

Christchurch – Milford Sound – Christchurch

Overview

Start Christchurch / Finish Christchurch

Recommended Length: 12 Days

Distance: 2261 km (1413 miles)

This route takes you right around the South Island. From Christchurch you'll follow the coast to Oamaru, where you can see the amazing Moeraki Boulders. Dunedin has history and wildlife experiences on offer before you drive across Southland to Lake Te Anau and spectacular Milford Sound. Have fun in Queenstown and Wanaka, where adventure and indulgence are available in equal quantities, then explore the soulful West Coast between Haast and Westport. The Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers and the Pancake Rocks at Punakaiki are highlights. Beaches, wine and art are things to enjoy around Nelson and Blenheim, while in Kaikoura you can get close to whales and dolphins. Shop for wine in the Waipara Valley as you return to Christchurch.

Day 1 – Christchurch to Oamaru

Christchurch - Ashburton - Timaru - Oamaru

89 km (56 miles)

Approximately 1.25 hours

Road Conditions: Motorway/State Highway

The South Island's largest city, Christchurch is an entertaining mixture of refined lifestyle and cultural excitement. The tranquil Avon River meanders through the city and adjacent Hagley Park, historic buildings house a lively arts community and restored trams make it easy for visitors to get around. Visit heritage sites, museums and art galleries, and enjoy the highly developed restaurant scene.

The route to Christchurch is about as straight and flat as roads get in New Zealand. On a clear day, the Southern Alps provide outstanding scenery. The town of Rakaia sits on the southern side of the Rakaia River, and it's 'the salmon capital of New Zealand'. The Rakaia bridge spans 1.8 kilometres of one of the world's best examples of a 'braided' river system.

Christchurch - Ashburton - Timaru - Oamaru

77 km (48 miles)

Approximately 1 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

Ashburton is a large town that serves the local rural community. It sits between the Rakaia and Rangitata rivers, so fly fishing is the local obsession. Ashburton also has about six museums and some excellent craft galleries. The skifields of Mt Hutt are an easy drive from here.

Your trip south is straight and flat. It's worth taking the loop road to Geraldine to visit the gourmet cheese factory and vintage car museum. Rafting in the Rangitata Gorge is another possibility. Just before Timaru you'll drive into Temuka, a town that produces high quality pottery – look for the factory shop if you'd like a useful souvenir.

Christchurch - Ashburton - Timaru - Oamaru

80 km (50 miles)

Approximately 1 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway



Timaru is a small but beautifully formed city. The historic walk will introduce you to many of the old buildings. Enjoy the boutique brewery, botanic gardens and the park at Caroline Bay, which has an aviary and a maze. Timaru also has the third largest public art gallery in the South Island and an excellent museum.

River crossings are a feature of the journey south. If you enjoy fly fishing, you could make this trip last a long time. Just beyond the town of Hook, take a detour to Waimate to see the museum and an original thatched cottage – it was made from a single tree. In summer the Waimate District is overflowing with delicious berry fruits.

Day 2 – Oamaru to Dunedin

Oamaru - Dunedin

119 km (74 miles)

Approximately 1.5 hours

Road Conditions: Motorway/State Highway

Oamaru has a population of around 12,000 and an impressive heritage. Many of the elegant historic buildings were made from the local sandstone. Visit the Harbour-Tyne area - the best-preserved collection of historic commercial buildings in New Zealand. You should also check out the penguin colony, the museum and the pretty public gardens.

Your journey south is flavoured with history. First up is Totara Estate Centennial Park, where you can see restored 1860s farm buildings. Clark's Mill is next - a limestone flourmill built in 1866. You could pick up some interesting, ancient stones on the beach at Hampden before visiting the mysterious spherical boulders at Moeraki. The town of Palmerston has a museum devoted to the region's Scottish past.

Day 3 – Dunedin to Te Anau

Dunedin - Te Anau

291 km (182 miles)

Approximately 4 hours

Road Conditions: Motorway/State Highway

In the late 19th century, Dunedin acquired an impressive amount of ostentatious Victorian architecture. No expense was spared. Today you can enjoy the historic public buildings, imposing churches, palatial homes and ornate hotels. There's even a castle. Eco-tourism is the other face of Dunedin – visit penguin, albatross and seal colonies.

Fresh, green farm scenery will accompany you to the historic mill town of Milton – the unusual kink in the main road is where two surveyors didn't quite meet. Next is Balclutha with its distinctive arched concrete bridge and an interesting museum. After Gore you'll travel across the river plain to Lumsden. Stop in Mandeville if you'd like to fly in a Tiger Moth, or by the Mataura River if you want to catch a trout.

Day 4 – Te Anau to Milford Sound

Te Anau - Milford Sound

117 km (73 miles)

Approximately 1.5 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

Te Anau township sits on the shores of Lake Te Anau. From here, the delights of the Fiordland National Park are within easy reach, including the start of the Milford Track. Cruise on the lakes, walk the tracks and visit the Department of Conservation wildlife centre. The Te Anau Caves are an excellent adventure.

The road to Milford is one of New Zealand's most scenic drives. The first part is relatively mild farmland, then you'll ease into beech forest near the entrance to the Fiordland National Park. Look for the Avenue of the Disappearing Mountain and the Mirror Lakes. The rough hewn



Homer Tunnel brings you into Milford Sound, an amazing 22km-long fiord dominated by Mitre Peak.

A cruise on Milford Sound will be an essential component of your time in Fiordland, or you can get up close and personal in a sea kayak. Tall waterfalls, vertical rock faces and seals are some of the things you'll remember. The underwater observatory is an option with most cruises.

Day 5 – Te Anau to Queenstown

Te Anau - Queenstown

172 km (108 miles)

Approximately 2.25 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

Trout fishing rivers and high country scenery are features of the drive to Queenstown. The small towns of Mossburn and Lumsden can be explored for unique shopping opportunities – a farm tour is another possibility. Leave time to take a break in Kingston, the home of a remarkable vintage steam train. From here, the rest of your journey clings scenically to the edge of Lake Wakatipu.

Day 6 – Queenstown to Wanaka

Queenstown - Wanaka

103 km (64 miles)

Approximately 1.25 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

The alpine resort of Queenstown is exciting, sophisticated and fantastically scenic. It's the place to source almost any kind of adventure, including bungy, jet boating, horse trekking, rafting and river surfing. It's also a destination for luxury experiences – gourmet food and wine, spa treatments and leisurely games of golf.

The shortest route to Wanaka is over the Crown Range Road. It's a challenging drive, but the views are amazing and you'll probably encounter friendly keas (mountain parrots). More conservative drivers can take the route that runs beside the Shotover River, Lake Dunstan and the Clutha River. The vineyards of the Gibbston area and bungy jumpers at the Kawarau River Bridge are interesting distractions along the way.

Day 7 – Wanaka to Franz Josef

Wanaka - Haast - Fox Glacier - Franz Josef

139 km (87 miles)

Approximately 1.75 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

The lakeside town of Wanaka can provide you with an appealing mix of fine living, family fun and adventure. It has a high concentration of cafes, restaurants and interesting shops. You'll also find unique attractions, like the 3D maze and the 'warbird' air show, which is held every two years.

Lake Hawea is the first scenic highlight of your journey, followed closely by the northern end of Lake Wanaka. The famous 'bra fence' is impossible to miss – it started as a joke, but it's become a local legend. At the wilderness town of Makarora you can fuel up and refresh before you take on the dramatic twists and turns of the Haast Pass. Enjoy waterfalls and river scenery as you arrive in rainforest country.

Wanaka - Haast - Fox Glacier - Franz Josef

122 km (76 miles)

Approximately 1.75 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway



The settlement of Haast was once a construction camp for the Ministry of Works (the government department responsible for road and bridge building). It's a town with a touch of the wild west – helicopters fly deer hunters into the rugged ranges and local pubs make a feature of stuffed animal trophies.

Just north of Haast is Lake Moeraki, a peaceful forest lake with good fishing – a 40 minute walk takes you to the penguin colony at Monro Beach. Next is pretty Lake Paringa, where you can enjoy a delicious meal of salmon at the salmon farm. Just before Fox Glacier is the western end of the Copland track. In half a day you can walk to the hot springs at Welcome Flat.

The terminal face of Fox Glacier is just 5 kilometres from the township that serves it. The road to the walking track crosses ancient moraine from earlier advances and retreats. Fox Glacier was named after an early New Zealand Prime Minister, William Fox.

Wanaka - Haast - Fox Glacier - Franz Josef

23 km (14 miles)

Approximately 0.25 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

The Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers are unique relics of the last ice age. Mighty rivers of solid white, tumbling down ice-hewn rock valleys, they are classically beautiful in the glacial sense. Nowhere else in the world have glaciers advanced so close to the sea at this latitude. While in the area, you can choose from a wide range of adventure activities.

After a short drive north, you'll arrive at Franz Josef Glacier. First explored in 1865, the glacier has been moving forward at a rate of about 1 metre a day since 1985. Previously it was in retreat. You can walk to the terminal of the glacier in about 10 minutes. Franz Josef township has a good range of accommodation and eating establishments.

Day 8 – Franz Josef to Greymouth

Franz Josef - Hokitika - Greymouth

133 km (83 miles)

Approximately 1.75 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

Hokitika was first settled in 1860, after the discovery of gold on the west coast. It still has the feel of a 'frontier town', and there are some lovely old buildings to admire. Greenstone (NZ jade) is the town's treasure these days – watch it being carved. You might also want to investigate the museum and do the historical walk.

The road from the glaciers is rural, but with a wild streak. The farmland is trying to turn back into forest, and the beauty of the rivers is raw and primeval. At Ross there's a goldfield walkway to explore, or enjoy a picnic by the shores of Lake Ianthe. A visit to the White Heron colony near Whataroa is a rare experience.

Franz Josef - Hokitika - Greymouth

40 km (25 miles)

Approximately 0.5 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

The road between Hokitika and Greymouth provides great views of the wild west coast. Detour to the beach and breathe the salt spray air. Driftwood is the ornamentation of choice for west coast beaches – every shape, size and colour. Shantytown, just south of Greymouth, is a reconstructed 1880s gold rush town – great family entertainment.

Greymouth has a long gold mining history. It's the largest town on the west coast and is known for its awesome seascapes. The local brewery runs tours or you can catch up with west coast history at the museum. White water rafting, sea kayaking and gold panning are other things to do.



Day 9 – Greymouth to Nelson

Greymouth - Punakaiki - Westport - Nelson

45 km (28 miles)

Approximately 0.5 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway



The road to Punakaiki is breathtaking. White capped breakers and rugged rocks on one side, bush-clad mountains on the other side. The town of Runanga is a classic mining village – it offers an interesting walk to nearby Coal Creek Falls. To see interesting old gold mining areas, look for the Point Elizabeth walkway.

Punakaiki is famous for its pancake rocks and booming blowholes. It is the centrepiece of the Paparoa National Park, which is packed with a variety of stunning landscapes. There are many excellent coastal and inland walks in this area. The pancake rock formations date back about 30 million years. When the tide is right, Punakaiki's blow holes are spectacular.

Greymouth - Punakaiki - Westport - Nelson

57 km (36 miles)

Approximately 0.75 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

The road to Westport hugs the coast, providing spectacular views of wild beaches and the tempestuous Tasman Sea. At Charleston, formerly a prosperous gold town, you can arrange underground rafting and cave exploring trips.

Westport is known as a coal mining town, but it's also a base for outdoor adventures. Visit the local coal mining museum, then strap on your walking shoes to investigate the seal colony. Black water rafting, jet boating, horse trekking and surf rafting are other opportunities for outdoor excitement.

Greymouth - Punakaiki - Westport - Nelson

226 km (141 miles)

Approximately 3 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

The road to Nelson is scenic and interesting, beginning with the dark, forbidding Buller Gorge. At Hawks Crag you'll drive under a dramatic rock overhang. When you reach Lyell you can pan for gold or walk to a pioneer cemetery. The museum at Murchison will tell you all about the massive earthquake that shook the region in 1929. Those with plenty of time can turn off and loop past the Nelson Lakes National Park.

Day 10 – Nelson to Blenheim

Nelson - Blenheim

115 km (72 miles)

Approximately 1.5 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

Nelson is home to a fascinating community of beach, bush and art lovers. From here you can organise yourself an eco-adventure or become immersed in the local creative culture. Every year the city hosts the Montana New Zealand Wearable Art Awards, where art comes off the wall and onto the body.

The drive to Blenheim is both beautiful and interesting. Rai Valley has a delightful cottage museum, and at Pelorus Bridge



Scenic Reserve you can enjoy a bush walk or a swim. Nearby Canvastown gives you the chance to explore old gold mining fields – thousands tried to get rich here in the 1860s. Havelock is the place for a seafood meal – it's known as the Green Shell Mussel Capital of the World. When you reach Renwick, which is surrounded by vineyards, it will be clear that you've arrived in wine country.

Blenheim is the heart of wine-growing Marlborough. You'll find a pleasing selection of cafes, restaurants, pubs, shops and golf courses. Character accommodation is another Blenheim delight – everything from homestays to boutique hotels.

Day 11 – Blenheim to Kaikoura

Blenheim - Kaikoura

129 km (81 miles)

Approximately 1.75 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

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State Highway 1 takes you through the coastal foothills, and then out into the picturesque Awatere Valley. In the township of Seddon you'll find authentic New Zealand crafts. The Lake Grassmere saltworks is an interesting stop - the ponds turn coral pink in late summer. After the small town of Ward, the road turns toward the awesome beauty of the Pacific Coast. Just north of the Ure River is a road that leads to the walking trails of the Sawcut Gorge.

Kaikoura is a base for wildlife experiences of all kinds – it's also a great place to eat crayfish. A whale watch tour can take you to see Minke, Humpback and Southern Right whales mixing it with dolphins and orcas. You can also walk to see fur seal colonies and spy on big seabirds such as mollymawks, albatross and petrels.

Day 12 – Kaikoura to Christchurch

Kaikoura - Christchurch

184 km (115 miles)

Approximately 2.25 hours

Road Conditions: Motorway/State Highway

The trip south takes you along the edge of the rugged coastal ranges. From Cheviot you can detour to Gore Bay to see the fascinating cliff formations. The landscape becomes more gentle as you approach Waipara – a region known for its vineyards and olive groves. The last leg of your journey takes you past the surf beaches of Amberley, Leithfield, Waikuku and Woodend.

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Source: Tourism New Zealand (Our thanks to the team at Tourism New Zealand for these itineraries).