compact design based off the Fiat Ducato van. It was one of the most luxuriously appointed vans available, and at \$73 a day, represented the absolute best bang-for-buck option. The decision was easy. Dealing with Wilderness was also a pleasure. We were picked up from the airport from John Managh, the company founder, treated like royalty and given a quick informational tour of our temporary home. Each camper also

comes with a map guide of the entire country showing locations of all dump stations, camp and recreation sites, attractions and amenities, a particularly valuable tool that was utilized more than once.

When to go

This is a rather important question you must ask yourself, that comes with several consequences. December, January and February are New Zealand's summer months. As a result, peak season charges are in effect, and tourists flood the country making reservations and camping sites much harder to procure. We took our trip in May, which is fall in NZ. I found this to be the ideal month to travel the country, as peak season pricing is not in effect, camping is easy to come by, you're not battling hordes of other tourists, and the country's weather is still quite pleasant, as NZ winters are similar to those of Vancouver, with mild temperatures. And when it did get cold, the diesel heater made our BaseJumper 2 a comfortable sanctuary.

Camper van amenities

New Zealand is ideally set up for Camper Vanners, and mimics Canadian standards. The country has a good infrastructure set





up to aid Camper Vanners. Dump stations, campsites, recreation areas and even in-town parking areas are prevalent throughout the country and are well-signed. Dump stations are easily found and permit the dumping of both grey and black water. Propane canisters can be found at just about any service station; many, however, like Shell, only have swap services, and recharging was usually found at Mobil or BP stations.

Where to set camp

There are two kinds of camping available to you. Free camping consists of settling down for the night in a clearing, picnic area or even a pullout, provided there aren't any "No Camping" signage. Other than three nights spent at dedicated campgrounds, the majority of our nightly stays consisted of picnic and pullout areas. Your other camping choice is using dedicated campgrounds. These are spread all over the country and provide users with water and power hook-ups, and usually offer showers and lounges. Of course, there is a fee involved ranging from \$25 and up. Your choice of campsite will alter your travel habits. If free camping, you will want to aim for rural areas away from town centres to ensure an ideal setting with available space away from annoyances. Those using campgrounds will want to aim for urban centres as camps are situated close to attractions.

Where to go

It has to be said, there is no better place than the country of New Zealand for pinning a map up on a wall and throwing a dart to determine a destination. The short travel distances coupled with the sheer number of attractions, adventures and surprises to be explored, means no day is a wasted day. While our route had a few prior researched destinations placed in, some of the trip's best finds were totally by accident.

Upon picking up our BaseJumper at Auckland International, we immediately took in Rally New Zealand over the weekend, which included stages as far north as Whagerei, and as far south as Raglan. A must for any car guy, spectating the rally also is a great opportunity to see lots of spectacular rural countryside. Some Maori culture can be both witnessed and ingested in the stinky thermal town of Rotorua. Hike in the shadow of Mount Doom, aka Mount Ngauruhoe, one of three volcanoes near Lake Taupo featured in the Lord of the Rings. Explore one of many wine regions south in Hawke's Bay. Get an eye full of national history and museums in the capital city of Wellington.

After a choppy and expensive ferry ride to the South Island, check out two more wine regions in Marlborough and central Otago. Watch an abundance of sea life and sample a gourmet-cooked crayfish meal on the roadside in secluded Kaikura. Experience the great nightlife culture of Christchurch, with alleys filled with unique beer houses, pubs and nightclubs. Down the coast, see the unique Moaraki Boulders, massive sphere-shaped boulders lay on a sandy beach. A little farther south is a Yellow Eyed Penguin preserve complete with a beach full of grumpy sea lions.

Crossing to the west side of the island is the beautiful Milford Sound (see June issue of RPM for Milford's great road.) Queenstown was a must, New Zealand's equivalent to Whistler. The Gates of Haas, a rocky water feature, precludes the sand fly-infested beaches of Haas, followed by the Fox and Franz Joseph glaciers. Back to the top of the South Island, be sure to explore Abel Tasman Park.

Experiencing New Zealand proved to be everything we had hoped it would be. Everything every travel writer says about the country was true, and thanks to Wilderness Motorhomes and our little BaseJumper, we were better equipped to see it all, while both saving money and living in relative luxury. If your travels one day take you to the land of the long white clouds, be sure to take advantage of what a Camper Van can do to make your trip easier, cheaper and one to remember. 📷