

Orange County Venturers' of Boy Scouts of America

Amazing Journey to New Zealand and Fiji

by Donald S. Roberts

On December 18, 2008, 46 youth and adult members of the Venturing division of the Boy Scouts of America (youth ages 14 to 20) departed for New Zealand and Fiji. Upon their return December 30, 2008, they had some amazing stories to tell. This adventure began as an invitation from the Scout Association of New Zealand for our southland youth to visit and get a sample of "Kiwi hospitality."

The Venturers, primarily from Fullerton in Orange County, learned that there are actually three kinds of Kiwis, and they got to experience them all. New Zealand is known for the Kiwi bird, a brown, watermelon sized nocturnal animal with amazing speed and agility. The group was able to visit the "Kiwi Experience" on the North Island and observe several Kiwis along with many other examples of local flora and fauna, including the famous three foot long fresh water eels found in New Zealand. In addition, the group visited "Kiwi360," an active Kiwi fruit plantation where the world's healthiest fruit is grown on vines that look very similar to grapes. Finally, throughout the New Zealand portion of the trip, our local youth had extensive opportunities to interact with the human Kiwis, as the New Zealanders like to call themselves. Almost every day the group was visited by scouts from throughout the north island of New Zealand.

This trip was one amazing non-stop adventure after another as the New Zealanders were so anxious to help our youth experience all that New Zealand has to offer. During the flight across the equator and the international date line, the group had the unique experience of skipping a day, boarding the plane on December 18 and coming off on December 20, with no December 19 between. This caused some consternation for one of our youth whose birthday was December 19. We decided she could stay 20 years old for another year since we skipped her birthday. Upon arrival, the group headed to Motu Moana scout camp. Not satisfied to sit idle, the youth had an opportunity to experience the "Flying Fox", a 70 yard long zip line located there as their first sample of active adventures.

December 21 commenced the whirlwind tour of the Rotorua and Tauranga area where the first venue was an extinct volcano in the middle of Auckland called Mt. Eden. After experiencing the amazing vistas the next venue was a ferry to the outlying volcanic island Rangitoto with a brief climb to the top and views of Auckland harbor and the city from the harbor. After returning to the north island, the next venue was Kelly Tarlton's, an Antarctic themed museum and aquarium. At Kelly Tarlton, the group was able to visit with penguins and south pacific aquatic life, including the walk through aquariums and shark tank.

After an early start December 22, we took to the road for adventures while heading to the active thermal areas of the North Island around Rotorua. Our first stop was Matamata, the location where the Lord of the Rings movies placed Hobbiton. The group was fascinated by the remaining facades and sets,

the stories about the making of the movies, as well as enjoying comparing the beautiful countryside to what can be seen in the movie. After the pastoral splendor of this sheep country, next stop was the beautiful river town of Hamilton to meet with some top officials of the Scout Association of New Zealand. Then it was on to Orotohanga and the massive Waitomo caverns for "Blackwater Rafting," taking an inner tube through underground rapids. This extreme experience was enhanced by views of the mysterious glow worms, which look like a field of stars overhead when your light is turned off. We then settled in to the scout hut at Te Kuite, where we again visited with the local scouts and enjoyed the pleasure of a quaint New Zealand village.

December 23 was our visit to the Kiwi Experience, followed by more Lord of the Rings location visiting as we entered *** National park for spectacular views of the mountains that were used for Mt. Doom and Moria, and the falls and pool used for Henneth Anun in the movies. Our travels next took us to the beautiful Lake Taupo region, where we visited Craters of the Moon, an active geothermal area for geysers and bubbling mud, Huka Falls and the Waikato River and finally settling at the Rotorua Sea Scout Den on the shore of Lake Rotorua for more visits with local scouts.

Christmas eve found us at Agrodome for some truly off-beat sports. We started with Zorb, a twelve foot wide ball you crawl into and then are rolled down a mountain. After that rush, it was on to Shweeb, an incline bicycle hanging from a monorail track for a real rush as speeds up to 70 kilometers per hour can be reached. Then it was the sheep show, where members of our team had an opportunity to bottle feed a lamb, milk a cow and we watched a demonstration of a sheep being sheared in less than a minute as we learned about the different breeds of sheep and their uses. We followed Agrodome with a visit to Whakarewarewa village, a Maori village in the midst of geysers and mud pots and learned about Maori culture, wood carving, weaving and history. Some of our group then went Christmas caroling and a midnight church service at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Rotorua.

Christmas day continued the frantic pace as we started with the half mile long land luge track for multiple runs. After a few minor spills and some road rash, it was off to a BBQ on the beach at Whakatane hosted by the Ohope scouts. While there, we frolicked on the beach, swam in the warm Pacific waters, kayaked, sailed and relaxed. Following our relaxing day at the beach it was dinner out at Valentines and a chance to relax in the natural hot pools at "Polynesian Pools."

We started Boxing Day at a climbing wall in Rotorua. The walls were about 100 feet high, and at the summit was a high wire where the kids could buckle up and try their skill at walking across a wire 100 feet off the ground. Then it was on the road again as we headed to the "Buried Village", a Maori settlement that had been buried in ash and lava 130 years ago and is considered New Zealand's Pompeii. We experienced the tragic events of that day long ago as we visited the remains of the structures and learned the stories of those who were there. Next was a drive by the scenic Blue and Green Lakes and Kiwi360 where we learned about the three major types of commercially grown kiwi fruit. We stopped for the night at the resort town of Mt. Maunganui where we enjoyed the salt water hot pools before settling in.

December 27 saw us drive through the beautiful regions of Tauranga and Katikati. Next was the Karanaghaki Gorge gold mines, a massive open pit mine. Then a visit to the town of Paeroa, the source of a natural soda spring and location where a famous New Zealand soft drink, Lemon and Paeroa is bottled. We finished our day at “Wilderness Gems” in Ngatea for some much needed retail therapy, then settled into Camp Sladden just outside Auckland. That night we had some awesome views of the Southern Cross and Orion (upside down from our perspective) and proved that the water still drains counter-clockwise in the southern hemisphere.

The morning of December 28 we had one last opportunity for some retail therapy before saying goodbye to our New Zealand hosts and returning to Auckland airport for our flight to The Fiji Islands. That afternoon, we arrived in Fiji to stay at the Horizon Backpacker’s Hostel right on the beach where we watched the fire dancers and beautiful Fijian ladies perform and relaxed before our next day’s activities.

It was on to Mana Island, one of many in the Malaleuca chain of islands which includes a four star resort and all the water sports you can imagine. After a one and a half hour boat ride visiting various small islands, we arrived at the resort to cavort in the very warm Pacific waters. We went snorkeling, catamaran sailing, swimming, sun-bathing, diving and had a great time. We were served an outstanding buffet lunch while there and returned to the main island late that afternoon.

For our final day, December 30, there was no stopping our team. We went on an “Eco-Tour” which started with a swim in a thermal mud pool where we covered ourselves completely with the therapeutic mud. Next we cleaned off in a hot thermal pool that could rival any manufactured hot tub. Next was a hike to a waterfall that we swam right into and climbed upon to our great delight. This was followed by a lunch served on a taro leaf consisting of fruit, vegetables and meat all produced there at the Fiji village, picking pineapples along the trail to be used as part of the lunch. We followed the meal with a kava ceremony with the chief of the village who then hosted us as a group of young people performed a variety of Polynesian dances. Upon return to our hostel, a group of us went to play golf on the home course of Vijay Singh, the number one money earning professional golfer who is from Fiji. We ended our day by boarding a plane at 10:50 pm, arriving at LAX at 1:10 pm the same day, 10 hours earlier than we left Fiji.

This was summer in New Zealand and Fiji, and we enjoyed warm sunny days most of the time, with occasional rain. It was hot and humid in Fiji, but well worth the experience. The participants in our crew will never forget our “Wonder Down Under” trip.