

# New Zealand's no Sunday drive

But there's no better way to see this beautiful country than on the road

BY LIISA ATVA, SPECIAL TO THE SUN    SEPTEMBER 28, 2015 10:22 AM



Driving New Zealand's winding roads can be tough: people drive on the left, and highways are often two lanes with no shoulders.

I survived driving New Zealand. Trading a Canadian winter for summer in New Zealand was easy, but finding someone to come with me was not. Undeterred I went alone and, preferring my travel unscripted, rented a car instead of signing on for a group tour.

I picked up the car in Napier, a small city on New Zealand's North Island. When the subcompact I'd booked was unavailable, I was upgraded to a 2001 Toyota Verossa with just over 140,000 kilometres, an upgrade I appreciated even more when I saw the hatchback with 250,000 kilometres that fellow Canadians had rented from the same outfit.

After taking photos of every little mark on the car — a tip I'd learned from the book *How to be the World's Smartest Traveller* — I took a deep breath and drove on the wrong side of the road, or it would have been if I was still in Canada. It didn't take long to get used to driving on the left, except that I kept wiping the windows when I wanted to signal a turn. It took me longer to learn how to be a pedestrian — remembering to look right before left when crossing the street, and to walk on the left when sidewalks were full of people.

Driving south toward Waipukarau, the roads were quiet and often I had them to myself. Signs with location distances were a little sparse. Taking a turnoff from the main road to a local beach, I'd naively assumed that if the distance wasn't marked it must be just around the corner. Twenty minutes later, when the road turned to gravel, I turned back. The rental car insurance was invalid on unsealed roads and the free map I'd picked up proved to be worth its price in figuring out how much further the beach was.

Other than a high incidence of opossum roadkill, driving in the Napier area was uneventful — so I was surprised when the local news was abuzz with the mishaps of tourist drivers. In three separate instances, vigilante New Zealanders had taken car keys away from tourists that were driving dangerously. One of the tourists thought someone was trying to steal his rental car!

But as I neared Lake Taupo, I soon learned what the fuss was about. The main highway, even near populous areas, was a two-lane road that snaked through steep mountains with 25-kilometre-an-hour corners, single-lane bridges, no shoulders, no barricades and nowhere to pull over. Barrelling toward me on the other side of the road was a steady stream of logging trucks — 450 a day unload in Tauranga alone. On some curves the outer edge sloped down instead of up. Speed signs were often contradictory — a 100 km/h limit sign, the speed unless indicated otherwise, with a 40 km/h one a few metres further.

By the time I reached Auckland, the six-lane motorway — busy even on a Sunday — was a treat with all those lanes.

Although I've never had a speeding ticket, not everyone wanted to pass me. On switchbacks, there were a few drivers — probably tourists — content to let me lead the way. If I could have pulled over I would have gladly switched places. For the most part, other drivers were polite: they didn't tailgate and I didn't feel pressured to speed up.

The Canadians in the subcompact hadn't fared as well. They were delighted when, having mastered the art of letting other drivers pass, they received their first thank-you honk instead of an irate one.

Although I was uncomfortable driving in New Zealand, I would rent a car there again. Without one it would have been difficult to visit memorable places: Shakira, an 80-hectare sheep and cattle spread near Porangahau, and Ohope, New Zealanders' favourite beach with its seven-kilometre stretch of white sand and turquoise water fringed with Norfolk pines. But I would bring someone with me to do the driving — then I'd get to see all the spectacular scenery that I missed when my eyes were glued firmly to the road.

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