Lakes and Glaciers: South Island, New Zealand

NEW ZEALAND · CHRISTCHURCH · QUEENSTOWN

9D 8N | 25–30 PAX | STARTS CHRISTCHURCH | NOT INCLUDED

Set your own pace on a nine-day self-drive loop through New Zealand's South Island. From Christchurch, cross Arthur's Pass to the West Coast glaciers, continue over Haast Pass to Queenstown, then return through the Mackenzie Basin past Aoraki Mt Cook and Lake Tekapo. Included experiences add the International Antarctic Centre, Queenstown's Skyline Gondola and a TSS Earnslaw cruise to Walter Peak for a gourmet barbecue lunch. Milford Sound can be added as an optional full-day journey. Rental car hire and eight nights' accommodation are included, while international flights are arranged independently. This itinerary suits travellers who value scenic roads, flexible days and the freedom to linger rather than follow a fixed coach timetable.

DAY

01

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Arrive Christchurch — collect rental car

Collect the rental car at Christchurch Airport, ten kilometres and a 20-minute drive from the centre — this is where the zero or reduced excess liability terms are confirmed, so read them before signing. The International Antarctic Centre sits right next to the terminal, and today or tomorrow morning is the better window to use the included admission: live penguins, a Hagglund ride, and a storm simulator that's worth the two hours. The Botanic Gardens and Avon River are an easy walk from most central accommodation if there's daylight left.

OVERNIGHT

Christchurch

DAY

02

GLACIER REGION · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 2

Christchurch to the Glacier Region — via Arthur's Pass

The drive west is the day's real activity — 280 to 340 kilometres depending on route, 3.5 to 5 hours behind the wheel. Arthur's Pass is the more direct option: the Waimakariri Gorge climb before the 920-metre summit is one of the more dramatic stretches of the Canterbury approach, and the kea in the carpark are reliably there. West of the divide, the coastal drive south from Greymouth runs through temperate rainforest that grows right to the glacier's edge, with up to 5,000 millimetres of rain a year to prove it.

OVERNIGHT

Glacier Region

DAY

03

FRANZ JOSEF · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 2

Glacier Region — Franz Josef and Fox Glacier

The second night here exists for exactly this: a full free day to cover both glaciers without rushing, plus a weather buffer if you want the heli-hike. Franz Josef's valley walk to the current viewpoint takes under two hours return, with guide boards marking where the ice stood decades ago; Fox Glacier, 25 kilometres south, follows the same format. Both descend from around 2,700 metres to near sea level through rainforest — a combination that exists almost nowhere else on earth.

OVERNIGHT

Glacier Region

DAY

04

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 3

Glacier Region to Queenstown — via Haast Pass

This is the South Island's most varied single day of driving — 350 kilometres, about 4 hours 45 minutes, from West Coast rainforest over the lowest crossing of the Southern Alps to Central Otago's dry schist landscape. Haast Pass sits at just 563 metres, and the transition from rainforest to dry country happens within a few kilometres of the summit. Break the drive at Makarora for the Blue Pools — a short walk to glacial meltwater pools clear enough to see straight through — before continuing on to Queenstown.

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

05

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 3

Queenstown — Skyline Gondola and Walter Peak lunch

Two included experiences carry the day, both showing the lake from a different angle. The Skyline Gondola climbs to Bob's Peak at 450 metres for a panorama across Lake Wakatipu and the Remarkables — the viewing terrace is worth lingering on before you head back down. Then it's the TSS Earnslaw, a 1912 coal-fired steamship that's crossed this lake since before the high-country farms had road access, over to Walter Peak for a sit-down gourmet BBQ lunch at the Colonel's Homestead rather than the standard farm-show format.

MEALS

Lunch

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

06

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 3 OF 3

Queenstown — free day

The second Queenstown night is yours to spend however you like. Milford Sound is the big call — a 287-kilometre, roughly 12-hour round trip through Fiordland if you're driving yourself, worth it if you're up for the early start, skippable if you'd rather not lose a full day to the road. Closer options exist too: the Glenorchy road along Lake Wakatipu's western shore is one of the most scenic short drives in the South Island, and Arrowtown's old gold rush streetscape is worth an hour.

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

07

MT COOK · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Queenstown to Aoraki Mt Cook — through the Mackenzie Basin

The drive northeast runs 256 to 266 kilometres, about 3 hours 15 minutes, through the Kawarau Gorge and over Lindis Pass at 971 metres — tussock on both sides and one of the more photogenic stretches of road in the South Island. Lake Pukaki's turquoise water, coloured by suspended glacial rock flour, deepens the closer you get to Aoraki Mt Cook, New Zealand's highest peak at 3,724 metres. The Hooker Valley Track to the glacier's terminal lake is 90 minutes return if there's time before dark.

OVERNIGHT

Tekapo or Mt Cook region

DAY

08

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Aoraki Mt Cook and Lake Tekapo to Christchurch

The drive back to Christchurch is 230 to 330 kilometres, 3 to 4 hours, descending from the Mackenzie Basin through the Canterbury foothills to the plains. Stop at the Church of the Good Shepherd on Lake Tekapo's shore — a stone chapel from 1935 with a plain glass window framed on the lake and mountains, best in the morning light on the turquoise water. It's a brief stop, but the right one before the last long drive of the trip.

OVERNIGHT

Christchurch

DAY

09

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Depart Christchurch — return rental car

Return the rental car to Christchurch Airport and check in for your international flight — allow at least three hours for the car return, check-in and immigration together, since both happen in the same precinct. The car is due back on a 24-hour basis from when you collected it on Day 1, so confirm the exact deadline before you leave the counter that morning.

OVERNIGHT

—

YOUR TRIP AT A GLANCE

What's Included

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

INCLUDED

- check 8-day rental car hire with zero or reduced excess liability (collected and returned Christchurch Airport)
- check 8 nights accommodation
- check International Antarctic Centre admission — use on Day 1 or Day 2
- check Skyline Gondola ride, Queenstown
- check Walter Peak Gourmet BBQ Lunch by TSS Earnslaw Steamship, Queenstown

NOT INCLUDED

- International flights
- Travel insurance
- Fuel and road tolls
- Meals not specified in the itinerary
- Optional activities and entrance fees
- Personal expenses, laundry and minibar