

From the Kitchen

18 November 2009

“This is the final wake-up call for passengers travelling on flight EK460 to Auckland. We apologise for disturbing you but we must insist you board the plane and we invite you to continue your slumbers in the cramped seats in sub-economy class C.”

I wake up with the jolt of the wheels touching down. I uncramp myself and smile at my wife uncramping herself next to me.



Yes, I’ve escaped from the kitchen and left the dog in the capable hands of number one daughter. I expect both to survive for a week.

Driving and walking around and over the Coromandel Peninsula, I can see why Peter Jackson chose New Zealand to film *Lord of the Rings*. There are areas that feel other-worldly, ancient, dark and forbidding. Yet just over the rise and around a corner in Waiomu they serve some of the best Benedict and coffee to be had anywhere. Very modern.

I am fascinated by how travelling changes me, immediately. I find my senses more eager and my mind more alert than when at home. I’m trying to take in information at an accelerated rate. I notice things I would glance over when not in unfamiliar territory. However, the familiar is still present, in that I compare everything to it. Is it the same? Is it different? How is it different? What makes it different? What is familiar about it? In other words, how does it fit with what I know?

Actually, I told a lie about travelling changing me instantly. On the first day in New Zealand I slept until the crack of noon and woke up with a sore throat. In the plane, we had a sick person coughing and spluttering nearby. I would be all for having a mask for each passenger, with separate air supplies. It would also take some of the panic out of mid-air emergencies, not having hundreds of yellow masks fall down suddenly.

The Coromandel Peninsula can be circumnavigated by car in a matter of hours, but it took us three days to see some parts of it, thoroughly. And there were serendipitous detours, such as breakfast with a celebrated New Zealand children’s author at said Waiomu Café. She lives across the road in a little house and works in a tiny studio, all set in a colourful cottage garden. Just the sort of setting in which you’d expect to find a writer – in a novel.

The road was described to us as similar to the Great Ocean Road in western Victoria. Past the windy (as in continually changing direction) trajectory and the ocean views, the similarity ends. This road is windier and narrower and often steeper, with disastrous consequences if you steer wide – sheer drops of hundreds of metres. Flowers in broken fences are testimony that some people left the road precipitously. There are breath-taking views down long, estuarine valleys, with the sun glinting on the distant water, or shining through clouds with shafts of brilliant light which silhouette receding rows of mountains.

As we walked along tunnel-like paths in some of the remnant forest, I would not have been surprised if an Orc or Smeagol himself had come out from behind a moss-covered boulder. Twisted tree trunks grow from gnarled roots seemingly straight out of the rocks. Lichen hangs from dark branches and broken bits of tree hang suspended in vines, never to fall to earth. There are pockets of air heavy with the smells of damp growth.

I have to admit to a reluctance to leave home to embark on adventures, but once embarked, I revel in it. It's the having to pack and prepare that irks me. I also find that I unpack, on my return, as soon and as quickly as possible, so that in almost no time there is no evidence of my having travelled, other than my memories, my photos and others' reminders that, yes, we have been away.

Certainly, having new experiences and seeing things I've not previously laid eyes on, make the pre-trip angst forgettable. Until the next adventure.

There is another aspect to travelling. People I meet are different – different expressions and mannerisms, even different languages. Yet there is some underlying quality that says, "We are really all the same. We worry about similar things; we love, we hate; we want to know what happens in other places." The family we stayed with on the Coromandel Peninsula brought home the sameness and otherness – warm hospitality, children running around, different ways of doing things and an accent; just like the family up the road from us in Australia.

We're about to spend four days in a hotel for a conference. Hotels – they seem to be the same everywhere and I'm fine with that, provided I can get good food and good coffee.