

Down Under Through New Eyes

I've worn lots of hats during my career as a travel writer. In addition to penning guidebooks and magazine features, I've conducted tours of New Zealand and Australia and planned itineraries for clients headed in that direction. However, I took down those last two shingles when I started writing for *Ranch & Coast* in 2004. It's been a pleasure giving you my undivided attention.

I was sure my consulting days were over until old friends and Del Mar residents Sandy and Bram Dijkstra requested my assistance. Bram, Sandy explained, really wanted to visit his sisters in New Zealand, and they also wanted to go to Australia.

It seemed incongruous planning a trip Down Under for the West Coast's most successful literary agent and her UCSD Professor Emeritus husband who collect fine

art, know fine wine, and have highly sophisticated palates. I could have said no, of course, but I was intrigued by the idea of organizing an itinerary unlike any I had ever taken. To me, Australia and New Zealand are adventure destinations — and they would be for Sandy and Bram, too, just very different kinds of adventures.

The six-week trip was timed to accommodate the tour schedule of Bram's newest book, *Naked: The Nude in America*, and to enable the Dijkstras to spend the holidays with family. Our preparations included booking a string of five-star hotels and lodges, acquiring tickets for a Mahler concert at the Sydney Opera House, and researching the collections at various art museums.

Since Sandy kindly sent messages from her iPad while they were traveling, I can share their

experiences in her own words.

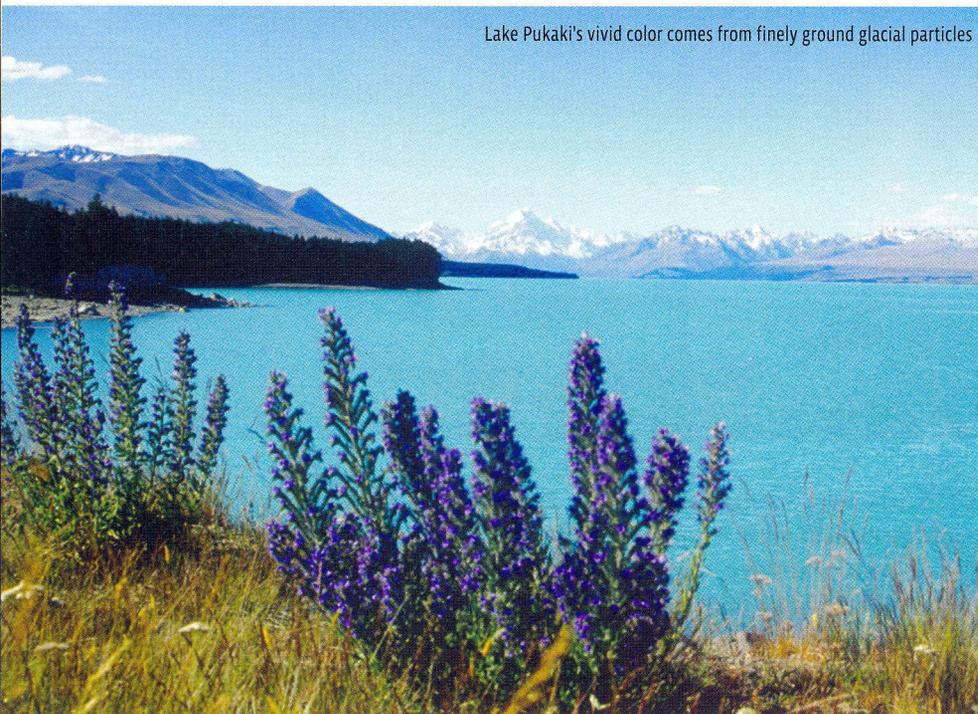
Favorite Australian Hotels: "Park Hyatt Sydney, with a view from our balcony of the Opera House across the water and fab food; also the Park Hyatts in Canberra and Melbourne. All three hotels have a pool, but Melbourne's was the best." (www.sydney.park.hyatt.com)



Sandy and Bram Dijkstra at Timara Lodge in the Marlborough Wine District

Art: "The Aussies really know how to honor and to display their historical art collections in their National Art Galleries. We saw only three — Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne — but each was spectacular, and we treasure the memories of the many great works we saw. The NZ museums slight their European historical treasures in favor of Maori art, which we found repetitious and minimally interesting with the exception of Charles Goldie's portraits of Maori chiefs. Government support for the arts both in Australia and New Zealand surpasses anything we experience in San Diego or the United States, sadly."

Wine: "The Aussies' Shiraz rules. No matter how hard the NZers push their Pinot Noir, it remains



Lake Pukaki's vivid color comes from finely ground glacial particles

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANDY AND BRAM DIKSTRA, PARK HYATT HOTELS, AND ADAM HANSEN STOCK PHOTOS

thin, but their Sauvignon Blanc rules (Wither Hill a favorite), as does their Pinot Grigio (especially Herzog).”

Bookstores: “In both Australia and New Zealand, indie bookstores are browse-able treasures well appreciated by local residents and one of the key cultural assets of these countries. Any traveling reader will be happy to come upon them.”

Differences Between Traveling In Australia And New Zealand: “In Australia the scenery seemed so sparse and, for us at least, the art dominated. In NZ, the scenery was the highlight — the aqua lakes Pukaki and Tekapo after driving through fields of purple, yellow, pink, white, and blue lupine; winding through green hills down into Akaroa; driving over the Otago Peninsula dotted with sheep forever munching; seeing misty Milford Sound’s amazing gorges and fjords.”

Favorite New Zealand Hotel: “The George Hotel in Christchurch, truly a luxury hotel



especially if you stay on the third floor and are upgraded to the Hilary Clinton Suite, as we were. Food and service were terrific, too.” (Author’s note: The George closed briefly after the February 22 earthquake, but has re-opened. In fact, all of NZ is open for business except the very center of Christchurch.) (www.thegeorge.com)

New Zealand Lodges: “They all provided extraordinary service. Our South Island favorite was Timara Lodge — a 1920s mansion — pure heaven, pure luxury inside and out, its gardens, its lake, its exquisite food — and biking through the Marlborough vineyards.” North Island: “Treetops really delivers on service. We were there on New Year’s Eve and loved the barbecue dinner on the shores of Reflection Lake with guests from around the world — and San Diego.” (www.timara.co.nz, www.treetops.co.nz)

“Aussie art, New Zealand scenery,



and connecting with family made this a spectacular trip. We feel so privileged to have seen NZ from the perspective of New Zealanders, having such wonderful visits with our relatives, who astutely placed themselves respectively in the South and North Islands. It gave us invaluable insight into this wonderful country, but we’ve only scratched the surface and will need to return one day soon. Meanwhile, we shall treasure the memories of our terrific visits with family, only wishing they lived closer, but so glad for them



☞ that they live in such a paradise.”

In Auckland, the Dijkstras enjoyed meals at Soul Bistro on Viaduct Harbour and Mecca Chancery in Vulcan Square. They stayed at The Hilton Auckland, a beautiful property right on the harbor, and Sandy enjoyed swimming in the infinity pool. However, it was “cruise ship season” and view blockage and noise were an issue. Before making a reservation, check the Web site or call the hotel to make sure your dates don’t overlap with the arrival of a floating horizontal skyscraper.

(www.hilton.com/auckland)

A favorite Auckland experience was a ferry ride across the harbor to Devonport, “a cute little town peppered by Victorian houses,” but an even better excursion was to “gorgeous Waiheke Island, where the stunning view from above Mudbrick Vineyard remains vivid in our mind’s eye. The meal there

was excellent and we enjoyed driving around the island to see its various beaches and vineyards and the view of Auckland far off across the harbor.”

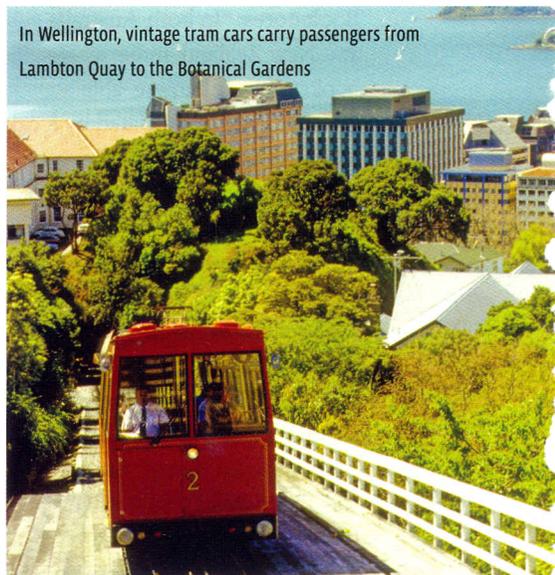
Sandy and Bram’s favorite NZ purchases included Merino/mink sweaters, vests, and dresses; Whittaker’s Chocolates “Bittersweet Peanut Slab;” and Wild Ferns NZ Manuka Honey cosmetic products.

In Dunedin, the Dijkstras enjoyed the warm hospitality of the hosts at Fletcher Lodge.

The Park Hyatt Sydney is one of Australia’s best hotels and offers spectacular views of the Opera House, the harbor, and the city. It is temporarily closed for renovations and will re-open in November 2011. Sandy says “The restaurant was terrific, one of the best on our trip, so we hope they’ll return with the same chef and crew.” Another favorite spot

in The Rocks area of Sydney: Pony Lounge and Dining.

The Park Hyatt Canberra is a historic landmark sited in the shadow of Australia’s Parliament building. Sandy: “One intriguing



In Wellington, vintage tram cars carry passengers from Lambton Quay to the Botanical Gardens

surprise was to find, on its walls, large scale copies of works by turn-of-the-century California painter Arthur Mathews.” Melbourne offers quite a few five-star hotels, but the Dijkstras opted for the Park Hyatt because it has an indoor swimming pool.

Sandy: “In Canberra, the War Memorial Museum, to which you sent us, and to which we went with resistance, was spectacular, not-to-be-missed, and a “vaut-le-detour” in Michelin-speak.”

Some of Sandy’s favorite “FAB, intrepid, independent, amazing booksellers and bookstores in Australia and New Zealand” include Readers in Melbourne, Unity and Parsons in Wellington, and Women’s and Unity Bookstores in Auckland. “Each an oasis for the thirsty reader.”

ELIZABETH HANSEN

The beautiful Marlborough Sounds are located at the top end of the South Island

