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THE GREAT JEEP GLADIATOR EXPERIENCE

Travel presenter and adventurer **Tyson Mayr** takes the all-new **Jeep Gladiator** off-road and on the ultimate adventure on New Zealand's stunningly rugged South Island.



Jeep[®]

There is something special about being awake at 4.30am when you're on holiday, especially when you know adventure is about to follow.

It's day four of my six-day road trip around New Zealand's South Island and I'm at the base of the country's highest peak – Aoraki/Mount Cook – a location I've only ever dreamt of visiting.

Formed by tectonic activity over millions of years, the South Island is a true adventurer's paradise, with alpine peaks, lush rainforests, ancient glaciers and rugged terrain adorning every inch of this 150,437-square-kilometre masterpiece.

Officially called Te Wāipounamu ("the greenstone waters"), the South Island's name is a reference to the precious green-hued stone used by the Māori to make tools, ornaments and weapons. Despite being the larger of the two islands, it's home to about a fifth of the country's human population – and, having shared the dirt roads with mainly sheep and cattle, I believe it!

When I land in Queenstown, in the island's south-west, I make a beeline for Yonder, a quaint local establishment brewing arguably the best beans in NZ. Gary, the cafe's manager, asks what brings me to the self-proclaimed adventure capital of the world, but before I answer, he's already glanced over my shoulder and spotted my ride parked outside: the all-new Jeep Gladiator.

And how could he not? The Jeep Gladiator defies convention and really sets the bar when it comes to off-roading. It's without a doubt one of the most capable vehicles when it comes to four-wheel driving, it's comfortable on the road and it has the iconic good looks and seven-slot grill that Jeep is renowned for.

As Gary and I chat about the fact I don't have a set plan for my trip, we both watch on as water inundates Queenstown. This unrelenting torrential rain has blocked the main arteries for more than a week.

Undeterred by this challenge presented by the weather gods, I jump into the truck – equipped with a list of places to start my journey – and hit the dirt roads out of town in search of untamed excitement. First stop: the Mavora Lakes.

THE ROUTE



DAY 1

● Mavora Lakes

Fringed by forest and grassland, and overlooking the Thomson and Livingstone mountain ranges, the Mavora Lakes are part of the stunning UNESCO World Heritage-listed Te Wāhipounamu area.

Buoyed by the prospect of plenty of water crossings, I find myself on an unsealed road in the Jeep, with sheep farms on either side and no other vehicles as far as the eye can see. Lakes sparkle as I continue down the track, flanked by seemingly symmetrical mountain ranges.

Within seconds of arriving at the Mavora Lakes entrance, I know that my shiny new Jeep will not be clean for long. I have 12 kilometres of bumpy gravel roads ahead of me and the rig is now well under almost two feet of water. I'm elated to discover just how easy a task this is for the Gladiator as I comfortably arrive at a camp site I will share with only the trees, the birds and the whispers of the mountains.



● Lake Wanaka

DAY 2

● Milford Sound

Heading to the West Coast via unmarked roads, I arrive at Fiordland National Park, one of the country's great wilderness areas. Hailed as a World Heritage site, this green space covers more than 1.2 million hectares, making it one of the largest national parks on the planet. And yet the region is still so unexplored that some wildlife species, previously thought to be extinct, have been found thriving in the park's ancient forest.

A few locals tell me it's possible to kayak the famous Milford Sound, if I have the right vehicle to transport watercraft. With paddle in hand and kayak loaded into the trayback, I now have my next adventure!

Surrounded by a spectacular natural landscape carved by glaciers during the ice ages, it's no surprise that Milford Sound was nicknamed the "eighth wonder of the world" by Rudyard Kipling. From my kayak, I'm mesmerised by the flooded river valley that stretches 16 kilometres from the head of the fjord to the open sea. The mighty Mitre Peak rises above the fjord's impenetrable

indigo waters, the Stirling and Bowen waterfalls plummet down vertiginous rock faces (some as high as 1200 metres) and the rainforests thrive in a place almost untouched by modern human development.

I've reached Eden. This ocean inlet lying in front of me – no bigger than a bay but bathed in an ethereal atmosphere – is the most beautiful place on Earth.

DAY 3

● Lake Wanaka

As evening draws near, it's time to head to Wanaka, the next stop in my NZ adventure. Greeted by skies illuminated by stellar constellations, I'm surrounded by wilderness and there's not a person in sight.

I spend the night in an Airbnb overlooking Lake Wanaka. It's a dome tent with a clear roof, perched on the side of a steep hill – a stargazer's dream come true.

Against the backdrop of mountains, lakes and a smattering of valley towns, you'd be forgiven for thinking you're back in Queenstown. But there are two differences: the lack of boisterous crowds and, more impressively, the sight of Mount Cook straddling the horizon.

An early-morning run reveals the snow-capped sierra, lush green vegetation and pure blue water of the Clutha River. With every mile covered, the Southern Alps' imposing Mount Cook becomes more and more inviting. It's these mountain adventures that beckon most.

● Aoraki/Mount Cook

● Tyson Mayr

● Lake Pukaki





● Lake Pukaki

DAY 4

● Aoraki/ Mount Cook

Encompassing 19 peaks over 3000 metres high, Aoraki/Mount Cook is surprisingly accessible. Mountaineers regard it as the best climbing region in Australasia – it’s said that scaling Mount Cook helped Sir Edmund Hillary develop his climbing skills in preparation for the conquest of Everest – but even less-skilled adventurers find satisfaction with the alpine walks, passing tarns and herb fields with incredible glacier views.

The 2.5-hour drive from Wanaka to Mount Cook turned into a five-hour trip, with breathtaking detours, four-wheel-drive action and stops for photos. It’s possibly the most scenic route I’ve ever travelled. I could spend a week here and still not have enough time to do everything. But, for now, I have only one day left so, after a brisk 4.30am hike and coffee, it’s time to keep moving.

DAY 5

● Banks Peninsula

Fact: no matter where you are in NZ, you’ll never be more than 128 kilometres from the sea. With that in mind, I make my way towards the Banks Peninsula, a stretch of the east coast known for its treacherous surf breaks and wildlife, about 90 minutes south of Christchurch. Following the call of the ocean along narrow dirt roads lined with cliffs on either side, just getting to the beach is half the fun. And compared to where I’ve come from, I can’t believe the contrast before me: a warm sun, blue skies and seals playing among the surfers and swimmers.

With only a day here before returning to Queenstown, I find a mountain bike in the shed at my Airbnb, strap it into the back of the Jeep and set off for the highest peak I can find. It’s time to work up a sweat before taking a plunge in the cool Pacific Ocean.

DAY 6

● Lake Pukaki

The last day of any adventure is usually filled with a little despair – the trip is coming to an end. But I still have 24 hours to reach my destination and even though some of the roads have been washed away or covered by landslides, I plan on making every minute count.

After cutting across the alluring green Canterbury Plains towards Queenstown, I reach the wild heart of the Mackenzie Basin, an iconic expanse of glacier-fed alpine lakes and golden tussock stretched beneath an endless veil of pollution-free sky.

A shimmering blue jewel set into a grand montane playground, Lake Pukaki holds some of the bluest water I’ve ever seen. The sparkle is caused by sunlight hitting extremely fine rock deposits, known as glacial flour, sending brilliant turquoise and blue hues into the atmosphere.

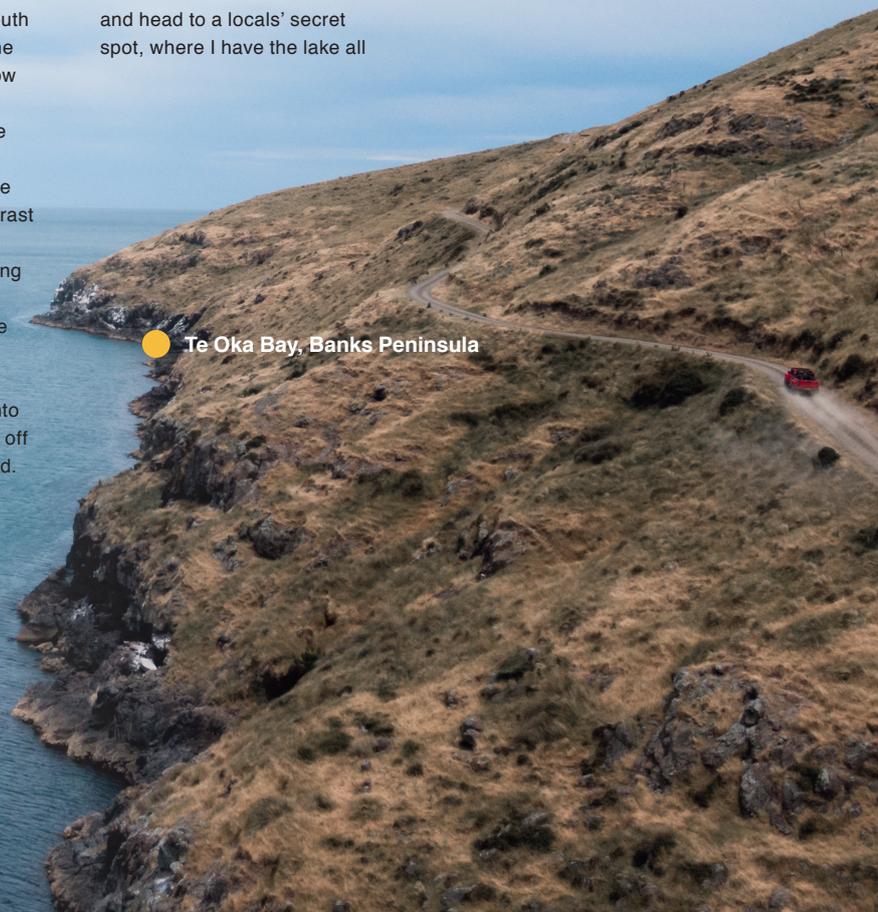
Embarking on one last activity to close out my trip, I hire a stand-up paddleboard, chuck it in the back of the Gladiator and head to a locals’ secret spot, where I have the lake all

“I hire a stand-up paddleboard, chuck it in the back of the Gladiator and head to a locals’ secret spot. I have the lake all to myself.”

to myself. I paddle out to explore the coves and beaches hidden away from the traditional tourist trail and arrive back just in time to watch a magical sunset over the lake. As I pack my Gladiator ready for the journey home, I realise I couldn’t have asked for a better way to finish my trip.

The South Island of NZ is undoubtedly one of the most scenic and diverse places I’ve ever visited. Having travelled to nearly 100 countries, I am yet to discover a destination that offers such a thrilling sense of adventure with unmatched serenity.

If you have the right gear and the right attitude, this is a part of the world that is ready to be discovered, rewarding intrepid explorers who are brave enough to venture into the unknown.



● Te Oka Bay, Banks Peninsula

The all-new Jeep Gladiator will be available in Australia from mid-2020.

