Mountains to Sea: South Island's Western Circuit

NEW ZEALAND · CHRISTCHURCH · QUEENSTOWN

8D 7N | 25–30 PAX | STARTS CHRISTCHURCH | NOT INCLUDED

Cross New Zealand’s South Island in eight varied days, beginning with the TranzAlpine railway from Christchurch through the Southern Alps to Greymouth. Continue to Punakaiki’s Pancake Rocks and Franz Josef for a guided nature walk beside the glacier, then travel across Haast Pass to Queenstown. Two nights there allow time for included regional touring before a full-day Milford Sound journey and fiord cruise. The return to Christchurch follows the Lindis Pass through Aoraki Mt Cook and Lake Tekapo. Seven nights’ accommodation, transfers, rail and coach travel, guided experiences and airport transfers are included. Seasonal operating days vary, making careful date selection important. This route suits travellers seeking maximum South Island variety without driving themselves.

DAY

01

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Arrive Christchurch

Your arrival in Christchurch is met with a private transfer to your hotel. The city sits between the Pacific Ocean and the foothills of the Southern Alps — a position that becomes apparent on day two when the TranzAlpine crosses those ranges. The central city has been substantially rebuilt since the 2011 earthquake; the Avon River precinct and the transitional architecture of the rebuild are worth an evening walk.

Christchurch City Centre — The Botanic Gardens and Victoria Square are within easy walking distance of most central accommodation. The Christchurch Art Gallery and the new convention and arts precinct reflect the post-earthquake rebuild investment in the central city.

Note on operating days: October to April this tour departs daily. May to September it operates Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday only.

Optional: Christchurch Tram Dinner (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Christchurch

DAY

02

GREYMOUTH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Christchurch to Greymouth — TranzAlpine and Punakaiki

The TranzAlpine departs Christchurch Railway Station in the morning and covers 224 kilometres to Greymouth in approximately 4.5 hours. The route crosses the Canterbury Plains, follows the Waimakariri River through its gorge, climbs through Arthur's Pass National Park, and descends the western face of the Southern Alps to the coast. Open-air viewing carriages are available for the mountain section.

TranzAlpine Scenic Train — Included. Subject to track maintenance; a coach transfer is provided if the train is cancelled. The Waimakariri Gorge section and the viaducts near Arthur's Pass are the visual high points. Arthur's Pass village at 737 metres is a request stop; the kea (alpine parrot) in the carpark are a reliable feature.

Punakaiki Pancake Rocks and Blowholes — After meeting your transfer at Greymouth station, the coach heads north 45 kilometres along the West Coast to Punakaiki. The rock formations are 30-million-year-old limestone layers, alternating hard and soft sediment compressed by alternating deep-sea conditions and then eroded by wave action into their stacked appearance. The blowholes are most dramatic at high tide. A self-guided walk covers the main circuit in 20 minutes.

OVERNIGHT

Greymouth

DAY

03

FRANZ JOSEF · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Greymouth to Franz Josef — West Coast rainforest and glacier country

The drive south from Greymouth to Franz Josef takes approximately two hours along the narrow coastal strip between the Tasman Sea and the Southern Alps — a corridor of dense temperate rainforest, river flats, and small settlements that carries more rainfall than almost anywhere else in New Zealand.

Franz Josef township sits at the edge of the Westland Tai Poutini National Park, which holds two of the world's most accessible glaciers. Both Franz Josef and Fox Glacier descend from around 2,700 metres to near sea level through native bush — a combination of altitude and climate found almost nowhere else on Earth. The glaciers have retreated substantially in recent decades; the current ice face is accessible by helicopter or guided hike (own expense, weather dependent).

Franz Josef Nature Tour Guided Walk — Included. An afternoon guided walk through the temperate rainforest at the glacier's edge, covering the ecology, geology, and glacial history of the Westland valley. Allow 2–3 hours.

Optional: West Coast Wildlife Centre — a conservation facility in Franz Josef township housing kiwi and kea in a controlled environment (own expense); Franz Josef Glacier Heli-Hike — helicopter access to the current ice face with a guided walk on crampons (weather dependent, own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Franz Josef

DAY

04

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 3

Franz Josef to Queenstown — via Haast Pass

The drive from Franz Josef to Queenstown takes approximately 4.5 to 5 hours via Fox Glacier, the Haast Pass, and Central Otago. Note: this transfer currently operates Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday only — confirm your departure date aligns before booking.

Fox Glacier — A brief stop through Fox Glacier township, 25 kilometres south of Franz Josef. The two glaciers are fed by the same neve on the Main Divide; Fox is slightly longer and lower.

Haast Pass (563 metres) — The lowest crossing of the Southern Alps, running through the Haast Pass / Tioripatea UNESCO World Heritage Area. The transition from West Coast rainforest to the drier eastern landscape happens within a few kilometres either side of the summit. The road follows the Haast River through the gorge before the pass.

Wānaka and the Cromwell Basin — The route descends from the pass through the Makarora valley to Lake Hāwea and Lake Wānaka before crossing the Crown Range or continuing through Cromwell to Queenstown.

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

05

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 3

Queenstown — highlights tour and free afternoon

The morning Queenstown Highlights Tour covers the three areas east and northeast of the town that give the best sense of the region's geology and history before the afternoon is left free for optional activities.

Queenstown Highlights Tour — Included. The tour covers the Kawarau Gorge (the original AJ Hackett bungy site from 1988, and the schist gorge carved by the Kawarau River through the Central Otago plateau), Gibbston Valley (the wine-producing sub-region sheltered in the gorge, planted predominantly in Pinot Noir and known as the Valley of the Vines), and Arrowtown (the gold rush settlement on the Arrow River that retained its 1860s streetscape and Chinese settlement precinct). Allow a half day.

Afternoon free for optional activities. KJet — a 60-minute jet boat ride on the Shotover and Kawarau rivers through the Queenstown canyon system (own expense); Original Onsen — a private outdoor hot pool overlooking the Shotover River canyon (own expense).

Optional: Skyline Gondola for afternoon views across Lake Wakatipu and the Remarkables (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

06

MILFORD SOUND · OVERNIGHT 3 OF 3

Milford Sound — Fiordland's granite walls and year-round waterfalls

Approximately 12 hours door to door — worth knowing before you start. The drive through Fiordland National Park covers 120 kilometres each way through terrain that has seen minimal human modification since the glaciers retreated. Mirror lakes, the Homer Tunnel, and the hanging valleys above the main road are the waypoints on the way in.

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. Single lane with traffic managed by lights. The approach through the hanging valley above the portal is one of the more memorable road moments on the South Island.

Milford Sound Fiord Cruise — The fiord runs 15 kilometres inland with granite and gneiss walls rising 1,200 metres out of the water. Mitre Peak at 1,692 metres is the most photographed point on the cruise. Stirling Falls and Lady Bowen Falls run year-round; the vessel passes close enough to feel the spray on most days. Lunch included on board.

Return to Queenstown by coach, arriving early evening.

MEALS

Lunch

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

07

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Queenstown to Christchurch — via Aoraki Mt Cook and Lake Tekapo

A long day's drive north from Queenstown to Christchurch through the Mackenzie Basin — the most varied driving day on the itinerary. The Kawarau Gorge, Cromwell, the Lindis Pass, and then Aoraki Mt Cook before the lakeside road to Tekapo: the landscape changes register four or five times between Queenstown and Christchurch.

Lindis Pass (971 metres) — The main divide between Otago and the Mackenzie Basin. Tussock country on both sides; one of the more photogenic stretches of the South Island's state highway network.

Aoraki Mt Cook Village — Free time at the village beneath New Zealand's highest peak. The Hooker Valley Track runs from here toward the terminal lake below the Hooker Glacier; allow 90 minutes if conditions permit. The approach road along Lake Pukaki's western shore is the visual introduction to the mountain — the lake's turquoise colour from suspended glacial rock flour is at its most vivid in afternoon light.

Church of the Good Shepherd, Lake Tekapo — A small stone chapel built in 1935 on the lakeshore, with a plain glass window framing the lake and mountains. A brief stop on the drive back north.

OVERNIGHT

Christchurch

DAY

08

CHRISTCHURCH

Depart Christchurch

The tour concludes with a departure transfer to Christchurch Airport. Your guide confirms pick-up timing the evening before based on your flight schedule.

Christchurch Airport (CHC) — International departures from CHC. Allow at least three hours for international check-in and immigration.

Optional: The International Antarctic Centre adjacent to the airport is worth two hours before an afternoon departure — a substantive museum covering Antarctic exploration with a live penguin encounter and a storm simulation room (own expense).

YOUR TRIP AT A GLANCE

What's Included

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

INCLUDED

- check Meet and greet arrival transfer in Christchurch
- check 7 nights accommodation
- check Transfer to Christchurch Railway Station
- check TranzAlpine scenic train Christchurch to Greymouth (subject to track maintenance)
- check Punakaiki Pancake Rocks and Blowholes self-guided walk
- check Greymouth to Franz Josef coach transfer
- check Franz Josef Nature Tour guided walk
- check Franz Josef to Queenstown coach transfer
- check Queenstown Highlights Tour — Kawarau Gorge, Gibbston Valley and Arrowtown
- check Milford Sound day tour with fiord cruise and lunch
- check Queenstown to Christchurch tour via Mt Cook Village and Lake Tekapo
- check Departure transfer to Christchurch Airport

NOT INCLUDED

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