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Being adventurous comes easy in pretty New Zealand

● SAMRAT

WHETHER IT'S WALKING ATOP A BUILDING OR JUMPING OFF A PLANE MID-AIR, NEW ZEALAND PROVIDES JUST THE RIGHT AMBIENCE FOR ONE TO TAKE THAT LEAP OF FAITH

The first thing we did after waking up on our first morning in New Zealand was go for a walk. It was a short walk, barely a few hundred metres, but a memorable one. I had never before gone out for a stroll around the top of a building on a narrow walkway some two feet wide, with a drop of 192 metres on either side. That's what you do, strapped in safety harness, at the Auckland Sky Tower. There are no handrails, and the wind whips in from the sea nearby, threatening to leave you dangling a long way above the pavement. The view is spectacular. All of Auckland lies at your feet, while away in the distance you can see the bay, and a volcano a mere 700 years old – a little baby in geological time.

Walk done, we descended the tower for a closer look at New Zealand's biggest city from the back of an 1800 c.c. Harley Davidson motorcycle. Our ride took us through perfectly paved roads with neat, orderly traffic, past a seafront where a few citizens were swimming, running or parasailing in the cool, clean environs. We went up a gentle hill, past manicured greens that I initially mistook for a golf course. Then I saw the pitches. It was the prettiest cricket ground I've ever seen.

Up another hill, at the bottom of which a nudist beach nestled out of sight, we saw our first totem poles. The three carved wooden poles had meaning for Tony, the big, burly tattooed Maori man who was showing me around on his Harley. He knew them as Maori chieftains from long ago, with names and histories, who had come to this spot on New Zealand's North Island centuries ago.

The Maori were the first human settlers on New Zealand, arriving from Polynesia by boat to the areas around Auckland some 650 years ago. They called it *Tamaki Makau Rau*, meaning 'isthmus of one thousand lovers'.

The evocative old name is long gone, along with the Maori way of life, but to its credit, New Zealand has done far better for its original inhabitants than neighbouring Australia or distant USA. The Maori symbol of the silver fern, called the *koru*, is the country's most popular emblem, seen on the jerseys of its country's cricketers and the tail of the national carrier's aircraft. Air New Zealand also greets fliers in Maori, with a "*Kia Ora*", meaning "be well", which is the Maori way of saying hello. They have, however, dispensed with the Maori custom of rubbing noses, which is probably for the best, because air hostesses might otherwise find their noses rubbed right off their faces.

We flew out of Auckland in a tiny plane to a town called Nelson in New Zealand's wine country. Vineyards all around, with sauvignon blanc, riesling and pinot noir grapes on the vine, and tastings in their tasting rooms. There are wine tours and wine trails where you basically drink your way through the Marlborough region. Bicycle tours through the vineyards are recommended, with stops for slow meals at the excellent restaurants in the tasting rooms. The sea is close to Marlborough, and the seafood is fresh and tasty, and offered in thoughtful pairings with the local wine.

A couple of hours' boat ride out from Nelson will take you to the Abel Tasman national park. A school of dolphins raced our boat at the start of the journey, jumping out of the water, their sleek bodies glistening in the sun.

We went for a walk in the forest. There's nothing there that can seriously harm a human being. No crocodile in water or tiger on land. No snake, or even a scorpion.

New Zealand just feels extremely safe. It has

no animal predators, and few human ones. It is a place where nature is kind, people follow the rules, and everything works.

This is why walking on a ledge of a building 192 metres up feels safe there. You know that the harness will work. It's also why I felt confident enough to take a ride up in a plane to a height of 13,000 feet, dangle my legs outside the open door, and jump out.

Skydiving is an experience of a lifetime; it's over the Abel Tasman region at the edge of the Tasman Sea, it was otherworldly. The land is a picture postcard. The roar of wind in the ears is the only reality as you tumble out of the plane, towards the unreal ground far, far below.

In New Zealand, it felt exciting, but no more dangerous than taking a Mumbai local at rush hour. Anyone could do it.

The writer's trip was organized by Tourism New Zealand



Dolphins en route Abel Tasman park; top right: sky diving over Tasman sea coast; bottom: Marlborough wine country