



PERSONAL PICK

The (Almost)* Total Lack of Scary Creatures in New Zealand
By *Stephanie Pearson*

Nearly a decade ago, I was offered a dream assignment explaining why New Zealand had become a heaven for adventure travelers. My Kiwi photographer (also dreamy) and I climbed craggy peaks, cannonballed into swimming holes, and paddled the Tasman Sea in kayaks, pursuing a rich diet of seafood and adrenaline. A week into the journey, while camping on South Island, I became aware of a strange, calming absence. What I was missing was fear. At that moment, it occurred to me that New Zealand is utterly devoid of bloodthirsty critters. No hungry bears or toothy cats. No man-eating crocodiles or venomous snakes. Not a single deadly insect. In other words, it's the complete opposite of neighboring Australia, where the cast of killers is so eclectic it includes a predatory snail with a harpoonlike tooth.

To check my facts, I recently e-mailed Herb Christophers, of New Zealand's Department of Conservation. "Here is your list of native deadly animals," he replied. "Nothing!" But Christophers did mention a few isolated incidents of death by sheep butting and forwarded a 2010 news story about a 22-year-old Canadian man who, while nude sunbathing at a North Island beach, was bitten on his privates by a katipo spider, an endangered, less venomous relative of the black widow. The guy's member did swell horribly, and he contracted myocarditis, but he lived.¹

It makes you wonder: is that famously fearless Kiwi spirit a product of ... boredom? Did New Zealanders turn their home into the thrill-seeking center of the universe² because, when there's nothing around to kill you, you crave risk? Was Sir Edmund Hillary—a beekeeper, perhaps the most dangerous career in New Zealand!—simply overcompensating?

Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, I can't wait to go back.³

*OK, there are great white sharks, but they seem to be of less menacing stock. New Zealand has had 13 documented fatal shark attacks in the past 170 years; Australia has had 15 since 2000.

1. Enjoy a North Island beach (with no katipos) at Wharekauhau Country Estate, an iconic Kiwi lodge with three new cottages on 5,500 acres overlooking Pälliser

Bay just northeast of Wellington. From \$531 per person; wharekauhau.co.nz

2. The highest bungee jump in the country is the 440-foot drop over the Nevis River, near Queenstown (\$212; bungy.co.nz). The longest continuous mountain-biking trail is along the 47-mile Queen Charlotte Track, on the South Island, with an elevation gain of 1,300 feet. Expect

a 13-hour ride (\$6 per night at one of seven Department of Conservation campsites; qctrack.co.nz).

3. Note to my editor: I'd especially like to check out the Southern Alps' Minaret Station, New Zealand's first luxury tented heli-lodge (think wall-to-wall sheep-skin). Suites, \$2,850 per night (minimum stay, two nights); minaretstation.com