THE GREAT NEW ZEALAND OE

Fran Hunia

A Specific Form of Travel Experience

Travel takes many forms, from a brief holiday to migration across the world. In between these two extremes lies the travel experience of living in a foreign country for a period of time as a student or an employee. This option enables the traveller a great deal more insight into another lifestyle and culture than the fast-dimming mental snapshot gained from a brief holiday.

Many Japanese universities offer their students opportunities to study abroad, either on a study tour of a few weeks, or for a longer period of time on student exchange. However, while some New Zealand secondary schools organise short study tours for their students, similar opportunities are not generally available to New Zealand university students. As a result, most young New Zealanders have to delay their travel plans until after they have graduated. This delay is one factor that has shaped the phenomenon known as The Great New Zealand Overseas Experience or, as it is more commonly known within New Zealand, The Great OE.

New Zealand Culture Far from Home

The Great OE has been part of life for young New Zealanders for many decades, and is showing no sign of disappearing. A brief search of the New Zealand pages of Google reveals 37,000 entries for The Great OE and 26,700 for The Big OE (an alternative name for the same experience). Information to be found on these sites includes practical details such as visa and passport requirements, a wide range of job offers, blogs about personal OE experiences, and an open invitation to a free information evening run by the British High Commission. At least one site reports on a recent doctoral thesis about The Great OE by Jude Wilson, who completed her
doctorate on the subject in 2006. Wilson makes the pertinent comment that, although The Great OE occurs overseas, it is nevertheless a distinctive New Zealand cultural practice (Tourism Lincoln: News and Views, 2008).

**Features of The Great OE**

Features that distinguish the great OE from other forms of travel include: the duration of the experience, work experience in the host country, the choice of destination (traditionally the United Kingdom, Ireland, and/or continental Europe).

The first two features of The Great OE may be due to economic considerations. Typically, the young New Zealander embarking on the Great OE has little money. Compounding this problem is New Zealand's physical distance from the rest of the world. This remoteness raises the cost of travel well above the level for fares between countries in closer proximity to each other. Rather than squander the heavy financial outlay on a brief holiday, therefore, those preparing for the Great OE look on the trip as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and plans accordingly. A typical timeframe for The Great OE is two years, which is also the length of time permitted by the British government for young New Zealanders in general to take up temporary employment in Britain.

Closely linked to the issue of expense is the second feature of the Great OE, work experience. Working in the host country is essential for basic survival over an extended period of time, as well as for providing funds to extend the OE to include travel to neighbouring countries, particularly continental Europe. Furthermore, working in the host country is regarded as part of the cultural experience, enabling those on OE to immerse themselves in the lifestyle of the host country, even if this includes unpleasant realities such as crowded and uncomfortable living conditions and, in some cases, insufficient income to meet more than the most basic living costs.

A likely explanation for the third feature, choice of destination, can perhaps be found in the ethnic composition of New Zealand's population. According
to the 2006 New Zealand census figures, only 14% of New Zealanders are of indigenous Māori descent. Ethnic Asians account for 8.8%, and 6.6% are of Pacific nations origin. Of the remainder, 68.6% are of European (predominantly British) descent (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.). A significant majority of New Zealanders, then, trace their recent ancestry to Britain or continental Europe. It seems likely, therefore, that the reason for the choice of the United Kingdom, Ireland and continental Europe as the OE destination for many generations of young New Zealanders is that they have been answering a call to their ethnic roots.

The Changing Face of The Great OE

Despite the challenges, the Great OE has been a rite of passage for many generations of New Zealanders, and will no doubt continue to be so for many more generations to come. There have, however, been changes over time. Until the mid 1970’s, for example, travel from New Zealand to Britain involved a month-long sea voyage, which in itself formed a significant part of the overseas experience. Concerts, dancing, deck games and other entertainment on board made the voyage an enjoyable and social experience. A special camaraderie developed among New Zealanders from different parts of the country, as well as between New Zealanders and Australians venturing off on their own OE. Friendships formed aboard ship often endured throughout the entire OE and beyond. Much has been lost now that the journey entails just 24 hours of tedious flight and little opportunity to meet fellow adventurers. This, however, does not stop expatriate New Zealanders and Australians from grouping together for mutual support and friendship on arrival at their destination.

Widening the OE Boundaries

There are indications of a more recent change to the Great OE in terms of destination. This may be explained in part by population demographics, as an increasing percentage of New Zealand immigrants now come from countries other than Europe. In the five years from 2001 to 2006, for example, census figures show the number of New Zealand residents defining themselves as European had dropped from 80% in 2001 to 64% in
New Zealand society is becoming increasingly diverse, with newer immigrants arriving from the Middle East, Africa, and South America as well as from the more traditional sources of Europe, Asia and the Pacific. Only time will tell if the descendants of these new New Zealanders will undertake a traditional OE in Britain and Europe, or choose to explore their own ethnic roots.

**Focus on Asia**

A second factor impacting on choice of destination is a general shift of interest among young New Zealanders, away from England and Europe and towards Asia. As trade, political and educational links between New Zealand and Asia strengthen, New Zealanders are looking to Asia with growing interest. Small, but increasing numbers of young New Zealanders are choosing to learn Asian languages, particularly Japanese. Many New Zealand secondary schools host groups of Japanese students on study tours, and some also visit Japanese high schools. Such visits create valuable opportunities for language and cultural exchange.

One effect of this growing interest is that New Zealand students are beginning to look to Asia, particularly Japan, as a destination for their OE. Programmes such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme, for example, have facilitated this shift. Since its inception in 1987, the JET programme has placed more than 2000 young New Zealanders in Japanese Junior and Senior High Schools as Assistant English Language Teachers for periods of from one to three years (Adapting to Difference, 2007). Other young New Zealanders make independent arrangements to teach in private language schools or for other large companies in Japan, while still others take up job opportunities in Korea, China and Thailand.

**Job Prospects on Return**

In New Zealand, OE returnees' employment prospects are excellent. Employers appreciate that international experience adds another dimension to the formal educational qualifications that job applicants bring. Most employers acknowledge the initiative, flexibility
and adaptability required to live in another country, and the personal qualities that develop as a result of the experience of interacting in different cultural situations. Indeed, understanding of the advantages is heightened in some cases, where the employers are themselves past participants of the Great OE.

A Bright Future for The Great OE

Future generations of New Zealanders are likely to continue the Great OE tradition, venturing overseas to work for relatively lengthy periods of time. They may, however, do so over a wider range of destinations than were readily available a few decades ago. Through educational initiatives such as the JET programme and student study tours, Japan has played a pivotal role in extending the boundaries of the Great New Zealand OE. The increasing numbers of New Zealanders choosing Japan as the base for their OE can only strengthen the existing friendship and cooperation between our two countries. (Language Consultant)

[References]