

by Nicole Bhathal

# South Pacific Holiday with Horses

## Orange County dressage rider hits the beach, forests and farmlands in New Zealand.

Touchdown, Melbourne Australia! My journey began at the world famous Flemington Racecourse for the Melbourne Cup, Australia's most celebrated day in horse racing, similar to the Kentucky Derby in the United States.

On this crisp spring day, ladies and gents were dressed to the nines. Many women wore their most interesting fascinators (hats) and colorful dresses. My Australian friend Trish and I had top tickets inside the Birdcage, where many marquees were set up for VIP guests. Champagne, wine and gourmet finger foods were served while we watched high fashion parades.

Unlike our Kentucky Derby, the Melbourne Cup race is open to horses of any age, so the same horse can win multiple times. This year, Michelle Payne won the race riding Prince of Penzance. This made her the first female to ever win the Cup in Australia's history!

After Cup day, I flew a short three hours to Auckland, New Zealand. Here I met up with my good friend Christina for a three day equine trekking tour through the North Island arranged by Equitours.

We stayed on a rustic 200 acre sheep farm overlooking the gorgeous ice blue waters of Kaipara Harbour. Here we met Ida, an adventurous rider from France who joined us for part of the trek. Each day our outfitters guided us across vast stretches of black sand beaches, through quiet pine forests and amid rolling farmland. Numerous herds of sheep and cattle dusted the landscape amongst beautiful springtime wild flowers. Lupines, with their brightly colored yellow petals, covered the fields shining as bright as gold. We no doubt had uncovered heaven on earth!

We saw wild red deer and a large variety of rare birds. At one time, there were only birds that inhabited New Zealand. My favorite were the wild peacocks abundant in the lush, green meadows. To this day there are no snakes or coyotes.

The outfitters rode along our sides, sharing historic stories of the Maoris, the original settlers, who were a

Polynesian people like the Hawaiians, who navigated thousands of miles in their open canoes to reach previously uninhabited New Zealand about 800 years ago. Much of their ancient heritage still thrives to enrich the culture of the islands. The English settlers did not begin to arrive until the early 19th Century. The country has developed a strong equestrian reputation and consistently produces some of the world's top three-day event riders and champion performance horses.

Although I actively compete in dressage and take leisurely trail rides about five days a week at home, I was not quite prepared for the long seven-hour treks each day. My body had never been so sore!

I was grateful for my steady and strong steed Max, a Clydesdale-cross who took good care of me through rough terrain. My fondest memory with Max was "sand surfing" down steep dunes to the beach. He must have known I closed my eyes a couple of times as he never stumbled once.

Each day our host family prepared authentic meals using fresh foods from their farm. We enjoyed resting for lunch at scenic stops along the trail. We felt fortunate to visit during spring when the sun was bright and temperatures were comfortable in the mid 60s to low 70s. Ideal for long gallops along the unspoiled coastline.

These treks are best suited for the experienced rider. Equitours can personalize the treks if shorter rides are preferred.

For more information, visit [Equitours.com](http://Equitours.com)

*Nicole Bhathal is the Southern Regional Director for the California Dressage Society and a USDF silver and bronze medalist. Having recently graduated with distinction from the USDFL Program, she plans to continue her education as a dressage judge. Nicole resides in Laguna Beach and is an active member of the Orange County equestrian community.*

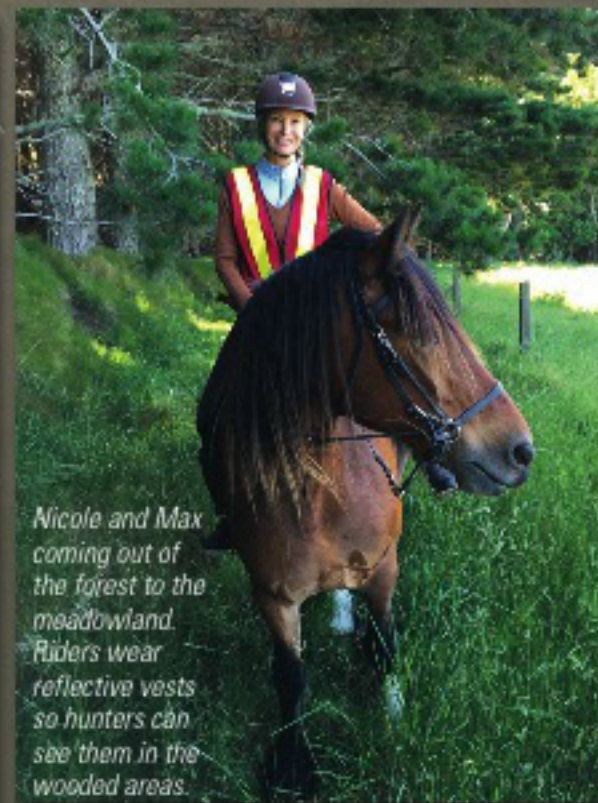
Nicole rides Monty along pristine black sands of the South Kaipara coastline.



Ubiquitous sheep graze in paradise.



Nicole and Trish Mangold sport their fascinators and spring dresses at Flemington Race Track for the Melbourne Cup.



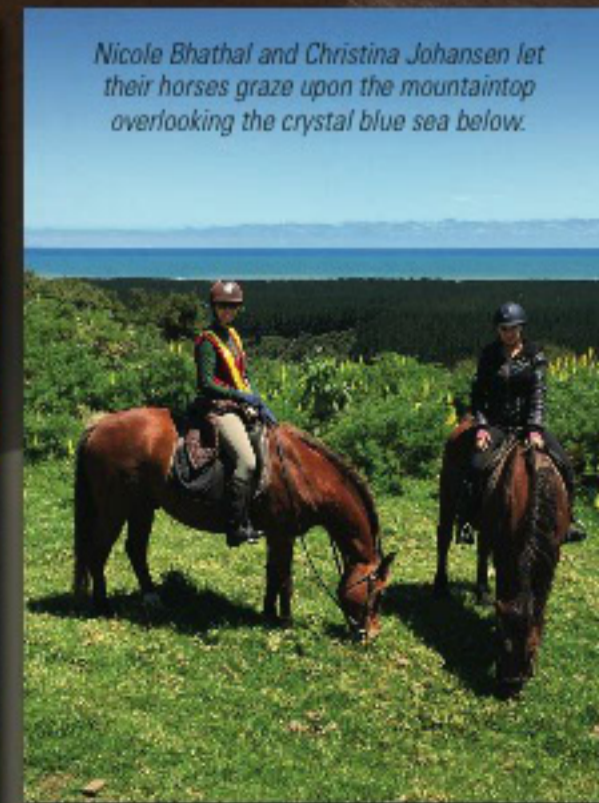
Nicole and Max coming out of the forest to the meadowland. Riders wear reflective vests so hunters can see them in the wooded areas.



View of Kaipara Harbour where Orcas come to feed on Stingrays.



Host family Bev and Rodrick enjoy a glass of wine after a long day's ride.



Nicole Bhathal and Christina Johansen let their horses graze upon the mountaintop overlooking the crystal blue sea below.



Christina Johansen enjoys hacking along the beaches of the north island.