



On board Lord Nelson for five weeks, Anne sometimes found the sailing challenging

## Freewheel Annie

**For many years I have wanted to visit New Zealand, but have been put off by how far away it is. But, when I hit fifty last year, I decided that I needed to make a plan or I would never get there.**

At around the same time I saw that the Jubilee Sailing Trust was planning to sail one of their ships, the Lord Nelson, round the world. They had divided the trip into different voyages and the thought of sailing from India to Singapore, across the Indian Ocean, held huge appeal for me. Singapore is approximately half way to New Zealand, and I was going to need to take some unpaid leave in order to do the sailing trip. I spoke to my employers, Irwin Mitchell, who were very enthusiastic and agreed to me taking a four-month sabbatical to travel round the world! After that everything else fell into place.

I used Trailfinders to buy my round-the-world ticket. They were incredibly helpful and arranged with the airlines all the assistance that I needed. Because of the countries I chose to visit I was able to use the air carrier alliance between Virgin, Singapore Air

and Air New Zealand, which are arguably the three best airlines in the world.

I did have one hiccup at the beginning because I needed an internal flight in India and Air India refused to take me because I was travelling on my own. Fortunately, I was able to fly with Jet Airways who did not insist on me having a companion, although they did insist that my doctor completed a medical form which included questions like, "Was my condition offensive to other passengers: (smell, appearance, conduct)"!

In the end, the flights all went very smoothly and on most of the long-haul flights the cabin crew found space for my wheelchair in the cabin, which meant I did not have the fear that my wheelchair would get broken in the hold, or not be on the flight at all! On the Singapore Air flight, my >

> chair, when folded down, was small enough to go in two overhead lockers – one for the chair and one for the wheels!

India is a beautiful vibrant country that assaults your senses in every possible way. It is colourful, loud, pungent and the people are incredibly warm and friendly. I spent the whole time in the southern province of Kerala, which I understand is one of the wealthier areas. There is a huge focus on education, and as a result I did not see the extreme poverty and begging that much of India is known for, nor did I spend the whole time in fear of pickpockets or muggers. Sadly, I did see a lot of rubbish, especially plastic waste everywhere.

The sailing was challenging. We left India and sailed to Sri Lanka, where we visited Galle for three nights. Originally we were only supposed to be there for two nights, but there was a tropical storm brewing in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, exactly where we were supposed to be going. The captain delayed our departure by 24 hours so that he could assess the situation and work out an alternative route. Fortunately for us, the alternative

involved sailing south to the equator to avoid the storm.

Crossing the equator on a ship invokes a traditional initiation ceremony for all those on board who have not done it before, which was the vast majority of us. So we were duly visited by King Neptune, made to grovel, squirted with unpleasant liquids and finally made to kiss the fish – not as bad as it sounds since the fish was represented by a tin of tuna! So now I can proudly claim that I am no longer a pollywog – and I have the certificate to prove it!

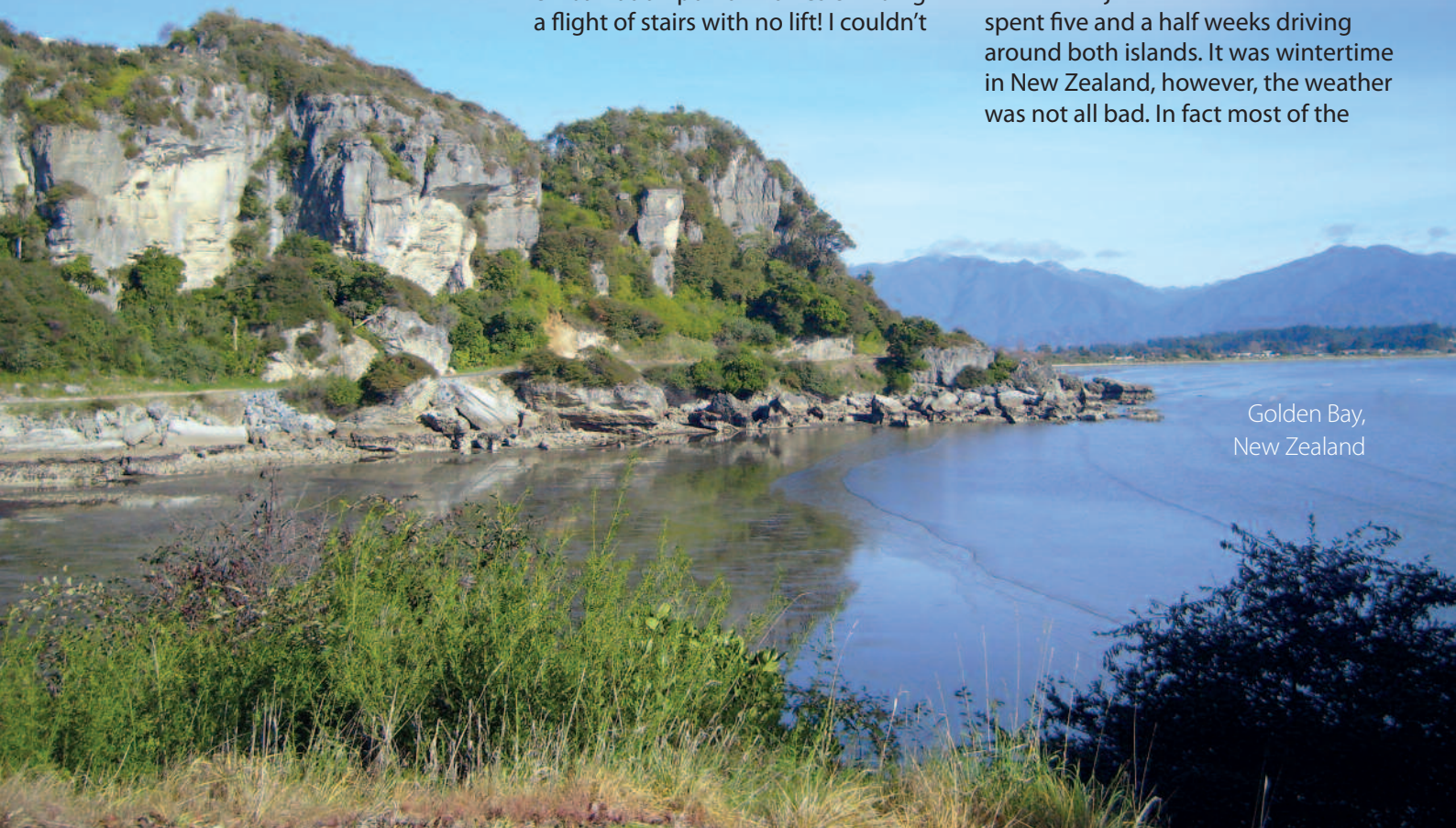
### **From Singapore to Australia**

Having gone much further south than was originally intended, we were no longer on course to visit Phuket in Thailand, however instead we went to Langkawi in Malaysia. This is a beautiful collection of islands with sandy beaches and tree-covered mountains: a spectacular place to spend a couple of days. The highest point on the main island has a wonderfully accessible cable car with flip-up seats so that a wheelchair user can drive straight in and remain seated in the wheelchair for the journey to the top. However, to get to the embarkation point involves climbing a flight of stairs with no lift! I couldn't

help remarking that some joined-up thinking would be advantageous. Fortunately for me, my fellow crew members were happy to carry me up the stairs so I was able to do the cable car ride. I spent an enjoyable week in Singapore, which is a very accessible city. The underground system is one hundred per cent wheelchair friendly. I was able to go all around the city knowing that I could get on and off at any underground station. It is a stunning city to visit with its mixture of old and new. The national pastime of Singaporeans seems to be shopping – I have never seen so many shopping malls stuffed full of designer outlets. However, alongside these are also some of the most delicious food outlets serving a vast range of different Asian cuisines.

From Singapore I flew to Australia, where I spent time visiting family and friends in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. I would definitely recommend a guided tour of the Parliament building in Canberra, and in Sydney I was lucky enough to be able to get tickets for a dance show at the Sydney Opera House.

After three weeks I went on to New Zealand, where a friend from the UK flew out to join me. We hired a car and spent five and a half weeks driving around both islands. It was wintertime in New Zealand, however, the weather was not all bad. In fact most of the



Golden Bay,  
New Zealand

time we had clear blue skies and sunshine. It was cold, but crisp and fresh. One advantage of travelling in the winter is that the accommodation is cheaper and generally not booked up in advance, so it was possible to be fairly flexible about where we went and how long we stayed in each place.

I was very impressed by how accessible New Zealand is, considering the terrain is, in many places, not easy. The country has been shaped by seismic activity over the years, which means that it is a stunning landscape of volcanic mountains, gorges and rivers. Indeed while I was there, Wellington suffered a series of earthquakes sufficient to break windows and rattle foundations.

We started in Christchurch, which is still suffering terribly from the effects of the two earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. They have barely started rebuilding the city: in some areas the barricades were still erected and buildings in a state of semi-collapse. I also heard that some households have no sewage system or fresh running water!

We crossed over to the west coast of the south Island and went to Hokitika, where they have a fully accessible tree top walkway with beautiful views and a chance to experience nature first hand. We drove up the west coast stopping off to look at the Pancake rocks at Punakaiki – where there is a very accessible path out to the edge so I could see the rocks close up.

### From South to North

One of the prettiest parts of New Zealand is the top of the south island and particularly Golden Bay, which is on the Abel Tasman peninsula. We stayed just outside Nelson in a very accessible two-bedroom property that we rented from an English couple who had moved out there some years before. Nelson is a lovely city, where we found delicious food, especially the fish. The green lipped mussels, a speciality of New Zealand waters, have to be seen (and tasted) to be believed. They are enormous!

On the ferry crossing from the south to the north island, we saw huge mussel bed farms, whilst weaving our



Anne by geysers  
in Rotarua

way through the archipelago on what was fortunately one of the smoothest crossings of the month – if not the year!

Wellington was tricky as it is very hilly and although we had tried to find a centrally located motel the access to it was almost perpendicular! But Te Papa, the national museum of New Zealand, was one of the best laid out and most interesting museums I have ever been to. Definitely a good way to spend a rainy day.

After Wellington we headed up to Napier, the art deco city. Having been destroyed by an earthquake in the 1930s, the city was rebuilt to reflect the architecture and style of the time. It is very accessible and surrounded by New Zealand's oldest wineries.

We went to Rotorua to look at geysers, sulphur lakes, boiling mud and other thermo-volcanic activity. Again, access to the main tourist spots was good, although I did appreciate some help with the hills when getting around Wai-O-Tapu. The Hobbiton movie set in Matamata was not as easy as many other tourist sites, despite the fact it has newly opened and was the most expensive attraction that we visited on the whole trip!

The peninsula of Coromandel has more stunning scenery and hairpin

bends to navigate. I was very glad we were driving this in a car and not a camper van. Another advantage of travelling in winter time is that the roads were virtually empty.

We then drove round the coast, straight through Auckland and on up to Kerikeri, where we found a beautiful wheelchair accessible chalet in the middle of a tropical rainforest, with a top-class restaurant on our door step! We did the usual tourist trip in the Bay of Islands, out to see the hole in the rock and back, spotting a school of dolphins, which came and played in our wake and gave us a wonderful photo opportunity.

We flew home via Vancouver where we spent one night, because I did not think I could spend 48 hours without getting off my backside. New Zealand is a very long way away, but I would definitely say it is worth the journey. My only regret is that it has taken me 50 years to get there – now I can't wait to go back again!



Anne coiling rope

**If anyone is planning a trip and wants any advice on travelling around, hiring cars, and finding accessible places to stay then do please get in touch via the SIA office. I am very happy to share my experiences. Alternatively I did keep a blog while I was travelling, so do take a look at that [www.freewheelannie.blogspot.com](http://www.freewheelannie.blogspot.com)**  
**Anne Luttman-Johnson T11**