

ARNO HOLIDAY 2008

The holiday started with what was probably the smallest ARNO group yet at Heathrow on Saturday 8th. November, where we flew for just under 12 hours by Boeing 747 to Hong Kong's Lantau airport – much to the relief of those who remember the hair-raising drop over the flats at the old airport! We had to take a train! to collect our luggage, where we met Ms. Edwina Carpenter, who was to be our guide throughout the trip, her having returned from guiding in Australia but two days before. An hour's coach trip over the new bridges linking the small islands and beneath the tunnel linking Hong Kong with the mainland saw us at our hotel – just opposite one of the tube stations and close to a large recreation park. For those of us who remembered the old Hong Kong, the city was barely recognisable, having been transformed with innumerable blocks of flats of some 20 or more storeys and business buildings even higher.

Monday 10th. saw a bright, warm day – just right for sightseeing. We started by taking the coach to Aberdeen. The harbour was much as most of us remembered it, though overshadowed by the enormous accommodation blocks. We took a sampan trip around the harbour, and the famous old floating Fish Restaurant is still there, though now looking a trifle shabby. There followed a tour round a jewellery factory where one of our couples, whose wedding anniversary it was, was tempted to buy, and then a coach ride to Stanley – little changed, and with its market still thriving as busily as ever. The return journey took us to The Peak – very crowded with visitors but giving wonderful views over the city and harbour. The precipitous funicular took us down to earth again to catch the coach back to our hotel. In the evening, we dined high above the city in a rotating restaurant in the Hopewell Building, followed by a boat trip in the harbour to see the city's lights by night. We were well watered in the boat, thus ensuring a sound night's sleep for all!

Tuesday 11th. was essentially a rest day, to give us time for private exploration of the area before the coach took us to the airport in the evening for our flight south. We arrived on a fine, warm day on Wednesday and passed through the extensive checks for foodstuffs. One of our party had eaten the last wine gum from her luggage, but the sniffer dogs still reacted to the smell of her suitcase. We met Tom, who was to be our 'bus driver throughout our stay in North Island, and he took us to our hotel in Auckland – the "City of Sails" and New Zealand's largest city. The hotel was just round the corner from the ferry port and at the bottom of the main shopping street. We dined that evening in the Observatory Restaurant of the city's radio/TV tower – similar to London's Post Office Tower - and had plenty of time to explore the main shopping street before dining. The Tower gave us a splendid all-round view over the city, the Hauraki Gulf, Waitemata Harbour and the islands, and its glass floor was sufficient to give the collywobblers to those of a nervous disposition!

Thursday 13th. saw us in Tom's coach for a tour of the area. Our first call was to the a bridge linking the islands that, having proved inadequate for the increasing amount of traffic, was widened by a Japanese company by the attachment of two-lane wings on each side of the bridge – know locally as the Nippon Clippons! We were introduced to Auckland's mono-generic volcanoes – great uprisings of magma that did not explode but simply created hills - and were taken to one called Mount Eden, a triangulation point from which could see both the Tasman Sea on one side and the

Pacific Ocean on the other. Thence, to the world-famous Kelly Tarleton Aquarium, built underground in abandoned sewage tanks, followed by a visit to Museum, a fine, large building overlooking the city. Time there was too short to see the wonderful range of exhibits before the coach carried us back to the hotel.

A short walk took us to the ferry port where we boarded the boat to Devonport to witness Beating Retreat by the personnel of HMNZS PHILOMEL. Unfortunately, the temperature dropped in an increasingly strong wind while we waited for the ceremony but this was compensated for afterwards by Commander James KERRY's taking us to a local bar, where we warmed-up and met our hosts. The ferry trip back to Auckland was much more comfortable!

The following day, we took the ferry again and were met by James KERRY and Lieutenant-Commander John MURRAY, who escorted us in a 'bus to HMNZS PHILOMEL, where we toured the museum and went to a Marai – a Maori meeting house - where a Maori Chief Petty Officer made us welcome and taught us how to execute a Maori greeting – shake hands and rub noses together! PHILOMEL's officers and some senior ratings greeted us and then sang a Maori song, to which we responded with "Hearts of Oak"! Lunch in the wardroom was followed by a tour of PHILOMEL and the dockyard, then our hosts took us on a tour of the area and introduced us to HOKEY POKEY – New Zealand's special sort of ice-cream. This hokey-pokey, for those with long memories, was different from what we used to buy from the Wall's tricycle – flavoured and coloured water ice – it used to cost a penny, as opposed to threepence for REAL ice cream! Our hosts' hospitality knew no bounds and it was with regret that we had to bid them farewell before returning to the hotel, to dine and pack for the next day's journey.

Saturday saw us in the coach for a long trip – luncheon at Otorahanga followed by a fascinating tour of the Waitomo Glow-worm caves that house millions of moth grubs that spin long sticky strands with which to catch flying insects, above a path strewn with stalagmites and with water rushing by in the dark. An odd but most interesting experience for all. On, then, to Rotorua (Maori for "second lake"), sitting within hillocks of volcanic activity and the largest spa town of the southern hemisphere. The town itself is in a caldera, with many vents and several lakes nearby.

In the afternoon, several of the party took a float-plane tour over the caldera and lakes – an exhilarating experience for all. Then back to the hotel, with its wide range of facilities including a spa and volcanically-heated swimming pool. On the next day, Sunday, we visited the Agorodome for an interior demonstration of various breeds of sheep and sheepdogs, members of the audience milking a cow and feeding a baby sheep by one of our members, followed by a live demonstration in a large field of the use of a dog to herd sheep, all controlled without any physical touch by the shepherd's using voice and whistle alone. Rainbow Springs followed, where we saw a variety of native fish, birds and animals, almost all of which are in need of protection and preservation. The day's tour ended with a visit to Te Puia, where we were briefed on Maori lifestyle, culture, clothing and history – a most interesting trip. And finally, a "hangi" (a Maori meal) for dinner, with dance and song presentation, in which two of our members were required to play their parts!

Next day, we left the sulphurous smell of Rotorua to drive to Wellington, New Zealand's capital city. It was a long but interesting drive, mainly through farmland, with a stop at an electricity generating station at Wairaki, which uses as fuel the superheated steam rising from the earth. A brief stop at Lake Taupo for luncheon was followed by a drive down across the flat plain, with tea at Levin, before arrival in the hilly city. We were given a photo-opportunity from a hill overlooking the city and harbour before going to our hotel via Sir Basil Spence's "Beehive" – the parliamentary offices, opposite which is a black-painted pub called The Backbencher, and containing a Division Bell for the MPs.

Tuesday found us aboard the "Kaitaki", once known as the "Pride of Cherbourg", and still registered as a ferry at Portsmouth. This took us on the two-and-a-half-hour run across the Cook Strait to Picton, in South Island. This delightful little town is the rail terminus, where we took the train along tracks somewhat narrower than England's to Christchurch, the largest city in South Island and the country's second largest. The trip was interesting and we were briefed from time-to-time by the train's guard, who also noted that sheep have 10-minute memories – somewhat similar to politicians!

Our hotel, within easy walking distance of the city centre, was alongside the River Avon and from there, on Wednesday, we took a coach tour that encompassed Sumner Beach, Lyttleton Harbour with its "One-O'clock Ball" (still in place) that was used to enable ships' officers to set their chronometers – hence the phrase "Keep your eye on the ball!". The trip culminated in a drive through a 1.7Km tunnel and a visit to the museum, from which we each found our own way back to the hotel. Kathy was our coach driver, who stayed with us throughout the South Island tour and gave us a most comfortable journey throughout.

Thursday 20th. saw us rising very early to take the train over the mountains to the west coast, with Kathy taking our luggage in her coach to meet us at Arthur's Pass, the rail terminal. The train was full, and it was noticeable that its signs were in both English and Chinese – a reflection of the number of Chinese tourists who visit New Zealand. The guard was very informative about the country and its animals, and we were able to see Wapiti – a species of deer. Re-boarding the coach at Arthur's Pass, we visited Shanty Town, an old gold-prospecting place, where we each panned (successfully) for gold, that was put into little glass bottles, and took a steam-train ride in the mining area.

Hokitika was the next stop – the place where the gold-miners landed, with 42 ships in one day bringing them in! Our final stop was at Whataroa, where we stayed the night, and those of booked for a helicopter flight the following day were weighed.

The airfield was just opposite the hotel, so on Friday forenoon we went into two helicopters that took us up to land on the Franz Joseph glacier, in the Westland National Park. The weather was wonderful, with bright sunshine, splendid views, and excellent visibility for photography. The pilots took photographs of their passengers and then used their own printing presses in the backs of the aircraft to produce instant pictures!

On, then, to the Hearst River, where we took a jet-boat trip up stream and the boat's owner demonstrated the craft's ability to turn through 360 degrees in its own length – a peculiarly invigorating experience! Our trip took us through farms where Kiwi Fruit

– known in New Zealand as “Zesperri” – was grown on vines similar to grapes, and on to Lake Wanaka, the 4th largest at 35Km long of South Island’s lakes. The day ended at Queenstown, near the lake and with splendid views of The Remarkables, a snow-capped range of mountains above Lake Wakatipu, with the Richardson and Harris ranges on the other side

The next day, Saturday, started with a visit to Kawarau to witness the Bungee Jump – a drop of 43 metres. The age record is held by a 94-year old man! This was followed by a visit to Arrowtown, scene of the great New Zealand gold rush in 1862. It is a pretty little town, very crowded with visitors and especially so that day for the charity-raising Wacky Races. We moved on to see a Jet Boat – literally, water-jet-propelled, with a draught of only 4 inches, to enable it to navigate the very fast, shallow rivers. A cable-car trip up Bob’s Peak was next, where we enjoyed superb views of the country, watched people taking luge runs down the steep hill, and saw the last remaining steamship returning from a trip on the lake.

Sunday 23rd

Our coach tour took us past The Remarkables to Kingston, at the end of the lake, with a stop for photographs at Mirror Lake, one of a series of lakes beneath the Earl Mountains (so named after the Earl of Eglinton), past Latitude 45 degrees South, through the Cleddau Valley Tunnel (dug by Welsh miners right through a mountain), thence through the Fjordland National Park, to reach Milford Sound, which is actually a glacial valley - a fjord. A boat, the Milford Adventurer, was waiting for us, with luncheon provided for our party, and we sailed down the Sound, past the mile-high Mitre Peak, to a photographer’s delight of scenery, including fur seals at rest – and it stayed relatively dry, despite being in an area that has 27 feet of rain a year. On returning, as we waited our turn to drive back through the Tunnel, we were amused by the cheeky Kakapo parrots that have little fear of humans and whose recreation seems to be stripping cars’ windscreen rubbers and wipers! The high number of Japanese visitors was surprising. On the journeys to and from the Sound, we stopped for a rest at Te Anau – an opportunity to buy some rabbits for the folk at home! We noticed many old mileage markers, at 5-mile-intervals, though distances now are measured metrically.

Monday 24th

Not too early a start today, with a stop at Cromwell for our trip to Dunedin, where miners first arrived for the gold first found in 1862. Bendigo, through which we travelled, is the home of Shrek the Sheep, found in 2004 after escaping the shearers for 10 years. Once sheared, his wool was donated to charity. Beehives were frequently seen among the wild lupins at the roadsides and by the River Lindis. Lupins are ubiquitous and regarded as a weed, but beautiful

We climbed the Lindis Pass, at 2186 feet, through hills barren of all but tussock grass, and had a photo stop there and at Lake Pukaki – a glacial lake for a hydro-electric scheme. Then, by Lake Tekapo and tiny Church of the Good Shepherd with, very near it, a statue to all working dogs. And finally, to Fairlie, at the southernmost end of the Canterbury Plains. The town was originally a staging post for changing horses.

There, the party was split into small groups, each of which was “adopted” by a local family for the night and made singularly welcome, with tours of farms and dairies and all of us made to feel fully at home. The people there make a business of this hospitality, but it is nevertheless sincere and friendly.

Next morning, we bade farewell to our kind hosts and set off through sunny, warm weather for Christchurch, passing Monterey Pines, of which 150 were planted in 1879, and many more high macrocarpa windbreak hedges. On the way, we passed through Geraldine, then stopped at a shop called The Tin Shed – run by a group of local women and selling a wide variety of woollen articles and other items. Many of us fell for it, and took advantage of the tax break of having our purchases directly mailed home. Our route took us over the Rakaia Bridge, beneath which was a vast flow of water, and we passed many fields of sheep and alpaca.

Arrival at Christchurch saw us disperse to a couple of pre-booked restaurants for luncheon before taking the flight to Auckland. We had an opportunity for a last look round, noting that the willows that line the River Avon were first imported from the island of St. Helena. On arrival at Auckland, some of us stayed overnight at the airport hotel while the remainder flew on home. Here, we lost our splendid guide, who had to fly home for yet another task.

We “stayers” rose early and took the flight to Fiji, where we landed at 1240 local time at Nadi airport, on the west coast. A small bus took us bumpily along the south coast to our hotel, almost an hour away and roughly equidistant between the airport and Suva, the capital, on the east coast. We passed many small villages, most with roadside vendors selling fruit, and the road lined in many places by flame trees in bloom. And it rained almost all the way!

On arrival at our hotel, we were greeted by “Bula!” as, indeed, on all occasions of meeting members of staff, on all conceivable occasions, and learned “Vinaka” as thank you. Having settled in, we were taken to the hotel’s fish restaurant, out in the lagoon, for dinner. Then, to settle in and sleep.

Thursday dawned bright and fine, and with a splendid selection of tropical fruit available for breakfast then and every morning. We all had a quiet day, finding our way around. The hotel faced a lagoon with a coral reef and a fine sandy beach. There were canoes for exploring the lagoon, as well as two swimming pools, a range of restaurants, games facilities, bars, and all this with colourful Mynah birds flitting about. A wonderful setting. A cocktail party that evening enabled us to meet the new Manager, who had arrived from France but 6 weeks before. It rained during the day, after the bright start, but the convivial fish supper did much to invigorate us.

Friday 28th.

The one poor element of our stay at the hotel was the incessant noise by what passed for music that overlaid every where and every conversation. Today, we were to go river-rafting, so prepared to get slightly damp. A short coach trip took us to two canoes powered by powerful, noisy outboard motors, and we set off up river, stopping for a break at a small waterfall where some of the canoe party, mainly Australians, jumped in. We landed at the bottom of a hill below the Fijian village and were met by

a group of colourfully-dressed women, who took us up to the Village Hall. There, we left shoes outside, were introduced to the Kava Ceremony (quite a few screwed-up faces on tasting the Kava!), and given a splendid demonstration of the wooden weapons, and how they were used, by the warriors. Then, a plentiful and varied luncheon, spread on mats on the floor, followed when it had been cleared away by a display of local crafts and beadwork for us to buy. By this time, it was raining outside so, when we returned to the canoes, we were each given a large sheet of plastic with which to protect ourselves. And we certainly needed it – the wind blew chill (the boats moved at high speed – possibly up to 40 knots at times) and the rain blasted at us. Just for once, most people were more than a little glad when the afternoon ended and we were able to return to the comforts of the hotel.

Saturday 29th

The day dawned dull but warm and a small group of us hired a taxi and took a trip of about 35 minutes to a nearby bird sanctuary, run as a charity. There were, as one might expect, many parrots, through whose cages one could walk, but also a great variety of birds in cages, all excellently cared for, colourful, and with plenty of room for flight. And at the entrance, some fine, tame green lizards that were perfectly at ease when being handled. Most of the cages and walkways were suspended in the trees, so there was also a variety of birds and ducks beneath, with the stream running there.

Back at the lagoon, it was a pleasure to see the variety of sea life – crabs and many beautifully-coloured small fish dashing around the coral and sand. Lawns overhung the beach, giving fine views seaward, and made the more welcome by the constant but unobtrusive attention of the stewards.

Sunday 30th.November – p.m.

Both sexes of Fijians sport a shock of black, frizzy hair, often with a flower in it, that surrounds the head – a hair stylist would soon go broke here! We had to clear our rooms quite early, but it was not until 6 p.m. that we were able to leave the hotel for the long, bumpy drive to the airport. It was noticeable that all the staff at the hotel spoke good English and were very courteous and cheerful – a marked contrast to the loud and boorish behaviour of some of the many young visitors there. It was not until nearly 11 p.m. that we departed, so a long night flight to Los Angeles was in order.

Sunday 1st. October – a.m.

Los Angeles was bright and sunny when we landed, but it was a long hike between terminals, fortunately with only our cabin baggage, for the flight to Heathrow in the early evening. The usual boring business of full customs search of ourselves and our hand luggage, then the long wait in the departure lounge. All in all, a bit of an anticlimax! Eventually, onboard the aircraft, to land at Heathrow on Monday forenoon, and home.

In summary, some long flights, but a most interesting and varied holiday with memories that will long linger.