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TRAVEL

South Island fun for daredevils - and scaredy-cats

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By **Stephanie Strauss** Special to the Star

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

SOUTH ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND—Stacy, my younger sister, was a happy dot high on the Kawarau Bridge. Glassy green water churned lazily in the gorge 43 metres below as she stepped to the edge of the bridge and whipped the crowd into a frenzy with the ease of a circus ringmaster.

“Woooo!” Stacy shouted, clasp ing her hands above her head like a prizefighter.

“Woooo!” the spectators responded.

The Queenstown bridge is home to the world’s first commercial bungee-jumping site, a mecca for thrill-seekers like Stacy.

For cowards like me, it was a phenomenon to be viewed from the safety of the observation deck, which is exactly where I was right now.

Next to me, my mother happily waved up at her other daughter, the fearless one.

Stacy's attitude and mine were night-and-day when it came to what constituted "fun" on vacation. Fortunately, we stumbled upon a destination suited for both the adrenalin junkie and the faint-of-heart: New Zealand's South Island.

"I love you, Mom!" Stacy said, drawing laughs from the onlookers below. Then in one fluid movement, she leaped, headfirst.

She was always a wild child. I was less prepared for the outdoorsy free spirit of New Zealand's inhabitants, the Kiwis. The appearance of Steve Hale should have tipped me off when he met us at tiny Christchurch International Airport.

Steve has a red Mohawk. Steve has blue tattoos crawling across his huge arms.

Steve is a jolly ex-rugby player and ex-primary school teacher with a daughter named Ella and a son named Boston who lived across Cook Strait on the North Island.

Steve owns Red Beard's Tiki Tours and would be our driver for the next two weeks, hired to herd us over mountain passes and prevent us from cruising down the wrong side of the road.

The first thing Steve tried to do was teach us about rugby, New Zealand's national pastime.

We sat at a booth in a popular chain restaurant, drinking house-brewed ale while he explained a complicated play-by-play of the game on TV. All I learned about rugby was: a) it involved a football-shaped ball, and b) lots of young men fiercely clobbered each other to get possession of said ball.

I didn't understand.

"I don't understand," I told Steve.

"That's okay," he said, and launched into a different story about a rugby website.

Christchurch was beautiful, harmless in its quaint steeples and pleasant green parks. We strolled past punters gliding on the chocolate-coloured Avon River and students on their lunch breaks in long charcoal blazers and ties.

We bypassed the plump, centuries-old oak trees for a farm 40 kilometres outside the city. Karen Martin, one of the owners, greeted us at the door with a smile and her husband, Daryl, jovially slapped Steve on the back and offered to show him the Harley in the garage. The three of them chatted like they had known each other for years.

Why are New Zealanders perpetually happy? I chalked it up to other unanswerable questions like, "What is the meaning of life?" or "Why isn't phonetic spelled the way it sounds?"

The kids, Hannah and Paul, were accustomed to guests at their house. Paul challenged me to a sing-off on his karaoke machine and Hannah showed us a fluffy chick cheeping weakly in a shoebox. Hannah had rescued it from a mud puddle, but despite her best efforts with towels and heating lamps, it would die overnight. Outside, peacocks paraded in the dusty road and ostriches with dinosaur-like talons scratched in their pen.

Stacy sighed. Christchurch was boring and she wanted to leave now.

We left, destined for the glacier in the small hamlet of Franz Josef. Franz Josef Glacier is visible from every point in town. We brazenly ducked under the metal chain on the trail, ignoring a sign that warned against

going further without a guide.

Under a marble-blue sky, we navigated an expansive plain of large, chalky rocks covered in brick-red algae. Finally we arrived and stared at the massive glacier. Stacy turned to me and grinned. "Now this is more like it."

Fortified with a sudden bravery, I climbed a boulder to get a closer look. My finger traced the dirt in the thousand-year-old ice.

"Hey," said a guide from a neighbouring tour. "Don't be dangerous. That piece just fell last night." A chunk of ice dramatically tumbled on cue, and I scrambled down.

He called me dangerous!

Days later, we disembarked a boat at the remarkable Te Anau Glow-worm Caves.

I fought off eager mosquitoes and ducked into the cave, hunching over to avoid the low ceiling and trying to not trip on the metal grate walkway in my flip-flops.

The tour group filed past rock formations and dripping walls for 20 minutes before halting at a rowboat and a small underground pond.

Although glow-worms shine to attract prey, they're frightened of bright lights and loud noises. Our guide hushed us and extinguished the lamps on the walls, keeping only a small electric lantern lit as he ushered the group into the boat.

An inky blackness spread, so dark I couldn't even see my hands. Gradually, millions of glow-worm clusters bloomed before my eyes as the boat made circles around the grotto, the weak green pinpoints of light reflecting dimly in the water.

Beside me, Stacy poked my leg and whispered:

"Isn't New Zealand fun?"

I smiled. "Yeah," I said. "It is fun."

Bungee cord optional.

***Stephanie Strauss** is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.*

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