



## 35 THE NELSON LAKES

DRIVING TOUR ■ 222 KM ■ 1 DAY ■ JEWELS HIDDEN IN THE MOUNTAINS

*The main road west from Blenheim follows the Wairau River, skirting the Richmond Range, to two deep lakes carved by glaciers set within the rugged mountains and bird-filled beech forest of the Nelson Lakes National Park.*

Early British immigrants came to New Zealand to build houses and churches and to run sheep and cattle on flat grasslands, so most of the European explorers in the South Island were looking for a large inland plain. For over a hundred years the main route from Nelson south for the coaches and farmers driving stock lay along the river valleys to Tophouse and the Wairau River. The route between the Wairau and Nelson was discovered in 1842 by a young surveyor named John Cotterell, who was later killed in a skirmish after joining a group of settlers attempting to arrest Te Rauparaha and his warriors. Cotterell had got as far south as the Nelson Lakes and had climbed the St Arnaud Range hoping to see an inland plain. He was dismayed to find instead rows of mountain ranges stretching as far as the eye could see. The dream of finding flat pasture lands was soon replaced by the quest for gold and miners worked their way around the river valleys to Lakes Rotoroa and Rotoiti.

The beauty of this wilderness area touched even seasoned explorers like Julian Haast who commented in 1859, 'I am sure that the time is not far distant when this spot will become the favourite abode of those whose means and leisure will permit them to admire picturesque scenery.'



Haymaking time on the Wairau Plains.

### 1 RENWICK

From Blenheim take SH 6 and drive west 11 km to Renwick via Woodbourne where the aerodrome was the starting point for the first east to west crossing of the Tasman by plane, on 13 October 1928. Charles Kingsford-Smith made the flight in the Southern Cross, having already completed the first west to east crossing when he landed at Wigram in Christchurch a few weeks earlier.

The Renwick museum, located on the main road, features a reconstruction of an old tavern and houses relics from the early days of European settlement in the area. Some of the historic homesteads in Renwick date

back to the early days of sheep farming in Marlborough, including the Langly Dale Station where the original homestead and outbuildings still survive. You can also visit the Cork & Keg on Inkerman Street, styled after an old English pub, that brews its own beers in Renwick.

### 2 TOPHOUSE

From Renwick take SH 63 and drive 87 km south-west along the Wairau Valley to the Tophouse turn-off on the right. Drive 3 km north to the Tophouse which is signposted on the right.

This detour is the start of a long winding

route that was used to drive sheep from Nelson through to the Wairau Valley during the early days of European settlement. The cob-walled Tophouse was one of the first hotels in Marlborough and a staging post for horse-drawn coaches. To the north the Douglas fir and radiata pine that make up the Golden Downs State Forest cover large parts of the catchment areas of the Motueka, Waiti, Tadmor and Sherry Rivers.

### 3 LAKE ROTOITI

Return to SH 63, turn right and drive west 4 km to St Arnaud. Turn left off the main highway and follow the access road past the

### MARLBOROUGH WINE TRAIL

Marlborough is the largest grape-growing region in New Zealand. About 20 wineries near Blenheim produce a variety of wines but the area is internationally acclaimed for its sauvignon blancs. Most wineries are open daily and can be found easily with the Marlborough Winemakers Wine Trail Guide available from the Blenheim Visitor Information Centre on Queen Street. Visitors can learn about wine-making, sample wine at the cellar door or enjoy it with the best of local food at the wineries' restaurants.

Montana's Brancott Estate hosts the famous Marlborough Food and Wine Festival each year during the second weekend in February.





**Park Headquarters 1 km down to the edge of Lake Rotoiti.**

Once a mining centre, St Arnaud is now the headquarters for Nelson Lakes National Park. An old sluice gun stands as a reminder of the miners who worked their way up the river valleys in search of the 'mother lodes'. Several walks lead along the luxuriant shores of Lake Rotoiti. This lake is popular for swimming and yachting, and carries plentiful stocks of brown trout.

The Nelson Lakes are a product of thousands of years of glaciation. The rocks that make up the surrounding mountains are sandstone and greywacke that was uplifted from the sea floor 200 million years ago. During the ice ages ancient glaciers gouged and carved away the rock, creating the steep valley walls and the deep depressions that later filled to become lakes.

Today much of the area's beauty lies in the native forests that cover the river valleys and stretch into the mountains. A good way to experience these forests is on some of the short walks that run from the lakeside. Two interesting walks that each take about an hour and a half are the Loop Track that runs through moss-covered beech forest on the edge of the lake, and the Peninsula Nature Walk leading through the forest across a moraine formed by the glacier that created Lake Rotoiti. The glacier carried rock debris down from the mountains, piling it up into a huge natural rock wall that was left behind when the glacier retreated. This glacial moraine created a natural dam behind which the lake formed and which now makes up the peninsula at the edge of Lake Rotoiti.

#### **1 MT ROBERT**

**Return to SH 63, continue west 2 km and turn left onto the road leading south 7 km to the base of Mt Robert.**



*Lake Rotoroa, more isolated than Rotoiti, lies in the mountains of Nelson Lakes National Park.*

Mt Robert rises above the south-western shoreline of Lake Rotoiti. A huge fracture in the earth's crust known as the Alpine Fault runs right through this area. Over many thousands of years the continents have moved along these fault lines which separate the earth's crust into vast plates that float like islands on the underlying mantle of molten rock.

It was on the slopes of Mt Robert that German geologist Julius von Haast stood when he made his observation that the landforms to the west had moved. He arrived at his own theory of an alpine fault line to explain the movement of the land, coming to this conclusion more than a hundred years before the theory of plate tectonics and continental drift had been developed.

#### **E LAKE ROTOROA**

**Return to SH 63 and drive north-west 30 km to Kawatiri, turn left onto SH 6 and travel west 6 km to Gowanbridge. Turn left here onto the 11 km unsealed road south to Lake Rotoroa.**

The Flower Walk and the Short Loop Track are two easy 10-minute walks through the forest near Lake Rotoroa. The forest canopy is alive with a wonderful variety of birds including tui, robins, frolicsome bush parrots and inquisitive little fantails that often flit along beside humans on the forest trails. In the low light that filters through to the forest floor many kinds of insects and lizards live among luxuriant mosses and lichens.

**Return 11 km to SH 6 and head east 38 km back to St Arnaud.**



*Expansive vineyards thrive in the well-drained alluvial soils of the Wairau Valley.*