

San Juan Journal

Memories of ride-sharing Down Under | SJRideshare

Oct 06 2008

By Liza Michaelson

I spent five months last winter driving a campervan around New Zealand and Australia. It was summer there.

Since wheels were my way of life, I decided to pick up every hitchhiker who was willing to deal with the fact that there was no seat, only a bed in the back.

There were surprisingly few folks thumbing rides, and those I met were generally travelers from abroad. Once when I came around a sunny bend in the road on the south island of New Zealand, a gorgeous woman with an abundance of long black curly hair was standing there with a beaming smile and her arm straight out over the road.

I pulled over, she opened the sliding side door, and asked with a thick Spanish accent if there was room for her pilot.

“Pilot?” I had to pause for a moment as I could see no one else, and I was wondering if she had landed from a UFO or a crashed plane. But she looked unharmed and totally human, so I said of course there was room for her pilot if they both wanted to ride on the bed.

She waved to the bushes across the road and out came a guy hunched over with the weight of an enormous pack which turned out to be his parasail. The one he piloted with his Spanish customer.

There is one place in New Zealand which is very much like our island communities, called Golden Bay. It’s like an island because to reach it you have to go over a high mountain pass, and then once you are down in the bay it is a dead end so it’s a big commitment; and there isn’t a lot once you are there. Not much except a small paradise.

There is one town, called Takaka, and the rest of it is small enclaves strung along the road for thirty or so miles. There are “honesty boxes” filled with produce along the road, and lots of beach access and some great gathering places like the Mussel Inn, a brew pub with lots of outdoor seating, live music every night, and a fire pit, kids running around, and indoor composting toilets with lots of information about how to live green posted on the walls.

I was excited to see that Golden Bay has an organized hitchhiking system similar to ours. Instead of signs posted where it’s safe to stand and wait for rides, they have benches. At every bench there is a stick with a red flag and people who want a ride sit on the bench and hold up the flag.

Part of the deal is the riders are expected to contribute towards the cost of petrol, at least a dollar. We are still trying to work that out here. Many drivers think that is wonderful to get help with gas, and just as many feel offended when I offer a bit of cash. It’s getting costlier by the week.

Sometimes I put two dollars in an envelope and put a rideshare sticker on the outside and I tell them I want to be very clear that I am not just hitch-hiking around the island to save money. I am doing it to meet my neighbors and protect our environment.

I encourage everybody to think twice before you leave home in the morning and consider leaving your car at home for a day. It’s a great way to remind ourselves that we live in our own slice of paradise.