

Wild thing, I think I love you! New Zealand serves up a pulse-racing honeymoon

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Day one of our honeymoon and my wife and I are about to throw ourselves out of a light aircraft at 16,000 ft. An odd start to what is meant to be a romantic holiday in New Zealand.

Mrs Foy, bless her, is trying to look calm as two skydive guides sit with us high above the Bay of Islands in the far north of the country. In fact, she's terrified - and so am I. We both have a fear of heights. Now it is up to Gavin, a former British Army soldier, to convince her to take the plunge. He has more than 8,000 jumps to his name and Anjela will be sharing a tandem parachute with him, while another expat, Carl, is entrusted with bringing me back down to earth.



A hair-raising start to married life: The new Mrs Foy gets to grips with another man - Gavin the parachute instructor - while Chris looks on.

We ask at least ten times if we are properly strapped to our partners, but once the door opens and I'm perched on the edge, it is all beyond surreal. Smile for the camera, cross arms, feet back, quick shove and we're away. All the islands and turquoise water, myriad beaches and lush green landscape provide a vivid scene as we plummet for more than a minute before Carl opens the parachute and I exhale.

It's a thrilling, exhilarating descent followed within minutes by a soft landing. Thank goodness Anjela duly arrives safe and well and awash with adrenaline and relief. Once we have armed ourselves with photos and DVD evidence of our debut in 'the zone', we drive on through Paihia for a short ferry ride to Russell.

Our destination that night is the exclusive Eagle's Nest - five high-class villas, perched high on a headland overlooking the bay on two sides. The complimentary champagne on arrival sets the tone at a resort where the most expensive of the villas includes use of a Porsche Cayenne. The slogan is 'somewhere between seven stars and heaven' and this seems a fair summary as we take in the sunset views from our private infinity pool.



Maori magic: Watching New Zealand's traditional warriors perform the Haka is an essential experience while Paihia's market offered another authentic encounter with locals

This is more of a classical honeymoon experience and my wife is reluctant to drag herself away. But the next day we drive into Russell and check into the Duke of Marlborough Hotel by the waterfront. In the 1830s, its owner named the place after the world's richest man at the time, in an attempt to raise the tone of a debauched location. During the early 19th century, Russell was called Kororareka and gained notoriety as the 'hellhole of the Pacific'. It was the largest whaling port in the Southern Hemisphere.

Local prostitutes did a roaring trade and there was an air of drunken lawlessness about the place. The modern-

day Russell couldn't be further removed from its dubious past. It is a sedate, pristine village full of whitewashed clapboard buildings. There is a small, well-kept church, a museum, the oldest petrol station in New Zealand, allegedly, plus a decent array of restaurants and licensed premises.

The Duke - with a popular outside terrace - evidently acts as the heartbeat of the place, in a prime, sunset spot facing yachts moored in the bay around a pier. It's from here that we catch a boat for a half-day dolphin-watching trip. There are bottlenose dolphins in the Bay of Islands year round, so it has become a favourite tourist outing.

In the three-and-a-half hours we are out on the water, we come across three pods and a total of about 30 dolphins. They obligingly frolic around, enjoying the human contact. The young ones in particular seem keen to display their acrobatic ability with jumps and flips. We can't resist leaping in with them. Next morning, we stop off at the market in busy, bustling Paihia and wind up chatting to a local couple selling beautiful landscape photographs. As with so many New Zealanders, they exude a pride in their surroundings and a profound wish that tourists should savour their experiences.



Bay bliss: New Zealand's North Island offers peace aplenty among its archipelagos

The historical links between the country and Britain serve to create a comfortable, natural connection; not just in language, but in shared interests and general outlook - although Kiwis are largely more laid-back and enjoy a more sedate pace of life. Those historical links are illustrated at the nearby Waitangi Treaty grounds - the birthplace of the modern New Zealand.

The treaty was signed by Captain William Hobson of the Royal Navy, on behalf of the British Crown, and local Maori leaders, in a marquee on the lawn. These days, the site provides an immaculate record of the landmark agreement, amid landscaped gardens, on high ground overlooking the bay. While the location holds great significance for Maori people, for those curious about the development of British-Maori relations, there is not sufficient explanation of what followed the signing of the treaty.

Nonetheless, as an outsider it is worth a visit, especially to witness a Haka - or native war dance - at close quarters. The drive back to Auckland includes a brief detour to the Whangarei Falls - an eye-catching 80ft waterfall conveniently close to the highway. It is just another minor example of the natural wonders that are the most striking element of a trip to New Zealand.

This is an uncrowded world of small towns and villages and, in contrast to busy Britain, it is a peaceful place where you might pass just a handful of cars on a drive lasting hours - especially in the more remote parts of the South Island. Our honeymoon is spectacular in every way and we hope to return one day - though we might forego the daredevil leap from that light aircraft. Not because we're cowards, naturally, but because there are so many other ways to set the pulse racing in this wonderful country.

Travel facts

Wexas Travel (020 7838 5892, wexas.com) organises tailor-made trips to New Zealand.

A five-day itinerary starts from £799 pp including car hire, one night at Eagle Nest B&B (eaglesnest.co.nz), three nights at Duke of Marlborough B&B (theduke.co.nz), sky dive at Sky Dive Zone (skydivezoneboi.co.nz), dolphin cruise and swim (dolphincruises.co.nz), and a tour of Waitangi Treaty Grounds (waitangi.net.nz).

Flights from £807 return. For more information, contact Tourism New Zealand (newzealand.com).

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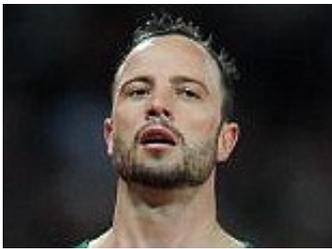
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