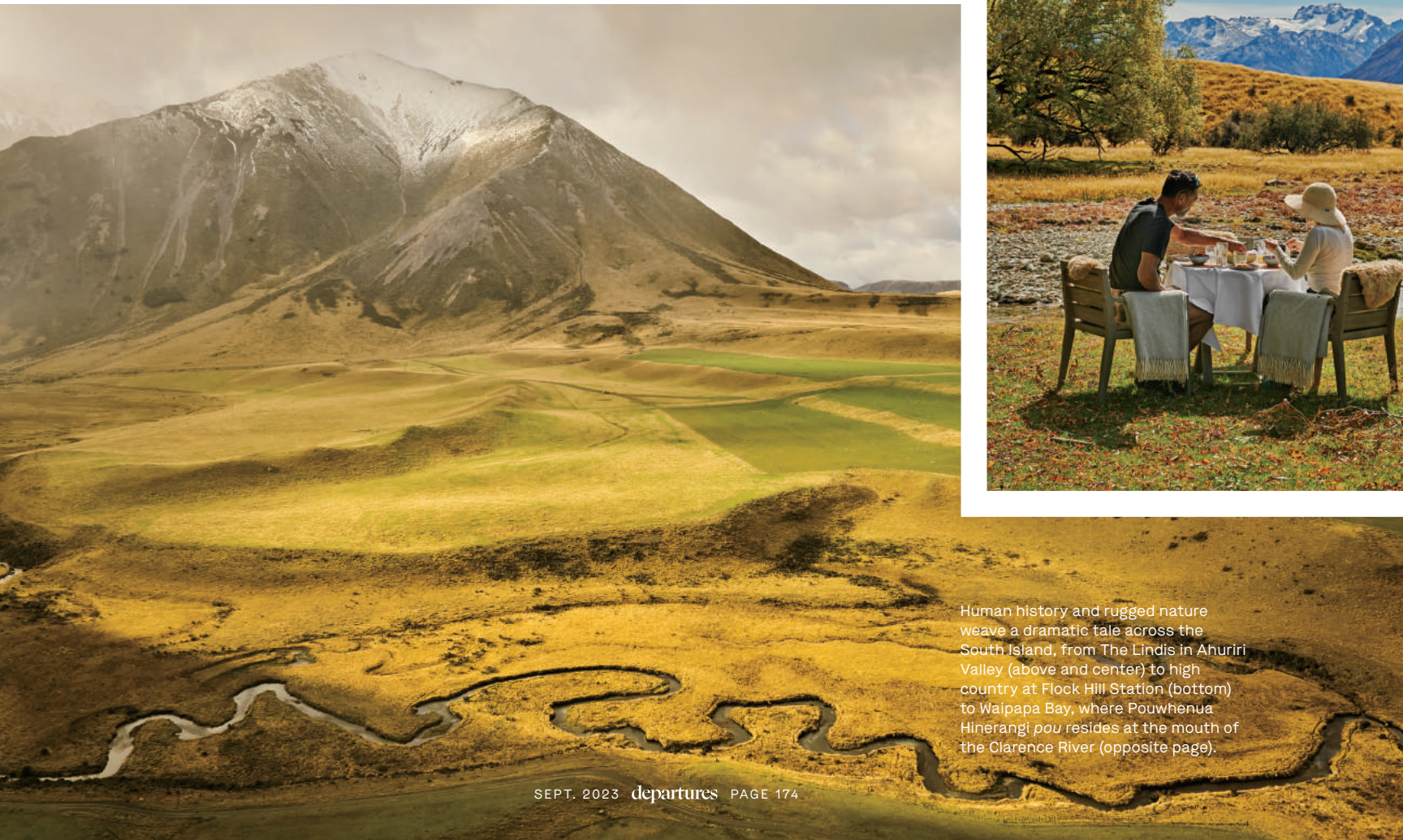




Human history and rugged nature weave a dramatic tale across the South Island, from The Lindis in Ahuriri Valley (above and center) to high country at Flock Hill Station (bottom) to Waipapa Bay, where Pouwhenua Hinurangi pou resides at the mouth of the Clarence River (opposite page).

Rock, Sky, and Sea

From **fertile valleys** to the peaks of craggy, **snow-capped mountains**, an author explores the wild topography and **layered history** of **New Zealand's** South Island.

WORDS BY **CHRISTINA THOMPSON**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DEREK HENDERSON**



► **AS A HISTORIAN**, I always think that to understand a place you need to go back at least a hundred years. But after traveling the length of New Zealand’s South Island, I think it might be more like a hundred million. Everywhere you look there is evidence of Earth’s great action: folding and melting and rising and shifting and grinding and wearing away. You see it in the smooth gray fans of shingle that spill from the mountain clefts, in the carved-out glacial valleys with their dead-flat floors of scree, in the wide gravel swaths cut by fast-flowing rivers that wind from the mountains to the sea.

The forces that created these glorious vistas are largely tectonic. A remnant of the ancient supercontinent Gondwana, New Zealand lies directly on the boundary between the Australian and Pacific plates, which are slowly grinding across and against each other, giving rise not only to earthquakes and volcanoes but to soaring snow-capped mountains, ice-blue lakes, and stygian limestone caves — in short, to one of the most bracing landscapes on the planet.

I am married to a New Zealander, and I have made many visits to the country over the years. But my husband’s family lives in the far north, and I had never spent any time in the rugged and less populated South Island.

Our journey, designed and executed by luxury tour operator Black Tomato with expert local help from Southern Crossings of New Zealand, began in the Marlborough region. Flying south from Auckland to Blenheim in a twin-prop regional plane, we had a perfect view of New Zealand’s topography. Passing between the volcanic cones of Mount Taranaki to the west and Tongariro National Park to the east, we dipped under a layer of low-hanging cloud and landed in an expansive, flat valley of green and gold, surrounded by rolling hills.

Marlborough is wine country; the vines apparently just love the good drainage of gravelly glacial soil. But the Wairau Valley has it all: cool nights, warm days, shelter from the wind, and more sunshine than almost anywhere else in New Zealand. At The Marlborough, a charming two-story Victorian convent-turned-boutique-hotel, the talk was all of wine. Set in 16 acres of gardens and vineyards, the hotel features the famous Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, as well as its own riesling, malbec, and merlot, and our server, a chatty young Irishwoman, told us that she even had her own label.

The miraculous fertility of the region is good for more than just grapes, however. Geoff Pullin, The Marlborough’s head gardener and vineyard manager, gave me a grand tour of the hotel grounds. Beginning at an astonishingly tall hedge, we wandered past a giant tangle of white blossoms — *Rosa banksiae*, the thornless scented rambling rose named for the wife of Sir Joseph Banks, who sailed to New Zealand with Captain James Cook in 1769 — through a handsome grove of specimen trees (chestnut, ginkgo, and Indian bean) to a kitchen garden full of herbs, beets, lettuces, and squash, some of which turned up on our plates at dinner.

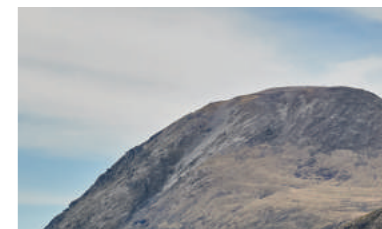
But there is something else in the Wairau Valley that many people do not know about, even many New Zealanders, and that is one of the country’s oldest archaeological sites. A short drive from Blenheim to the coast brings you to the mouth of the Wairau River, and a stone’s throw from there is Wairau Bar, a long gravel barrier between the ocean and a broad expanse of marsh and saltwater lagoons. Discovered in 1939 and first excavated in the 1940s, Wairau Bar revealed a treasure trove of middens, ovens, adzes, and necklaces in a style rarely seen elsewhere in New Zealand, plus several human burials and intact blown moa eggs: clear evidence of coexistence between humans and a long-extinct giant bird.

New Zealand is one of the very last places on earth to have been colonized by humans, and until the ancestors of the Māori arrived from central Polynesia around 1200 A.D., it was essentially a land of birds. Many of the species were flightless, including the moa, a huge ostrich-like creature that could stand up to 12 feet tall and weigh as much as 500 pounds. The moa was an excellent source of protein, and when the first humans arrived, they quickly hunted it to extinction. It is only the very earliest archaeological sites, therefore, that show evidence of humans and moa together.

Wairau Bar is a vast and windswept place, beautiful but exposed, and it’s intriguing to think of it as the first landing spot of a new people, especially a people used to the balmy tropics. Today, the area is off-limits to the public, having been closed by Rangitāne, the local *kaitiaki*, or guardians, of the site. In 2009, the human remains, which had been held in the Canterbury Museum, were repatriated and reburied, and in 2012 Wairau Bar was formally declared a *wāhi tapu*, or sacred site. But you can still drive out to the mouth of the river and gaze across the water at what might have been the very first human settlement in New Zealand. ►



From ocean to mountains and back again, we explored Queenstown’s Lake Wakatipu with Matakauri Lodge in the distance (top); the Ohau Point seal colony along the highway on the way to Kaikōura from Blenheim (center); Pyke Hut, on the walk up to Minaret Station in Lake Wanaka (bottom right); and Ben Avon Station in Ahuriri Valley (bottom left).





It felt as though we had traversed not just 500 miles of country — from Hapuku Lodge + Tree Houses in Kaikōura (top) to Matakauri Lodge near Lake Wakatipu in Queenstown (center) to Flock Hill Station in Craigieburn Valley (bottom) — but also traveled through time.



From Blenheim, we set off by car, skirting the north end of the Kaikōura Ranges and then following the coastline south. Here the mountains press right against the ocean, hills rising to snow-dusted peaks on one side, the sea stretching to eternity on the other.

The ocean in New Zealand has a color I have never seen anywhere else: a milky greenish-blue for which there is no exact name. Greener than turquoise, lighter than teal, it is called things like “pool” and “dream” and “seafoam” in designers’ palettes. “Werner’s Nomenclature of Colours” associates it with the mineral fluorite and says that it can be made by mixing Berlin blue with white and a little emerald green. The source, no doubt, lies in the sediments — pale limestone and a fine gray mudstone — that are constantly washing into the sea.

There are many great ways to see this coast, but the best is by helicopter. We had just arrived at our destination — the stylish and quirky Hapuku Lodge + Tree Houses, with its row of elegant one-room bungalows on stilts — when Daniel Stevenson of South Pacific Helicopters arrived to collect us from a paddock behind the lodge.

Out we flew over the ocean, past the line in the sea where the currents collide and the water suddenly changes to a midnight blue. Kaikōura is world-famous for its marine life: schools of dolphins and colonies of seals, orcas, humpbacks, and sperm whales, who come to feed in a vast underwater canyon that lies just off the coast.

I would never have envisioned myself as a helicopter enthusiast, but what I learned in New Zealand is that nothing beats the perspective that a helicopter affords you. Looking down on the earth you really see it: the terracing, the folds, the places where it’s slipped. But a helicopter can also bring you surprisingly close: right up to the side of a mountain or down on the water’s surface. It’s at once Olympian and intimate in a way I had never imagined. But also — did I mention? — helicopters are a blast.

In 2016 a huge earthquake — magnitude 7.8 — shook the Kaikōura region. It was so powerful that it actually shifted parts of the South Island northward; the town of Kaikōura moved three feet to the northeast. Flying back inland over the hills, we saw some of the aftereffects of this catastrophe, including the spot where three cows were famously stranded on a pinnacle of land when the hillside they were grazing on disintegrated.

But there was another surprise in store for us. Almost

before we knew what was afoot, our pilot had landed the helicopter in a parking lot — much to the astonishment of a woman in a van — jumped out to collect a crate of live crayfish, and taken off again. A few minutes later, we touched down in the garden at Hapuku Kitchen, a farm-based cooking school run by Chris Sturgeon and Fiona Read.

Kaikōura means to “eat crayfish,” and that’s exactly what we did, feasting on grilled cray tails, freshly picked salad, and homemade hokey pokey ice cream, while Sturgeon and Read regaled us with stories of the quake:

how the house had shaken for a full two and a half minutes; how a mirror danced across the floor and back again, ending up unbroken against the wall where it started; how their first thought was of the possibility of a tsunami. It was a delicious, dramatic, and thoroughly enjoyable afternoon.

The next day we headed for the high country. Everywhere you look in the South Island there are mountains,

and every journey takes you over another set of hills. The one significant exception is the Canterbury Plains, a vast stretch of perfectly flat land whose agricultural potential attracted the South Island’s first European settlers.

Our route took us along the northern edge of the plains, past long shelterbelts and fields of lucerne, over the Waimakariri (“cold, rushing water”), one of the great braided rivers that descends from the glaciers of the Southern Alps, and up into the hills. To this point, the weather had been largely bright and beautiful, hot in the sun and cool in the shade. But as we wound our way up into the mountains it began to change, first to rain and then, as we climbed higher and higher — the hills getting bigger, the turns growing tighter — to snow.

We were bound for Flock Hill, a historic sheep and cattle station in the Craigieburn Valley that occupies some 36,000 acres of rugged hill country on the eastern flank of the Southern Alps. Such is the scale of New Zealand that while Flock Hill is just an hour and a half from Christchurch by car (half an hour by helicopter!), once you get there you feel as though you’re at the end of the world.

Flock Hill Station is a working farm, with more than 11,000 sheep and hundreds of cattle, plus dogs, horses, farmhands, and all the rest. But it is also home to an exclusive luxury lodge; the Financial Times calls it “the chicest sheep station in the world.” The Homestead, which

first opened in 2022, is a stunning one-story building of wood, stone, and glass, based *very loosely* on the idea of a farm shed. With only four bedrooms, it caters to just one party at a time (maximum eight people) and comes with its own private chef.

An exercise in great taste, everything at Flock Hill, from the limestone flooring to the alpaca throws, is simple, luxurious, and elegant — which is why getting out into the mud was important. In borrowed gum boots and rain gear and wearing every layer we had, we jumped into a Land Rover with Sean, one of the station shepherds, for a tour of the property. Sean, in true Kiwi fashion, was in shorts.

The sky was low and gray, and something between snow and rain was falling. We drove up to some high paddocks and got out to watch while Sean and his dogs moved a flock of sheep from one enclosure to another. It was a lovely choreography of man and beast: Sean singing out the commands — “Get away out,” “One to go, Tine” — the dogs pivoting and sprinting, the sheep clambering and jostling to get through the gates. After a couple of hours in the cold and wet, we returned to a crackling fire, warm slippers, and a glass of wine with whitebait fritter butties and scampi toast with caviar.

There were two places I had particularly wanted to see in the South Island: Wairau Bar and the home of Lady Barker, each in its own way a symbol of New Zealand’s history. If Wairau Bar is one of the earliest Māori settlements, the Lady Barker homestead is a vestige of the country’s early colonial past.

Europeans first encountered New Zealand and its Māori population in the mid-seventeenth century, but no one tried to settle there until the early 1800s. When they did, it was in the North Island first; the South Island did not see its first big wave of colonial immigration until the 1850s. Mary Anne Barker and her husband were part of this influx of settlers. Arriving in Christchurch in 1865, they set up house on a 9,000-acre sheep run in the hills above the Canterbury Plains. “Station Life in New Zealand,”

Lady Barker’s lively memoir (and a New Zealand classic), recounts their many adventures and misadventures, from her lighthearted account of learning to cook to the terrible 1867 snowstorm that wiped out more than half their flock.

I was excited to discover that the Lady Barker homestead was not far from Flock Hill, and I insisted on a detour. Despite my arriving unannounced, its current owner, Helen McArthur — who was just on her way to the woolshed for morning tea — recognized me for the Lady Barker fangirl that I am and generously agreed to show

me around. Although the house has been extended several times, it retains many original features, including the badly located fireplace that Lady Barker hated with a passion, a library of her books, and what is believed to be one of her boots — discovered under the house during a renovation.

We had two more destinations in the high country, each a little more spectacular than the last. Still heading south, the road took us past the famous Lake Tekapo, where we paused (with many other tourists) to admire the milky turquoise expanse and, rising beyond it, the great shining, snow-covered mass of Aoraki, New Zealand’s highest peak. At Lake Pukaki we stopped for a snack of high-country salmon

and then on through Twizel and Omarama, turning onto successively smaller and smaller roads until we reached a gate with an intercom on a dirt track in the middle of nowhere at all.

We had arrived at The Lindis, a famously designed luxury lodge in the remote Ahuriri Valley. Set on a slight rise above the valley floor, the long, low building with its undulating roof was designed to blend imperceptibly into the landscape; from some angles it is virtually impossible to detect. Even the outbuildings are a surprise: the gym, at some distance from the main lodge, is housed in its own little sod-covered hobbit hole.

The lodge looks out over a somewhat severe wilderness of golden tussock grass and rugged mountains, softened by the winding Ahuriri River. With almost no light pollution,

the stars at night were a marvel. In the morning, a mist hung in the valley like smoke and the river shone like silver under a pale gray sky. There was frost on the grass when we woke, but by mid-morning it had all burned off, and the day was hot and sunny for our barbecue picnic at a scenic spot down in the valley.

They call it a “picnic,” but it was more like what one imagines of an Edwardian safari: a table for two on the banks of a river, sheepskins on the chairs, woolen wraps in case of cold, linen, and silver. The Lindis’ head chef, Dane Archery, joined us for a chat, his hands full of the porcini mushrooms he had just foraged. Archery is originally from South Africa, but his Indian roots were evident in our dinner that night: lamb, wild rice, coconut pumpkin dal, labneh, and roti — a nice stylistic twist on New Zealand’s haute cuisine.

But if The Lindis is deliciously remote,

our final stop in the high country was truly spectacular. Not because it was the most elegant or luxurious of the lodges we visited, but because it was just so tucked away. Minaret Station Alpine Lodge bills itself as “one of the most secluded and private luxury lodges in the world.” And while I have no way of judging the truth of this claim, getting there is definitely an adventure.

The only way into Minaret Station is by helicopter. Our instructions were to present ourselves at the airfield in Wānaka, a fast-growing town at the foot of a long lake, where we were met by Doug Beech, Minaret Station’s general manager of operations. I was, of course, ecstatic at the prospect of being up in the air again, and our pilot from Alpine Helicopters was obliging, making a detour to fly us in a complete circle around Mou Waho, an island in Lake Wānaka with its own little lake known as Arethusa Pool.

About 25 miles up the lake, we turned into a valley, but not one of the wide flat valleys we’d become used to. This one was more like a canyon, with a rushing stream at the bottom and waterfalls coursing down sheer vertical walls. After a bit, Beech asked our pilot to put us down, which was surprising, since we could not see any place where you might land a helicopter. It turns out they can land almost anywhere at all, and a few minutes later we were standing on a small sort of shoulder, a mere bump on the hillside about the size of a car.

From there we set off walking, following the stream bed up through a cool, damp forest of beech trees and ferns.

We climbed past enormous boulders that had clearly come crashing down from the mountain above, and crossed paths with a couple of seemingly lost sheep. At length, we emerged out onto a kind of promontory, and there on the hillside above us was a musterers’ hut. Our pilot was already there, getting the fire going, brewing tea and grilling lamb chops for lunch, his helicopter perched behind him on the hill.

We walked the last stretch into an alpine valley with a curving boardwalk that brings you at last to the door of the lodge with its four neat little chalets. I could happily have stayed there forever, watching the deer dance across the valley at dusk, and the smoke from the chimney curling in the cool air.

But everything comes to an end eventually, and our last helicopter ride brought us out of the wilderness and back into civilization. We were due to fly out of Queenstown, which felt positively bustling by comparison with where we’d been. Matakauri Lodge, where we stayed, was a haven: a serene and elegant retreat on the edge of Lake Wakatipu, with handsomely appointed suites that look out over the lake. From there, it was back to Auckland and a return to our lives.

To me, it felt as though we had traversed not just 500 miles of country — up hill and down dale, north to south, east to west, from ocean to mountains and back again — but also traveled through time. People think of landscape as something static and immutable, but it’s really just another kind of history, like migration and settlement, life and death — played out on a different scale. Human history, with all its fascinations, is just a layer over the moving history of the earth. No place I have ever been makes this clearer than New Zealand.●



The South Island’s diversity is also evidenced on its tables, whether that be dinner at the stylish and quirky Hapuku Lodge + Tree Houses (left) or lunch at Harvest (above), The Marlborough hotel’s restaurant, where a kitchen garden grows herbs, beets, lettuces, and squash, some of which turned up on our plates.