



New Zealand: Remote Beauty, Lesbian Isolation

It takes more than covert homophobia and straight discomfort to disrupt a lesbian couple's stay in Kiwi land.

BY JENNIFER CALKINS

Will you hand me that spatula, hon?"

I never would have thought it, but those seven words were enough to make a room full of Kiwis stop dead in their tracks. All conversation in the communal kitchen came to a screeching halt.

"Uh, sure. Here you go," I said warily, glancing around the room, praying for someone, anyone, to continue with what they were doing.

My partner Emily spent a semester abroad in New Zealand last fall, and my aunt very generously offered to buy me a plane ticket to visit her down under. Emily would be finishing an independent study project while I was there, and we could stay at a youth hostel that cost \$7 a night for a room.

I never worried that New Zealand wouldn't be gay-friendly. I heard somewhere that Australia has

the largest gay Mardi Gras on the planet, so I committed a huge faux pas and associated the two countries together. Unfortunately, that assumption was not correct.

(A disclaimer: I did not see all of New Zealand; my conclusions are based on stays in Oputere, a town that consists literally of two dozen houses, a youth hostel, and a phone booth; and in Hamilton, a medium-sized college town. I'm not sure whether attitudes are different in other parts of the country.)

I flew to New Zealand alone, an adventure in itself with the new regulations from September 11, and after 24 hours of being on a plane, I would have been excited to be anywhere on solid ground. As I was leaving customs, very proud at having made it through successfully, I noticed a huge mural of a rainbow on the airport wall. I figured it had to be a good omen.

Emily described the place

we would be staying as remote, but Oputere completely redefined the word. After leaving the airport, I needed to take two buses to get there; I didn't realize how much trouble I was in until my second bus turned out to be a guy named Ken driving a beat-up van. I was his only passenger.

New Zealand is startlingly beautiful. There's just no other way to put it. Lush, green, jagged hills dotted with sheep, goats, and even deer lined the curvy roads we raced across. As we sped along, I tried both to keep up with what Ken was talking about and to keep my lunch where it was supposed to be. In his

thick accent, Ken chatted about New Zealand's huge agricultural industry, informed me that there are indeed more sheep than people, and how Kiwis pride themselves on being ecologically "green." I could instantly see what he was talking about; the landscape was unblemished by litter, and the only human influence that I could see was the pavement on the road (even that was pretty scanty in some places), and fences keeping the livestock where it was supposed to be.

We turned a corner and suddenly the ocean swept out before me. It surprised me to see that tall green mountains plunged dramatically into the sea, unlike most of the beaches I had ever seen. The aesthetics of New Zealand blew me away again, and I hadn't yet been there a day.

I fell in love with the hostel as soon as I arrived. It was a cluster of short, white clapboard buildings with a common kitchen and big, airy rooms. There were

kayaks to borrow, a trampoline, and a porch off the back with an amazing view of an estuary, a sand spit, and the ocean beyond that. We could see the white spray come up over the sand spit and rocks whenever a wave pounded the shore.

As beautiful as this place was, it was surrounded by a wildlife refuge, and that's about it. Emily was about to go out of her mind when I arrived, and the fact that she had been watching birds for four hours a day for her independent study project didn't help the situation. After my epic journey and her epic boredom, and the fact that we had been apart for three months, we were both really happy to see one another. However, it soon became clear to me that people in Oputere were not exactly used to having gay couples frequent their hostel.

There was no overt homophobia, just uncomfortable silences and glances whenever we entered the room. Nobody tried to make us feel unwelcome, it just seemed that they'd rather us not be there. It seemed that homosexuality in any form was just not talked about. Because there were new people coming and going every day, Emily had been placed in a camper where she could stay for the duration of her study. I, however, was assigned to a room where several other people were bunked, and the only reason I used that room was to get changed and to store my stuff. Every night, I walked to her camper through the common room with my toothbrush and pillow with a sheepish look on my face.

Midway through my visit, we decided to venture to Hamilton, an inland city relatively close to Oputere. We hired a cab to drive us 30 miles to the nearest bus station. I looked forward to seeing some New Zealand civilization and to experiencing a different part of the culture; we figured that a city would also provide more diversity and anonymity. We were also in

desperate need of groceries, and without a car, we had few options.

As we walked hand in hand down the busy streets of Hamilton, people stopped to gawk at us. People craned their necks out of car windows to stare. People winced and nudged their friends and pointed. It was bizarre. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced in the States. There were no rainbow flags, no gay bars, no other visible gay people as far as the eye could see. Essentially, we were specimens under a microscope for all the citizens of Hamilton to view. That's not necessarily a great feeling.

After a few days, we traveled back to Oputere with more food staples and a new understanding of how Kiwis really feel about gay people. There were two options to this situation, however: we could let it bring us down, or we could have a great time, anyway. We chose the latter, and spent several wonderful days hiking, swimming, kayaking, bird watching, relaxing, playing chess on the porch, and marveling at New Zealand's beauty.

In the end, we were only really out to two people, and both were Americans. One woman was a psychic healer, so we figured she already knew anyways, and the other tagged along with us on a walk to the beach. It was exhilarating not to have to hide around these two women, and it made our last few days really memorable.

Needless to say, the hostel owner was not terribly sad to see us pack up and go, but it was sad for us, knowing the chances that we'll be there again are slim. We did leave our mark, however: just before our cab arrived to take us away, we slipped several copies of *The Advocate* and *Girlfriends* into the stacks of magazines in the common room. ▼

Jennifer Calkins is a recent graduate of St. Michaels College and lives in Georgia.

India

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organizers), and our malls as opposed to street markets ...

India reveals one's own culture — and one's "self" — more sharply than any far-flung, exotic place I know, thus far, anyway. Diamonds show up best draped on black velvet, and for anyone who's open to it, India, in her contrast to us, will offer up a looking glass. So even as you're going native, so to speak, and your shoulders have dropped and your face has softened, you'll probably see what's up with your culture and yourself ... maybe it's the food which, by the way, was fabulous, non-stop, but strangely we're eating less, than in, say, France or Italy, where we're apt to travel by tongue. But there's so much going on. "Visible Feast" is now an experience

not a concept. The think-buzz is quieter but the senses have sharpened. Good thing, too, because perhaps India's most intense moments are just ahead.

Varanasi (aka Benares or Kashi) is the holiest city on Earth for Hindus. Everyone who dies in Varanasi is guaranteed moksha, or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Lord Shiva is everywhere, having chosen to settle here with his bride, Parvati. And no wonder. The city's power is so awesome that it shines out, bathing the Ganga as Kashi, the Luminous, might.

At the airport our group split into various nightmare cars driven by strangers, our guide and our drivers gone. Hurling into Varanasi's core, the on-rushing road riot was a kaleidoscope tumbling as fast as the Himalayan Ganges. Coming at us in a 50 mph frontal attack were enormous pounding diesels, laden donkeys, families mourning as they

transported their dead on their shoulders, scooters, bike taxis, dogs, flower sellers, beggars, and magnificent white Brahma bulls festooned with golden flower wreaths. Once we realized that all they can do is kill us, we were free.

The Ganges View, an old palace on the banks of the Ganga, is the most charming, serene and comfortable hotel in India. All the street-life is hushed away and the only riot is the flowers, alive and swarming. Drinks, refreshment, and then some of us took to the streets.

Varanasi is India, only more so. But now, settled in and broken in by all we've done thus far, the twisting mazes and the multitudes they contain are intense, but not overpowering. The assault delivered by India's initial impact has become an arouser, incense that goes to one's head.

At sunrise, thousands of people went down to the ghats (steps

to the Ganges) to bathe and wash clothes, to drink and swim, to meditate and pray, to mingle. It is brilliant, unforgettable, and some of the awe Shiva felt grips anyone who comes upon it.

Our first time on the river, we boarded a boat with an indefatigable rower, who took us the entire length of the ghats. The water oozed with disease, garbage, dead animals, and corpses. We saw the cremation fires at Manikarnika Ghat, the most sacred place; the fires never go out.

After we had visited the Golden Temple, bought silks and cottons, attended a classical Indian music concert in the living room of the palace turned into a hotel that was our home, and visited Sarnath where Buddha preached his first sermon, we took to the Ganga again, this time at night.

The same rower took us out, but we thought it was so different here, compared to our glorious

rafting on the Ganga above Rishikesh. But the rower said, "No, it is the same." Any Hindu would have said so.

We were, by now, a tight little group. We all lit candles, placed them on leaves and when our rower launched them, they looked like the orange smudges on the blackness that I saw when landing in Bombay — only much, much brighter as they drifted toward the ghats.

It was a trip that made pilgrims of a sort out of us all — some, no doubt, more than others. India, as they say, isn't for everyone. But I'll go back when I can. I saw so little, after all, but moved as I was by even this little part, finding it unforgettable, speaks to the power of India. ▼

Kristin Pettit is a retired high school teacher and world traveler who lives in Underhill.