Overview

New Zealand’s South Island might not be huge, but it’s so densely packed with incredible sights and destinations that it’s almost impossible to see it all in one trip. A better option than frantically driving around trying to experience everything in far too short a time frame is just to take in part of the island. Remember: you can always come back. This Nelson to Christchurch roundtrip will guide you through some of the most amazing places that the upper South Island has to offer - by the end, you’ll probably be planning your next New Zealand itinerary.

A New Zealand motorhome rental (they call them campervans down there) is the ultimate way to experience this South Island road trip. Pick one up in sunny Nelson, get to grips with the basics of travelling on NZ roads, and you’re on your way to an unforgettable journey. #LetsGoMotorhome
Those who want both the freedom of the open road and the comforts of home, there is no better way to see God’s Own Country than to book a NZ campervan hire and set a course for adventure. Between Christchurch and Nelson you will find so many exciting and wonderful places to stop that you might find yourself extending your trip! While we recommend as much time as possible, we have made it easy for you to see the highlights of this fantastic route and pack in as much as you possibly can.

**Nelson**

Most people arriving in the South Island make a beeline for Nelson, and it’s no mystery why. Blessed with a dry, Mediterranean-type climate that lends itself perfectly to winemaking, sunbathing and hiking, Nelson has made the most of what it’s been given to become one of the top tourist destinations in the country.

There’s no better way to shrug off the worries and cares of the working world than starting off your motorhome holiday in the sunny city of Nelson. Not sure what to do first? Why not start with a winery tour - the Nelson has risen in recent years as a serious viticultural rival to its world famous neighbour, Marlborough, and boasts an impressive selection of wineries that welcome visitors to try their vintages. Driving around to all the cellar doors yourself might not be the wisest plan, but there are plenty of companies that will take that responsibility off your hands and regale you with stories about the surrounding area while they’re at it. If you have a bit of a sweet tooth, don’t miss a visit to the Seifried Estate Winery - their Sweet Agnes riesling has captured palates (and gold medals) worldwide with its dulcet flavours; you won’t want to pass up an opportunity to sample this exquisite wine.

When many people think of a relaxing holiday, it’s beautiful beaches that they’re picturing. Nelson is of course situated right on the Tasman Bay, but there’s an even more amazing coastline just a couple hours up the road. Golden Bay is a place that feels like it hasn’t changed for decades - in the best possible way. Because it’s a little off the beaten track, Golden Bay doesn’t get huge visitor numbers but
those who know about its smooth golden sands, tranquil waters and sunny skies keep coming back time and time again. Nelson locals have a long standing love affair with Golden Bay, and now that you’re in the know, you too have the chance to fall under its spell.

Right next to Golden Bay lies **Abel Tasman National Park**, home to one of the country’s best loved hiking trails: the Abel Tasman Coast Track. Whether you take 3 to 5 days and explore the entire route or just go for an hour long stroll along the first piece of the track, make sure you take at least a little time to discover why the Abel Tasman Coast Track has become a Kiwi tramping classic. It’s not a demanding walk at all, and any effort you do put in is repaid in spades with lush native bush surroundings and pristine secluded beaches. Water taxis (both for pick up and drop off) are available for those want to do just one section of the track, so don’t think that you need to walk the whole 51 kilometres to get a great experience.

There’s enough to do and see in and around Nelson to keep you busy for months on end, but your journey has barely begun and the rest of the South Island beckons...

**Murchison**

The first part of your journey south will take you along the legendary State Highway 6 toward Murchison. You’ll come across this unassuming town a little less than 2 hours southwest of Nelson - it has a permanent population of only around 500 souls, but in spite of its size it’s actually a thriving adventure hub, the variety of activities on offer far outstripping what you’d expect from such a small centre. For a start, this is the **whitewater capital of New Zealand** - whether you’re a rapid-riding veteran or you’ve always had the urge to hurtle down a tumultuous river in an inflatable craft, Murchison is the perfect place to scratch that itch.

For those who want the thrills without the spills, a high speed **jetboat ride** winding through the **Buller River** canyons at 85 kph might be just the thing you’re looking for. On the other hand, if you’re not opposed to a little adventure but would rather stay dry, head to the Buller **Gorge Swingbridge**. Race from bank to bank along a 160 metre zip line or get launched into the air by the ‘Supaman’ with only a harness to hang on to.

Once you’ve had your fill of excitement in Murchison, it’s time to wend your way southward for 2 hours or so to the warm waters of the beautiful Hanmer Springs.

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**Leg 1 Highlights**

- Golden Bay
- Abel Tasman Coast Track
- Murchison Jetboating
It’s a little off the beaten path, but Hanmer Springs is one of those places that it’s worth taking a little detour to find. From adventure to relaxation, this town has a little something for everyone. And once you head on your way, you have Waipara to look forward to - the Canterbury region’s most lauded wine country.

*If you’re beginning your trip in Christchurch, find your nearest motorhome rental depot here.*

**Hanmer Springs**

Built around a natural hot spring discovered in the late 1800’s, Hanmer Springs is still known for the soothing properties of its waters but that’s far from all that this small town can offer. Whether you’re an adrenaline fiend or you’re travelling with children, there’s enough to do in Hanmer Springs to keep you entertained for quite some time.

If you’re visiting during ski season (which varies from year to year, but can often stretch into mid-spring) then a trip to the Hanmer Springs Ski Area on the slopes of Mount Patrick is certainly in order. All abilities are catered for here, from beginner to advanced, making this the perfect ski spot for families and ski veterans alike. The ski area is about 17km away from the Hanmer Springs township, and shuttles run regularly from the town to Mount Patrick during the ski season.

If you’re craving a bit of an adrenaline buzz, Hanmer Springs can certainly scratch that itch. Thrillseekers Adventures offers daring souls a whole range of ways to get the blood pumping. From jetboating through the canyons and whitewater rapids of the Waiau River, to bungy plunging toward that same river with only a rubber cord between you and disaster, to getting down and dirty with a quad bike trek, adventurous travellers will find themselves spoiled for choice in Hanmer Springs.

Of course, no visit to this town would be complete without heading to the Hanmer Springs Thermal Pools and Spa. Open every day of the year except Christmas, this beautiful facility has a little
something for everyone - the aquatic thrills of the Super Bowl and waterslide, the natural relaxation of the Sulphur Pools and the refreshing qualities of the Aqua Therapy Pools each have their own appeal - this is definitely an experience not to be missed.

**Waipara**

Once you’re ready to leave Hanmer Springs behind, head south on SH 7A until it becomes SH 7. About an hour down the road you’ll come across one of the most esteemed wine regions in New Zealand: Waipara. Renowned for its Pinot noir, Riesling and Chardonnay, the land around this small town is ideal for vineyards, thanks to exceptionally high summer temperatures and low rainfall. If you have the time, taking a Waipara wine tour is highly recommended.

There are plenty of companies happy to take the driving responsibilities off your hands so you can just focus on admiring the gorgeous Canterbury landscape and sampling some of New Zealand’s most delicious wines. When you’ve sated your appetite for fine wine, hand over the keys to a sober driver and set a course for Christchurch - just one more hour down the road.

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**Leg 2 Highlights**

Hanmer Springs Ski Area  
Thermal Pools  
Waipara Wineries

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**Leg 3 Christchurch to Kaikoura**

Christchurch was always a lovely city to visit, but after the changes of the past few years it’s become a fascinating display of originality and determination - there really is nowhere else like it on Earth. Read on for a little insight into how the city has changed over the past five years and what sparked that dramatic shift.

*If you're beginning your trip in Christchurch, find your nearest motorhome rental depot here.*

**Christchurch**

It’s an exciting time in this city’s history: the Christchurch earthquake of 2011 brought the city to its knees, claiming lives and destroying infrastructure. But instead of losing heart after the catastrophe,
Christchurch residents banded together to rebuild and revitalise the city. Witnessing sights such as the beautifully creative cardboard cathedral, quirky pop-up bars and cafes, and shipping container based malls will erase any doubt that Christchurch is more full of life and energy than ever before. In spite of all the changes over the last few years, those who’ve visited in the past will find that some Christchurch attractions have stayed exactly the same.

Punting down the Avon river on a warm afternoon is still a welcome shortcut to tranquility, and taking a stroll through the Christchurch Botanic Gardens never fails to restore a sense of peace and refreshment to the weary.

Kids will absolutely love Christchurch’s International Antarctic Centre - they’ll have the chance to get into the mindset of an early Antarctic explorer as they hunker down to weather a fierce blizzard, get up close and personal with Little Blue Penguins and learn about Earth’s coldest continent via a fascinating collection of interactive displays. To be honest, taking the kids along is a great excuse to explore this place yourself - anyone with an enquiring mind and a spirit of adventure will find the International Antarctic Centre enthralling.

Another of the things to do in Christchurch that will appeal to families and nature lovers alike is taking a trip to Orana Wildlife Park. The only open range zoo in New Zealand, this is a rare chance to see exotic animals, not locked in small cages but free to roam and enjoy their environment. Travel through the Lion Reserve, hand feed a giraffe or observe the social antics of a gorilla group - Orana Wildlife Park offers unforgettable experiences for young and old alike.

Once you’ve explored Christchurch to your heart’s content, it’s time to head north again, this time along the eastern edge of the island. If you didn’t get the chance to indulge in the delights of Waipara on your way in to Christchurch, you have one more opportunity now before you leave it far behind you. From Waipara, it’s just a little over an hour and a half before you’ll reach one of the most lauded ecotourism destinations in the world: the coastal town of Kaikoura.
Leg 3 Highlights

When it comes to oceanic ecotourism, Kaikoura has opportunities that put the rest of the world to shame. Get right up close to **whales, dolphins and seals**, for encounters of the wild kind that will stay with you for many years to come.

*If you’re beginning your trip in this area, find motorhome rental in Blenheim or Nelson.*

Kaikoura

While it’s often the west coast of the South Island that gets all the good press, Kaikoura more than does its bit to ensure that the east coast doesn’t get left behind. A little over two and half hours drive from Christchurch, this small coastal town has become a hub for those looking to experience the incredible sea life of the region from an unparalleled vantage point.

Of all the town’s watery attractions, **whale watching in Kaikoura** is by far the most popular. Companies like Whale Watch Kaikoura give visitors the opportunity to see these massively majestic creatures right up close. No matter what time of year you’re in town, taking a Whale Watch tour gives you a 95% chance of laying eyes on a whale - and for those who are unlucky enough to fall within the remaining 5%, Whale Watch will refund 80% of whatever you’ve paid. At the very worst, you’ll get a cheap cruise along Canterbury’s beautiful coast line.
While whales tend to grab the attention of the masses (for good reason) they’re certainly not the only aquatic creatures you can get up close to in Kaikoura. Encounter Kaikoura gives you the chance not only to see *dusky dolphins* playing in the waves but to actually get in the water and play among them. This last bit is optional (there aren’t many willing to brave chilly winter waters) but if the weather’s warm this can be a truly life-changing experience. As if whales and dolphins weren’t enough, Seal Swim Kaikoura will have you snorkelling with wild New Zealand fur seals! It’s no wonder that Kaikoura is known as one of the best places on Earth to come experience enchanting social sea creatures as you never have before.

The road north from Kaikoura will take you along the coast before curving inland to come in line with Blenheim. The entire trip from Kaikoura to Blenheim should take a little under 2 hours non-stop but it’s worth getting out to stretch your legs at Lake Grassmere, a shallow lagoon that provides about half of New Zealand’s domestic salt requirements. The *salination ponds* turn coral pink in the late summer and if you’re around on a Tuesday or Friday at 1:30 PM, you can even take a guided tour of this oddly fascinating facility. Less than 40 minutes further down the road you’ll come to Blenheim, the heart of Marlborough.

**Leg 4 Highlights**

Whale Watching  
Swimming With Dolphins  
Snorkelling With Seals
There are far worse ways to end a journey. Blenheim lies at the heart of New Zealand’s most prestigious wine country, and Nelson is renowned for its sunny weather and laid back vibe. Winding down from an epic road trip has never been so satisfying.

If you’re beginning your trip in this area, find motorhome rental in Blenheim or Nelson.

**Blenheim**

Blenheim (and the Marlborough region in general) is blessed with some of best weather in the whole country - mild winters and hot, dry summers make this is a haven for holidaymakers and winemakers alike. This, in fact, is where New Zealand’s world famous **sauvignon blanc** comes from. If you want to find out what wine critics around the globe are making such a big fuss over, a tour around **Marlborough’s cellar doors** is in order. One particularly fun way to make your way around the vineyards is to take a **self-guided bike tour**, with transport from Blenheim and back provided. Just make sure you’ve allowed enough time in your schedule so you don’t have to do any driving afterward!

If you’d rather be exploring the great outdoors than relaxing with a vino in the shade, check out **Molesworth Tour Company**. Taking visitors on an epic journey in the remote highlands of Marlborough, their **4WD tours** provide a rare glimpse into the rugged backcountry and isolated rural communities of New Zealand.

It may be tempting to put down roots in Marlborough and never leave, but don’t forget that you still have the treasures of Nelson waiting for you.

If you drive straight from Blenheim to Nelson without stopping it will take you about 2 hours along State Highway 6, but we’d recommend stopping for a breathe of fresh air and a bite to eat in **Havelock**, about halfway between the two. This quaint little village on the Marlborough Sounds is well known for the succulence of its **green lipped mussels** and the high quality of the aptly-named **Mussel Pot** restaurant and cafe. Shellfish dishes are their specialty, obviously, but there’s a multitude of options available for those who aren’t so seafood savvy. Once you’ve filled your belly with delicious Havelock
cuisine, you'll be just one hour away from the place where your journey began.

Whether you choose to stay a while longer in Nelson, exploring aspects of the city that you missed the first time around, or turn in your campervan hire in Nelson and fly away from the South Island filled with fond memories, there's no chance that you'll come away from this round trip unaffected. Chances are, after you've had one taste of the glories of this rich New Zealand landscape you'll be inspired to return, time after time.

**Leg 5 Highlights**

- Blenheim Wine Tours
- 4WD Backcountry Trek
- The Mussel Pot