

Adventure in New Zealand

Mystina's Trip to New Zealand for the National Association for Interpretation (NAI)
International Conference

April 1 – 18, 2016

Rainforest, whales, penguins, adventure, adrenaline, new friends, and memories are the words that sum up my adventure to New Zealand for the NAI International Conference. The best part of being an interpreter is the opportunities for experiences of a lifetime; and this certainly was. My adventure began just like Bilbo Baggins', stepping out my door and saying "I'm going on an adventure!" Although I didn't experience any encounters with fire breathing dragons, I did travel through several Lord of the Rings filming locations and New Zealand truly is Middle Earth. Anywhere you are in New Zealand you feel like that at any moment you could meet a hobbit, elf, orc, or wizard. It was all so surreal and I loved every minute of it.

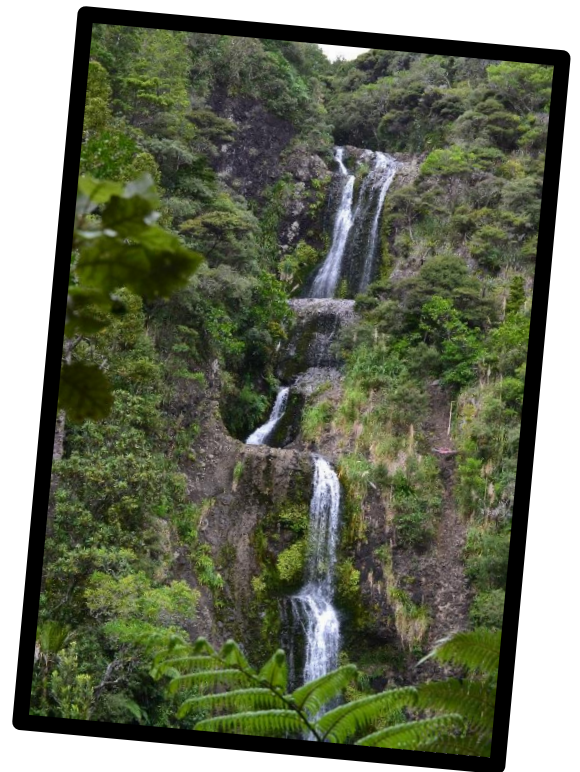
Day 1

My journey began with two flights that reached San Francisco and then from there a 12 hour and 40 minute



flight across the Pacific Ocean to Auckland, New Zealand. We landed early morning April 1st and traveled to meet with the NAI group for a pre-conference tour. I met several new friends on this tour, including a couple from Australia and a few from New Zealand, friends I would spend a lot of time with for the next two weeks. We traveled to and explored the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park where we visited a radar station

interpretive site, Mercer Bay interpretive site, a historical Maori village site, the Tasman Sea, and the Arataki Visitor Education Center. Today I discovered more about the Maori ancestral way of life, New Zealand interpretative exhibits, and native birds including the tui, fantail, silver-eye, Australasian gannet, Australasian magpie, and common myna.



We then traveled to Kitekite Falls (pronounced "kitty-kitty"). To get to the falls, we hiked through the native rainforest where I saw my first kauri tree, New Zealand's ancient, sacred tree that are hundreds of years old. I paid my respects by "tree-hugging" it. We also had a

picnic lunch where I tasted my first New Zealand food. I never became a big fan of New Zealand food throughout the trip... We also stopped for the New Zealand traditional afternoon tea. This was an interesting cultural experience.

Day 2



On day two, we boarded the train heading south to Wellington, where the conference was to be held. It took the whole day to travel from Auckland to Wellington, but it was worth



every minute. We saw a lot of the North Island countryside. It was a beautiful place filled with rolling green hills dotted with white sheep, tropical and evergreen trees, crops, cattle, steep gorges, creeks, small towns, and birds. I added the pukeko, paradise shelduck, white-faced heron, Australasian harrier, and spur-winged plover to my life list. The birds of New Zealand were so spectacular! They

were also easy to spot and photograph since they had no fear. Because New Zealand is a group of islands so cut off from the world, there were no native mammals except for two bats. This caused a lot of the native birds to adapt to be flightless and have no need to be fearful. When the Europeans arrived in the late 1600s, mammals began to be introduced including rats, stoats, possums, weasels, cats, dogs, deer, farm animals, etc. The native birds were vulnerable and several species went extinct. New Zealand is now very conservation minded and have set traps throughout the country to begin to rid the land of these invasive predators. They have also began to net the wild deer to put them on farms. One of their awesome conservation projects is creating these "lifeboat islands" by ridding outlying islands of invasive plants and animals and releasing native birds to build up their populations and remain protected. These islands are successful so far and populations of extremely endangered birds such as the kiwi, takahe, kakapo, and kokako are beginning to recover. We had the special opportunity to visit one of these islands which I will talk more about later in the report.

When the train arrived in Wellington, I hopped into a taxi to meet Missouri NAI members John and Kathy Miller at Zealandia, a native wildlife sanctuary, for a night tour. It was raining, but I was too excited to notice. This was probably my only chance I was going to see a kiwi in the wild since they are nocturnal and very rare. I was lucky to hear one while on the tour. They are so loud for such little guys! They sound like a distressed Tribble. I didn't get to see one though. I got close because one crossed the path right behind our group and we turned to see him, but we weren't fast enough. We tried looking around the area for him, but we didn't ever find him. Hearing him was good enough for me and it counts enough to mark him on my life list. I did get to see one in the zoo later on as well. Some of the other things I got to see on the Zealandia night tour were glowworms, cave weta (a cricket type insect), a long-finned eel, a maud frog, takahes (very endangered birds) and tuataras (ancient native lizards). John was so excited to see the tuatara because one of his main things he wanted to do in New Zealand was see one. We all had a great experience!



Day 3

On day 3 we had most of the day before conference started so I visited Peter Jackson's Weta Workshop where they design and make movie props and costumes, including those of the Lord of the Rings movies, the Hobbit movies, and King Kong movie. We had a behind the scenes tour of the workshop and discovered how costumes and props are made. I also got to see some of the original Lord of the Rings costumes up close.



After exploring the Weta workshop and taking photographs with the trolls from the Hobbit movie, I headed back to Zealandia to explore the reserve during the day time. I spent a good deal of time wandering the paths through the rainforest landscape looking for birds or other critters. Some of the things I saw today were kaka parrots, red-crowned parakeets, bellbirds, Eurasian blackbirds, tui birds, saddleback birds, the New Zealand robin, tuatara lizards, and a tree weta cricket.

When the conference officially started later in the afternoon, we participated in a traditional Maori welcome where we were fortunate enough to hear welcome singing and prayers in the Maori language that we responded to by singing our own song in the same language. We then lined up to be greeted with the traditional Maori greeting of the touching of the noses. We were getting to experience the local culture of this great country.

Day 4

Today at the conference I attended sessions. The first session I attended was about the “Amphibians and You” curriculum, sort of like the Project Wet and Wild curriculum. We participated in a few of these amphibian activities and it gave me great ideas for a new amphibian program to be offered at Devil’s Den. I also received information on how to be certified in this curriculum which I will look into further. I also attended other sessions including one about combining stories of animals, people and the land to better help audiences understand the story of the site as a whole; and one about dealing with emotions when interpreting difficult topics such as cultural or historical stories. We also had the opportunity to visit the Wellington Zoo to see their interpretation techniques. My favorite part was that even though it was a traditional zoo housing exotic animals, it had one whole section of the zoo dedicated to New Zealand’s natives called “Meet the Locals.” This section housed many native New Zealand birds with exhibits interpreting these birds. It also had an agriculture exhibit to show how agriculture plays an important role in New Zealand, how the agriculture remains sustainable and organic, and how it all ties together with conservation. The “Meet the Locals” section also had a garden of only New Zealand’s native plants. This is also where I finally got to see the native little blue penguins, the world’s smallest penguin. A zoo educator was giving a program on them as well so it was neat to hear a New Zealand interpretive program as well as discover more about these adorable little penguins.

Later in the evening we had an organized dine-around where we got into small groups to sample some of the local restaurants. I was in the group that ate at the Crab Shack. Even though my shrimp (which they call prawns) still had the heads and eyes and were looking at me while I ate them (not a comfortable way to eat shrimp), we had a great time. We had a few people from Australia and New Zealand in our group so it was great getting to spend some time with new friends from different countries. Afterwards, as we were walking back to our hotel, we came across a cool playground complete with a lighthouse slide which of course, being adventurous interpreters, we all had to go down the slide. We also found and ventured out onto a pirates plank over the bay and we found a bridge full of padlocks clipped onto the fence, just like in the “Now You See Me” movie. We had a lot of crazy fun as you would with a bunch of interpreters.

Day 5

Today was our conference's field experience day. The field experience I chose to go on was the trip to Kapiti Island Nature Reserve and Marine Reserve. This is the island I mentioned earlier in this report about being closed to visitors, except by permit, to protect the native species. I was so excited because this is a special opportunity and I thought about all the native bird species I was going to see! A native Maori named Joe was on the trip with us and he brought his guitar so our trip began with a fun bus ride to the island that was an hour long and complete with the singing of oldies songs. We were all singing the songs and having a great time. When we got to the island checkpoint where we were to meet our ferry that would take us to the island, we had to check our bags and clothing for any hitchhiking plant parts or animals. This is one of their conservation safety measures to ensure nothing gets on the island that isn't supposed to be there. After we made sure we were all clear, they gave us a birding checklist (awesome!!) and we boarded the ferry. There were a lot of us birders on this tour, including Ted Cable, so when you get a lot of birders together and you're trying to herd them to the boat but there is a pile of gulls and oystercatchers nearby, it's not an easy feat. After identifying the birds, checking them off our lists, and snapping some photos, we were satisfied with our lifers and boarded the boat. The boat took us out to sea and to Kapiti Island where we were met with a few Maoris that would be our tour guides for the rest of the day. We were also treated with another Maori welcome. For the next few hours, we had the opportunity to hike the trails into the island's forest



where all the native birds were. Even though the trails were much more challenging than that of Devil's Den, I added many more lifers to my checklist and the scenery around the island was spectacular. I could've lived there. Once I reached the top of the island, I took in the views from a 360 angle. I also made a new friend up at the top of the hill, a weka. The weka is a larger native bird that is an opportunistic eater so if you rattle something in your day pack that sounds like a package of food, the weka is going to hang out around you. We all were rattling our packs to make it seem like we had food just so the weka would stay near long enough to get several photos of him. He was really cool. Our guide told us that because wekas are large and are opportunistic eaters, they will sometimes eat small bird chicks and eggs which isn't good for the

other more endangered native birds, but he gets to stay on this protected island because he is a native bird, too and deserves the same amount of conservation help as the others. I agree.

After our break at the top of the hill we all tiredly made our way back down towards the beach where we started, passing a kiwi burrow, which was cool to see. When we made it back down to the beach and lodge, we were rewarded with a lunch prepared by the island family. I



sat out on the deck to eat this delicious lunch and I found that I would have to hover over my plate to protect my food from the kaka parrots that were sitting up in the tree above me eyeing my food hungrily. Apparently the kakas that live on the island have learned that they should hang out near the house to get food. Even though there are strict rules to not feed them, they get in close enough to snatch a bite from an unsuspecting visitor. When I finished my meal I took my plate inside and grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the cookie jar. I went back outside to enjoy my cookie. As I was standing on the deck eating my cookie, a kaka flew up and landed on my head. All I could think of at the moment was "I have a parrot on my head and his claws are sinking into my skin and it hurts." I didn't think about my cookie. He

had made his way down onto my arm at which time he snatched a big bite of my cookie and flew away. Then, our tour guide came out and told me to put my "biscuit" into my pocket or he's just going to keep coming back for more. So that stupid parrot got me in trouble, but it was an awesome experience! How many people can say they had a wild parrot land on their head??

Day 6

Today I attended more conference sessions and volunteered as a room monitor. I also went on a Lord of the Rings Filming Location tour around Wellington. We visited sites where they filmed Rivendell, the River Anduin, Isengard, and the woods were the hobbits hid from the ringwraiths. Our guide gave us hobbit cloaks and swords so we got to act out the scenes in these locations. It was so fun!



This evening was the banquet and auction. There were several great auction items representing the countries of the conference attendees. It was a great final evening with all of us together. It was sad to say goodbye to a few of my wonderful new friends I made, but I was happy because most of my new friends were going to be traveling with me on the post-conference tour.

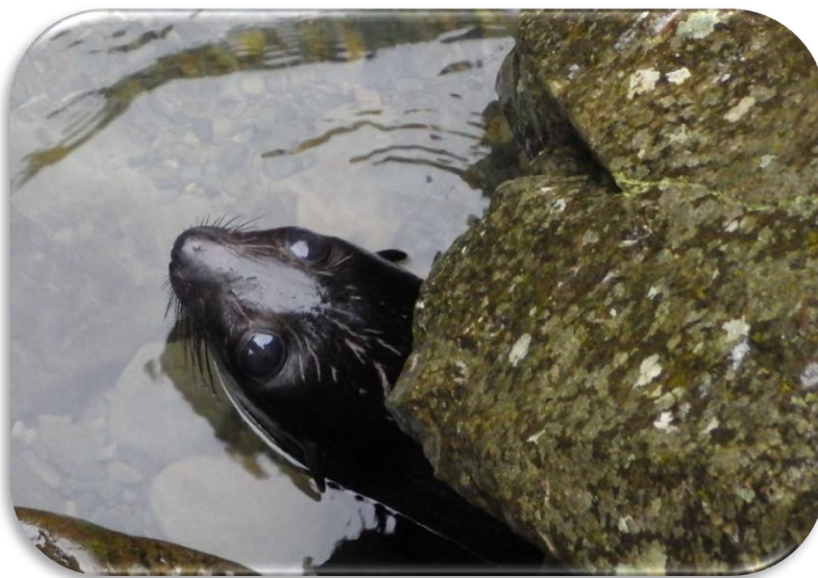
Day 7

Today was the last day of the official conference and the first day of the post-conference tour of the South Island. We had a group of 19 of us interpreters on the tour and we were heading out to explore interpretive sites and other cool things in the South Island since so far we all have only just seen parts of the North Island. Our trip began with a 3 hour ferry ride across the Cook Strait between the two main islands. Once we arrived in the South Island we had our first dinner together and then checked into our motel for the night.

Day 8

First on our agenda for today was visiting Peter Jackson's Knights of the Sky Aviation Museum. This was a really well designed museum with great interpretive exhibits. The museum had a natural flow that took you through the exhibits. Everything in the museum was from Peter's collection and it consisted of old planes, war uniforms, war propaganda posters, etc. It was a great museum.

We also traveled to a waterfall where mommy New Zealand fur seals bring their babies. This waterfall area is sort of like a seal day-care. The mommy seals bring their babies to the waterfall so they can play all day in a place safe from predators while mommy goes hunting at



sea. I could have sat there for hours watching the cute baby fur seals dive around under the waterfall and play with each other. It was so heartwarming. The cutest thing that touched my heart was seeing a baby seal waiting for his mommy at the creek entrance. "I'm going out to sea to hunt. You have two hours to play at the waterfall and then I want you to come back and wait right here for me to pick you up," said the mommy fur seal. "Ok, I'll wait here for you to get back, mommy," replied the baby fur seal. As I looked

down at this cute little baby, he looked up at me with the biggest, saddest eyes. "My mommy told me to wait right here for her." I hope mommy comes back for him soon. He looked worried.

Further down the road we stopped at some tide pools. They only gave us five minutes to see the tide pools, but when you are dealing with a group of interpreters and you put them in a place with a lot of fascinating things to be discovered, you're going to be there longer than five minutes... There was a ton of different kinds of seaweed. I found so many cool shells (with things living in them), trilobite-looking critters on rocks, my very first star fish in the wild, a sea slug, my very first brittle star, a mud fish, and a seal. NAI president Amy Lethbridge was inching closer to the seal to get a photo and I guess she got too close for comfort because the seal started snorting and growling at her. It was pretty funny.



Day 9

We had an early morning today so we could catch our boat for the whale watching tour. I was so excited because I had never seen a whale in the wild before. My new friend Heather from Colorado had never even seen a whale before, even in captivity, so this was going to be a great new experience for a lot of us. The sea was rough and exciting. There were tons of



seabirds flying around the water and to my great excitement we started seeing different species of albatross!! New birds for my life list! A few minutes later, we spotted a spray of water as a whale surfaced to breathe. Not just any old whale, a sperm whale! This was my first time to ever see a sperm whale and a whale in the wild. I must have taken 100 photos of him.

Later in the afternoon we arrived in Christchurch, a town devastated by numerous earthquakes. We had a guide show us around the town and she talked about the earthquake damage.

The city just looked broken, but she was telling us how everyone is



picking up and rebuilding. Conservation projects are turning rubble into small garden areas. More green spaces are being created since they won't be able to rebuild on the "red-zones." It was an interesting interpretive perspective.

Day 10

Today we explored the town of Tekapo, a glacier lake, and Aoraki Mt. Cook (New Zealand's highest elevation). When we reached the Mt. Cook visitor center, I saw for the first



time a glacier. The light blue color made it look so surreal. We hiked on a trail to see another glacier and when we got there we could hear it cracking, an eerie sound that carried through the valley. It was hard to imagine that I was standing there looking at something so ancient and powerful. We also hiked a different trail that took us to another glacier and lake with icebergs. This was the first time I've seen an iceberg.

When we arrived back to our motel in Tekapo, it was dark so we made plans to eat dinner and then go stargazing. Tekapo is supposedly the darkest skies in New Zealand and maybe even the world, so it's perfect for astronomy. We got a great view of the Southern Cross, a constellation that can only be seen in the southern hemisphere. It was also a great opportunity to see Orion upside-down, the Milky Way and two other galaxies that can only be seen in the southern hemisphere. It was spectacular!

Day 11

Today we traveled to Queenstown, the adventure capitol of New Zealand. I had the extraordinary opportunity to bungee jump off New Zealand's original Kawarau Bridge at 142 feet. This is the first time I've bungee jumped and I actually didn't experience any fear, until about halfway through the jump when I was like "holy cow, what am I doing?!" I had the entire NAI group cheering me on from the observation deck so it made it better and it was something I can mark off my bucket list.



Later in the day we had a free day of shopping, dining, and exploring Queenstown. A small group of us visited the Kiwi Birdlife Park where we got to see the exhibits of native birds. We watched an interpretive presentation on kiwis and watched the caretakers store insects in the kiwis' exhibit.

In the evening, two of my interpreter friends and I rode the gondola to the top of the nearby mountain to overlook the city lights below.

Day 12



Today was our last day together as part of our NAI post-conference interpretive tour. We headed to Dunedin and the Otago Peninsula for a wildlife tour to see sea lions, fur seals, birds and penguins. We got to see wild yellow-eyed penguins! This is the first time I've seen wild penguins.



Our wildlife guide was leading us out on a beach and interpreting the sea lion. A male sea lion jumped out of the grass next to us and started running towards us. We quickly got out of his way. What an experience it was getting chased by a wild sea lion in New Zealand! We cautiously made our way around the sea lion and down the beach to where the penguins were. It was really neat to see the penguins hanging out at the beach that connected to a steep hillside of a sheep pasture. The sheep, sea lions, and penguins were living in the area quite harmoniously. Only in New Zealand will you find such a group of animals. We stayed for a while enjoying the penguins and learning more about them from our guides.

NAI group cheering me on from the observation deck



Later in the evening we had our last meal together. It was really sad saying goodbye, but hopefully I will see my new NAI friends at future conferences. Several said they would like to visit Devil's Den State Park so maybe I can catch up with them then.

Day 13

I rented a car to drive back to Queenstown for a helicopter ride over glaciers to see Milford Sound. While driving the car, it was an interesting experience

driving in the wrong side of the car on the wrong side of the road. New Zealanders drive like they do in England. I now can say I can drive in any country on any side of the car and road.

The helicopter ride was my first ever. We flew close to glaciers and I got a great view of the beautiful blue ice. We then landed in Milford Sound



to see and photograph the famous Mitre Peak. After the helicopter tour, I caught a short flight back to Auckland in the North Island, leaving the South Island behind, for the rest of my stay in New Zealand.

Day 14

Today was full of Hobbit life. I boarded the bus for a tour of Hobbiton and the Glowworms caves. We traveled out of Auckland to Matamata where Hobbiton is located. After the completion of the Lord of the Rings films, Peter Jackson tore down the set of the Shire and the hobbit holes leaving nothing but the sheep farm where it was located. So many people came knocking on the farmer's door asking to see the Shire location that the farmer finally gave Peter



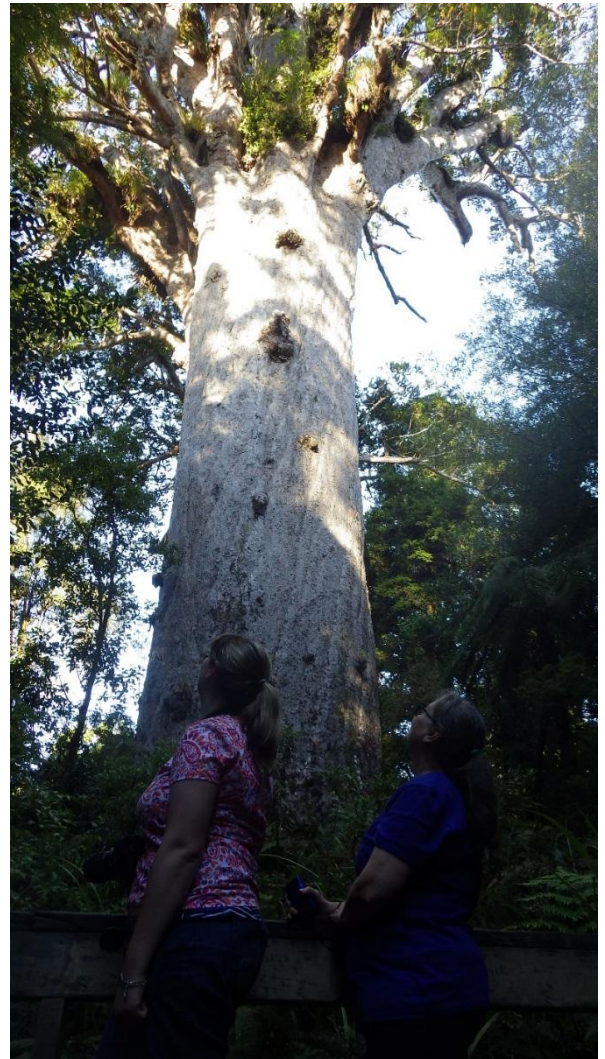
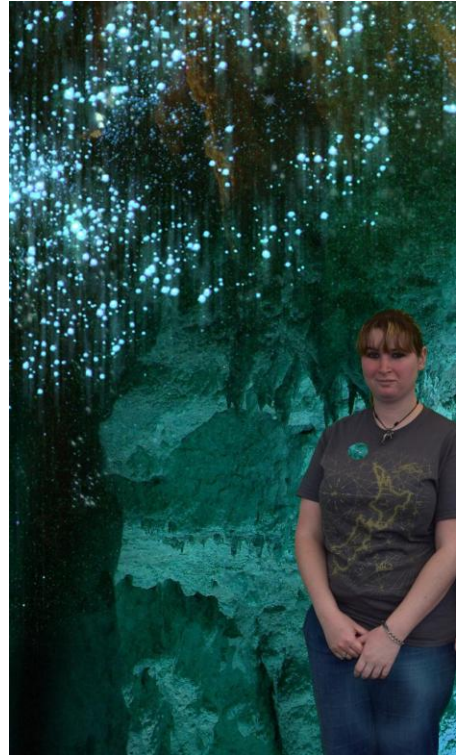
Jackson permission to leave the set up after filming scenes in the Hobbit movies. I had the wonderful opportunity to tour the Shire and see all the hobbit holes (there were over 40). As I walked through the place, it all felt so real like that at any moment I would see a hobbit step out of his house to tend his garden. We even had lunch at the Green Dragon Inn where Merry and Pippin frequent for drinks and merry singing. I could definitely live at the Shire. It was a very special place.

Our next stop on our tour was the Waitomo Glowworm Caves. Our guide was a native Maori and a great interpreter. He even sang us a traditional Maori song in the cathedral part of the cave. We toured more of the cave before heading down to the river where a boat was waiting. So we could have the entire experience of the surreal atmosphere, there was no motor on the boat and it glided gently on the water being pulled by our guide using ropes on the ceiling. The group was silent and all you could hear was the soft drip, drip of the water falling from the ceiling to the river below. In the darkness of the cave I looked up to see a million glowing lights, their reflections dancing on the water below. It looked like stars in the night sky. It was such a powerful, surreal experience that I almost started crying. It was probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Day 15 – 17

For the next 3 days I went on a Bay of Islands tour in the northern part of the North Island. We had a small group and I made new friends from Italy, New Zealand, and Australia. We spent time at a couple beaches, explored a waterfall, viewed the famous Friedensreich Hundertwasser toilets, soaked in natural hot springs, and visited the Waitangi Treaty grounds where we toured the museum and attended a Maori cultural display to discover more about the treaty signed between the Maori and the early Europeans in the 1700s. The museum was really interpretive and really well designed. My favorite part was a large touch screen that was like a table that you could click on different pictures to discover more about a certain time in the history. This is something I would like to do for our CCC history here at DDSP.

We also got to visit Tane Mahuta, the oldest and largest kauri tree in New





Zealand and the largest according to mass in the world. This tree is over 2,000 years old and still standing tall. It was magnificent! You can't help wondering what this tree has seen and experienced throughout his years. He lived 1,000 years before the Maori, the first humans, came to New Zealand. It blows my mind.

I also got a chance to take a boat tour around the islands in the Bay of

Islands where I saw dolphins, volcanic rock, and many seabirds. The waters in the more open areas further from the islands were choppy and rough. It made for a fun ride, but it meant we weren't able to get in the water to swim with the dolphins. We traveled to the famous Hole in the Rock and our crazy captain actually took our 3 deck boat through the rock. It was such a rush! I loved it! I also got to try "boom-netting," an adventurous activity where you are sitting in the water on a net attached to the side of the boat and the captain is driving the boat forwards and backwards to drag you along. It was kind of scary. Scarier than bungee jumping anyway.

Day 18

On my last day in New Zealand I was going for the ultimate adrenaline activity. I've always wanted to sky dive so I might as well do it in New Zealand,



the adventure capitol of the world. After suiting up and meeting the instructor I would be diving tandem with, I boarded the little plane that would take me up to 16,500 feet, the highest in New Zealand, where I will be jumping out of a perfectly good plane for 75 seconds of free fall. Maybe I'm insane for doing this, but it'll be another checkmark on my bucket list. It was great! I, again, didn't experience any fear. As I was free falling back to earth I could feel the skin on my face flapping around like the classic high speed facial expressions you see on TV. My mouth dried out pretty quick so I couldn't scream any more, but man the view was spectacular! When the instructor finally pulled the parachute, it was a smooth ride. He let me drive the parachute, too. At the very end, we landed back on earth very smoothly. I did it! I sky dived! It was a great way to end my adventure in New Zealand.

Later in the afternoon, I boarded the plane for the long flight home. After the 12 and ½ hour flight to Houston I was supposed to hop on another flight that would take me to Little Rock. But because Houston had experienced flooding, all the flights from the airport were canceled for the rest of the day. I ended up waiting hours at the airport to retrieve my checked bags and then I rented a rental car to drive 9 hours to Devil's Den. I arrived in the park at 5am for a few hours' sleep and then went in to work at 9am. I felt like a zombie the next day, but I managed.

New Zealand is like heaven on earth. Any naturalist could find a home there. It's full of beauty and awe-inspiring landscapes and nature you cannot find anywhere else on earth. New Zealand now has a special place in my heart and I hope I can return again one day to experience her splendor and adventure. I made many new friends, far and near, on this adventure and I've learned so many new things both on the personal and professional level. I am truly thankful and



blessed for the opportunity to experience this amazing country.

Some of the friends I made from the NAI conference and Bay of Islands trip