

# Wellington – Christchurch, The Ultimate Trip

## Wellington – Picton via Freefall

***Of all the methods and machines we adrenalin junkies have devised in search of that ultimate hit, one has to respect skydiving as the most intuitive; get as high up in the air as you can and fall for as long as you can.***

This is how I recently opted to cross Cook Strait with the pioneering folks at Skydive the Sounds. Conceived over a round of beers, this small friendly company is just over a year old, but is already becoming a hot talking point in the skydiving world for its unique convergence of transport and thrill seeking. Their terrifying alternative to the ferry? You're boarded onto a Sounds Air plane at Wellington Airport (after a reassuring briefing and harness-donning), flown over the Strait, then once you're roughly 12,000 feet above Picton they throw you out the door. I can't think of a more appropriate grand entrance into the South Island – land of the long loud scream.



Of course the only downside of this idea is that a virgin skydiver like myself spends most of the otherwise pleasant scenic flight into the Marlborough Sounds proverbially soiling myself as the altimeter ticks away my mounting anticipation and dread. As the watercolour landscape of the South Island looms nearer and lower in the window, my efforts to psyche myself into a state of rational calm are wearing thin. Until they open the door you can quite comfortably convince yourself it's just any other plane trip, but once your legs are dangling over the void, every self preserving faculty in your body is screaming resistance. It's well too late for any reconsiderations though - before a particularly unladylike word has time to cross my lips I'm barrelled out into the sky.

The immediate sensation is one of complete disorientation, followed swiftly by one of incredible speed. Don't listen to anyone who says it's like floating – it's most definitely like falling, but not the stomach-somersaulting, rollercoaster falling you'd expect on an exponential scale. I'd more accurately describe it as 'high-speed vertical travelling', kind of like sticking your entire body out the window of a speeding vehicle (one that's travelling 200kmph and headed straight for the ground). It is truly the most incredible



sensation I've ever experienced. Immediately addicted, I know right away that I'll be comparing everything else I do in my life to these 50-odd seconds above Picton.

The intensity of freefalling is abruptly countered by a sudden euphoric calm as the opening parachute brings us to a virtual halt. As if the acute silence opens up the very earth beneath my feet, I now extend my gaze to the breathtaking vista below me. The extraordinary thing about this skydive is that

you don't see the landscape you're jumping into until you're plummeting towards it. A world away from the hillsides surrounding Wellington where we began our ascent, the sounds and valleys extend out before me like the encroaching arms of a great beast slowly sinking into the ocean.

Now this is floating. It doesn't feel like we're losing height at all – but sure enough with every turn the landing site gets larger and the panoramic view flatter. After five glorious minutes living like the birds, we make a smooth sliding landing at the feet of our welcoming party at Picton Airport. For some minutes after my blessed reunion with the ground I'm left with that rubbery feeling in my limbs that comes after such an extreme feat.

'Recommend' seems like such a weak word when it comes to an experience like this – whether you're a complete wuss like myself or a seasoned extremist, this is the coolest way to drop into the South Island.

### **Picton – Christchurch via train**

What better way to counteract this wild entrance into the South Island than with a leisurely paced scenic train journey into its heart. The Tranz Coastal rail journey from Picton to Christchurch is a five hour feast for the senses as the luxury locomotive makes its way across the rolling hills and vineyards of Marlborough, skirts the Kaikoura coast, and finally heads inland over pastures and through rural townships towards Christchurch.

Like a slow pulsing scenic strobelight, the journey in and out of tunnelled hillsides along the edge of the Pacific Ocean is an experience of the Kaikoura coastline only railway can offer. The mighty mountains loom large and snow-capped on our right and the glittered ocean on our left. NZ reggae buffs look out for the 'Cay's Crays'

crayfish vending caravan just before Kaikoura – I'm guessing this was the inspiration for the title of Fat Freddy's Drop's second track on their legendary album 'Based on a True Story'.



This epic trip from NZ's capital to the South Island's largest city is definitely designed for those people wanting to get the maximum possible experience out of their journey. Up for it? Get 1 night accommodation at YHA Wellington City, a scenic flight and skydive into the Marlborough Sounds, 1 night accommodation at YHA Picton and a scenic rail journey down the Kaikoura coast to Christchurch from just \$566\* - that's a saving of \$119 for YHA members. Of course you can always use these ideas to build your own adventure – book it all at the YHA travel desk.

### **YHA New Zealand Reservation Centre**

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