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The Perfect 10-Day New Zealand South Island Itinerary

Day 1-2: Christchurch and Akaroa

Christchurch

Christchurch is the largest city on the South Island and is most likely where you'll be flying into to start your South Island adventures.

You can see the main sites of the city in one day, but I would recommend spending two days here to see some of the surrounding area as well.

Despite the challenges it faced after the 2011 earthquake, Christchurch has emerged as a vibrant and resilient city.

Hagley Park is one of the main highlights in Christchurch. This stunning 165-acre city park has beautiful botanic gardens, a museum, playgrounds, cafes, walking trails, and more. You can even rent a kayak or go punting on the Avon River.

I would also recommend taking a [Hop-on- Hop-off Tram Tour](#) of downtown Christchurch. This restored vintage tram will take you to the major sites around the city, including the colorful New Regent Street, Cathedral Square, Hagley Park, and more.

If you have time, I would drive out to Taylor's Mistake. It is our favorite beach cove and has a beautiful walking trail around the headland.

There are plenty of hotel options in Christchurch, but for a unique experience, I would recommend staying at the enchanting [Observatory Hotel](#).

There are so many cool spots to explore in and around Christchurch. For more recommendations, I have put together a guide for the [Top Things to Do in Christchurch](#).

Akaroa

If you spend two days in Christchurch, I would highly recommend taking a day trip from Christchurch to Akaroa for one of the days. It is a little out of the way, but the drive is beautiful and the town is darling.

Akaroa is a charming coastal town located on the Banks Peninsula. It is the home of New Zealand's only French settlement, and you can still see evidence of the French influence today.

Explore the town's heritage through its charming streets, colonial architecture, and French-inspired cuisine. Sample delicious pastries at local bakeries, and browse artisan shops for French-inspired souvenirs.

One of our favorite things to do is walk along the waterfront, grab a bite to eat at a local cafe, and swim at the beach at Akaroa Harbor.

New Zealand is home to the rare Hector Dolphin, and Akaroa Harbor is one of the unique places where you can spot them. You can even take a [wildlife boat cruise](#) to swim with the dolphins!

A few other recommendations include the Akaroa Museum, the Akaroa Heads Lighthouse Walk, the Giant's House, St. Patrick's Church, and spending an afternoon with the cutest alpacas at [Shamarra Farms](#).

Day 3: Castle Hill, Cave Stream Reserve, Devil's Punchbowl Falls, and Punakaiki

Castle Hill

After spending a few days in and around Christchurch, it's time to head over to the West Coast!

You'll be driving through Arthur's Pass, but first, make a quick stop at Castle Hill. Here, you'll find a surreal landscape of limestone formations that are straight out of a fantasy book.

The unique limestone outcrops also provide a natural playground. If you are traveling with kids, they will especially love the natural rock slides, climbing the boulders, and playing hide-and-seek in the cracks and crevices.

Cave Stream Scenic Reserve

Cave Stream Scenic Reserve is located just down the road from Castle Hill. Here, you will find Flock Hill which was the filming location for the final battle in Narnia.

The most popular attraction at the Cave Stream Scenic Reserve, as its name states, is a cave with a stream running right through the mountain.

If the water level is low and you're feeling adventurous, you can hike through the cave. It takes about an hour and you'll need headlamps as you scale up waterfalls and explore the twists and turns.

It can be sketchy if the conditions aren't right and you are inexperienced with caving. I would recommend going on a guided tour. This [tour](#) also includes rock climbing at Castle Hill.

See our guide [17 Underrated Spots on New Zealand's South Island](#) for more information about visiting Cave Stream Scenic Reserve.

Devil's Punchbowl Falls

On your way to the West Coast, you'll take the scenic drive through [Arthur's Pass National Park](#), the highest pass across the Southern Alps.

It is such a stunning drive! Alternatively, you can also experience the beauty on a [Tranzalpine Train Ride](#).

I would recommend making a stop along the drive to hike the trail to Devil's Punchbowl Falls.

The short but steep 1.2-mile out-and-back trail will take you through a lush rainforest before reaching Devil's Punchbowl Falls.

There is a viewing platform where you can see the dramatic waterfall and feel the powerful mist as it plunges 429 feet down the side of the mountain.

Punakaiki

Punakaiki is home to the famous Pancake Rocks, one of the most unique natural formations on the South Island.

The rock formations have been sculpted by the sea over millions of years, and the layers of sediment make the rocks look like stacks of pancakes.

What makes this geological wonderland even more special is that you can witness the spectacular geysers that erupt through blowholes during high tide.

If you visit during high tide when the waters are rough, you will be able to witness one of Mother Nature's spectacular water shows.

There is a 20-minute loop track leading around the rock formations where you will see water spraying and feel the mist from the fury of the ocean below.

I would recommend staying in Punakaiki for the night. The [Scenic Hotel Punakaiki](#) is a great option.

Alternate Route #1:

If you have an extra few days to spend on the South Island, you may also want to consider driving from Christchurch up the coast to Kaikoura.

This scenic coastal town is a haven for wildlife enthusiasts. Click on the link for our [Kaikoura Travel Guide](#).

From there, drive up to Picton, the small port town where you can catch a ferry to [Wellington](#) on the North Island.

Continue to Nelson, another charming beachfront town, then make your way to Golden Bay. The Golden Bay Region is one of our favorite spots on the South Island.

You'll want to spend a few days here before heading to Punakaiki and continuing the rest of this itinerary. See our [Golden Bay Travel Guide](#) for recommendations.

Alternate Route #2:

This alternate route will take you from Christchurch to Hamner Springs where you can soak in thermal hot springs, hike the Conical Hill Trail, and Explore around Frog Rock.

Make a pit stop at Nelson Lakes where you can book a vacation rental near the water.

Most of the rentals include canoes or kayaks so that you can paddle around the scenic lake. There are also shoreline trails to explore. Just be sure to pack bug spray, the sandflies are terrible here!

After Nelson Lakes, head up to Golden Bay or cut over to Punakaiki, depending on how much extra time you have.

Day 4: Hokitika Gorge, Fox & Franz Josef Glaciers, Haast Pass, and Wanaka

Hokitika Gorge

I have a feeling that the beauty of Hokitika Gorge will take your breath away! Take a short 15-minute walk through native bush to a viewing platform where you'll catch your first glimpse of the Koo-aid blue water framed by the lush forest.

Continue down the trail where you'll cross over a swing bridge to reach the banks of this

glacial river.

The water is freezing cold, but you can take a refreshing dip if you're brave enough!

Fox & Franz Josef Glaciers

The Fox Glacier and Franz Josef Glaciers are both fairly close together and are easy to access.

I would recommend taking the 1.6-mile out-and-back Fox Glacier Valley Walk to reach the foot of Fox Glacier. To reach Franz Josef Glacier, you'll need to take a 3.7 mile out-and-back trail.

If you want to walk on the glacier, you'll need to book a [guided glacial hike](#).

For a unique experience, you can also take a [helicopter tour](#) that will fly over both glaciers and will even land on the snow so that you can walk around.

Another fun activity is going on a [quad bike tour](#) along the glacial river bed, surrounded by incredible scenery.

If you only have time to visit one glacier, I would recommend Fox Glacier.

Haast Pass

Haast Pass is a UNESCO World Heritage Area renowned for its dramatic landscapes and rich biodiversity. This scenic mountain road is also the only road that connects the West Coast to the town of Wanaka.

The drive is stunning with multiple hikes and photo ops along the way.

I would recommend taking the 1.6 mile round trip trail to see the crystal blue glacial waters at the Blue Pools. If it has been raining, the water does get muddy so it's best to visit on a clear day.

Thunder Creek Falls and Fantail Falls are two impressive waterfalls in Haast Pass that can be easily accessed from just off the side of the road.

Just be aware that the road is susceptible to mud slides and it is often closed during inclement weather. Since there are no other alternate roads nearby that lead to Wanaka, you'll need to keep an eye on the weather when planning your trip.

For more information about visiting these locations on the West Coast, see our complete guide to [South Island New Zealand's West Coast](#).

Wanaka

Wanaka is a picturesque town on the shore of Lake Wanaka with a laid-back vibe and plenty of outdoor adventures.

If it is warm enough, you can swim or paddle board at Lake Wanaka. Be sure to stop and take a photo of the famous "Lone Tree", a solitary willow tree growing in the middle of the lake.

Roy's Peak is a popular 10.1 mile trail that leads to one of the most scenic overlooks on the entire South Island.

If you are traveling with kids, Puzzling World is a fun optical illusion museum that our kids loved!

I would recommend spending the night in Wanaka, check out [Cross Hill Glamping](#) where you can spend the night in a dome at the nearby Lake Hawea.

Day 5-6: Arrowtown, Queenstown, and Milford Sound

Arrowtown

As you make your way to Queenstown, make a pit stop at Arrowtown, a cute historic mining town. This former gold rush town has been preserved to look much like it did in the early 1860s.

Walk down the main street and check out the heritage shops, explore the Chinese Settlement, and grab a bite to eat at Dudley's Cottage Cafe.

I would recommend stopping by the Lakes District Museum to see the exhibits and learn more about the history of Arrowtown. You can also rent a gold mining pan from the museum and try your hand at panning for gold in the river.

We also love the Arrow River Trail. It follows along the banks of the Arrow River, which just so happens to be the filming location for the Ford of Bruinen on *Lord of the Rings*.

Queenstown

Queenstown is my favorite city in all of New Zealand! The surrounding scenery is stunning as it is nestled on the shore of Lake Wakatipu at the base of the Remarkables Mountain Range.

Queenstown is also known as the Adventure Capital of the World, and there is no shortage of things to do.

One of our favorite things to do in Queenstown is to take the world's steepest cable car lift to the top of Bob's Peak. The view from the top is mindblowing and you can enjoy the view with

a meal at the Stratosfare Restaurant.

At the top, you'll also find the Skyline Luge where you can race your friends or family down this fun and scenic track.

We also love the jet boat tours. You can take the [Kjet Boat Tour](#) up the Kawarau River, or the [Shotover Jet Boat](#) Ride.

We have only done the Kjet Boat Tour and loved it, but Will and Kate did the Shotover Jet Boat during their New Zealand tour in 2014, so it's royalty approved!

You can also take a scenic lake cruise on Lake Wakatipu, dine at a waterfront restaurant, soak in the Onsen Pools, and go on the world's biggest swing at Nevis Swing.

If you're feeling adventurous, you have to bungee jump at Kawarua Bridge, the birthplace of bungee jumping.

For more recommendations, see our guide for the [Best Things to Do in Queenstown](#).

I would recommend spending two nights in Queenstown. For a romantic stay, consider [The Canyons Bed & Breakfast](#). If you're looking for a budget-friendly stay, the [Quest Queenstown Apartments](#) is a good value. The [Holiday Inn Queenstown](#) is also a good option for families.

Milford Sound

Milford Sound is the crowning jewel of New Zealand's South Island and is often referred to as the "Eighth Wonder of the World".

Set out early in the morning and stop for a bite to eat at Sandfly Cafe in Te Anau.

Then get your camera ready because the drive from Te Anau to Milford Sound is one of the most beautiful drives in New Zealand.

If it has been raining, then you are in for a treat as waterfalls will be pouring off of the surrounding mountains. It is absolutely incredible.

The beauty only continues as you reach Milford Sound. You'll want to make reservations for a [scenic boat cruise](#) in advance because they do sell out.

Prepare to be blown away as you cruise through the fjord's pristine waters surrounded by towering cliffs, cascading waterfalls, and lush rainforest. Be sure to keep an eye out for dolphins, seals, and penguins too!

If you have time, book a tour at the [Te Anau Glow Worm Caves](#) on your way back to Queenstown. It is one of the few places where you can see glow worms on the South Island.

Day 7-8: The Catlins and Dunedin

The Catlins

After spending a few days in Queenstown, head south to The Catlins. This untouched region is a bit of a hidden gem and one of our favorite regions on the South Island.

Not many tourists make it down this far south, so you'll be able to experience much of the beauty in solitude.

Slope Point is worth a quick stop. It is the southernmost point of New Zealand and the closest point to Antarctica. As a result, the brutal antarctic winds relentlessly whip the trees causing them to grow at a permanent angle.

Continue on to Nugget Point. This is arguably the most scenic lighthouse in all of New Zealand. Take the short 10 minute walk from the parking lot to the lighthouse perched high above the cliffs.

The rocky islets below look like nuggets of rocks floating in the water below. If you look closely, you can see fur seals lounging on the rocks and playing in the water.

The Catlins is also home to the most beautiful waterfalls on the South Island, particularly McLean Falls and Purakaunui Falls.

You'll also find a massive sea cave, a petrified forest that can be seen at low tide, yellow-eyed penguins, and a beautiful bay that served as the filming location for Cair Paravel on *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

See our guide [9 of the Most Beautiful Places in The Catlins](#) for more details and recommendations.

Dunedin

I would recommend spending the night in an Airbnb in the Catlins then heading up to Dunedin the next day after you have finished exploring the area.

Dunedin is the South Island's second largest city. It is filled with history and unique architecture.

Be sure to drive to Baldwin Street which holds the Guinness World Record as the steepest residential street in the world. The 19-degree gradient means that the houses are constructed on a steep slant. It is wild to see!

The historic Dunedin Railway Station is also worth a stop, as well The Octagon Plaza, St. Paul's Cathedral, the First Church of Otago, Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, and Larnach Castle. Larnach Castle is about a 20-minute drive, but it's the only castle in all of New Zealand and is worth touring.

It's also worth the drive to see Tunnel Beach. This picturesque beach can be accessed at low tide through a hand-dug tunnel.

Tunnel Beach was a birthday gift for the daughter of the wealthy Cargill family. Tragically, she drowned at this very beach not too long after.

If you have extra time, there are so many other amazing spots along the Otago Coast, like the Moeraki Boulders and Katiki Point.

See our guide [7 Must-See Stops Along the Otago Coast](#) for more information about visiting Dunedin and the surrounding area.

Day 9-10: Omarama, Lake Pukaki and Lake Tekapo

Omarama

As you make your way to Lake Pukaki, make a stop at Omarama to see the Clay Cliffs

This landscape is not your typical New Zealand scenery, these towering orange sandstone pinnacles look as if they belong in Southern Utah.

There is a short trail from the parking lot that leads through the cliffs where you can climb around and explore.

Parking is \$5 cash and you'll need to drive along a dirt road for a few miles to reach the entrance, but a high clearance 4WD vehicle is not necessary.

For a relaxing experience, you may want to consider booking a private scenic hot tub at the nearby [Omarama Hot Tubs](#).

You'll also drive by Lake Ruataniwha on your way to Lake Pukaki. It's a fun little stop if you are traveling with kids. You'll find a playground overlooking the water and even an old-school waterslide sitting in the lake.

Lake Pukaki

Lake Pukaki is my favorite Lake in New Zealand. It is renowned for its stunning turquoise waters and panoramic views of the Southern Alps.

Mount Cook (also known as Aoraki) is the highest mountain peak in New Zealand and you can spot it on the northern shore of the lake.

To get a closer look, drive Mount Cook Road as it contours along the west shore of the lake. It is one of the most scenic drives on the South Island.

After about 45 beautiful minutes, you'll reach Mount Cook Village and the beginning of the Hooker Valley Track.

The Hooker Valley Track is a 6.8 mile out-and-back trail that leads to Hooker Lake where you'll find a glacier and floating icebergs.

The entire trail is stunning as it follows through a valley surrounded by snow-capped mountain peaks and views of the Mueller Glacier.

You'll cross over three different swing bridges and the scenery feels as if you walked into Middle Earth from *Lord of the Rings*.

It's one of our favorite hikes on the South Island and I would definitely recommend adding it to your itinerary!

Lake Tekapo

Lake Tekapo is an equally beautiful turquoise lake just down the road from Lake Pukaki. The vibrant blue water is surrounded by rugged mountain peaks and a thick forest of pine trees.

If you visit in the summer between mid-November and late December, you'll be lucky enough to see the surrounding area dotted with blooming pink and purple lupins.

Lake Tekapo is known for its thermal hot pools overlooking the lake. There is also a year-round tubing hill and an ice skating rink in the winter.

Be sure to stop and see the Church of the Good Shepherd, it was built in 1935 and is one of the most photographed churches in New Zealand.

Lake Tekapo resides in the Mackenzie Basin region that has been designated as an International Dark Sky Reserve. It is one of the best places to go star gazing in New Zealand!

I would highly recommend booking a [star tour](#) at the nearby Mount John Observatory. It is also worth driving up to the observatory during the day to see the view of Lake Tekapo from above.

For more recommendations, see our guide for the [Best Things to Do at Lake Tekapo](#).

After Lake Tekapo, it will be time to head back to Christchurch and wrap up your 10-day trip. I hope this guide will help you plan the best 10-Day New Zealand South Island itinerary!