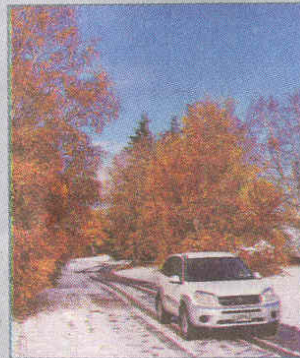


NEW ZEALAND

# Three ways to find yourself upside down

PHOTOGRAPHS: RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

## TRIP PLANNER



**Booking:**

**Flights:** Fly via Singapore Airlines to Christchurch for about Rs54,000. Air New Zealand goes via Hong Kong and Auckland for about Rs52,000. If you fly via Australia, you need an Australian transit visa.

**Visa:** Get a visa at the New Zealand embassy in Delhi or from the embassy's travel desk in Mumbai.

**Quick tips for driving through South Island:**

- Start planning at [www.newzealand.com](http://www.newzealand.com)

And other reasons why New Zealand is the adventure-activity capital of the world



BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

**A**re you an adrenaline junkie, who trips on the buzz doled out by adventure activities? Do you have a passion for food, drink and dramatic landscapes taken in through the windscreen of a car travelling along a fluid road net-

**High impact:** (Clockwise from above) Blazing a trail on an ice hike; Lake Wakatipu from the Tiger Moth; grounded after a 3,000ft skydive.



leopard skin leather

her helmet-mounted cameras

# HT Mint

## Three ways to find yourself upside down

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in Mumbai.

### Quick tips for driving through South Island:

- Start planning at [newzealand.com](http://newzealand.com).
- Buy a good road atlas; AA and Kiwi Pathfinder are good.
- Drop into iSites, represented by a white 'Y' on a blue background. Helpful staff give useful information on weather, local markets and festivals. Plus: racks of brochures, booklets and detailed regional maps.

### Where to stay:

Bed and breakfasts are charming and well-run. Some B&B's I stayed at: Hapuku Lodge, Kaikoura (Tel: (64) 03 319-6559; [www.hapukulodge.com](http://www.hapukulodge.com)); Holly Homestead, Franz Josef Glacier Village (Tel: (64) 03 752-0299; [www.hollyhomestead.co.nz](http://www.hollyhomestead.co.nz)); The Rainbow's Edge, By the lake's edge, Queenstown (Tel: (64) 03 442-6177; [www.rainbowsedge.co.nz](http://www.rainbowsedge.co.nz)). All priced Rs5,000-6,000 for a double room.

For more upmarket accommodation in Queenstown, try the Mountvista Boutique Hotel (Tel: (64) 03 442-8832; [www.mountvista.com](http://www.mountvista.com); Rs15,000) or book a luxurious treat at The Spire (Tel: (64) 03 441-0004; [www.spirehotels.com](http://www.spirehotels.com); Rs30,000).

### Where to eat:

Kiwis consider dining out an indulgent, but relaxed affair, and the restaurants reflect this. A good meal is never hard to find. Choose from bustling pubs, simple cafes to fine-dining restaurants. New Zealand is home to splendid wines, the Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs are especially good. Seafood is abundant; Kaikoura is famous for crayfish. Meat eaters are spoilt for choice, but vegetarians aren't ignored; every restaurant has vegetarian options.

ture activities? Do you have a passion for food, drink and dramatic landscapes taken in through the windscreen of a car travelling along a fluid road network? If your mind is shouting "yes, yes, that's me, that's me", then New Zealand's South Island beckons you, mate!

I'd answered the summons, and was holding the grab-rail of the Wheketere, a whale-watching boat, off the coast of Kaikoura, wide-eyed with wonder as a 20m long sperm whale, lazying on the Pacific, blew fountains into the sky. Then it arched its back to dive, in that characteristic gesture, and the tail broke surface.

I'd hired wheels for this southern sojourn and took the twisty mountain road across Arthur's Pass from Christchurch. The deep-blue Pacific greeted me as I joined the West Coast and headed towards its coolest star. The Southern Alps that border the West Coast block moisture-laden winds, which precipitate into snow and ice as they rise, creating some 140 glaciers above.

One, the Franz Josef glacier, has a village named after it. This 21km-long, fast-moving, slow-melting tongue of ice is, quite literally, enjoying its place in the sun. Of the numerous activities here, the most exciting and enjoyable is the Heli-Hike, a chance to play Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, without the effort real mountaineers make. A helicopter whisks you to the mountain top, and within 15 minutes, you are walking on the glacier, taking in its rugged surface, staring at your reflection in glass-like frozen pools and exploring blue-hued ice caves. I had been blessed with perfect weather, cloudless blue skies and a cheery sun. Helicopters today make aerial sightseeing a comfortable, cocooned experience, but flying machines were not always comfortable like this, as I found out later in Wanaka.

Pilot Peter Hendriks handed

me a heavy sheepskin leather jacket reminiscent of those in *Commando* war comic books. I wondered how old that apparel was when he opened his hangar and wheeled out the plane that goes with the jacket—a 1941 Tiger Moth largely built of fabric and wood. Flying in that Tiger Moth, dressed in authentic flying garb from an era long gone, was the fulfilment of a childhood dream. The cold wind in my face, the shuddering of the plane, the roar of its 4-cylinder, 130horsepower piston engine turning the wooden propeller, and in front of me on the hand-crafted instrument panel, the altimeter spinning like a clock on steroids... I couldn't stop grinning. This was a plane straight out of World War II, one that Spitfire pilots trained in. Caught up in the experience, I was almost looking out for the Hun in the sun.

Below me stretched the town of Wanaka, resplendent with her lake, meadows and snow-capped peaks. Behind me, Peter obligingly directed the Tiger Moth to where I pointed, and then he did a loop. I remember a plucking sensation on my neck and, looking up, I wondered why the sky was shimmering and a moment later realised that the sky was the lake and that we were upside down. But, of course, the plane fitted Peter like a glove and he knew exactly what he was doing.

It was in Queenstown finally that I started seriously weighing the pros and cons of illegal immigration. The four days I spent in the city were a combination of supercharged excitement from buzzing activities, a feeling of warmth thanks to the people, and a general happiness brought on by the lofty Remarkables, a mountain range and skifield in South Island, and the blue spread

after a 3,000ft skydive.



of Lake Wakatipu.

Once again, the Weather Gods obliged when I climbed to 15,000ft in NZone's little flying machine. (NZone is a skydive operator.) And when the pilot flicked the switch that slid a door open, I started seriously questioning the sanity in willingly flinging yourself out of a perfectly sound aeroplane. Of course, the jumpmasters and the jump-photographers were on a completely different wavelength—two of them had previously jumped out at 12,000ft, whooping with joy. Now as we reached our ceiling 3,000ft

above, Sasa, my jumpmaster, securely fastened the clamps that would secure me to him as we would plummet down, reaching a terminal velocity of 200kph in just under 12 seconds. I would be brave, nonchalant... And he flung us into the air and all my resolutions spiralled into a wisp. Yet, I had a smile plastered to my face, not because I was fearless, but simply because of the force of the air on my face at that speed, I just couldn't change my pre-jump bravado smile. As we dropped at 183ft a second, Lee, the photographer, spun circles around me,

her helmet-mounted cameras furiously whirring. A light tap on my head indicated that Sasa had pulled the rip cord and a second later, a reassuring jerk upwards told me that the parachute had indeed opened. Now we went for a sort of joyride, floating around slowly over the Remarkables and the lake, dropping through low clouds.

The next morning, I was scraping the foot pegs off on a low-slung 1,450cc Road King Classic Harley Davidson, riding the wicked, winding roads between Queenstown, Cromwell and Glenorchy. Hardly had I swung my leg off the handcrafted leather saddle, when I was once again questioning my sanity, as my mind told my body to leap off the ledge of the Kawarau Bridge in a 43m bungee jump. And so it was, that as I drove away from Queenstown, my mind was buzzing with the heady after-effects of adrenaline.

The small speck that is the South Island on a map may convince you that it can be covered in a couple of days. But even a month there might make you feel short-changed. There is so much to see, so much more to do. And, the entire Kiwi experience is infinitely better when you have your own set of wheels. Finally, be warned, illegal immigration is an offence.

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### CHILD-FRIENDLY RATING



New Zealand is a very child-friendly country, but participation in different adventure sports will depend on a child's age.