

Life, the universe and everything

The rugged beauty of New Zealand gives **Janine Thomas** a fresh perspective

Sometimes in life, you can feel very, very small. Minuscule, even. To the point of obscurity. And nowhere more so than standing on top of Mount John in South Island, New Zealand, gazing up at a blanket of stars close enough to touch.

The Earth and Sky observatory at Mount John houses New Zealand's largest telescope, to which international astronomers flock in their quest to find another planet similar to Earth. Around it lie the new Astro Cafe, another telescope dome and a wooden hut, where my stargazing tour group congregates to snuggle into feather-filled Mongolian jackets before braving the cold, alpine air.

Outside, our guides, René and Eeva, start with a naked-eye tour of the sky. They introduce us to the Southern Cross, a sliver of a crescent moon and the brightest star in the sky, Sirius. Then we move on to the telescopes. One is a chunky 16-incher in the dome, the other is outside, and we alternate between them, admiring Jupiter's red spot, a hurricane raging around the planet and the sparkling splendour of the star cluster Jewel Box. There's no astro-geek speak — this pair are knowledgeable amateurs, not professional anoraks. Nor is there a flashy planetarium or whizzy night show — this evening is simply about the sky.

New Zealand is a country known for its breathtaking scenery, loved by trampers (ramblers to you and I) and adrenaline-sports junkies alike. But its natural beauty does not end at dusk. On the other side of the world, you see the universe from a fresh angle — the main difference here is the lack of light pollution. The village of Tekapo lies in the Mackenzie Basin below, but outdoor lighting is carefully monitored. The observatory is making a

bid to protect the big, bright expanse of stars above it, and aims to become a Starlight Reserve, the first Unesco world heritage park in the sky, to coincide with the international year of astronomy next year. It will be the perfect partner to the national park that sprawls beneath it.

Just as the landscape here inspires you to get snap-happy — stopping at every possible moment for yet another photo of the turquoise water of Lake Tekapo, the

largest and highest glacial lake in New Zealand — now you can shoot the stars, too. Fraser Gunn's new Earth and Sky astrophotography session gives you the chance to create eerily beautiful photographs of the night sky to take home.

Nocturnal activity aside, Tekapo is a splendid place to stop and explore Mackenzie Country. I did it by plane — jumping onto an early-morning air safari around Aoraki Mount Cook, the country's highest peak at 3,754 metres. The view was stupendous.

If you want to keep your feet on the ground, you can soak up the view of Lake Tekapo from the new outdoor hot pools at the Alpine Springs & Spa. The water comes straight from glacier springs, and is heated using an energy-efficient system to a toasty 36C-40C. Next year,

secluded hot tubs in the forest will be available for hire if you fancy a bit of privacy, as well as a winter park, with sledging and ice-skating. Wallow in the water and watch the sunset or head to the Japanese restaurant Kohan. Order fleshy crumbed scallops, so big they have to be carved, giant tempura prawns and melt-in-the-mouth Mount Cook salmon sashimi, then sit back and watch the impressive vista melt into darkness.

For a closer look at Aoraki, a 90-minute drive takes you to Mount Cook village.

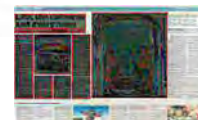
Here, the Hermitage hotel dominates the landscape. This is a perfect base from which to delve into the mountains and explore the wilderness playground of Aoraki Mount Cook National Park. Last year, the hotel opened the Sir Edmund Hillary Alpine Centre, complete with 3-D

cinema, planetarium and museum, a tribute to the explorer, who had a long-standing connection with the region.

For a first-hand experience, you need to get outdoors. Glacier Explorers takes you to the Tasman Valley, an eerie lunar landscape of grey rocks and boulders that opens up into a milky-grey lake filled with giant icebergs. Yes, icebergs. The last thing you expect up a mountain, right? Ken the Dane, our guide for the boat trip, motors up to these melting giants, so close we can see bits of leaf and twig frozen inside the ice.

New Zealand is a land of natural giants: towering mountains, huge icebergs — and enormous prawns, of course. For more of the big stuff, take a hop, skip and a jump by plane to the Bay of Islands. Renowned for its huge dunes, where you can sand-surf the days away, this isolated, unspoilt harbour is where you imagine the true soul of New Zealand to rest.

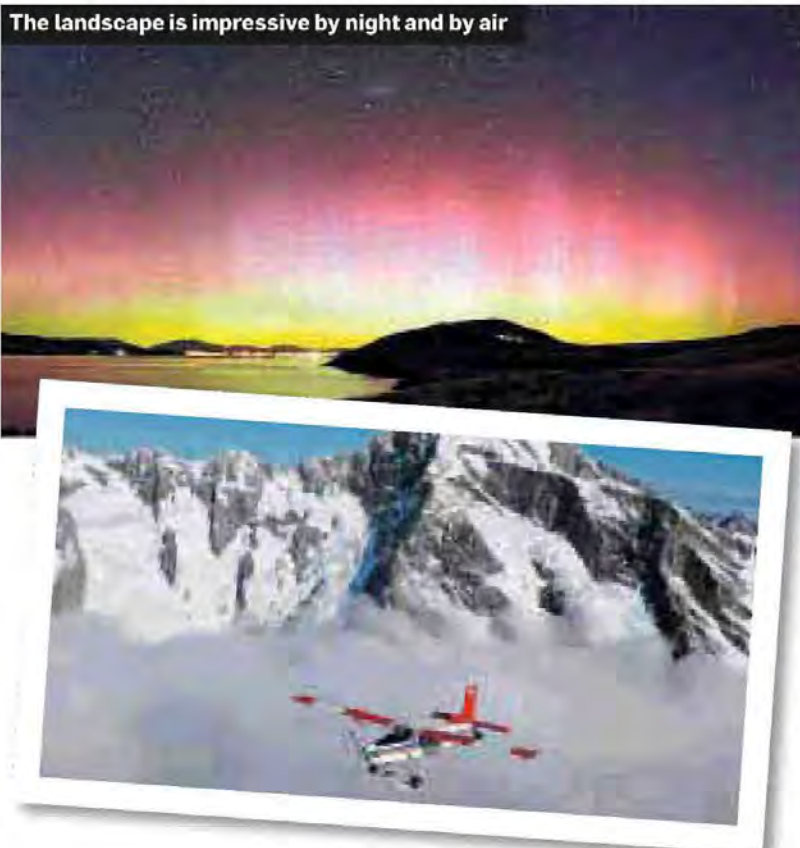
Tawhiri is my Maori guide for another encounter with the very large: the Footprints Twilight Encounter with the ancient kauri trees, which can grow to 50m. He sets the tone with a Maori prayer before we enter the rainforest. I learn about the sap from big ferns, a natural steroid that can cause hallucinations in strong doses. As we go deeper into the forest, we hug baby kauris, a mere 100 years old, and hear how the bark sheds like fish scales and is used for Maori tattoo ink; we see a tea tree and rub its leaves, inhaling the familiar sweet, antiseptic



scent.

As the sun sets, we arrive at Te Matua Ngahere, a kauri estimated to be 4,000 years old. Framed in the dusky light, the tree stands tall and proud. We stand in silence, offering our own thanks to the magical forest, mosquitoes buzzing around us as day turns to night.

■ *Janine Thomas travelled as a guest of Air New Zealand (0800 028 4149, www.airnewzealand.co.uk) and Tourism New Zealand (www.newzealand.com). Air New Zealand has flights from London to Auckland via Hong Kong or Los Angeles, with returns from £907pp. With Discover the World (01737 218 800, www.discover-the-world.co.uk), a 14-day package including activities mentioned above starts at £2,765pp, including transfers, excursions and accommodation but not flights from the UK*



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The Amber Fort at Jaipur is popular with tourists but Rajasthan has other attractions off the beaten track