



MAORI RITUAL: A traditional Haka dance

With the eagerly awaited Rugby World Cup kicking off in New Zealand next week, NICK McGRATH picks out a few must-sees from the many off-field highlights

1 WILD OTAGO

England's home away from home for the tournament will be Dunedin, where they play their first three games.

The likes of Georgia and Romania should prove sitting ducks for the 2007 runners-up but away from this lively university town on the spectacular south-east coast of South Island, visitors will encounter far less humdrum birdlife, including yellow-eyed penguins, monochrome waddlers and, at Taiaroa Head, an albatross colony.

Elm Wildlife Tours (elmwildlifetours.co.nz) runs single and multi-day tours exploring the peninsula, from £50.

2 MYTHICAL WAIKATO

Wales' second game of the tournament is in Hamilton against Polynesian giants and dark horses Samoa.

For a more diminutive experience, head due east to the rolling countryside of North Island's Waikato region, used as a location for *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy and the forthcoming *Hobbit* movie.

Explore the sets, try sheep-shearing and enjoy the stunning Middle Earth-esque views from the Shires Rest Café in Matamata. Hobbiton Tours (hobbitontours.com) offers twin rooms from £70 (two sharing), half board. Location tours from £35.

3 FIORDLAND

If Scotland are seeking inspiration for their first two group matches at Invercargill they need look no further for spectacular Alpine scenery than this nearby World Heritage Site on the tip of South Island.

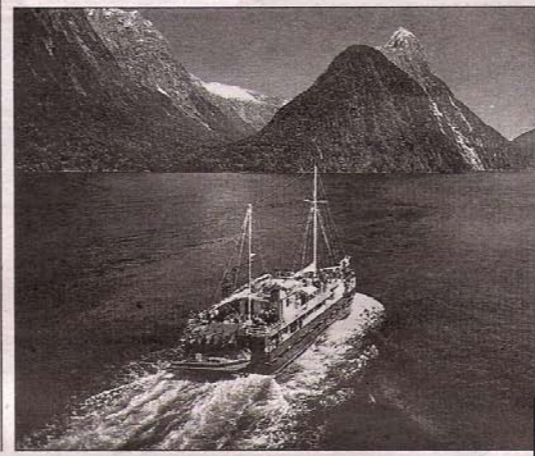
Carved, according to legend, by Maori demi-god Tu-te-raki-whanoa and visited by Captain Cook in 1773, this stunning national park is home to majestic Mitre Peak and the

TOP 10 In New Zealand

awe-inspiring Doubtful Sound and Milford Sound. Real Journeys (realjourneys.co.nz) offers nature cruises from £48.

ADVENTURE ISLANDS: Go jet-boating in Queenstown or take a cruise on Milford Sound in Fiordland, below

4 RING OF FIRE With its volcanic landscape and geothermal geography, Rotorua is known as the Pacific Ring of Fire. This unmissable spot south of Auckland provides the



Get close to the action



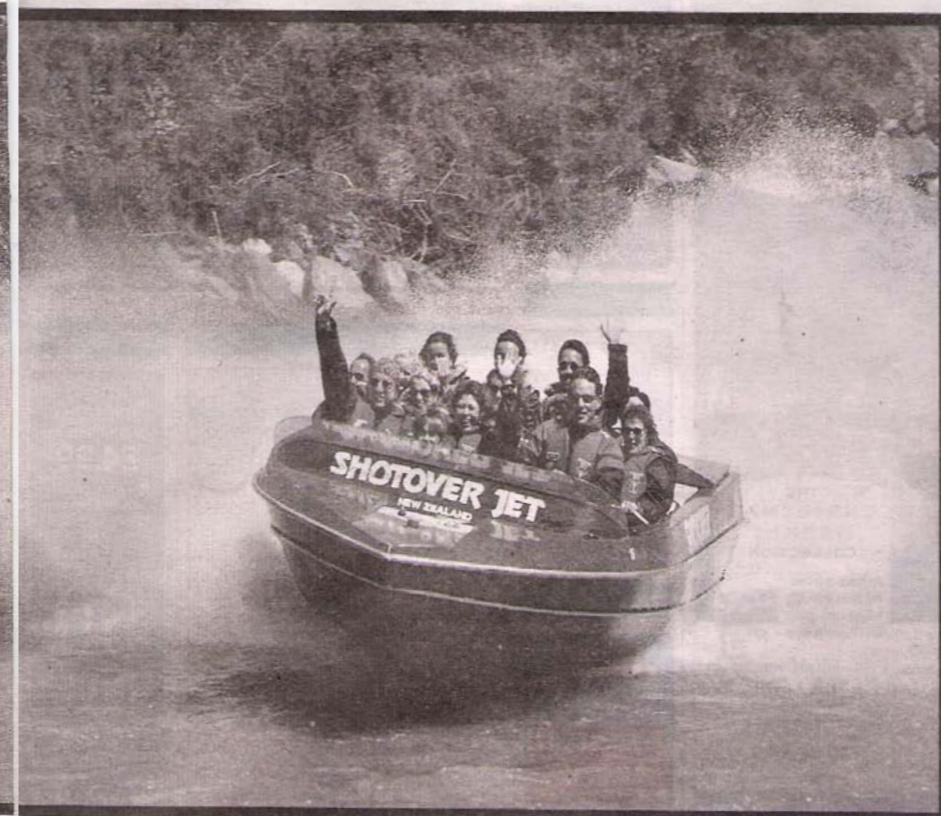
BOX OFFICE: England's Manu Tuilagi is set to star in NZ

TICKET AND ACCOMMODATION ONLY

● **Thomas Cook Sport** (0844 800 9900/thomascooksport.com) offers three nights in Auckland from £411pp (two sharing), room only, including ticket to England vs Scotland on October 1 or three nights in Wellington from £341pp (two sharing), B&B, including Wales vs South Africa on September 11.
● **England Rugby Travel** (0844 788 5000/englandrugbytravel.com) offers a three-night stay in Auckland from £899pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes tickets to the quarter-finals on October 8 and 9.

FLIGHT PACKAGES

● **Thomas Cook Sport** (as above) offers an 11-night package from £2,625pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes tickets to Wales vs Fiji in Hamilton and two quarter-finals in



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backdrop for the Irish to burn off the challenge of tournament minnows Russia.

Away from the pitch, an air safari provides a bird's-eye view of the geysers, bubbling mud pools and lava flows. Volcanair (volcanair.co.nz) offers a Buried Village/Tarawera Tour landing directly on Lake Tarawera from £140. Hakaworld (hakaworld.com) meanwhile, gives an insight into the All Blacks' famous pre-match ritual.

5 AWESOME AUCKLAND

With the opening match, two quarter-finals, both semi-finals and the final on October 23, there's no doubting the epicentre of this tournament.

New Zealand's largest city is also a potent spot for wine-lovers, with more than 80 flourishing vineyards producing chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon. Wine Trail Tours (winetrailtours.co.nz) offers a full-day tour of five wineries from £130.

Get light-headed in a different way with a trip up the Southern Hemisphere's tallest structure, the 1,080ft Sky Tower (skycity.auckland.co.nz). Eat in the 360-degree revolving Orbit restaurant, take a SkyWalk around the pergola (£76) or SkyJump off the tower (£118). Probably not in that order.

6 WELLINGTON FEAST

The venue for Wales' pivotal opening match against 2007 champions South Africa,



WILDLIFE: Seals can be seen in Otago

New Zealand's capital and beautiful harbour city has more places to eat out per capita than New York. Top of your menu (if your budget allows) should be the award-winning triumvirate of Swiss-themed Matterhorn (matterhorn.co.nz), contemporary shrine to fine dining Logan Brown (loganbrown.co.nz) and waterfront seafood specialist Martin Bosley's Yacht Club (martin-bosley.com).

7 QUEENSTOWN THRILLS

Adventure capital Queenstown's adrenalin will be pumping long after the final whistle of this year's tournament. This former gold-mining town nestled on the shores of picturesque Lake Wakatipu, north-east of Fiordland, boasts 220 round-the-calendar physical thrills including jet-boating, skiing, skydiving, rafting and mountain biking.

If you are brave enough, book the full-day Awesome Foursome package with Queenstown Adventure (queenstownadventure.com) which includes a helicopter ride and 440ft bungee jump. From £314.

8 COOK UP A STORM

Located in the middle of South Island, Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is a haven for hikers hoping to scale New Zealand's tallest peak, 12,316ft Mount Cook. There are at least 25 other peaks of more than 10,000ft, their foothills serving as the perfect setting for four-wheel-drive safaris, horse-trekking, skiing and fishing. For something really special, take a Cessna 185

ski plane (skiplanes.co.nz) Grand Circle tour over Mount Cook, across the sweeping Fox and Franz Josef glaciers and ultimately landing on the spectacular Tasman Glacier. From £260.

9 KAIKOURA

North of Christchurch on South Island's east coast is the marine jewel of Kaikoura.

It's the perfect base from which to experience whale-watching, swimming with dolphins, bird-watching or snorkelling with fur seals. Whale Watch (whalewatch.co.nz) offers an 80 per cent refund if you don't do just that: with the waters teeming with humpback, pilot and blue whales, not to mention pods of dusky dolphins, you're in for an unforgettable experience. Tours from £75.

10 WESTLAND NATIONAL PARK

With its rugged peaks, glacial landscape and titanic, serene lakes, South Island's western coast is a nature-lover's paradise. Subterranean explorers will love underground rafting where millions of glowworms light up the otherworldly panorama of stalagmites and stalactites.

For a peaceful waterborne vista of the surrounding wonders, including a total of 14 glaciers, take a half-day paddle with Glacier Kayaks (glacierkayaks.com). From £50.

GETTING THERE:

Ethiad Airways (0800 731 9384/ethiad.com) offers return flights from Heathrow to Auckland via Abu Dhabi from £1,080pp and from Manchester to Auckland from £1,089pp. Tourism New Zealand (0207 930 1662/newzealand.com/rugby)

