

IN SEARCH OF KIWI FRUIT



In the latest of his journeys to the world's great wine regions, sponsored by Mercedes-Benz, **Nick Tarayan** drives round New Zealand in an ML 500 Automatic

For most people the words 'ferry journey' conjure up the image of a fairly grim, bulky-looking vessel crossing a grey and dismal Channel, with little in the way of on-board entertainment or off-board views. However, following my recent trip to New Zealand, the words bring back altogether different memories for me. I now associate them with out-and-out pleasure and indescribable beauty.

The three-hour ferry journey across the Cook Strait and through Marlborough Sound from New Zealand's North to South Islands is nothing less than glorious. Sitting on deck allows one to breathe in some of the cleanest air on the planet, while gazing out at some of its most beautiful seascapes. With the sun shining on the unpolluted, azure water, one's eyes are literally stung by the silver and gold glinting. It's an incredible experience.

I was making this wonderful crossing en route to Blenheim, in the region known as Marlborough, in order to explore what has become home to some of the best Sauvignon grapes in the world.

In the early 1970s, this was where New Zealand's largest producer, Montana, decided to expand its grape-growing and winemaking operation, which had previously been based entirely in the North Island. It took the decision that the soil, abundant sunshine, long autumns and crisp, cool winters provided the ideal conditions for producing world-class wines. And it was not long before many others followed, including the now cult winery Cloudy Bay.

Marlborough is now the largest

grape-growing region in New Zealand, accounting for more than half the country's total production, and it still has plenty of room to grow. There are two main areas of production. Wairau Valley, where Cloudy Bay is situated, has a warm climate, nutritious soils and good irrigation, producing generous, full-fruited wines. The slightly cooler Awatere Valley has a mixture of fertile, silty soils and stony, less vigorous soils, to produce tighter, more mineral-tasting wines akin to those of the Loire valley.

While it is always a joy to wake up to cool, clean air and sunshine, during my visit the sight of the vineyards stretching away into the distant, early-morning mist hovering below the Richmond Ranges was sublime. It was the Cloudy Bay label come to life – even more so when I spotted Kevin Judd, chief winemaker of the company and creator of its legendary wines, riding out of the haze.

He had come to take me on a journey through some of the area's most feted wines, and we began with a tasting of his range on the terrace at the winery.

Pelorus is the sparkling wine produced there. The non-vintage showed generous fruit and weight in the mouth, balanced with cleansing acidity, while the 1999, with 60 per cent Pinot Noir in the blend, gave off ripe, strawberry aromas. The 2003 Sauvignon was clearly still very young (worth tucking away for a couple of years, if you can get hold of any), while the 2001 Te Koko was another delicious Sauvignon we tasted. This is slowly fermented in old oak barrels,

where it stays for almost 18 months, so it is ready to drink on release – preferably with food. A lovely, rounded Chardonnay, a soft-fruited, beautifully balanced Pinot Noir and a brilliantly lime-scented, late-harvest Riesling rounded off the morning's work.

After a light lunch of rabbit terrine, goats' cheese, salt cod, olives and smoked salmon – all fresh, locally sourced ingredients – we drove up along barely used tracks to survey the vast and stunning flood plain of the Wairau River.

The gravel roads and uneven terrain provided a great opportunity to try out the permanent four-wheel drive of my Mercedes M-Class. (The 5-litre V8 engine of the ML 500 would also later prove to be useful on the single carriageway roads, affording plenty of reserve power to allow safe overtaking.)

Next day, the sights became yet more sensational as we headed further south along the eastern coast towards our final destination of Central Otago and Queenstown. We passed the fabulous surfing beaches of Kaikoura, where you can see gigantic sperm whales all year round, migratory humpbacks in June and July, and Orcas between December and February.

Our schedule didn't give us time to stop and swim with the dolphins and seals but it did permit a fleeting taste of the fantastic Pinot Noirs at Pegasus Bay Winery in Waipara, about 30 minutes north of Christchurch.

The winery has a restaurant, which should not be missed, and it's an excellent spot to stop before heading inland on the back roads to

Lake Tekapo. Around every twist and turn is yet another breathtaking view, but nothing can prepare a visitor for the sight of the lake itself. At an altitude of 700 metres, the area is said to have the clearest air in the southern hemisphere and, on a good



MERCEDES-BENZ ML 500 AUTO

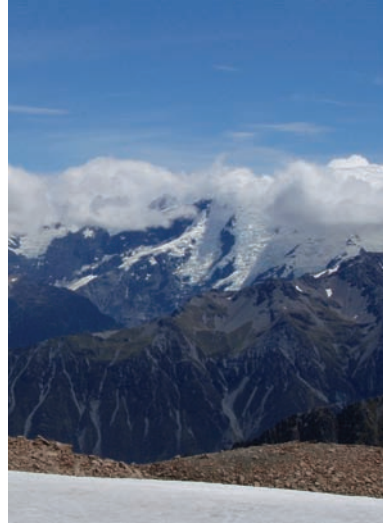
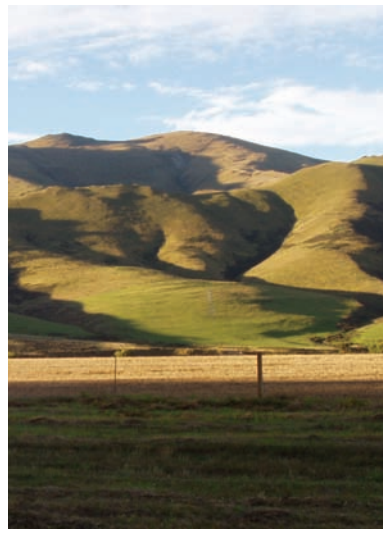
Nick Tarayan's verdict:

Wonderful high driving position, an absolute feeling of safety both on and off road, a burst of reserve power which came whenever it was needed, and a luxurious ride. What more could you want from a four-wheel drive?

Top Gear's Andy Wilman's verdict:

If the world stopped spinning, the ML 500, with its huge 5-litre V8, would probably have the wherewithal to get things turning again. The acceleration for such a huge chunk of metal is positively sports car, at 7.7 seconds for 0-62.5mph, and yet its clever traction control system makes it equally impressive off road. Interior space is good and the standard kit is generous, with climate control and electronic four-wheel drive as standard.

Price:	£44,730
Engine:	5-litre V8
BHP:	292
0-62.5 mph:	7.7seconds
Top Speed:	137mph



the soil,
 abundant sunshine,
 long autumns and
 crisp, cool winters
 provide the
ideal
 conditions for
 producing
world-class
 wines





day, the views of the lake and surrounding mountains are pin-sharp.

But it is the colour that is most remarkable. Microscopic rock particles, held in suspension in the glacial meltwater of the lake, reflect light from the sun and produce the most incredible, vibrant turquoise hue.

commercial release of a Pinot Noir from the region was only in 1987.

There are several distinctive areas within the region, all locked in deep valleys and surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Rain is light, summers are warm and the soils perfect for the production of top-quality Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Riesling.

Felton Road, a bright new wine-making star, is situated in Bannockburn, which is one of the warmest sites in the region. Since its inaugural vintage in 1997, wine-maker Blair Walter has created another New Zealand cult wine here and has overseen arguably the most complicated patchwork of planting outside Burgundy. So-called 'soil mapping' has divided the vineyards into 13 blocks, and 11 different Pinot Noir clones have been planted in densities ranging from 2,667 to 6,667 vines per hectare. It's all a far cry from 20 years ago, when the land was home to a few sheep, rabbits, briar and wild thyme.

The results, though, are clear to taste. These are opulent wines of a quality that even the very best producers in Burgundy would be proud. What's more, as stunning as the Pinots of Felton Road are, they are by no means alone in terms of quality. In fact, it isn't easy to find wines that do not come up to scratch in this region and, although quantity is low and prices are high, these bottles are well worth searching out.

Of all my Mercedes wine tours this trip was undeniably the most beautiful and dramatic – and the choice of car for this journey couldn't have been better. The high driving position of the ML 500, the absolute feeling of safety on and off road, the burst of reserve power that came whenever it was needed, and the luxurious ride all contributed to one of the most memorable drives of my life.

Add to that the wonderful space and surroundings of New Zealand, the sparkling cleanliness of it all and the charm of the people and it's simply imperative to open another delicious bottle to remind myself of it all. **SM**

THE GRAPES



SAUVIGNON BLANC

The relative warmth of New Zealand's climate tends to ensure ripeness in the Sauvignon grape, which means that there are less green, astringent flavours than when this grape variety is grown elsewhere. Predominant flavours and aromas include lemon, lime, grapefruit, nettles, herbs, peach, pear, melon, mineral, stony and floral. There is a marked distinction between Sauvignons from different parts of New Zealand. Those from Marlborough, Martinborough, Nelson and Canterbury tend to be light and crisp but, nonetheless, vibrant and punchy, while Hawke's Bay and Gisborne in the North Island produce riper, richer styles.

PINOT NOIR

The red grape of Burgundy is notoriously fickle and one that winemakers pride themselves on being able to tame. New Zealand and Oregon are generally regarded as being Burgundy's most capable competitors and there is no doubt that many of the wines from Wellington (Martinborough area) and the South Island are world-class. In Marlborough and Nelson, the style tends to be quite feminine – fresh and full of lighter red fruit flavours – while in Central Otago the wines take on a voluptuous character, with notes of black cherry. Pinot Noir from Marlborough is also used in the production of many of the excellent sparkling wines that can be found in New Zealand.

OTHER GRAPE VARIETIES

There are many other varieties that thrive in New Zealand's prospering vineyards. Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are normally, although not exclusively, restricted to the warmer climates of Hawke's Bay, while Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Riesling and Semillon, as well as the aromatic Gewürztraminer, all feature widely too.



Against the backdrop of the Southern Alps – featuring New Zealand's highest point, Mount Cook, and majestically crowned with snow all year round – this is a truly awe-inspiring sight.

After this highlight, our next stop was Central Otago, the southernmost grape-growing region in the world, located at a latitude of 45° south. Wine-growing began with experimental plantings at Rippon Vineyard in 1975 and the first

THE REGIONS AND THEIR STARS



There are 10 major wine regions in New Zealand. This is a brief run-down, with the main grape varieties and the names to look out for

Northland and Auckland

These two regions in the north west of the North Island cover a large area. The climate is warm and therefore suited to Chardonnay and red grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. Key makers are Matakana Estate (Semillon, Pinot Gris, Syrah), Kumeu River (Chardonnay, Merlot) and Villa Maria (a wide range of good-value wines).

Waikato/Bay of Plenty

Moderately warm climate producing small quantities of Chardonnay, Cabernet and Sauvignon. Morton Estate produces a wide range of wines, including award-winning Chardonnays.

Gisborne

The world's most easterly vineyards and the Chardonnay centre of New Zealand, at least half the vineyards are devoted to the variety. Milton Vineyard is a key producer, also known for Riesling and Chenin.

Hawke's Bay

More than a quarter of vineyard space here is devoted to Chardonnay but the region is famous for its reds, too, thanks to high temperatures and plenty of sunshine. Esk Valley, Kim Crawford, Redmetal, Sileni, Trinity Hill and Vidal are some of the top producers to look out for.

Martinborough

Martinborough has had huge success with Pinot Noir and, although small in terms of production, contributes hugely to high-quality wine production. The main producers are Craggy Range, Solstone (also Sauvignon), Te Kairanga (also Riesling), Palliser Estate (also Chardonnay), Voss, The Escarpment, Borthwick, Ata Rangi and Martinborough Vineyards.

Nelson

Partly sheltered by mountains, this area can get cool. Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are grown here. Greenhough Hope and Neudorf are two names worth looking out for.

Marlborough

This is Sauvignon central – more than half the land is planted with that grape. Excellent sparkling wines are made here in the traditional way. Cloudy Bay, Isabel Estate, Koura Bay, Seresin, Mud House, Blenheim Point, Herzog, Staete Landt, Charles Wiffen, Dashwood, Lake Chalice, Framlingham and Vavasour are just some of the names worth trying out.

Canterbury

Stretching down the eastern coast, this area enjoys long, dry summers, sunshine and cool growing conditions. Great for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir with Riesling and Sauvignon also showing well. Pegasus Bay and Geisen are two names worth seeking out.

Central Otago

This area is becoming more and more important, with great Pinot Noir and some excellent examples of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Riesling. Mount Maude, Mount Michael, Mount Difficulty, Felton Road, Rippon, Peregrine, Amisfield, Pisa Range, Chard Farm, Carrick, Two Paddocks and Sleeping Dogs are some of the best names from the region.

HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS

MARLBOROUGH AND THE SOUTH ISLAND

RESTAURANTS

The Mussel Boys

73 Main Road
Havelock
Tel: 00 64 3574 2824

A quirky restaurant specialising in Greenshell Mussels, one of the finest non-vinous exports of Marlborough.

Herzog Winery & Restaurant

81 Jeffries Road
Blenheim
Tel: 00 64 3572 8770

Memorable European-style eatery with exquisite antiques and one of the best cellars in the country.

Pegasus Bay Winery & Restaurant

Stockgrove Road
Waipara
Tel: 00 64 3314 6869

Wonderful lunches in a Provençal-style garden or a warm brasserie – after you've tasted fabulous wines in the adjoining tasting room.

HOTELS

The Charlotte Jane

110 Papanui Road
Christchurch
00 64 3355 1028

Former Victorian boarding school for girls that's now a boutique hotel with 12 suites and a conservatory restaurant.

CENTRAL OTAGO

RESTAURANTS

Ambrosia

76 Golf Course Road
Wanaka
Tel: 00 64 3443 1255

Great views over Wanaka. Rustic,

Tuscan-style building serving contemporary Pacific Rim cuisine.

Missy's Kitchen

80 Ardmore Street
Wanaka
Tel: 00 64 3443 5099

Excellent wine list and good modern food in an informal atmosphere near the lakeside.

Saffron

18 Buckingham Street
Arrowtown
Tel: 00 64 3442 0131

Innovative, brasserie-style spot serving excellent wine and food. Actor Sam Neill's favourite.

Carrick Winery & Restaurant

Cairnmuir Road
Bannockburn
Tel: 00 64 3445 3480

Architecture, food, wine and views combine for a perfect lunch spot. Make sure you try the fabulous Pinot Noir.

HOTELS

Minaret Lodge

34 Eely Point Road
Wanaka
Tel: 00 64 3443 1856

Luxury lodge featuring elegant decor and landscaped grounds, about 10 minutes from Wanaka centre.

Browns Boutique Hotel

26 Isle Street
Queenstown
Tel: 00 64 3441 2050

Small, relaxed, personally run hotel with 10 bedrooms, a few moments from town and with great views of the lake.

LONDON EATERIES WITH A GOOD SELECTION OF NEW ZEALAND WINES

Bleeding Heart Bleeding Heart Yard, Greville Street, EC1. Tel: 020 7242 2056

Harvey Nichols Fifth Floor 109-125 Knightsbridge, SW1. Tel: 020 7235 5250

The Providores 109 Marylebone High Street, W1. Tel: 020 7935 6175

The Sugar Club 21 Warwick Street, W1. Tel: 020 7437 7776

Suze in Mayfair 41 North Audley Street, W1. Tel: 020 7491 3237

Suze Wine Bar | Glentworth Street, NW1. Tel: 020 7486 8216