

# 2005 Travel Grant

*Kim Kurcab: 2005 Travel Grant recipient. The following is her photo journal submission chronicling her trip to New Zealand.*



*The Los Angeles Council of HI-USA's 2005 Travel Grant Recipient, Kim Kurcab*

As a recent college grad I was feeling a little lost and in need of direction. So, I pointed myself south and ended up in Wellington, New Zealand. I volunteered in numerous parks and wild areas around the country. Not only did I get to spend three wonderful months in New Zealand, I had the privilege of replanting forests, saving endangered species, and living and working among the locals. I was a conservation volunteer by day, but I found plenty of time to revel in the sights and hop on the tourist bandwagon.



*Cape Palliser, North Island, New Zealand*

They are funny creatures, every child's favorite during trips to the zoo. Without the glass separating us, though, my heart raced. If they wanted or if I surprised one, they could take quite a large chunk out of me. By the second trip to see them I had forgotten most of my fears. I knew how best to approach them and where to look for them. As I watch pups chase each other around the tide pools I wonder, 'what is everyone doing back home?' (they are definitely missing out).

I know its cliché, but getting there really is half the adventure. Take the scenic route as often as allowed. Don't be afraid to leave your comfort zone. If it's comfort you want you need not go farther than your couch.

This is the experience that every traveler hopes for. I can't find the words to describe this moment except, today I held an endangered species in my arms. We had the privilege of assisting biologists in tagging and assessing the health of these unique birds, found only in New Zealand.



*Northern Coromandel Peninsula, North Island, New Zealand*

Locals complain that it gets crowded in summer with all the Aucklanders trying to escape the city. All I could think is, 'You should see Huntington Beach in the summer.'



*Mt. Cook National Park, South Island*

It was a difficult time, wading through rivers, balancing on steep hillsides where one wrong step would leave you stranded on the jagged rocks below, crawling and pushing our way through thick bush, some of it with thorns and nettles, the heat, and the loads we carried on our backs. At one point we could not see each other as we pushed through shrubs over reaching our heads. I think everyone found a different way through than the others. However, when we reached the top and looked down on hilltops, green pastures, pristine white sand beaches, and the sparkling water stretching to infinity, every thought of pain, worry, and complaint faded from my mind. That is what standing on top of a mountain will do to you.

I think one of the biggest mistakes travelers make is that they resign themselves to the tourist stereotype, only visiting the sites. If you really want to know a place, skip the lines and the souvenir shops. Walk in the footsteps of the locals, participate in the community and only then will you know the soul of a place.

Sometimes it's the little things about traveling that give you the greatest perspective of the world. I remember standing in a valley with mighty Mt. Cook lingering before me and thinking, 'I have never seen snow in another country.' Not that the mountain was not significant, but these little things show how big and vast the world really is and how home is only a little speck in something so much greater.



*The Remarkables, South Island*

My wish...a lifetime of adventure whether it be abroad or at home. I am too spoiled by the taste of excitement to return to my mundane ways.

The Chocolate Fish Café has become my Graceland. Rumor says the Lord of the Rings stars frequented the place while filming in Wellington. So, naturally it's a place I just had to experience. I was not sure where I was going exactly, but I knew the general direction. As usual this is all I need to begin any number of quests, the idea that a place lies somewhere over yonder. While I was unsuccessful in walking to the location, I have a good knowledge of the Southwest side of the harbor and a gaping blister on my heel.



*View of Auckland*

Some of my happiest moments are when I am lost. Assuming I am not lost somewhere in the Yukon and have no chance of running into a bus stop or 7-11. I am not bothered. It adds just a twinge of adventure and the curiosity of what is around the next bend in the road is enough to keep me going for hours. I guess this is my approach to traveling. When I am in an unfamiliar place, I take a walk, get a feel for what is around, then tomorrow I will walk the opposite way.

As we bounced around in the back of the van along a dirt road, the girl next to me asked if I was scared. I was surprised to hear myself say, 'no.' After all, we had a 100 foot repel into an underground cave followed by a ride down a cold river to explore the caverns. I thought this over. Okay, I was a little scared, but excitement overpowered all.



*Mt. Eden, Auckland*

I hiked up the side of the volcano and gazed down into the crater 50m below. The crater is now only a gaping hole filled with grass and a few typical volcanic rocks that look purposely placed to make it look volcanoish. I walked, well actually slid, my way to the bottom just to say I have stood inside a volcano.



*Lake Tekapo, South Island*

I know a lot of people cry when they leave home, not me. I cry when I have to return home. See, I know that home is always a plane ride away, but these sights are once in a lifetime happenings. As I drag myself down the jet way I have to be reminded that there are many more adventures to come whether I am here, home, or in a place I don't even know exists yet.