

New Zealand - South Island

September 2009

Saturday 12th of September.

An early 4:30 start after seeing Jimoin the night before. A quick shower and a cup of Swiss coffee, which was interrupted by a car pulling up in the driveway. Yep a car, even though we had booked for a bus. I was getting my bag into the car and Zuz informed me that her bag has a had a malfunction. Oh nooo. Zipper busted. Too late for a repack so it was safety pins to the rescue. The driver of the car was from our destination, Christchurch. Go figure! We picked up one more at East Corrimal and had a real smooth ride to the airport.

Check in was open and we got in line. All way too easy. Zuzi's bag weighed in at a whopping 27.3kg and mine a lean 23.4kg. Lucky we were flying Emirates with a 30kg limit. As usual, they are rebuilding the airport and for once in my lifetime – No Macca's when we wanted one. So it was a muffin and some yogurt for breakfast. Then we had to join the biggest line up to get through immigration. Then through security. The lappy bag went through the x-ray 3 times before they decided a manual search was the way to go. After getting through that they collared me for an explosives test and a pat down as Zuz got to sit and watch. Finally, now we could go to the gate after a window shop and some m&m's for brunch. At the gate we got to see the Emirates A380 cruise past our lil old 777.

As we were at the back of the bus, we got to board nice and early and got the pick of the newspapers and magazines. We got to our seats and the entertainment screens are even bigger now. Still way too much available for a long haul flight, let along a 3 hour hop. When you include all the safety videos, I was lucky to get in and episode of Mythbusters and one of Top gear in. Of course, Zuz watched a chick flick. Lunch was lovely and what one would come to expect from Emirates. On route we were given an awesome aerial view of some of the snow-covered mountains, rivers, a nice blue Lake Coleridge and flat green farmlands. That was worth the 3hour flight alone. A bumby landing and all but last off the plane.

Another airport window shop saw us walk away with a 1L bottle of Gentleman Jack for \$50Au. BARGAIN!!! after I had also recommended it to fellow Jack drinker. Then into another big line to clear immigration to be near the last ones through. Well at least we did not have to wait for our bags before proceeding to customs. Any Hiking boots? Um, yep we do. Ok, jump on the end of that long line there. We make it to the table and got our boots from the depths of our bag. It was a nice feeling when he commented that mine don't have much tread left. Sign of a good boot I say. Then someone else had managed to leave some Coolendel wombat crap on her boot and it needed to be cleaned. Ty ty ty Zuzi.

We were freed from the grasp of bureaucracy and finally made it as free people into New Zealand. We cashed up from an ATM and headed for the bus / shuttle. Found a dude who was doing 2 for \$25 to the door of the hotel. Ok, were in. A very pretty

dive. As we hit the city it felt very English. Checked into the hotel, a small room with 2 double beds. Did not stay long and back out and across the road so Zuz could get a pie.

Then onto Cathedral Square, 2 min walk from the hotel to check out the church. Very nice may I add too. We followed the tram track up over the Avon river (very pretty, but small), past the Arts Centre (also very pretty), the Gallery (again very pretty and very modern to the Botanic gardens. Guess what? Very pretty as well with lots of flowers and trees in blossom. Huge fat Sequa's and we spent a fair bit of time soaking it all up until the sun disappeared. We ended up at Barcelona restaurant for tapas for dinner. Zuz had a French onion soup and I followed it up with a warm seafood salad and a lovely wheat bear (3 boys). Yummy. Then a quick trip back through the square and into Macca's for a Sunday. What do you mean NO Chocolate?? Sorry then buddy, forget it. Got a Hungry jacks one instead but I really should have passed. Back to the Hotel to a message that we would be picked up at 9:30. Watched Grand designed as Zuz washed out the toiletries bag after the shampoo had leaked though it before hitting the sack

Sunday 13th of September.

A good, but noisy sleep. Showered, packed and down for some breaky. Hash browns, sausages and croissants. Nice and yummy, all part of the price too. Then at 9:30 a taxi pulled up and took us through Christchurch to the Kea depot. Seeing the snow covered mountains in the distance was fuelling our excitement.

On arrival they were pretty busy. The young lady looking after us was very friendly, but knowledgeable? Like I said she was friendly. In the end, we paid up for the extra insurance for a worry free trip. She took us to our van. Ummm, not the one we ordered. We were given a free upgrade to the 2 berth deluxe and were in two minds about it. Probably would have ordered one if we wanted one? The only flip top one they had was actually for sale. So, I guess we'll take the bigger one. In the end, what a great price for a deluxe van and it might end up being the better option anyway. We were taken through most of the features, it had a gas heater and an aux jack so that already made it a better option. Not to mention the extras of a DVD player, TV, Microwave, Air conditioning, shower and toilet.

Now we were off! On to the open road to..... well, we weren't quite sure.

We headed for a supermarket that we were shown on the map to find out that it was a farmhouse. Wow that's fresh food. So decided to head for Akaroa and get to a supermarket as we passed one. It was not long before we found one and in we went. They even sell grog in the supermarkets here like normal advanced countries. It was a hurried shop and then on to the Banks Peninsula. We were both surprised at how well the van drove. It had plenty of toe and handled real well too.

The drive was incredibly scenic which is what I suppose you expect from a scenic drive around the peninsula to Akaroa. Wow, Awesome, Beautiful. What more can I say, but check it out for yourselves.

We made it to Akaroa and went for a slow walk. Very similar to Stanely in Tassie or even Portree in the Isle of Skye. Typical of a lovely little coastal hamlet. We settled on some fush and chups for lunch which was lovely and somewhat unique with some

of the extras we got. A stunning place to walk along the water and wharfs. With a fair bit of light left we decided to leave and find a place to stay. Some more incredibly scenic driving, we had. Stopping several times for photos and to see where the smell in the van was coming from (Smelt like a tip in the sun, but we think it was a by-product of the loo chemicals).

We ended up at a rest area next to Lake Forsyth and spent some time getting to know the van and set everything up. What a top little unit. It was a beautiful place, except after dark, going outside was an absolute no-no. I was dive bombed by millions of 1cm long insects as I turned the gas on. It felt like I was being rained on, but without getting wet. We had to spend a fair bit of time 'culling' the bugs that had made it inside. Definitely the inside loo for tonight if the need is there. Yet another case of already being grateful for the upgrade. Very happy with the set up. Looking forward to the rest of the holiday. It was a very scenic day and near perfect weather wise.

Monday 14th of September

Well, we survived the night and the invasion of the bugs. Believe it or not we were actually woken by a rooster that was walking around the van. Funny place this. It was rather foggy outside and I was honked by the ducks and geese as I ventured into the insects domain. There were still a few around mind you and the warm breeze added to the eerie conditions. We made a quick cuppa and decided to have breakfast further on down the track. We stopped at Birdling's flat to check out the beach but only found a shite load of pebbles instead. None the less, more awesome views of the coastline and there were many a sea bird flying around. We also stopped to get a good look down the length of the lake that we stayed on.

Then back on the road. Drove straight on past the Lincoln Uni (rather impressive). As we were travelling along, the wind picked up a bit and got stronger and stronger. They have a lot of high hedges that I can only guess they use as wind breaks. Now these windbreaks were great until you got to a driveway. Then it was a jump to the left. Then a kick to the right.

We stopped for a loo stop and had our breaky of muesli and yogurt at the roadside. Ah, the freedom. Our next mission was to find an aux cable so we could hook up the iPod/phone to the stereo. This may end up being the purchase of the trip. As we ducked through Ashburton we spotted a Repco. Mission accomplished and for a mere \$20 at that. Now we were ROCKIN'.

Not long after that, we turned off the 'One' and headed for those ominous white peaked mountains. The weather was starting to clear and somehow the wind kept getting stronger. We stopped a few times. Once at Geraldine where we picked up a DEC (National parks) campsite book, guides and not forgetting the ice cream, cheese and fudge (hey we were on holidays). We continued on the awesome drive. Only problem was that you would get half way around a tight corner and these splendid mountains would hit the optic nerve and take away all concentration that should have been on the road. We got to a lookout and had to stop. It had a plaque that told us the height of the mountains that we were stunned by were only 1800-2000m high. Mt Cook stands at 3700+.

After another loo stop (are we back in Tassie) we turned right and headed straight for the mountains. More glorious driving. We came around one corner and this turquoise lake, big sucker too lay in front of us. I am sure both our jaws hit the floor simultaneously coupled with a certain verbal expression. It was Lake Tekapo.

Although she was very choppy it was stunningly beautiful. We stopped, as you do at the church of the good Shepard. Blowing a gale had now officially become an understatement. We walked inside the church and it truly was a refuge. Warm and still, worlds away from the ravishing conditions outside. Over the alter was a huge window with a heavenly view over the lake. When I think about it, it was the most profound feeling of peace, serenity and safety that I have ever got going into a church. The house of God, but this one also had the backyard to suit. Of course how could I forget, the backdrop of rugged snow covered mountains?

We walked around or should I say battled the winds to see the monument to the Sheppard's dog. Went down to the water, that was not too cold, but plenty of waves and so, so blue. A few more photos, another loo stop, picked up some souvenirs and the cheapest socks and undies I have seen in 20 years. Normally they cost 10x more is such a tourist ravished place like this. I picked up 3 pair of thermal socks for under the price of 2 pies. We planed to eat them (pies, not socks) at the top of Mt John near the observatory overlooking the lake. Drove out there and the road was closed due to high winds. Yep, it was that windy. So we thought down steam from the dam should be nice and scenic. We got there and were able to set up camp next to a blue canal.

Looked very unnatural, but we had inadvertently stumbled on a spot protected from the wind. Out with the camping chairs. Meat pies, corn chips and salsa. Life is good. But we could still hear the wind roaring up the gully like an angry giant and being deflected by the trees.

Back on the road and off towards Mt Cook. We were told by that knowledgeable lady that the road to Mt Cook was one of the roads that was off limits to the van (we though this to be extremely strange, being a major drawcard and all). Then a case of déjà vu. Around another corner to see another wonderful blue lake come into view. We happened to catch this moment on video too. It was Lake Pukaki, from where you can see Mt Cook on a good day. We stopped at the visitors centre, found a nice shotty for the collection and asked about places to free camp. The lady showed us on official and one unofficial spot.

We hung around for a bit as it looked like it was clearing. Watching and listening to the waves (up to 2 feet) hit the shore. It was awesome just soaking up the sight of it. No photo of this 'ordinary' day would ever do it justice. How must it look like in real life on a perfect day? (i.e. yesterday) That was actually our original plan, but hey, what's in a plan? We went to check out the site on the shore of the lake. It was even windier over here. Easily over 100km/h for sure, given the water spirals coming off the lake. There was a small protected area behind a bank of trees, but trees not are necessarily the safest form of shelter in these winds. But, this could be the site of sites, waking up to Mt cook out the back window.

We decided to check out the other spot and it was very nice too, but possibly even windier? The only other time we have seen winds like this, we saw a shed fly into the ocean. We needed some fuel so into Twizel to fill up. \$50au to fill up at \$1.06NZ per Litre for diesel. Wohoo!!! Then we checked out a couple of van parks to see if they

could offer more protection as we were starting to see branches and limbs impersonating the wicked witch of the East.

We found a park that had a nice 10ft hedge to park behind with no trees in sight, but \$30 for the site. At least the dude told us that this wind was pretty exceptional, so that made us feel a bit better as we had heard New Zealand was windy, but.....this was ridiculous. He also told us that the road to Mt Cook was very good and the actual road we were not allowed on was actually a 4WD track. Um, as if we would take a campervan 4 wheel driving. Now that bit of info induced a quick change of plans. Lucky we stayed there in the end. Tomorrow, up to Cook village. We hooked up the power, downloaded photos and were not real hungry for dinner. 8 or 9 other campers had the same idea and we fell asleep during a rainy thunderstorm.

P.S. This evening Neil has found the true 'holiday mode'. Actually we both did. We decided that we didn't care if we leave some stuff out as long as the sites and places we see, we explore properly. Thought about the boys a fair bit wishing for them to be a bit older so they could experience it with us. But! They are not hence they are home with Babi who is loving having them for herself. Also what needs to be added is that the stereo in the van sounds fantastic. Therefore a dose of pink Floyd and Radiohead was had together with some gentleman jack. Lucky we are not suicidal : -) Cant wait for tomorrow.

*P.P.S. Also I realised I seriously need to broaden my vocabulary (as the f*** word doesn't quite express the beauty, magnitude and wonder of the places we have seen and undoubtedly will see further on. Therefore note to self: Stop saying F.. all the time, Zuz*

Tuesday 15th of September

We woke and there was an anxious moment as the blinds were pulled back. Wow! It was a perfect morning. Such a contrast from when we went to bed. Not a cloud in the sky, any wind and crystal clear. We could see the pink light hitting the snow-capped mountains so quick sticks. A very quick shower and we decided to drive back to the Lake Pukaki visitors centre for breakfast.

Now we could see the monster of Mt Cook at the other end of the lake some 50km away as clear as a bell. What a sight. So we got the camp chairs out, made ourselves a Swiss coffee, chucked some muesli in a bowl and ate at what could be argued as the most beautiful restaurant going around. Took some photos and was hard to leave, but we had bigger fish to fry.

Up to Mt Cook village we went, stopping many times, as the closer we got the more majestic and overpowering the scenery became. Many, many a photo was taken. We got to the visitors centre, and a wonderful one at that. Lots of info and educational stuff about mountaineering / climbing and the history off. There was a great big window framing the great mountain outside to top it all off. We enquired about the boat trip on the glacial lake. One was just about to leave and the next one was from 2pm till 5 at \$130 a head. We will see. A quick bit of souvenir shopping and a review

of the forecast. Nothing but sunshine saw us out the door, and heading for the Tasman glacier.

We got to the car park and saw that the Ball Hut road (the actual road we were not allowed to go on) was chained off anyway and I probably would have thought twice taking the Suby on it. We had our boots on today and it was time to use them. We headed up to the Lake view, but took the Blue lakes detour at Zuzi's request. A nice walk around 4 or so blue lakes, all differing shades of blue/green. Then we headed up to the lake view. Got up there and was confronted with a totally unexpected sight. One of a huge milky grey lake with many an iceberg floating in it. Now they did not look too big, that was until we saw one of the boats peak out from behind an iceberg to give us a size reference. Dwarfed by the icebergs is an understatement. I was very glad that all those people paid their \$130 each so we could see how big the bergs really were. We were also lucky as the winds from the previous day had blown all the icebergs down to the section of the lake that we could easily access by foot, hence saving us \$260. Thanks Huey :)

Back down from the lookout, around to the lake was not too eventful other than telling Zuz that the bushes were sharp. She went to touch them softly and recoiled her hand with a mighty ouch and found two little holes with drops of blood coming from them. Told you, they are sharp. We finally got to the lakes edge (did not look that far from the lookout) and awesome just does not describe it. Sitting there listening to the drips of water coming off the icebergs and the occasional splash as a bit of ice or rock fell into the water. I could have sat there watching / listening all day long. There were some massive boulders being held up on the icebergs as well. Great to see Mother Nature at work in such a raw form. Many more pixels put to the sword before dragging ourselves away for lunch.

Back at the van, we took the chairs out and set them up next to this beautiful little stream underneath the mountainous peaks, keeping with the theme set from breakfast. This was really putting the pressure on for dinner. After cheese sandwiches / vita wheats it was back in the van to check out the campground. Awesome position, but not much to it so we thought we would check out the Sir Edmund Hillary centre and leave from there. It is supposed to be cloudy tomorrow and I would want the memory to keep this splendid image of what lay around us as is. In the end we expected a little more of the Hillary centre for all the hype it was given. Not saying it was bad. It was very informative and learnt heaps about the man himself, just not as big as we had been led to believe.

More shopping and then back down the highway, stopping many a time. Once even to clean the rear view mirrors. One last stop at the Lake Pukaki visitors centre for one last look before pointing the van towards the coast via Omarama to Oamaru. We followed the Tasman River down in its many forms as lakes and dams for the hydro electric scheme. They actually have 8 power plants on this river from Lake Tekapo to the Pacific. We also stopped at some Maori drawings along the way. As it was dark and I was getting very hungry we headed for the Top10 van park. Pricey and not too pretty in the dark, but better than anything we found. There were no rest areas for ages. Isn't that always the way. We cooked spag bol and ate it in the van. Not quite as scenic as the other meals today, but the company was just as good. We also tried to work out a plan of attack for tomorrow.

Wednesday 16th of September

We woke before the sunrise and I got us ready while Zuz took a shower. It was a corker of a sunrise, but could have been nicer if it was not for the foreground of a toilet block and a dozen campervans. We pulled out at 6:45 with the lights on and headed into town to check it out. We caved in as we saw one of the only golden arches that we had come across for some coffee to go. Don't normally use macca's as a tourist guide, but as they had photos of the old town section, we had to check it out. We did a couple of laps stopping a few times to check out the old buildings in the harbour area and the main drag.

Then onto the road south as the clouds were giving some lovely light effects. We stopped at the Moeraki Boulders, where it seemed luck was on our side again as we discovered it was low tide when we got down to the beach. These impressive boulders are about 4 – 5 feet tall and look like they are marbles that had fallen off the playing table up above. The broken ones were interesting with the patterns and markings. I am sure a geologist would have a wonderful and amazing explanation.

We got back up to the toilet before the café and more importantly the toilet opened. Headed straight on through to Dunedin, by which time the loo stop was priority. Followed the first little blue sign (which by the way accompany any town along the way and are a camper's best friend) we saw and came to a nice little toilet block. So, in I went. Oh oh, a high tech dunny. Pushed a button to close the door and it all went down hill from there. An automatic paper dispenser....push a button and it feeds out a small length of paper. Push again for some more then once again. Now even though I wanted more a forth push of the button was not allowed. On a timer. So one has to wait to start the whole process again. It also flushed when you stood up, washed your hands and opened the door. What a waste. People, please leave one of the most basic of human functions as just that. Basic.

After a rant to the video camera it was on through Dunedin, past some very nice buildings (notably the train station), past the Cadbury factory (still boycotting due to package resizing at same price) and onto the 30km long Otago peninsula. We rang the albatross centre and had booked a ticket for a tour at 11:00. We were lucky again as today was the last day tours were run for 2 months due to the courtship rituals of the birds. We drove the slow road that hugged the coast of the peninsular. And I mean hugged. Seemed like we were tethered to the water by a 10 m long rope. Not a good road if you suffer from motion sickness. But, yet again a very scenic trip.

We got to the Albatross centre with time to spare so after collecting our tickets and having a quick look around it was out to the van for a late breakfast. Somehow the van made a lunge for the muesli as Zuz opened a new packet resulting in most of it landing on the floor.

Back inside for the tour first saw us taking in an educational session and video from our French guide. Some very interesting facts we learnt. If you want to know....Google is your friend. A short walk up a steep hill saw us at the observatory where we could see 3 of the remaining 12 chicks at a distance. The observatory also overlooked a rookery of shags. Spent a fair bit of the time looking through the binoculars. Were treated to a fly-by of some 10 spoonbills and the views of the

harbour and coast were great. One of the young albatross even stretched a wing for us. WOW! It was huge and folded up like a German convertible.

After the tour we headed to the observation platform on the other side of the car park to hope for sight of an albatross on the wing. There were many more shags nesting on the cliff and flying around. We waited and waited. The sun came out and showed just how pristine this coastline was. We also saw seals to go with the plethora of sea birds. The wind was starting to pick up a little, then out to sea a fair way I spotted one.

Unmistakable and incredible the way they seem to dance and glide over the water. Truly a majestic sight and well worth the wait even if it was from a distance. Now that we knew what we were looking for and the wind was getting stronger we saw several more, all be it further out. Watching these creatures in the binoculars, some as pairs was something I could have done all day. Their grace was almost hypnotic.

But as we wanted to get to the other side of the Island to camp tonight, it was best we left. We high-tailed it back down the peninsular and that windy road, this time under bright sunshine, through the suburbs of Dunedin and heading west. The weather soon started to close and it rained for a majority of the drive. We stopped for fuel, both van and human. A couple of pies and the nicest supermarket chocolate muffin in existence. With about 80kms to go we saw a break in the weather on the horizon. It so happened that we kept heading for that better weather all the way to the campground. We decided on Fiord land great views holiday park as we had free wireless internet through Kea and needed to check mail and do some banking. We passed more fine scenery, snowy mountains and some 2.38 million sheep. But only 2 black ones. After some 292km from Dunedin we had reached our destination.

The van park was awesome and clean. Hedges were in between sites and a new amenities block / kitchen. Probably one of the nicest van parks I have laid eyes on. We backed onto our site and opened up the back doors to overlook the lake and snow covered peaks covered in mist. It was an awesome sight. We hustled up some spag bol for dinner, charged batteries, checked the net and downloaded our photos. There were some stunners from Mt Cook, if I do say myself. Then it was shower time and it was another awesome shower once I was able to work it out. It is amazing how many different designed of taps we can have in the world. Just where you though you had seen em all. Did not take long at all to fall asleep.

Thursday 17th of September

Woke before sunrise again. Another anxious pull back of the curtains to find Huey had smiled upon us again. A magnificent day. Ye Haaa! We opened the back doors for a bit to take it in as we lay in bed. As today we were doing Milford sound. One word covers what happened for the rest of the day;

WOW!!!!, that's it.

Well, for those that have not been there before, I will elaborate. We packed up quickly and left at 7:30. The cruise that we planned on taking left at 9:45 and they say it takes 2 ¼ hours to drive the 121km. We also needed to be there 20 min before departure

and it takes 10 min to walk from the car park. So we had a bit of time to make up. We decided no stops, straight on through and get the scenic shots on the way back. We were doing well, through some lovely scenery and the weather conditions were truly magical. It was crystal clear with some low fog on some of the mountains and the lovely warm light of the early morning. I was putting in the overtime as the passenger working the cameras and video. Then, we hit our first hiccup. Mirror lakes. There was no way we could just cruise past this. So we stopped. Truly amazing mountain vista reflected in the water with a wisp of mist hanging above the ground. No photo would ever come close, but I'll try none the less.

We got back to the van and I asked Zuz to find her inner German. And by crickey, she did!!! In the end, we made it with 10 minutes to spare. But that trip up was something truly amazing. I don't think my mouth was closed very much at all. Not a trip to do on a motorbike with an open-faced helmet. The cleared avalanches, the fog and mist we went in and out of, the light. Head and shoulders above any road I have driven anywhere. Then there was the Homer tunnel with its 1200m of darkness. It was though it was a portal to a different world emerging in a winter wonderland of snow, mist and gigantic peaks everywhere. The forests we went through were not to be left behind either. Then if that was not enough as we made it to the car park and I saw the sound, the water and reflections for the first time several expletives involuntarily escaped from the month.

We got our gear and took a real quick walk up to the passenger terminal and we got the tickets for the 9:45 cruise (2h15m), underwater observatory and a buffet lunch in the café for a measly \$100NZ each. A bargain price, even before getting on the boat. As for the boat, it was awesome. 3 levels to fit lots of people, but first things first, time for a cuppa out on one of the decks. The boat would have been 20% full at max as we left the wharf. One of the advantages of getting the 9:45 in the off-season. Zuz and I rugged up and headed for the top deck. This place is amazing. It was so unreal that it was like being in a movie. Whatever you imaging it could be, it will far exceed your expectations. Our skipper was game and took us within meters of the fiord walls. And just as close to the waterfalls that falls from 100m or so. After 30 minutes I had a sore neck from looking up so much. The cameras were going off like machine guns. There is nothing like cruising through a waterway where spires rise out of the water up to the dizzy heights of between 1300 and 2000m. I am still guessing you would be off the mark guessing what it would be like. I forgot to mention the waterfalls. With 7m of rain a year and a good dose of it yesterday (some 252mm) there were 100's if not even 1000's of them.

After this sensory overload we decided to go down to the bow of the boat for a different view picking up a tea for Zuz on the way. Within 90sec of arriving we spotted some dolphins out the front of the boat. Next thing we noticed that 3 of them were riding the bow wave. Outstanding. They stayed a while too. Next, some eagle eye spotted some penguins on the shore that we cruised up to for a good look.

We made it out of the sound into the Pacific. Even the views from here were majestic as we turned around and headed back past seal rock. Yep we saw seals too. Zuz even managed to make a friend of one of the guides. The dolphins gave us a return visit as we cruised past many more waterfalls. Then we motored up to the huge Stirling Falls, dropping 155m straight into the drink. We knew we were in trouble when they said

they were closing the doors for this one. Some brave souls stayed on the bow. I was on the upper deck for this one. The blast of wet wind from the waterfall hitting the water was surprisingly powerful. We got within 10m or so of it and I really tested the water resistance of the camera and even myself to some extent. We both got a wee bit wet, but oh how exhilarating was that!

Then we went around the corner to the underwater observatory. It took us about 10 m underwater and was pretty cool. There were heaps of fish, rare black coral and the size of one of the muscles down there would have filled a dinner plate. There was a fair bit of info in the foyer that was very educational. The rain chart would be off the scale back home. Then the next boat came and took us back to the wharf to complete the sensory overload with by now, sore back and very cold hands. Yet again it was left to someone else, this time in a plane flying high near the peaks to give us a reference of the scale. It shows as nothing but a dot in the photos. We disembarked having experienced the most impressive vistas my eyes have had the pleasure to witness. Mother nature at her creative best. No wonder this is the No1 thing to see in New Zealand, Possibly the globe?

Sat down to a buffet lunch where the wedges were a treat. We even threw around the idea of going on a flight, but it just did not take off. No disappointment though. We were both well satisfied with what we had seen and were happy to leave with our million photos and memories. We drove up to 'The Cascades' and after being accosted by a Kea parrot while eating a snack we walked up the path. We ended up at a vicious torrent of water that had carved many holes, shapes and hollows in the rocks by its march to abide to the laws of gravity. Yet another example of Mother Nature's raw power on show.

Back in the van and back through the winter wonderland where the waterfalls seemed to have increased through the day due to snowmelt. Back through the portal to the real world and pulled over when we were allowed to (due to avalanche warnings) throw a snowball or two and tick that off the list. Our next little walk was through a very green forest to Moraine Cascades. Everything that stood still was covered by either moss or some sort of lichen which made the place as green as the city of Oz. Ended up at another raging torrent of a creek. The noise was awesome.

A few more viewpoint stops on the wayback saw us well and truly buggered. I think being at a heightened state of excitement for that long is very draining. Took a quick detour into Te Anau for supplies and back to the same van park for the night, but in a different spot. What a DAY!!!

Friday 18th of September

No need to pull the curtains back today, as the rain on the roof was a dead give away. Scrambled eggs for breakfast followed by a nice hot shower. Then it was time for some van maintenance. As our water hose was too short to reach, I started to move then van onto the next site, which happened to be a grass one. But as I was doing so the lady came out saying don't back onto the grass. "Its new grass" I explain my dilemma and she says there is a tap on the way out next to the light pole. OK, no worries, will fill up there. Gee, lucky no-one else turned up overnight as we had the

last 'concrete' site. Actually they must have as there were 2 other vans parked on the grass.

So then we emptied the wastewater and loo at the dumping station. Then we parked at the tap on the way out. Only problem was it was on a big slope with the filler on the low side. So we manoeuvred around so we were flat. Then the dragon came up complaining we were on the grass again. Let me tell you this site had more weeds than grass. Very patchy at best. Now at least we know why the park was so clean. No one is allowed on the grass. I'm guessing not the best policy for business. Fancy putting grass on a campground where no one can use it. What a goose. So on we went. Through more scenic roads, weather was pretty dodgy. We got to Queenstown with the hungry eye on in the van. It even beeped at me to inform me of the situation. It ended up that there was still 8L in the tank and after filling up we continued on, past AJ Hackett's bungy jump. We stopped at a cheesery. As you do, we bought some and Zuz was amazed at the amount of Czech / Hungarian cheese (brinza) they had. We continued on to look for a rest stop for lunch. We stopped at a few lookouts over Lake Hawea and Lake Wanaka and eventually found somewhere to stop for lunch at a DOC site on Lake Wanaka. Nice, but it was pretty windy. Mmm, baked beans and sausages.

The weather was starting to clear and we kept going, through the Kawarau Gorge and stopped to see the roaring Meg. More lovely scenery as we headed up towards Haast Pass. Here is where it started to get, well how can I put it, INCREDIBLE!! We stopped at a few waterfalls, then a huge torrent of water rushing through the gorge at the Gates of Haast. Pooooowwwwer.

The sun was peeking through scattered clouds at various levels and steam was coming off the road. Driving past literally hundreds of waterfalls that you just hear zooming past only meters from the road, some were pretty noisy. We stopped at Fantail and Thunder Creek falls that were awesome, even the piles of rocks along the riverbank that people had stacked up were pretty cool. The light was fantastic and the conditions were very similar to those we had when driving the Milford road in the morning. We finally emerged from the mountains, into Haast. We stopped at the visitors centre for a very quick peek as they were closing. Got our info and off we went through more mist and then sunny terrain. More coastal and we started to see a different kind of forest. More ferns that lined the road and this area was very wet and very marshy. We soldiered on, stopping at a beach for a look. Again more stacked rocks. What is it with this?

On to fox glacier, which was where we were hoping to get to today. We went up to the glacier car park and took a 2-minute walk to the glacier view. WOW!! Even from the carpark, the evidence of the glaciers sheer power was so in your face through the carved walls of stone. We umed and ahed where to stay and we finally decided to head for town (after 3 laps of the carpark), where we ended up at a campervan park. No grass here, just a gravel site to park the van. They gave us some info on glacier hikes and we set up camp on our chosen piece of gravel. We treated ourselves to chicken curry (peri peri style) and it was nice and hot. Can you imagine what the van smelt like after cooking curry in such a confined space? Downloaded more photos and enjoyed them over a glass or 3 of J.D.

The plan for tomorrow is to do a guided 4 hour tour to Fox Glacier (if there are any spots left for us), then head to Franz Josef Glacier and do a couple of the walks there and slowly make our way to Greymouth. We will see how it works out. As today I must say I was even more impressed by the drive to Haast and Fox Glacier than I was by the drive to Milford sound. Everything seemed to be more alive. Lots more rainforest, mist and wispy clouds on the imposing rugged mountains, waterfalls and water in general wherever you looked. At some points Huey lit up the snowed on mountain peaks by sunlight and revealed such beauty I cannot find the words that would do the scenery enough justice. It felt like a trip through prehistoric times, at some places I would not have been surprised if a dinosaur walked out in front of us. Then we hit the coast, which was so vastly different to all the scenery we have seen so far. I think my chin was constantly on the steering wheel as I was driving.

*Didn't even need music for this part of the trip. I think we crossed about 100 bridges, there were so many creeks that they had to put numbers next to their names as there are not enough names in existence. (i.e. so big creek 1,2,3) Well you can probably tell the JD has hit the system. But at least I don't say F*** almost at all anymore.*

P.S. I just lost my tooth filling, actually it fell out – for the forth time!!!! Not going back to that dentist, that is for sure. Bloody bridil. (Czech insult)

Saturday 19th September

Well another WOW!! Day. There was no need to pull back the curtains today as when we had to go to the loo at 4:00am there were that many stars it was unfathomable. Truly amazing. So when we did wake up we reached for the phone. It was 7:41, we rang the fox glacier guiding mob to see if there were any spots for a half day guided walk. “Yep, will book you on the 8:15 tour”. Holy shit! Go, go, go, we very quickly threw down some breakfast. No time for tea or coffee. Got all the required gear for the hike and off we went. Luckily the place where the tour left from was a 45 second drive from where we stayed. Of course we planned it like that.

We rocked up and were ushered into the boot room, where you were fitted with a pair of boots for the walk. Our guide Grazer (Graham) checked ours and said we could keep them on if we did not mind getting them wet. I asked if those boots she was putting on were what we got. “Yep”, Ok, I'll keep mine. He gave us all a set of crampons and told us that there was no loo stops for 4 hours. So, off to the bus. We ended up with a group of 4. How cool. Us and a German couple who drove from Wanaka yesterday and said it rained cats and dogs all day. Lucky we came though a little later. They also told us what the hot springs at Franz Josef was like.

Now at this point, I will state the fitness level for the ½ day hike was ‘moderate’ and the full day was ‘good’. We got to the carpark and started to walk up towards the glacier. It was awesome. We had the clearest of days. Everyone said how lucky we were, remembering this place gets 5m of rain a year, I would have to agree. We did some stream hopping up along the creek/river. Grazer was a wealth of knowledge. Tonnes of info on the how's, whys and what's of glaciers 101. We got in line with the glacier face. What a raw sight. Then we had to climb to up to the access area of the glacier. And when I said climb. Holy shit!! It was steep and we went up like

greyhounds. I thought I was getting old, but later found out that Zuz was doing it real tough too. She didn't even take a drink at the waterfall we paused at. Then it was up even further. Oh, the legs were hurting. But it was the fact that they just had no power that was worse. We were hurried through the rock fall areas and had a ladder climb and to hold onto a safety chain through the 80m drop off section. Don't look to the right. As we kept going up, the views of the glacier became grander. Up and down more steps then down a huge set of steps to the side of the glacier.

We all grabbed an alpenstock each and gingerly walked onto the glacier to a flat area where we could fit our crampons. Not too difficult, even though we had to tuck our trousers into our socks so we did not catch ourselves and fall to our death. The guide was cutting steps for us to make it easier. There were also 2 dudes up on the glacier doing the same. What a job on a day like today. But the ice / steps melt as the day goes on so fit, one would have to be. Got used to walking in crampons real quickly. It was incredible being so close to these glacial formations, crunching our way through the ice. Lots more info and demos of the workings of glaciers to fill the grey matter. The pain in the legs had gone. I think the brain had channelled all available power to the optic nerve. The sights it was being treated to were impossible to describe. Photos help, but only a little. We saw drain holes (moulons) that you could hear the water draining and the wind it caused. Sections of the ice were patterned with dust from god knows when. Some sections gave off a lovely blue tint, crevasse and peaks throughout. It was a privilege to see nature on such a raw level. We ended up doing a lap on the top of the glacier and the group that left 15 min after us caught up to us. We had heaps of questions, which spurred heaps of discussion so we got the whole educational experience. Ah, travel, the ultimate schooling.

So after god knows how long on the glacier and a shite load of photo stops under the snow topped mountains on a perfect day, it was time to head off the ice, take off the crampons and climb those stairs. But at least from there it was mainly downhill. The trip back was awesome as the sun was now enlightening the whole of the glacier and valley. More and more photos. What a sight to behold. On making the bus I would have to say that the experience would have to rate extremely high on the things I have done. The effort to get there was well worth it. We were even given a certificate and this one probably will go straight to the poolroom as for what it represented.

More shopping for gifts and called time for lunch and decided to dine at a place called peak viewpoint. It was isolated with a wonderful view of the glacier and the surrounding Alps. We could even see our old friends Mt Cook and Mt Tasman as well. There was even a Ryan peak. We ate the cheese we got yesterday with crackers and soaked up the sun whilst enjoying the views. Then we took the 3-minute drive back to lake Matheson for a walk through the forest to the lake and surrounds. The views of the ranges were awesome and what you could expect to see on a postcard. Then we turned our attention to our next mission. Head for Franz Josef and search out those hot pools. Yet another beautiful drive, all be it a rather short one of 30 minutes. We were told where the spas were so we homed in. We found them and across the road there was a campervan park. Well here's a no brainer on where we stay tonight. It was even the campground that I had joked about 2 days before when we got the map as it was next to an Indian restaurant. How funny life works out. We booked into

the campground. The lady was cool and even booked us in for a private pool for half an hour's time at 5:30.

We parked and got our stuff ready and checked the menu on the way over. Paid our money and were led to our pool. It was very nice, a little 6x12 foot outdoor pool in the shape of a peanut with a little cover over one end. We also had a little cabana with a shower/toilet and changing area, all private and wooden with a heated floor. The pool filled up and was delightful and very relaxing in the rainforest setting. The time went all to quick and what goes on in the private pool stays in the private pool. But seriously, we showered, got dressed and felt a million bucks. Just what the doctor ordered after such a hard day.

Then it was off to the Indian restaurant. It was delicious and I was pretty glad I ordered only a medium curry, Whoa. The lassi was sweeeet too. A 90 second walk saw us back at the van where we downloaded and looked at some photos. We voted unanimously that a dip back in the public pool would be a way to go. So over we went. It was dark and the steamy water gave the place a whole different ambience and atmosphere, literally. Extremely calming and relaxing spoiling our bodies. We changed into our swimmers. Zuz was lucky as she had dry new swimmers she had bought for a steal. Mine were cold, wet and most exhilarating to put on. But all was made better once the boys hit the warmer water. Oh, so relaxing. The 38 deg pool was my home. Although Zuz also explored the 36 and 40 deg pools. So glad we went back. When we were finished it was time to hit the sack and we were both asleep in the blink of an eye.

Sunday 20th of September

The weather was not supposed to be as good today, but as we opened up the back door to look at the mountains it looked like someone had forgotten to tell Huey. Crystal clear, yet again. There was no rush today. A slow breakfast and then I bought some more Internet time so Zuz could do some required uni work. It did not go to plan due to connection issues with the uni. Oh well. Pretty amazing though, when you think about it. Sitting in a campervan with a laptop in a very wild location, being connected to almost anywhere in the world. It truly is becoming a smaller world. So then it was time to hit another glacier. The Franz Josef was our next port of call. Yet another road under repair for the summer peak. We packed our daypack with no expectations of how far we would go or how long we would take. Now that sums up the ideal holiday spirit. We walked to the glacier viewpoint through some lovely forest on the hills that were probably deposited only some 100's of years ago or so. At the view point one of the most interesting things was the schematic of where the glacier was at certain years going back to 1851. It shows how dynamic the process really is. There was even a big lake between 1939 and 1949. We decided to go out to the terminal face some 1.5 to 2 km along the riverbed. Let me tell you this was not a boring walk by any means. The waterfalls to the side of the valleys would be the major attraction near anywhere else. But here the poor buggers are nothing more than a sideshow.

As we got closer the glacier dominated more and more of the skyline. It was a lot steeper than Fox and it truly looked as though it did have a different personality. For

starters, it looked a hell of a lot more stable. But, hey looks can be deceiving. We got to the rope that states ye shall not go any further, but were still pretty close at probably 80-100m. Now that might not sound too close, but when this thing is that massive, it feels very close. Not much time had passed until it was reinforced why the no go zone exists. Rocks and ice was falling off the face constantly. Not huge stuff, but big enough to leave you fubar.

It was also hard to get a reference on the size of the rock falls. Later we saw on of the guided tours up on the glacier and wow, this thing is huge. Again, we could have stayed all day watching the rocks fall. Now that may sound silly, but to stand there in awe watching mother nature ply her trade so quickly in the scheme of things is almost mesmerizing. A wonderful experience that we finally managed to drag ourselves away from and head back via one of the many spectacular waterfalls near the face.

The rocks were so spectacularly patterned, works of art on their own.

Back to the van to bid a fond farewell to the glaciers for this trip and headed along the partially constructed road, following a roller who told us to pass onto the other side of the road, over a nice hump of loose dirt. Well, much wheel spinning later and we were free and heading through Franz Josef very happy to have visited.

We continued along the coast and stopped at a Maori gallery and started talking to the dude who was on his second day on the job. It was like we were the first people he had seen in 6 months. Either that or someone had way too much coffee this morning? Aside from that, the artwork was amazing. The 3500-year-old whalebone swords were most impressive.

We escaped his grasp and headed to Hokitika where we visited the fish and chip shop and the Jade factory. The former was ok, but the later was truly wonderful with some extremely grand and expensive works inside. They also had many a slab of jade cut to 8mm in thickness with a light source behind them. Now there is the work of a true artist. They even had a jade carving workshop where you could watch the carvers at work. Had pieces in differing stages of completion to show the progression. We had to laugh at the "Please don't feed the jade carvers" sign. If only one had 1000's to spend, you would go crazy. As it was, we bought Zuz a lovely pendant. I liked the raw chunks, maybe next time.

We left Hokitika and headed for Arthur's Pass after filling up the van and going through a few weird roundabouts. These had a rail line going straight through the middle of them. What the? The second one was even under construction. Now why would you not build the new roundabout away from the rail line? Beats me? We continued through more snow-covered mountains, under rock shelters and waterfall diverters over the road.

We stopped at a lookout where the car was attacked by a Kea. Further up the road we crossed a huge new viaduct and had to stop at the lookout to marvel at the impressive bit of engineering and thank god we did not have to follow the 'old road'. We carried on to Arthur's Pass and were going to stay at the DOC, but as it was wedged between the highway and the rail line and just off the station carpark we decided to head a further 9km down the road to Klondyke corner. It was nice and open and the setting sun was beautiful on the mountains. I decided to have a shower, so as the area only had a very cold river, I had to use the one in the van. Very small. It was like having a shower in a Czech pension. But got the job done in the end.

Then we proceeded to relax, until we heard a tapping on top of the van, which was a little annoying, but could live with it. Then on the under carriage. Now that's where we draw the line. It could do some nasty damage under there. So there we were in near darkness trying to chase these little F***ers (Kea's) off. Finally they went to bed fairly late. We cooked "glass noodles" for dinner. YUK!! Then downloaded yet more photos and sat writing the diary whilst polishing off the Gentleman Jack. Life is good.

Monday 21st of September

A very early start this morning was had. 4:30 in fact and that pesky little kea was as it again. Gee, don't they sleep. We conceded defeat and moved the van away from the trees about 60m into the open. It was windier as well and he landed on the roof, but did not stay for long. Luckily we managed to get back to sleep.

When we woke up for good, we made a cuppa or two. The next couple of hours were spent cleaning up and wrestling with bags and sensitive zippers as we fought to get everything back in. We did a pretty good job as well as we did not need to use the emergency daypack at all.

We also passed on our unused food to a gentleman who stopped at the rest stop for a coffee and a chat. He won't need to do any shopping for a while. We departed with a very different looking van. No beds made up and the table up. It was another nice drive, what we had come to expect around this place. We knew it was coming to an end soon as we exited the last valley and hit the Canterbury plains and said a fond farewell to the mountain scenery.

We completed our lap once we turned left onto the highway One, only 5 or so km from our destination. I put away the map, Luke Skywalker style and was going to use the force to guide us home after finding a petrol station to fill up the van one last time. Just like the missile into the death star, we cruised straight back to the depot. We took all our luggage out, deposited our garbage in the bins and filled out the necessary paperwork and worked out we had done just over 2500km. The dude bought over our fridges "want any of this?" Oops, no, forgot about that. The service was wonderful and very friendly. He even bailed us into a van and took us to the airport. We got another offer to stay to match the one in fox glacier as we seemed to have the sun tied to the van after telling the guy about the weather we had.

At check-in, somehow our bags weighed the same. Don't get that one considering all the stuff we bought. And as we did not have enough stuff, we decided to buy some more. The balancing kiwis will be a hit for sure. They made us pay departure tax before we could leave and killed some of the waiting time doing a survey for someone from the tourism ministry. It was a nice chance to relive it. Then boarded the fairly full flight, with an empty seat next to us. As usual great food and I watched Wolverine.

We landed in Sydney and made it out in lightning speed. Even went through an automated passport control, bags waiting there, straight through customs. I reckon it was about 12 minutes from getting off the plane to walking out into the arrival area.

The bloke was waiting for us and Zuz bought some flowers for her mum from a Czech lady from Brno. Small world, eh? Then we even nailed a car for the return trip as well. Walked in the door and it was lovely to be nearly knocked over by the boys.

So that was it. 10 Days that we could not have wished for it to turn out better. It was one of those holidays where everything went right or beyond. Things such as getting the cars to the airport, the upgraded Van and the incredible weather. Even down to dead low tide at Moeraki boulders. It was that sort of a holiday. Took way too many photos, but can you really with all that beauty around. And as for the travelling in a campervan. It is the only way to do it. Sure we did not get to all the stuff we originally intended to, but what we did see, we saw well and have left plenty on the table for next time. And believe me, there will be a next time.