Essential New Zealand: Both Islands Self-Drive

NEW ZEALAND · AUCKLAND · ROTORUA · QUEENSTOWN

7D 6N | 25–30 PAX | STARTS AUCKLAND | NOT INCLUDED

Cross both New Zealand islands in seven days with the flexibility of a self-drive journey. Collect your car in Auckland, visit Hobbiton on the way to Rotorua, then explore Wai-O-Tapu and the illuminated Redwoods Nightlights walk. Fly independently from Rotorua to Queenstown, where a free day is followed by a full Milford Sound excursion and fiord cruise with lunch. Rental car hire, six nights' accommodation and four key experiences are included; the domestic flight between islands is not. This compact route suits travellers who want New Zealand's essential highlights and the freedom to travel at their own pace, without spending valuable time retracing roads or following a fixed coach schedule.

DAY

01

AUCKLAND · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Arrive Auckland — collect rental car

Collect your rental car at Auckland Airport and drive to your city accommodation. Auckland sits on an isthmus between the Waitematā and Manukau harbours; the drive into the city centre from the airport takes 30–40 minutes depending on traffic. The car is included for 6 days with zero or reduced excess liability — confirm the specific excess terms at collection.

Auckland Waterfront — Viaduct Harbour and the Wynyard Quarter are within easy reach of most central hotels. The ferry terminal connects to Devonport and Waiheke Island for those arriving early enough to use the afternoon.

Sky Tower — At 328 metres, the observation deck gives the clearest overview of Auckland's two-harbour layout. Entry own expense.

Note: The car is not needed for city driving on Day 1; most central Auckland accommodation has parking available if you want to leave it overnight.

OVERNIGHT

Auckland

DAY

02

ROTORUA · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 2

Auckland to Rotorua — via Hobbiton

The drive from Auckland to Matamata is 175 kilometres — approximately 2 hours south on the Southern Motorway through the Waikato. Matamata itself is a small farming town; the Alexander sheep farm 8 kilometres outside it is the destination.

Hobbiton Movie Set Signature Tour — Included. A guided walk through 44 hobbit holes, the mill, the double-arched bridge, and the gardens of Bag End. The set was permanently rebuilt in aluminium and concrete for The Hobbit trilogy after the original wooden structures were dismantled. The Signature Tour includes a sit-down meal at the Party Marquee adjacent to the Green Dragon Inn. Allow 2–3 hours on site.

Drive to Rotorua — 70 kilometres from Matamata, approximately 1 hour. The sulphur smell on approach is the hydrothermal field below the city. SH27 through the Kaimai Range is the most direct route.

Optional: Waitomo Glowworm Caves — a detour west from Auckland before heading to Matamata adds 90 minutes but takes the itinerary through the cave system and its underground boat cruise (own expense); Te Po evening experience at Te Puia, Rotorua (own expense).

MEALS

Lunch

OVERNIGHT

Rotorua

DAY

03

ROTORUA · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 2

Rotorua — Wai-O-Tapu and Redwoods Nightlights

A full day in Rotorua across the two included experiences. Wai-O-Tapu in the morning, the Redwoods Nightlights in the evening — the gap between them is yours.

Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland — Included. A geothermal park 27 kilometres south of Rotorua. Drive yourself; parking at the entrance is straightforward. The Lady Knox Geyser erupts at 10:15am daily — position for it before the main park circuit. The Champagne Pool, a 65-metre-wide hot spring at 74°C with an orange antimony-and-arsenic rim, and the Artist's Palette silica flat are the two most distinctive features. Allow 2 hours.

Redwoods Nightlights — Included. An evening walk through the Whakarewarewa Forest along an elevated treetop walkway lit by artist-designed lanterns hanging through the California redwood canopy. The forest is 5 kilometres from central Rotorua; free parking on-site. The walk runs at dusk; allow 45 minutes to 1 hour. Seasonal operating hours — confirm the current schedule on arrival.

Optional: Skyline Gondola and Buffet Lunch — a cable car to the Skyline complex above the city, with views over Lake Rotorua and the Rotorua basin (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Rotorua

DAY

04

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 3

Rotorua to Queenstown — domestic flight (not included)

Drive to Rotorua Airport and fly to Queenstown. The domestic flight is not included and must be booked independently before travel. Air New Zealand operates the Rotorua–Queenstown route directly; the flight is approximately 3 hours. Book well in advance — this is the pivot point of the itinerary and seat availability on this specific sector can be limited.

Rotorua Airport (ROT) — 10 kilometres from the city centre, approximately 15 minutes. Parking at ROT is straightforward for a self-drive itinerary; confirm whether you leave the car here or return it first (the rental car continues with you — a one-way hire from Auckland to Queenstown). Check the rental terms for inter-island one-way fees when booking.

Queenstown — A compact lakeside town on Lake Wakatipu, ringed by the Remarkables and Cecil Peak. The drive from Queenstown Airport into town is 10 minutes. The afternoon and evening are free.

Optional: Walter Peak Farm Excursion on the TSS Earnslaw steamship — a 1912 coal-fired steamship crossing Lake Wakatipu (own expense); Shotover Jetboat (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

05

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 3

Queenstown — free day

A free day in Queenstown with the car available. The self-drive format makes the options around Queenstown genuinely accessible — Glenorchy at the head of the lake, Arrowtown and the Crown Range, or the Gibbston Valley wine country are all within 45 minutes of the town centre.

Glenorchy Road — The 45-kilometre drive north along the western shore of Lake Wakatipu is consistently cited as one of the most scenic short drives in the South Island. The river flats beyond Glenorchy toward Paradise were used as Lord of the Rings filming locations. Allow a half day return.

Arrowtown — 20 minutes from Queenstown on the Arrow River. The gold rush main street and the Chinese settlement precinct from the 1860s are worth an hour. The Crown Range road over to Wānaka from here is the highest sealed road in New Zealand at 1,076 metres; allow a full day for the loop.

Gibbston Valley — The wine-growing gorge east of Queenstown, planted predominantly in Pinot Noir. Several cellar doors are open for tastings (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

06

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 3 OF 3

Queenstown — Milford Sound day trip

The Milford Sound day is approximately 12 hours when self-driving from Queenstown — 287 kilometres each way through Fiordland National Park. An early start is essential: aim to leave Queenstown by 7:00am to reach the fiord comfortably before midday.

Driving notes: the road through Fiordland from Te Anau is sealed throughout. The Homer Tunnel is single-lane with traffic managed by lights; wait times up to 15 minutes. In wet weather the waterfalls above the road are running and the drive is at its most dramatic; in dry weather the drive is faster. Check road conditions at nzta.govt.nz the evening before.

Mirror Lakes — Small tarns off the Te Anau–Milford road that reflect the Earl Mountains on calm mornings. A 10-minute stop en route.

Homer Tunnel — 1.2 kilometres through the Darran Mountains, opened in 1954. The hanging valley above the portal is one of the more memorable road moments on the South Island.

Milford Sound Fiord Cruise — Included. The fiord is 15 kilometres long with granite walls rising 1,200 metres out of the water. Mitre Peak at 1,692 metres is the most photographed point. Stirling Falls and Lady Bowen Falls run year-round.

Return to Queenstown by your own vehicle, arriving evening.

MEALS

Lunch

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

07

QUEENSTOWN

Depart Queenstown — return rental car

Return the rental car to Queenstown Airport and check in for your international departure. Queenstown Airport (ZQN) handles international departures directly; allow at least three hours before your flight for car return, check-in, and immigration.

Rental car return notes: the car is due back on a 24-hour hire basis from the collection time in Auckland on Day 1. Early international arrivals or late departures may require an additional hire day — confirm the exact return deadline and any one-way inter-island fees at collection in Auckland.

Queenstown town centre — If you have time before your departure, the waterfront and central Queenstown are 10 minutes from the airport. The Queenstown Hill walking track is 2 hours return from the town centre and gives the best elevated view of the lake and surrounding ranges.

YOUR TRIP AT A GLANCE

What's Included

DEPARTS FROM	FLIGHTS	GROUP SIZE
Auckland	**Not included**	**25–30 pax**

INCLUDED

- check 6-day rental car hire with zero or reduced excess liability (collected Auckland, returned Queenstown)
- check 6 nights accommodation
- check Hobbiton Movie Set Signature Tour
- check Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland admission
- check Redwoods Nightlights walk, Rotorua
- check Milford Sound cruise with lunch

NOT INCLUDED

- Domestic flight Rotorua to Queenstown (Day 4) — to be booked independently
- International flights
- Travel insurance
- Fuel and road tolls
- Meals not specified in the itinerary
- Optional activities and entrance fees
- Personal expenses, laundry and minibar