Southern Highlights: South Island Self-Drive

NEW ZEALAND · CHRISTCHURCH · QUEENSTOWN

6D 5N | 25–30 PAX | STARTS CHRISTCHURCH | NOT INCLUDED

Cover the South Island's essential one-way route in six flexible days, driving from Christchurch through the Mackenzie Basin to Queenstown without retracing your journey. Visit the International Antarctic Centre, continue to Lake Tekapo for an included Dark Sky Experience, and travel beneath Aoraki Mt Cook before reaching Queenstown. A free day allows time for the town's adventure activities or nearby Glenorchy and Arrowtown, followed by a full self-drive day to Milford Sound and an included fiord cruise with lunch. Five nights' accommodation, rental car hire and three experiences are included. The Tekapo stargazing programme operates Thursday to Monday. This compact itinerary suits travellers who want maximum South Island scenery in limited time while retaining control of each day.

DAY

01

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Arrive Christchurch — collect rental car

Collect your rental car at Christchurch Airport and drive to your accommodation in the city. The car is included for 5 days with zero or reduced excess liability — confirm the specific excess terms at collection. Christchurch Airport is 10 kilometres from the city centre; the drive in takes 20–25 minutes.

International Antarctic Centre — Included. Adjacent to the airport terminal, covering Antarctic exploration from Christchurch's role as a gateway city. The live penguin encounter, the Hagglund all-terrain vehicle ride, and the storm simulation room are the main experiences. Use the included admission today on arrival or tomorrow morning before heading inland. Allow at least 2 hours.

Christchurch City Centre — The Botanic Gardens and Avon River precinct are within easy reach of most central accommodation and are worth an evening walk after a long travel day.

OVERNIGHT

Christchurch

DAY

02

LAKE TEKAPO · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Christchurch to Lake Tekapo and Aoraki Mt Cook

The drive from Christchurch to the Tekapo/Mt Cook region is 230–330 kilometres depending on how far you continue toward Mt Cook — allow 3 to 4 hours. The Canterbury Plains give way to the tussock Mackenzie Basin after the foothills; Lake Tekapo appears without much warning after a long stretch of flat farmland.

Church of the Good Shepherd — A small stone chapel built in 1935 on the Tekapo lakeshore, with a plain glass window behind the altar framing the lake and mountains. The lake's turquoise colour comes from suspended glacial rock flour. Allow 20 minutes; it can be busy in summer.

Dark Sky Experience — Included. An evening stargazing programme at Lake Tekapo covering the night sky, the reserve's designation, and guided telescope observation. Operates Thursday to Monday only — check the calendar when selecting your travel dates. The Mackenzie Basin holds one of the world's few certified International Dark Sky Reserve designations; on a clear night the sky above Tekapo is one of the most visible in the Southern Hemisphere.

Optional: Glacier Explorer boat tour on the Tasman Glacier terminal lake, Mt Cook region (own expense); Tekapo Springs Hot Pools (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Tekapo or Mt Cook region

DAY

03

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 3

Mt Cook region to Queenstown — via the high country

The drive from the Mt Cook/Tekapo region to Queenstown is 255–265 kilometres — approximately 3 hours 15 minutes. The route runs south alongside Lake Pukaki, through the tussock high country, and descends through the Kawarau Gorge into Queenstown.

Aoraki Mt Cook Village — If you stayed in the Tekapo area overnight, the morning drive to Mt Cook before heading south is a worthwhile detour. The approach road runs alongside Lake Pukaki for 50 kilometres; the lake's turquoise colour deepens as you approach the mountain. The Hooker Valley Track from the village is 90 minutes return to the glacier terminal lake.

Cromwell — The fruit-growing town at the head of Lake Dunstan is a brief optional stop on the route south. The heritage precinct on the lakefront and stone fruit stalls in season are worth 20 minutes.

Kawarau Gorge — The schist gorge on the final approach to Queenstown, with the original AJ Hackett bungy site visible from the road.

Optional: Skyline Gondola ride on arrival in Queenstown — cable car to Bob's Peak at 450 metres for views across the lake and Remarkables (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

04

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 3

Queenstown — free day

A free day in Queenstown before the Milford Sound day trip. The car gives you access to the full range of driving options around the town; use it or leave it parked and explore the waterfront and central Queenstown on foot.

Glenorchy Road — The 45-kilometre drive north along the western shore of Lake Wakatipu to Glenorchy is one of the most scenic short drives in the South Island. Allow a half day return.

Arrowtown — 20 minutes from Queenstown on the Arrow River. The gold rush main street and Chinese settlement precinct are worth an hour. In autumn (March–May) the poplar-lined riverbank is at its most photogenic.

Optional: Shotover Jetboat — high-speed jet boat through the Shotover River canyon (own expense); Walter Peak Farm Excursion on the TSS Earnslaw steamship — a 1912 coal-fired steamship crossing Lake Wakatipu to a high-country farm (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

05

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. Leave by 7:00am to reach the fiord comfortably for a midday cruise.

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 run heavily and the drive is at its most dramatic. 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.

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. Lunch included on board. Book your preferred cruise departure time when confirming the itinerary.

Return to Queenstown by your own vehicle, arriving evening.

MEALS

Lunch

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

06

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 Christchurch on Day 1. Early international arrivals or late departures may require an additional hire day — confirm the exact return deadline and any one-way fees at collection.

Queenstown town centre — If you have time before your flight, the waterfront and central Queenstown are 10 minutes from the airport. Arrowtown is 25 minutes and a good morning option if not already visited.

YOUR TRIP AT A GLANCE

What's Included

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

INCLUDED

- check 5-day rental car hire with zero or reduced excess liability (collected Christchurch, returned Queenstown)
- check 5 nights accommodation
- check International Antarctic Centre admission — use on Day 1 or Day 2
- check Dark Sky Experience at Lake Tekapo (operates Thursday to Monday only)
- check Milford Sound cruise with lunch

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