pictures from new zealand
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Introduction

Long, long ago, the demigod Maui Tikitiki a Tarangi, using a hook carved from his grandmother’s jawbone and his own blood as bait, hauled a giant fish from the Pacific Ocean. It was so heavy that he had to recite a magical chant to help pull it to the surface. He knew in return he would have to make offerings to the gods but his jealous and impatient brothers would not wait and they began to cut and scale the huge fish so that it writhed and thrashed in agony, its flesh becoming jagged and mutilated. At this moment the sun rose; as the rays of light hit the fish it became solid, creating a humped and rugged land.

This, according to one Maori origin myth, was the birth of New Zealand’s North Island, called Te Ika a Maui (the fish of Maui). The fish’s head is in the south with Wellington harbour as its mouth, and Lake Wairarapa as its eye. Lake Taupo is its pulsing heart, and Northland is its long thrashing tail. Maui’s canoe became the South Island, called Te Waka a Maui and the anchor became Stewart Island, which is called Te Puka a Maui (the anchor stone of Maui’s canoe). The seat of the canoe, which Maui braced himself against as he pulled up the fish, turned into the South Island’s Kaikoura ranges, called Te Taumanu a Maui (the canoe thwart of Maui).

Another Maori myth tells of gods who came down from the heavens in a great canoe and travelled so far from their source of power they were unable to return. The canoe eventually capsized and created the South Island. Its giant keel reached up to the sky and formed the high and jagged Southern Alps/Ka Tiritiri o te Moana, while the intricately carved prow shattered and partially sank, becoming the Marlborough Sounds.

European science echoes Maori myth in describing New Zealand’s origins as a rugged mountainous land, only recently raised from the sea. The Maori, a Polynesian people of Indo-Asian origins, were New Zealand’s first human inhabitants. Over 1000 years ago they set out from eastern Polynesia in great wooden canoes. The ocean currents and winds, and their skill at navigating by the stars carried them in search of the land promised by migrating shining cuckoos and godwits, which
flew to and from that direction every year. The adventurers discovered an isolated and thickly forested group of islands that was far bigger than any other in Polynesia. They named their new homeland Aotearoa (variously translated, most commonly as Land of the Long White Cloud) – the last large land area outside the polar regions to be inhabited.

The first European contact with New Zealand was only 360 years ago. Dutch explorer Abel Tasman was scared off by a disastrous initial contact, and his unfavourable report kept northerners away until the British explorer, James Cook, landed in 1769 and found a pleasant and generally hospitable country. The resulting European settlement began in force only about 200 years ago. Since then the population has grown to about four million, with around 15 per cent identifying themselves as Maori.

It is still a long journey across empty expanses of ocean to reach New Zealand. The two main, and many small outlying islands making up the nation lie isolated in the southwest Pacific. Australia, the closest large landmass apart from Antarctica, is 7000 kilometres distant; and Europe 19,000 kilometres. The total land area is about the same as that of Japan or the British Isles. The country is long, 1600 kilometres from north to south, and thin, 450 kilometres at its widest point, so its inhabitants are never far from the sight and sound of the sea. This shape, and the presence of many estuaries and natural harbours, gives New Zealand one of the longest coastlines in the world. However, the land rises steeply from these sea-washed edges and three quarters of the country is over 200 metres in height, much of it rugged and mountainous. The massive mountain chain of the Southern Alps stretches almost the whole length of the South Island, dividing it into distinct east and west coasts. High snow-covered and glacialized mountains rise steeply from the Tasman Sea in the west and dry plains spread out to the east.

The Maori relationship with Aotearoa begins, according to the story of Maui and his brothers, around 7000 years ago. In general the country has a mild, equable, maritime climate, although there are many regional variations and the weather has a distinct unpredictability. It can be hot and sunny one minute, cold and wet the next. Northern regions are at an equivalent latitude to the south of Spain, and Auckland and the northernmost parts enjoy a warm subtropical climate, with humid summers, wet springs, and frost-free winters. Further south the mountainous areas of the central North Island and the Southern Alps experience marked seasonal changes.

The effect of the prevailing westerly wind shows most dramatically on the South Island's west coast. This region catches furious storms that rise in the Indian Ocean and are borne by the trade winds across Australia and the Tasman Sea before striking the Alps' mountain barrier. There they shed their wet load in rain and snow, creating an environment of luxuriant forests and low-reaching glaciers. While the west coast can all but drown in rain, the east coast conversely experiences long dry summers and many droughts. The far south of the South Island, and more particularly the subantarctic islands, reflects its latitude with cold temperatures and the long summer days and winter nights of polar regions.

The Maori relationship with Aotearoa begins, according to the story of Maui and his brothers, with impatience and acrimony causing mutilation of the land. Later, the European settlers more than matched the demigods' hacking actions with their own drastic use of axe and match, and later of mining and agricultural technologies. The settlement and cultivation of this country by Maori and European has resulted in extensive damage to the natural landscape; however, many echoes of the older order remain. There are still times and places where spirit speaks and nature's power is felt – untamed and elemental. This is sometimes manifest in dramatic fashion: in floods and hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions; or in more gentle ways, in the rhythms of the sea and the elaborate ecology of a virgin forest.

New Zealand's rugged interior and small population of four million people, most of whom are crowded into a few North Island cities, mean it is relatively easy to find parts of the country left to nature's devices. Here it is possible to stand and gaze over vast expanses of untouched wilderness of forest and mountain and river; to walk in natural landscape for days without meeting a soul; or to find a deserted beach where there is only the sound of wind and surf and the cry of birds.
The Southern Alps and névé snowfields above the Fox and Franz Josef glaciers, Westland/Ta Poutini National Park.

Mt Tasman and Aoraki/Mt Cook, Westland/Ta Poutini National Park.
Pancake rocks and blowholes at Dolomite Point, Punakaiki, Paparoa National Park.

Kahikatea forest fringing Lake Wahapo, Westland/Tai Poutini National Park.
Greg and his dairy cows, West Coast.

Sheepdogs after a long day’s work, West Coast.
ABOVE Eroded cliff on Truman’s Track, Punakaiki, Paparoa National Park.
LEFT Kayakers explore the Oparara River, Kahurangi National Park.