Southern Splendour: South Island Self-Drive

NEW ZEALAND · CHRISTCHURCH · QUEENSTOWN

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

Drive the South Island's classic circuit at your own pace over seven days, connecting Christchurch, Lake Tekapo, Aoraki Mt Cook, Queenstown and Milford Sound. Begin with the International Antarctic Centre, then cross the Mackenzie Basin for an included Dark Sky Experience beneath one of the world's recognised dark-sky reserves. Queenstown provides time for independent activities before a full-day drive through Fiordland to Milford Sound and an included cruise with lunch. Return to Christchurch through the Lindis Pass and broad high-country landscapes. Six nights' accommodation, rental car hire with reduced or zero excess liability, and three experiences are included. This journey suits travellers who want the South Island's main highlights with freedom to stop whenever the landscape invites it.

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 6 days with zero or reduced excess liability — confirm the specific excess terms at collection. Christchurch is a straightforward city to navigate; parking at most central hotels is available on-site or nearby.

International Antarctic Centre — Adjacent to the airport, this is a substantive museum covering the history and science of 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 three main experiences. Included; use today or tomorrow morning before departing inland. Allow at least 2 hours.

Christchurch City Centre — The Botanic Gardens, Avon River precinct, and the post-earthquake arts and architecture of the central city are all within easy reach of most accommodation.

Optional: Christchurch Tram Dinner (own expense).

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 driving time. The Canterbury Plains give way to the tussock Mackenzie Basin after the foothills, and Lake Tekapo appears without much warning after a long stretch of 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. One of the most photographed locations in New Zealand. Allow 20 minutes; it can be busy in summer.

Lake Tekapo Dark Sky Reserve — The Mackenzie Basin is one of the world's few certified International Dark Sky Reserves. The Dark Sky Experience is an included evening programme covering the night sky, the reserve's designation, and guided telescope observation. Operates Thursday to Monday only — check the calendar when planning your departure date. If your arrival falls on a non-operating night, the stargazing can still be done independently.

Optional: Glacier Explorer boat tour at Mt Cook — a guided boat excursion on the Tasman Glacier terminal lake (own expense, if continuing to the Mt Cook region today).

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 region to Queenstown is 255–265 kilometres, approximately 3 hours 15 minutes. The route south follows Lake Pukaki, passes through Twizel and the Mackenzie Basin before climbing into the tussock high country and descending through the Kawarau Gorge into Queenstown.

Aoraki Mt Cook Village — If you stayed in the Tekapo area last night, the morning drive to Mt Cook is worth the detour: the approach road runs alongside Lake Pukaki for 50 kilometres, the lake's turquoise colour from suspended glacial rock flour intensifying as you get closer to the mountain. The Hooker Valley Track from the village takes 90 minutes return and reaches the terminal lake below the Hooker Glacier.

Cromwell — A brief stop in the Central Otago fruit-growing town at the head of Lake Dunstan is optional. The heritage precinct on the waterfront and the stone fruit stalls in season are worth 20 minutes.

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

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

04

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 2 OF 3

Queenstown — Milford Sound day trip

The Milford Sound day is approximately 12 hours when self-driving from Queenstown — 240 kilometres each way through Fiordland National Park. The drive is part of the experience: the road from Te Anau into the park passes mirror lakes, the single-lane Homer Tunnel through the Darran Mountains, and the final descent to the fiord.

Note on driving: the Homer Tunnel is single-lane with traffic managed by lights; wait times can be 10–15 minutes. The road beyond the tunnel is sealed but narrow. In wet conditions the waterfalls above the road are active and impressive; in dry conditions the drive is faster. Check road conditions at nzta.govt.nz before departure.

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

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.

Return to Queenstown by your own vehicle, arriving evening.

MEALS

Lunch

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

05

QUEENSTOWN · OVERNIGHT 3 OF 3

Queenstown — free day

A free day in Queenstown with the car available for independent exploration. The self-drive format opens up options that coach itineraries can't include: Glenorchy at the head of the lake (45 minutes north), Arrowtown and the Crown Range to Wānaka (a full day loop), or simply the town and its immediate surroundings.

Glenorchy Road — The 45-kilometre drive north along the western shore of Lake Wakatipu to Glenorchy 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.

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

Optional: Dart River Funyak — a self-guided inflatable kayak journey down the Dart River from Glenorchy (own expense); Kawarau Bridge Bungy — the original commercial bungy site (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Queenstown

DAY

06

CHRISTCHURCH · OVERNIGHT 1 OF 1

Queenstown to Christchurch — through the Lindis Pass

The return drive from Queenstown to Christchurch is 485 kilometres — allow 6 hours driving time, more if you stop at Mt Cook or Tekapo. The route runs northeast through the Kawarau Gorge, across the Cromwell basin, and up through the Lindis Pass before descending into the Mackenzie district and on to the Canterbury Plains.

Lindis Pass (971 metres) — The main divide between Otago and the Mackenzie Basin. The tussock landscape on both sides is one of the more distinctive stretches of the South Island's state highway network. Snow is possible in winter; check conditions.

Lake Tekapo return — If you want a second stop at the lake in different light, the turnoff is on the return route. The village has good coffee and the lakefront walk is 20 minutes.

Note: A Queenstown-to-Christchurch domestic flight can be added to your international itinerary as an alternative to driving, which avoids the 6-hour return. Your accommodation or a local travel agent can advise on availability and cost.

Optional: Christchurch Tram Dinner on arrival (own expense).

OVERNIGHT

Christchurch

DAY

07

CHRISTCHURCH

Depart Christchurch — return rental car

Return the rental car to Christchurch Airport and check in for your departure flight. The car return and international departures are in the same precinct at CHC; 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 on Day 1. Early international arrivals or late departures may require an additional hire day — confirm the exact return deadline at collection.

Optional: The International Antarctic Centre is adjacent to the car return area if you did not use the included admission on Days 1 or 2 (own expense if admission already used; included admission valid once).

YOUR TRIP AT A GLANCE

What's Included

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

INCLUDED

- check 6-day rental car hire with zero or reduced excess liability
- check 6 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