

Road trip

WOMEN'S EDITION

Vanguard of love

Do campervans and romance mix? **Fleur Bainger** finds out on her New Zealand honeymoon.

I'm decked out in ugg boots, long johns and a beanie, with a thick woollen cardi wrapped around me. It's not the sort of get-up I'd normally sport in public, but I've rationalised it: I'm only a few steps from home.

My brand new husband and I have made a huge campervan our abode-on-wheels for a 10-day, road tripping honeymoon. Sure, sipping martinis in a Tahitian bungalow while overlooking azure waters sounds nice but we've been lured by the promise of alpine rainforest, rare penguin colonies and glacier-cut mountains: New Zealand.

Opting for the romance of the South Island, we're tracing its winding roads so as not to miss an inch of glorious scenery. It's colder than expected, resulting in my questionable fashion choices, but the bitumen is smooth, the signs clear and an hour-long lesson on the van at the depot has given us a misguided sense of confidence.

I'm a campervan virgin and my husband's never been in one this fancy. So it's only after a few nights of failing to ignite the hot water system (cold showers) and discovering the TV won't work on the van's batteries (we relocate to a powered site), that the spouse and I have found our groove.

We've woken up just south of Queenstown, on the pebbly banks of motionless Lake Wakatipu. Its 84km-long waters reflect The Remarkables range as moody clouds hover around the craggy peaks. Our honeymoon suite views are courtesy of a Kiwi concept we've embraced called "freedom camping". Charming, parts of NZ encourage visitors to park their self-contained units somewhere picturesque, free, providing they leave without a trace. Locations are harder to find than you'd expect and signs can be confusing (our bay has an image of a tent with a cross through it but locals say that just means no tented camping). Nonetheless, our five-star location suggests it's something worth persevering.

The chug and puff of a vintage steam train is what's coaxed me out of my warm, curtain-drawn cocoon. The Kingston Flyer, which has been rolling along the rails since 1878, is pulling in to the station just metres away. A camera-equipped crowd has gathered and faced with a smoke-spewing black locomotive, no one notices my garb.

Donning proper shoes, my love and I pull out towards our bucket-list: Milford Sound. As the



kilometres peel away and the inclines get progressively steeper, I expect the campervan to groan but it rumbles away happily as maps and brochures slide to the back. Fortunately, a rather vocal GPS keeps at bay any lovers' tiffs over directions. It's paired with the vehicle's tourist radio unit, which sings out helpful suggestions between easy-listening tunes.

The reversing camera, used post-roadside picnic, is also a godsend, not to mention the fridge that chills our Marlborough sauv blanc. Perhaps campervanning and marital bliss can mix.

Arriving in Fiordland National Park, the drive through Homer Tunnel is a fitting prelude to the World Heritage site beyond. The speed limit is set to 30km/h as we trundle through what feels like a long, narrow cave: the tunnel was burrowed into a mountain, starting in 1935 and finishing nearly 20 years later. It allows for only one-way traffic and as water drips on either side, I'm awed by the confluence of raw manpower and engineering.

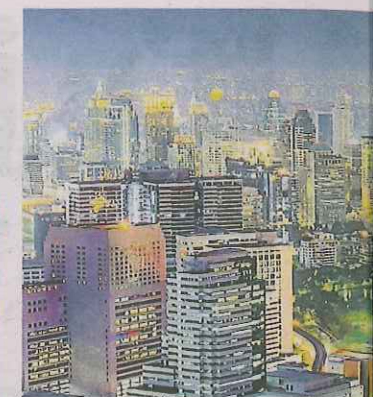
The scene that greets us is equally breathtaking. Snow-capped peaks tower over the

snaking bitumen, which is fringed by ferns and trees smothered in vines and mossy growth. Fiordland boasts a strange jungle: an alpine rainforest fed by more than six metres of annual rainfall, making it one of the wettest places in the world. It rains 200 days of the year.

Declaring wryly that our love will not be dampened, we emerge from the amphitheatre of mountains to Milford Sound and are met with the image on all the postcards of a 1682-metre sheer peak rising from still water. There, a regal ship awaits, primed to guide us through the glacier-carved



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organised (loosely) in more than 15,000 shops and stalls in 27 sections. From vintage to upcoming Thai designers, ceramics to livestock, jewellery to fruit, everything plus the kitchen sink (section nine, Household Appliances) is here.

Our brave huntresses emerge with "upcycled" vintage bomber jackets, slogan T-shirts and braided leather jewellery.

THE SWEET TREATS

Some hotels do views, some boast beaches or art. The Plaza Athenee does chocolate.

Every night there's a little delight in Belgian chocolate on your bed – an elephant, mini fruits infused with the real thing – even a chocolate CD.

These treats all emerge from a special, back-of-house chamber: The Chocolate Room.

Inside, amid a fragrance so heady you could swoon, three specialist pastry chefs, trained in the art of chocolate-making and sculpture, spend their days creating the figurines, flowers, fruit and fantastic constructions for which the hotel's patisserie is famous.

We like this room so much the chefs fear hotel security may be required to remove us. Instead,

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION
thaiairways.com.au;
tourismthailand.org.

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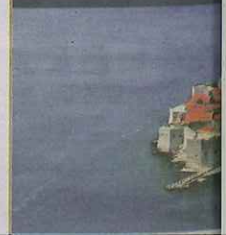
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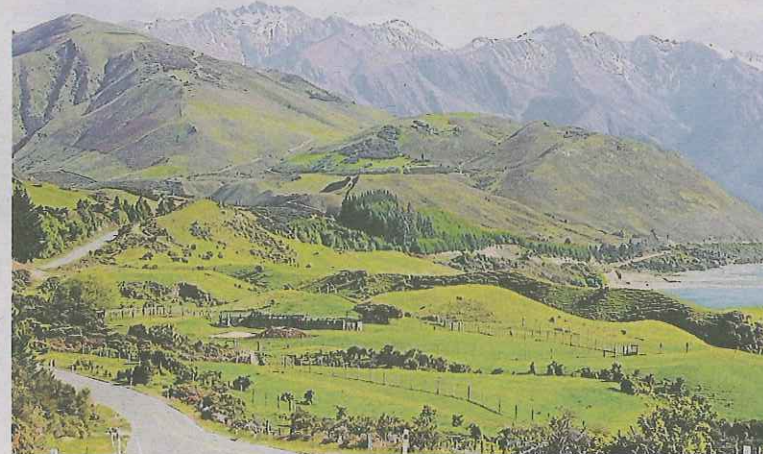




fiord discovered by Europeans in the late 18th century. I'm secretly relieved to be trading in our wheels for a night aboard the Milford Mariner; it's now day six and the close quarters are making us tetchy.

We pass a waterfall as high as a 50-storey building, then spot our first albatross. It glides centimetres above the water, its immense wingspan amazing. The area's penguins elude us but a visit by inquisitive seals followed by a night in a real bed delivers more than enough satisfaction.

With renewed enthusiasm, we



hit the road again, passing more reflective lakes, moody mountains and straw-coloured fields. The brakes go on at Queenstown, where

it seems no matter the season, everyone looks decidedly apres ski. There we discover what's possibly the country's best – and most



Van fans: (Clockwise from main) the Milford Mariner noses in to one of the sound's waterfalls; home from home at Milford; newlyweds Duncan and Fleur; the road to Fiordland. Photos: Fleur Bainger

expensive – motor park, the Top 10 Holiday Park Creeksyde, which is actually in the heart of town. The bathrooms are the highlight, with floor to ceiling wall prints that inspire a jaunt on the steepest cable car lift in the southern hemisphere, Queenstown's Skyline Gondola, where speedy joyrides on the luge track are a must.

Expect to scream and giggle like a child – I did.

We couldn't be happier when we hear the overnight temperature is

set to drop to two degrees for our final New Zealand night. Doing away with the campervan (which feels every drop of the mercury after dark), we check into the five-star Millbrook Resort for the ultimate comfort stop.

Just out of historic Arrowtown, this golf resort was singled out as the nation's number one hotel in the 2013 Trip Advisor Travellers' Choice Awards and is a honeymooner's dream.

I discover a GHD hair straightener in the bathroom (finally I can look like a newlywed) and after reaching for the third person in our relationship, my laptop, I find that internet access is restricted to a half-hour a day. There's a note on the login page with a gentle reminder of all the things I could otherwise be doing on the property: sipping pinot noir at the Hole in One bar, nibbling NZ lamb at the Millhouse restaurant, being pampered at the spa or joining a complimentary class in the fitness centre.

We take the hint and head to the outdoor hot tubs, soaking as steam rises into the chilly air. We rocked the campervan experience, we really did, but this is where I'll be back for our anniversary. **T**

The writer was a guest of Tourism New Zealand, Apollo Motorhome Holidays, Real Journeys and Millbrook Resort.

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION
newzealand.com.

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand flies to Christchurch from Sydney. airnewzealand.com.

TOURING THERE

Apollo Motorhome Holidays two-berth daily rates start from \$32. See apollocamper.co.nz/holiday.

DRIVING THERE

Real Journeys Milford Sound Visitor Terminal, Milford Sound; +64 3 249 7416; see realjourneys.co.nz.

CRUISING THERE

Overnight cruise on the Milford Mariner starts at NZ\$189 (\$165).

STAYING THERE

Top 10 Holiday Park Creeksyde 54 Robins Road, Queenstown camp.co.nz. Powered sites start at NZ\$50. Millbrook Resort, Malaghans Road, Arrowtown, see millbrook.co.nz. Rooms from NZ\$229.



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