

Top of the South Island National Parks

Experience the captivating blend of natural beauty and comfort on this 12-day self-drive adventure across the upper South Island. From the marine wonders of Kaikōura, where you can respectfully watch the majestic whales, to the world-renowned Sauvignon Blanc vineyards of Marlborough, this journey is full of delight. You will enjoy the stunning coastal drive into Abel Tasman National Park and cross the Southern Alps via the dramatic Arthur's Pass. Designed for travellers who appreciate boutique stays and the freedom of moving at their own pace, this is the perfect way to explore the South Island's spectacular northern parks in comfort and style.

Starts in: Christchurch
 Finishes in: Christchurch
 Length: 12days / 11nights
 Accommodation: Boutique Lodges & Hotels
 Can be customised: Yes

This itinerary can be customised to suit you perfectly. We can add more days, remove days, change accommodations, mix it up, add activities to suit your interests or simply design and create something from scratch. Call us today to get your custom New Zealand itinerary underway.



Inclusions:

- Includes: Late model rental cars
- Includes: Fully inclusive rental car insurance (excess may apply)
- Includes: Unlimited kms
- Includes: Afterhours emergency support while touring
- Included activity: Electronic Travel Guide and In-Country Support App
- Included activity: The Visitor Promise - Cultural Learning Course
- Included activity: Private Transfer Christchurch International Airport to Christchurch Accommodation
- Included activity: 30 Minute Whale Watch Explorer with Wings over Whales Kaikoura
- Included activity: Half Day Marlborough Wine Tour with Sounds Connection
- Included activity: Abel Tasman 3 day Guided Kayak and Walking Trip
- 11 breakfasts, 3 lunches, 4 dinners



Day 1



Welcome to Christchurch City

New Zealand's garden city is steadily being transformed into a vibrant urban destination. Encompassing a large green belt, it is known for its wide tree lined avenues and lush gardens. A great way to explore the city or easy way to see the sights or ride the historic trams across town to the renowned botanic gardens and the unique cardboard Transitional Cathedral, that's right it is built of cardboard!

Private Transfer Christchurch International Airport to Christchurch Accommodation

On arrival, you will be met by a private driver and transferred to your Christchurch accommodation.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY - Christchurch Triple Pass - Tram, Punting and Gondola

Experience three of Christchurch's iconic attractions in one day: the Christchurch Tram, Christchurch Gondola, and Punting on the Avon River. The historic tram is a delightful way to explore the evolving inner city, taking in the various sights with the hop-on hop-off pass and learning about the city from the live commentary. You'll also enjoy a bird's eye view of Christchurch and the Canterbury region including the distant peaks of the Southern Alps when you ride the gondola cableway to the top of the Port Hills in Heathcote Valley. Punting on the Avon River takes you through the city's green belt: a relaxing way to explore what is affectionately known as the 'Garden City'.

Your accommodation: Merivale Manor House

Originally built in the 1880's, Merivale Manor has been transformed into elegant motel and apartment accommodation. Less than 200 metres to central Merivale with its premier shopping, restaurants, cafes and bars.



Day 2



Collect Rental Car

This tour's from price includes an intermediate-sized vehicle, setting you up for comfortable travels. Yet, we understand every adventure is unique! Feel free to select the perfect wheels from our incredible collection of rental cars, spanning from economy hatchbacks to premium SUVs.

Christchurch to Kaikoura

The drive north from Christchurch to Kaikoura takes you through the rolling hills of North Canterbury's major wine region, the Waipara Valley. Allow time for a detour and visit Hanmer Springs for a dip in the mineral hot pools. Continue on and cross the Hawkswood Range before descending to the spectacular Kaikoura coastline - where the road hugs the ocean for the last leg of the drive.

Kaikōura

Kaikōura is a stunning coastal town known for its rich marine life and dramatic scenery. Visit the fur seal colony, take a whale-watching cruise, or swim with playful dusky dolphins. The town is rich with attractions, walking tracks, and activities for every visitor. A walk around the Kaikōura Peninsula is a must, where you can explore tide pools teeming with marine life, observe sea creatures basking on the rocks, and, for bird lovers, spot the impressive native albatross. Just be sure to keep a respectful distance from any sea lions you meet. Highlights like Ohau Point and historic Fyffe House offer insight into the region's wildlife and whaling past. Finish your visit by sampling the fresh local seafood, renowned for having some of the best fish and chips in the country, or by taking a relaxing wander through the tranquil Lavendyl Lavender Farm.

Your accommodation: Bendamere House B&B

Bendamere House B&B has quality ensuite rooms, detached from the main house adding to the privacy and comfort, with superb views overlooking the Pacific Ocean and Seaward Kaikoura mountain range.

Meals included: Breakfast



Day 3



30 Minute Whale Watch Explorer with Wings over Whales Kaikoura

In a typical 30 minute flight you will see the majestic Sperm Whale preparing for his next dive and up to 500 Dusky Dolphins cavorting with each other. On occasion, sightings include Southern Right, Humpback, Fin, Sei, Brydes, Pilot, Southern Bottlenose and the mighty Blue Whales. You may also spot Hector's, Risso's, Southern Right Whale Dolphins, and Orca, although these are all less frequent visitors to the area. Gain an aerial perspective of this fantastic marine environment in a high-winged aircraft with optimal, unobstructed viewing.

Kaikoura to Blenheim

Heading north from Kaikoura, the road hugs the shore for approximately 50 kilometres and offers many opportunities to view the native wildlife such as seabirds and New Zealand fur seals. One of the best seal watching locations is Ohau Point (25km north of Kaikoura), where you can observe the adults on the shoreline and the pups frolicking in the waterfall, just a short walk from the road (signposted). As you drive you will have turquoise waters of the South Pacific Ocean to your east and to the west the towering Kaikoura Ranges. Crossing the dry hills of the Marlborough ranges you head towards Marlborough, New Zealand's largest wine producing region. Blenheim sits right at the heart of Marlborough and is ideally located to enjoy an afternoon sampling the local produce. A great way to do this is to take a guided wine tour with Sounds Connection Wine Tours.

Marlborough Sounds

The Marlborough Sounds, located at the north-eastern tip of New Zealand's South Island, is a captivating region of sunken river valleys. Spanning 4,000 km²; between Tasman and Cloudy Bays, this diverse landscape of bush-clad mountains and clear waters is a haven for marine life and seabirds, including dolphins, seals, penguins, fantails, bellbirds, and wood pigeons. Sparsely populated, many of its secluded houses and resorts are accessible only by boat, making it an ideal escape. The main sounds – Queen Charlotte, Pelorus, Kenepuru, and Tory Channel – carve out a spectacular coastline and separate Arapawa Island from the mainland. Indulge your senses with the region's culinary delights – from fresh Greenshell mussels harvested directly from the Sounds and perfectly paired with world-famous Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, to an array of local delicacies. Whether you seek exhilarating water sports, tranquil walks, or simply the chance to unwind amidst spectacular scenery, the Marlborough Sounds promise an unforgettable and deeply captivating experience.

Your accommodation: The Peppertree

The Peppertree is situated in the midst of an extensive country garden a boutique vineyard and an olive grove. Choose from one of the five spacious suites, each of which reflects a different character. Days at The Peppertree begin with a delicious breakfast, served in the Dining Room or on the verandah.

Meals included: Breakfast



Day 4



Half Day Marlborough Wine Tour with Sounds Connection

An afternoon among the vines! Be immersed in the Marlborough wine country with the Sounds Connection half day wine tour. Get collected from your accommodation and taken through three or four hand-picked wineries to taste the award-winning produce this region is known for. Hear about the history of winemaking in Marlborough as well as learning the unique processes each winery goes through.

Your accommodation: The Peppertree

The Peppertree is situated in the midst of an extensive country garden a boutique vineyard and an olive grove. Choose from one of the five spacious suites, each of which reflects a different character. Days at The Peppertree begin with a delicious breakfast, served in the Dining Room or on the verandah.

Meals included: Breakfast



Day 5



Blenheim to Nelson via Queen Charlotte Drive

A short drive from Blenheim to the busy port town of Picton, and its here from that the Interislander ferries arrive and depart. The town centre is quite small with plenty of shops and cafes and the waterfront area is a very pleasant place to spend a few hours watching the activity of the ships. The Edwin Fox Maritime Centre on the wharf is worth a visit with the star attraction being the vessel the Edwin Fox, reputedly the 9th oldest ship in the world. Its also the starting point the for the famous Queen Charlotte Walk.

Queen Charlotte Drive travels the Marlborough Sounds coastline between Picton and Havelock. Magnificent views of the sounds can be had from many vantage points so allow plenty of time to enjoy the scenery. If you can spare the time take the narrow windy road to Portage along Mahau Sound and Kenepuru Sound with their bush clad hillsides and secluded sandy coves.

The small port town of Havelock has a great variety of cafes and restaurants to choose from so plan your journey to arrive in time for lunch. The highway between Nelson and Picton also crosses the Pelorus River and just at this junction is the famous and historic Pelorus Bridge. From here there are a number of forest walks with the most popular the 30 minute loop through beech, rimu and totara forest to the swing-bridge. Crossing the Bryant Range you arrive onto Tasman Bay and the city of Nelson.

Explore Nelson City

The vibrant Nelson city centre offers an abundance of cafes, restaurants, bars and shops and along the waterfront, you will find many fine restaurants specialising in seafood to enjoy. Founded in 1841 by the New Zealand Company the region today still boasts many remarkable buildings from these early days, however it is its close proximity to Abel Tasman National Park that is one of Nelson's greatest advantages to visitors with its pristine waters, beautiful native bush and golden beaches making this an adventure seeker's paradise. Nelson is also famous for its art and crafts and you will find many local offerings - including the world-famous Hoglund Glassworks.

Your accommodation: Ah House Nelson City Bed & Breakfast

Garden views in the heart of Nelson City Centre is the Ah house- an award-winning B&B. Soak up the sun on the patio or explore the garden and surroundings.

Meals included: Breakfast



Day 6



Abel Tasman 3 day Kayak & Walking trip

This 3 day holiday is the best combination to experience everything Abel Tasman National Park has to offer, with the comfort of Lodge accommodation on the beachfront within the Park. With 2 days sea kayaking the sheltered southern reaches of the Park and one day walking the lush northern rainforest and isolated beaches of Abel Tasman Coast Track, including a scenic cruise along the length of the Abel Tasman coast. It is important you read and understand the risks associated with this activity. For more information see here.

Day 1: Nelson/Motueka to Torrent Bay - Includes Lunch and Dinner

Today, you'll be picked up as arranged or meet at our Motueka office. After any last-minute luggage organization, your driver will take you to Kaiteriteri, where your guide will introduce you to your kayak and provide full instructions and a safety briefing. Set off to explore the idyllic coves and islands of the Astrolabe Roadstead, stopping at golden sand beaches for breaks. Then, paddle on to the picturesque shores of Te Pukatea and Torrent Bay. Welcome to Torrent Bay Lodge—your relaxed beachfront retreat. Total paddling distance: 12 km (7.5 miles).

Your accommodation: Meadowbank Homestead

Meadowbank was rebuilt as an eco lodge in 1994 using recycled timbers and featuring heirlooms representing 8 generations of the Wilson family's association with the Nelson region. The Lodge provides all the comforts of modern living whilst minimising impact on the environment.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner



Day 7



Day 2: Awaroa to Torrent Bay - Includes Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Wake to breakfast overlooking the gardens of Meadowbank Homestead, watching the movement of the tides over golden sands. At around 9.30 am, you'll depart Awaroa for the scenic walk over the Tonga Saddle to Onetahuti. Here, your guide will settle you into your kayaks with full training and safety brief. Don't worry, you won't leave the beach until your guide is satisfied you can safely negotiate the coast in your kayak. (If you are travelling on your own, your Guide will find a suitable paddling partner for you). In good weather, there's the opportunity to visit the Seal Colony on Tonga Island where New Zealand fur seals breed. It's often possible to spot new-born pups here in December and January. As you enjoy the sensation of paddling through the clear turquoise waters of the Park, you'll cruise past Tonga Quarry and the Tonga Arches, where your guide will explain the history of this granite area, pointing out some of the unusual natural features and relics from the historic quarry. Around midday, stop for lunch at sheltered Bark Bay, where you can take time out to explore, swim or relax on the golden sand. After lunch, continue your paddle, beach hopping along the coast with picture-postcard views, including the Falls River and Frenchman's Bay. At around 4.30 pm paddle into Torrent Bay to be welcomed with refreshments and a hot shower in your ensuite room. Today you will walk for approximately 1.5 hours (5 kms) and paddle for 4 hours (10 kms).

Your accommodation: Meadowbank Homestead

Meadowbank was rebuilt as an eco lodge in 1994 using recycled timbers and featuring heirlooms representing 8 generations of the Wilson family's association with the Nelson region. The Lodge provides all the comforts of modern living whilst minimising impact on the environment.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner



Day 8



Day 3: Awaroa to Motueka/Nelson via Totaranui - Includes Breakfast and Lunch

Today, you'll walk for approximately 2.5 hours (7 km / 4.5 miles), including a tidal crossing, with a maximum elevation of 100 meters (340 ft). Depending on the tides, either walk or take a boat ride across the vast Awaroa Inlet, then continue on foot for about two hours through the park's northern forests, home to magnificent Nikau Palms and Rata trees. At Totaranui, board a boat and relax on a scenic cruise along the spectacular coastline back to Kaiteriteri, where a bus will be waiting to take you to Motueka or Nelson as arranged.

Your accommodation: Ah House Nelson City Bed & Breakfast

Garden views in the heart of Nelson City Centre is the Ah house- an award-winning B&B. Soak up the sun on the patio or explore the garden and surroundings.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch



Day 9



Nelson to Punakaiki

Leaving Nelson City you will pass through the suburb of Richmond. Moving on, you will pass through the Nelson Lakes and Kahurangi National Park region. Trees, rivers, and valleys accompany you now as you head towards the town of Murchison. Murchison is a quiet place and a great lunch stop. Underneath its sleepy farming facade is an adventurer's paradise with white water rafting, jet boating, gold panning, kayaking, 4WD trips, and excellent trout fishing. Heading south, you will drive along the Buller Gorge, enjoying some wonderful scenery as you follow this magnificent river. Further along the river from the west coast turn off, one of the must-visit places is Whites Creek and New Zealand's longest swing bridge. Crossing the river, you get magnificent views of the gorge, and once on the other side, there are short bush walks, jet boat rides, and some of the historic gold mining remnants. Continuing on your journey, the first major town (by this region's standard) is Inangahua, and a small museum tells of the earthquake that hit the region in 1968, leaving 70% of the buildings damaged or inhabitable. Heading south, a worthwhile divert is to Cape Foulwind just south of Westport. Home to a seal colony and the short walk provides some spectacular scenery. Continuing south on the road to Punakaiki, you will pass through Paparoa National Park. On arrival at Punakaiki you may want to visit Pancake rocks. Pancake rocks are open to the public free of charge all year round. These are awesome natural blow holes and rock formations, the name says it all. The west coast is very rugged, mountains meet the sea, and the coast is covered with beautiful fauna and flora including nikau palms.

Punakaiki Free Afternoon

This afternoon is free to explore Punakaiki, you can visit the Pancake Rocks, there are many walking paths and stairways carved into the rocks. Enjoy the beautiful rugged coastline of the West Coast of the South Island.

Your accommodation: Scenic Hotel Punakaiki

Scenic Hotel Punakaiki is a modern, award-winning hotel complex, architecturally designed to harmonious with the local environment. Nestled in the foothills of Paparoa National Park the resort has spectacular views of the Wild West Coast beaches while all rooms have rainforest and/or ocean views.

Meals included: Breakfast



Day 10



Punakaiki to Arthur's Pass National Park

Today you'll head south towards Greymouth, before turning onto State Highway 73 as you make your way to Arthur's Pass. Winding your way up and over the Southern Alps, this route takes you through some of the most spectacular scenery in the country, even in the rain when hundreds of waterfalls cascade down the bush clad hillsides.

Originally the road was used as a pass by the Maori as they made their seasonal passage to collect Greenstone in the West Coast mountains. Following the 1800's gold rush a road and railway was developed through the area. Today, the railway is used predominantly for the world renowned TranzAlpine Scenic Train, transporting several hundred tourists per day from Christchurch to Greymouth or the other way round. Continue on through the Otira Gorge, before arriving at your destination for the night, Arthur's Pass.

Note: If you're feeling like a more leisurely drive, there is the option to take a more scenic route around Lake Brunner. Well signposted, this road begins just before the town of Kumara.

Walking tracks in Arthurs Pass National Park

Within Arthur's Pass there are many short walks to suit all ages and abilities. Located in the Arthur's Pass Village is a Department of Conservation information centre where you can get updates on track conditions and track suitability as well as learn about the natural history of the area and its people.

Listed below is a selection of short walks.

1. Millennium Walk - Time: 10 minutes return
 2. Devils Punchbowl Waterfall Walk - Time: One hour return
 3. Arthur's Pass Walking Track - Time: One hour 20 minutes (one way)
 4. Dobson Nature Walk - Time: 30 minutes return
 5. Old Coach Road Walk - Time: 30 minutes return
 6. Cockayne Nature Walk - Time: 30 minutes return
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Your accommodation: Wilderness Lodge, Arthurs Pass

Wilderness Lodge sits on it's own 3,000-hectare nature reserve and merino sheep farm and is surrounded by the mountains of Arthur's Pass National Park. Join nature guides to walk, canoe and discover kea parrots, giant buttercups, pygmy forests, alpine flower gardens and waterfalls.

Meals included: Breakfast, Dinner



Day 11



Explore Wilderness Lodge, Arthur's Pass

Nestled in mountain beech forest, midway between Christchurch and the West Coast, Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass offers stylish accommodation, great food, and warm hospitality in a spectacular mountain setting.

Set on a 4000 acre working sheep farm and nature reserve in the heart of the Southern Alps, a daily program of guided activities will be the highlight of your visit. Join naturalist and farmer guides to hike alpine trails, kayak wildlife refuge lakes, and experience life on a working farm.

Your accommodation: Wilderness Lodge, Arthurs Pass

Wilderness Lodge sits on it's own 3,000-hectare nature reserve and merino sheep farm and is surrounded by the mountains of Arthur's Pass National Park. Join nature guides to walk, canoe and discover kea parrots, giant buttercups, pygmy forests, alpine flower gardens and waterfalls.

Meals included: Breakfast, Dinner



Day 12



Arthur's Pass to Christchurch

Descending into the valleys of the Waimakariri this drive offers some spectacular views of the braided river valleys. Castle Hill Scenic Reserve sits in limestone country and the area is dotted with remarkable rock outcrops. A popular place with climbers it was also an important place for Maori in past years as they provided shelter on their seasonal journeys between the coasts. There is a network of walking paths allowing you to explore.

Descending onto the Canterbury Plains the rich farmland that attracted and helped settlers prosper becomes apparent as you head into the city of Christchurch.

Return Your Vehicle to Christchurch Airport

It's time to return your rental car and let the South Island journey come to an end. If time allows spend the day exploring more of Christchurch, we'd suggest a leisurely drive up the Port Hills for some great sites and then over to the harbour of Lyttleton, before circling through the tunnel and back to the airport to continue your journey home.

Farewell from Aotearoa / New Zealand

Bid farewell to Aotearoa / New Zealand, taking with you unforgettable memories of its breathtaking landscapes and incredible adventures. In Māori, it is said mā te wā, which is not goodbye, it is see you soon!

Tour details

Departures:	Daily
Tour type:	South Island Self Drive
Starts:	Christchurch
Finishes:	Christchurch
Tour length:	12
Accommodation:	Boutique Lodges & Hotels
Car/transport type:	

Accommodation summary

Day 1	Merivale Manor House
Day 2	Bendamere House B&B
Day 3	The Peppertree
Day 4	The Peppertree
Day 5	Ah House Nelson City Bed & Breakfast
Day 6	Meadowbank Homestead
Day 7	Meadowbank Homestead
Day 8	Ah House Nelson City Bed & Breakfast
Day 9	Scenic Hotel Punakaiki
Day 10	Wilderness Lodge, Arthurs Pass
Day 11	Wilderness Lodge, Arthurs Pass