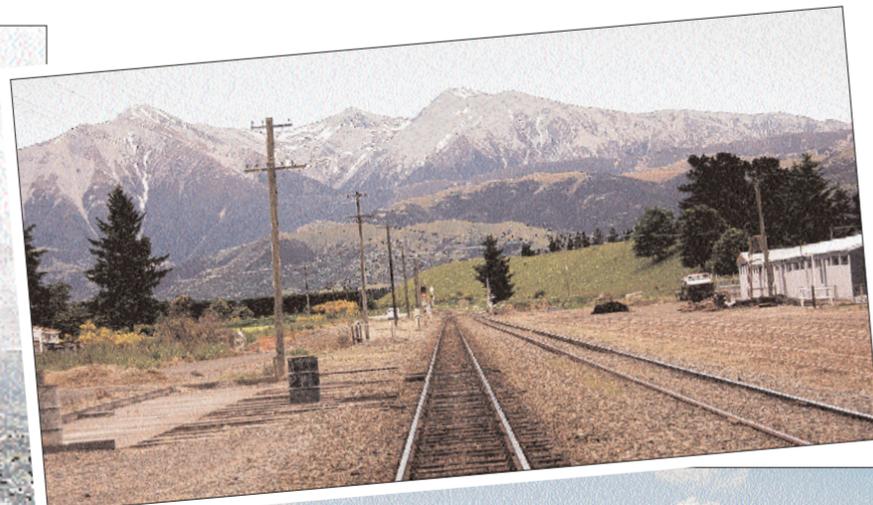
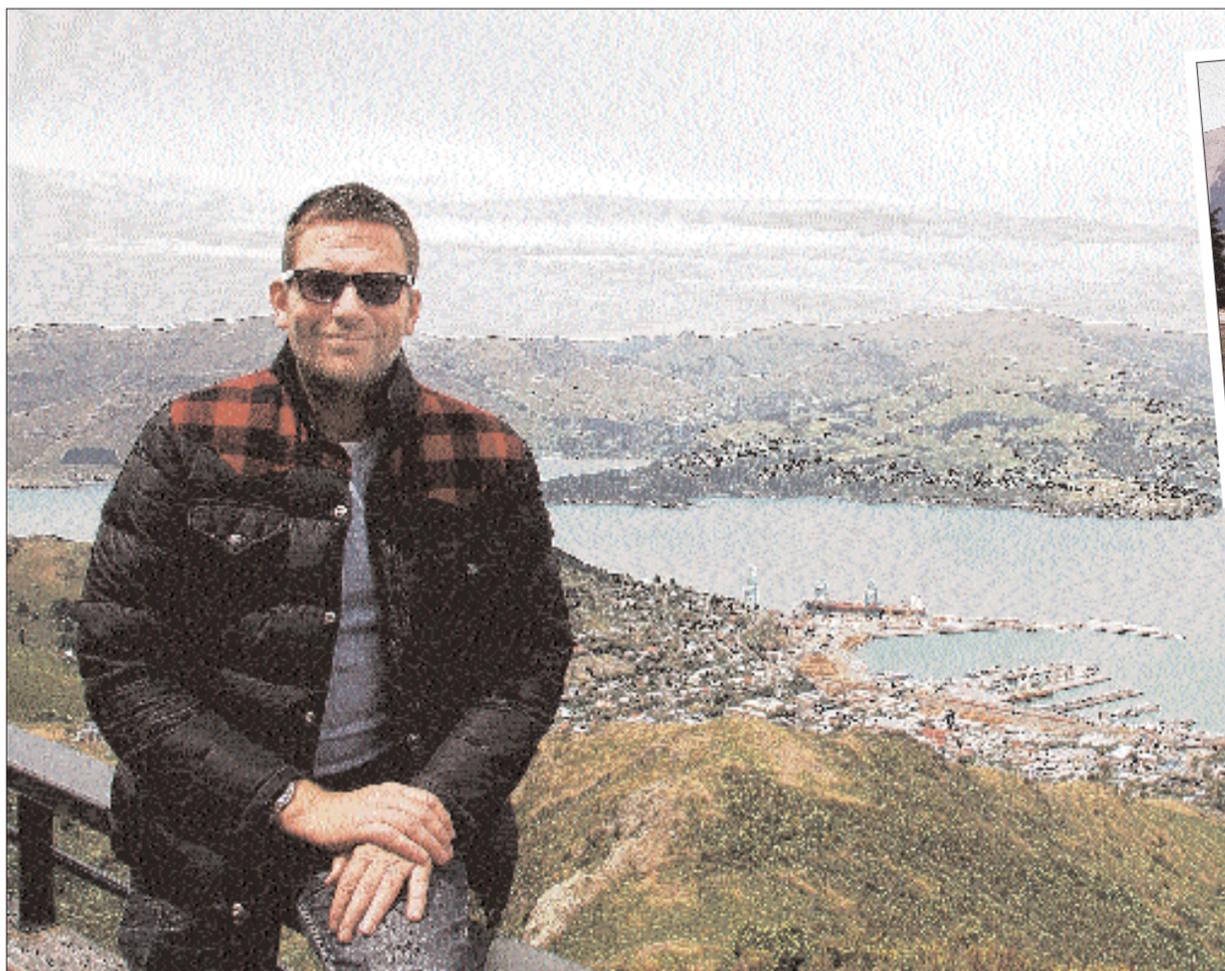


getaway



Making the most of your time off

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FULL STEAM AHEAD: Some of the breathtaking views of New Zealand by rail, including Springfield, Canterbury Plains, approaching Arthurs Pass and looking over Christchurch Harbour, left

New Zealand by rail – it's the best way

MY MATHS teacher at school was mad as she thought that air travel did not exist, and that airports were brainwashing centres to make us believe we had been on a plane.

As I sat in heavy traffic from Auckland airport to the city, across from a Wild Bean Cafe, with the rain falling as fast as the taxi meter was running, a thought crossed my mind – she may have been right.

I had just a few days in Auckland, which is all you need to see most of the city and recover from jet lag. Auckland is called the City of Sails, as it is windy and rainy all the time.

A trip up the Sky Tower (which weighs the same as 6,000 elephants and is the tallest man-made structure in New Zealand) is well worth the \$35 for a panoramic and breathtaking view. I also went on an "eco" tour that combines a city tour with the fabulous beaches and national parks around Auckland.

I recommend taking a ferry across to Devonport, a naval base and picturesque village. You get a great view back towards Auckland and if you have time you can have an excellent lunch at Riba Fish 'n' Chips Cafe on Victoria Road.

One of the best ways to see New Zealand is by train – and they are scrupulously clean, the staff knowledgeable and the food pretty good. The first leg of my journey was from Auckland to Wellington, 12 hours away, which takes the train through the wine growing regions, with its neat fields, as well as the

Big Brother's 'Nasty' NICK BATEMAN has moved on from Australia – in last week's *getreading* – to get on track in New Zealand. And the views are worth travelling for...

Whangamarino Wetlands and King Country, with its amazing rock formations.

The train stops at National Park, where you can get out and stretch your legs. South of National Park it goes over two impressive viaducts, one of them The Makatote is 79m tall. Also, on a clear day, you can see the volcanic cones of Mount Ruapehu and Mount Taranaki. The train then heads into the heart of the North Island's countryside and scenic valleys, where everything is so annoyingly green.

There are yet more impressive viaducts with stunning views of the Rangitikei Gorge. After leaving the station of Marton, there is not much to see for about two hours so it is a good time to eat.

The train reaches the Kapiti coastline and there are picture postcard views of the setting sun (from the right side of the train), before arriving in Wellington.

I found Wellington a much more happening city than Auckland with its galleries, museums and arts festivals. I had a great tour of Wellington with a guide/elf from The Lord of the Rings films.

Leaving Wellington, the ferry

journey between the North and South Islands is probably the most breathtaking in the world. Leaving Wellington Harbour to the open seas you will see Pencarrow Head and Lighthouse as well as seeing the Kaikoura mountain range in the far distance.

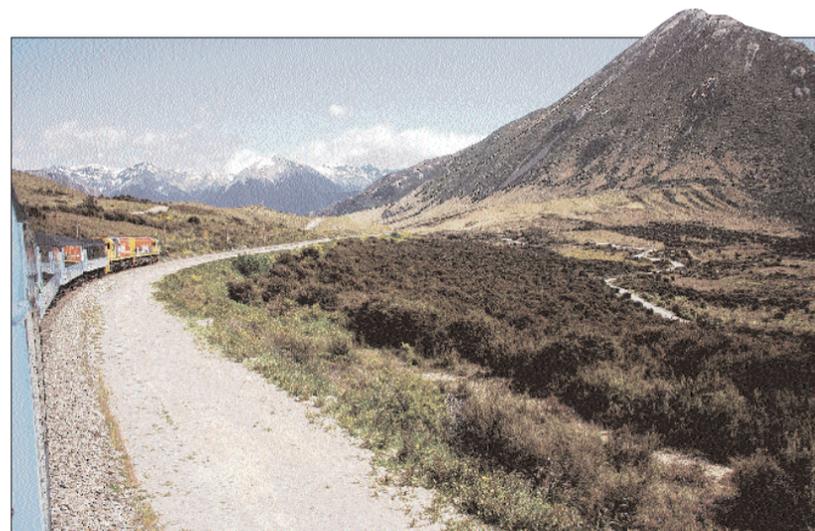
The ferry sails in open seas between the two islands and often you are joined, as we were, by dolphins. The entry to the South Island is via the Marlborough Sounds and by this stage I had to change memory cards on my camera.

The TranzCoastal train leaves from Picton (where the ferry docks) to Christchurch. The train travels through the Petra Wetlands, before a short journey inland cutting across the vineyards of Blenheim (part of the Marlborough region which produces most of New Zealand's wine). It then heads back to the coast, via the salt pools of Lake Grassmere, and then on to Kaikoura.

If there had been time I would have stayed the night and gone whale watching.

The train from Kaikoura to Christchurch hugs the coast and if you stay to the left side of the train you will see countless seals basking on the rocks.

Christchurch is a beautiful city, similar in feel to Cambridge in the UK. Not wanting to amble around I took the Grand Tour which includes a punt on the river, a cable car ride to a vantage point above the city, a ride on an old-fashioned tram and a city tour. I found a great and trendy little gourmet pizza bar in Gloucester



Street called Winnie Bagoes which was perfect after a long day.

My next iconic train journey was the TranzAlpine which links Christchurch in the east to Greymouth in the west and is listed as one of the most beautiful train journeys in the world.

The first hour is tedious, and the suburbs are only made pleasant by a stop to pick up fresh muffins for the train. The train then heads towards the mountains and Waimakariri Gorge, which as we cross it, brings large cries of excitement from the whole carriage.

The train then heads straight through the mountains, via Arthur's Pass and the Otira Tunnel which is more than 8.5km in length. The beauty with this train is that there is an open air viewing carriage.

Greymouth is not a pretty city and I returned back to Christchurch the same day, sitting on the opposite side to the way I came out in order to get a whole new view.

It may have been sensory overload, but the best way to see New Zealand is by train.

FACTFILE

■ For more information on Nick's rail tour of New Zealand and to help plan your trip visit these websites: www.bushandbeach.co.nz, www.tranzscenic.co.nz, www.interislander.co.nz, www.wellingtonrover.co.nz and www.welcomeaboard.co.nz.