

Awesome Antarctica - February 2009

Some background material:

Many of you will be surprised that we chose to take this trip, knowing of our reluctance to sully the pristine wilderness of this exquisite 'White Continent'. We still feel strongly that Man should make as little impact upon it as possible and whilst supporting the scientific research carried out there, do not feel that it should become a place of tourism with all the development and environmental impact that would impose. How, then, did we justify taking this cruise?

- We chose one which did not allow passengers or crew to land anywhere in Antarctica
- We chose a large ship (109,000 tons with 2,600 passengers and 1,500 crew, the largest we've ever sailed on) as it is less polluting than the number of small ships required to carry the same number of passengers
- The ship we sailed in was adapted to take the special, non-polluting, low sulphur fuel which would enable her to sail the waters without putting any noxious fumes or substances into the air or ocean. Most of the older, smaller ships do not have engines which lend themselves to this precaution
- Princess Cruises are committed to environmental sustainability and carry a dedicated Environmental Officer on every voyage they make, everywhere in the world
- The precautions taken by Princess on this voyage went to the extreme – to the extent of forbidding any activity on the open decks apart from photography, lest anything accidentally went overboard into the ocean.
- The prevention of any environmental impact even included noise and no music or broadcasts were allowed, thus maintaining the almost ethereal silence. This was to avoid the risk of alarming any sea creatures or birds which might be in the vicinity. Also, the vibrations from any extraneous noise might set off a disturbance in the ice and snow.
- It goes without saying that all waste matter stored on board and only disposed of in the approved manner at proper disposal stations once we had docked at Ushuaia

Of course, it would be naïve to assume that our visit will have had no impact of the area at all and indeed, there is now talk of forbidding all cruises to the area from next summer. We can only hope that in taking the particular trip we chose we did not cause any damage to the places we saw; we are confident that the only way to have had less impact would have been to stay away altogether and we will never be totally sure if we were right to go. We were interested to learn that, in all its history, only about 300,000 people have ever visited the Antarctic and of those, only 50,000 have ever set foot upon it. We do, therefore, feel immensely privileged to have had this experience and will never forget the wonders we saw.

12th February

We caught the LAN Chile flight from Auckland to Santiago – very comfortable as we got upgraded. This is the second flight we have taken with them where this has happened; we like LAN Chile! After a couple of hours wait in a surprisingly interesting airport (lots of shops and cafes), we transferred onto the 1 ½ hr flight to **Buenos Aires, Argentina** and enjoyed

spectacular views as we flew low, very low, over the Andes ... a never to be forgotten experience.

A quick and easy transfer by taxi got us to Hotel Ibis in Congreso Square less than an hour after touch-down. The hotel is in a good position but was very basic with no flannels, tea or coffee and only one thin towel each – not at all typical of Accor hotels. Dinner at the hotel was good and reasonably priced.

Bed at 10.30pm but our bodies told us it was later due to the time/date change and long day's travel.

February 13th

We got up early for good breakfast and half day city tour. This gave us a good overview of **Buenos Aires** but it was just as well we weren't in a hurry as the three hour tour took five, due to traffic and numerous hotel pick ups. We didn't mind as it was interesting to see some streets and areas we would otherwise not have seen.

After the tour we were dropped off in town. We took a walk through the shops but didn't see anything tempting but had afternoon tea at Café Tortoni. This is a very famous old tea rooms featuring fantastic stained glass and other ornate Art Nouveau décor. We indulged in a delightfully decadent chocolate cake. A local speciality made with rich, dark chocolate and a type of caramel called *dulce de leche*. We also ordered a strawberry cheesecake but it was very disappointing. Moral: stick to the local specialities! Also, check the size of portions before ordering ... the cheesecake was definitely surplus to requirements!



Stained glass and Art Nouveau décor

That evening we took the Subte (subway) back into town and the El Estado restaurant. On advice from one of the websites we only ordered half portions of fillet steak and sirloin steak with chips and salad. We were served the equivalent of half a Sunday joint each and a mountain of fries left no room for pudding. Complimentary sherry before and limoncello (nasty sweet sticky stuff – yuk!) after the meal, plus a good Argentinean merlot, together with a bottomless bread basket completed the excellent and memorable meal. We did not want to use the subway late at night so got a taxi back to the hotel.

February 14th

Went for Walk in Congreso Square but got targeted by muggers. This was the only unpleasant experience of the trip and deserves a full description if only as an “Awful Warning” to others:

A diversion is caused and someone comes up to one all solicitous and anxious to clean the bird dropping they say has landed on ones person. What has actually happened is an accomplice has squirted some noxious-smelling goo over ones back and the mopper-up manages to empty bags and pockets whilst ‘helping’ clean one up. Luckily, we had heard of this scam and so rejected the offer of help (the ‘kind’ lady just happened to have a loo roll in her bag – how convenient!) and departed rapidly back to the hotel to clean up and change. Martin glanced back as we were leaving the square and saw the lady and her accomplice hurrying off, no doubt after a more gullible tourist. The square was crowded with both tourists and locals and one of the most worrying aspects was that although many people must have seen what happened, no one did anything about it. Apparently it is quite normal – but it did put us off Buenos Aires and having now seen the city, we have no desire to return.

We decided not to try and explore Congreso Square again but to go into town and look for a camera, as I had dropped mine the night before and it no longer functions...good timing, eh? They were all too expensive, imported ‘luxury’ items and electronics being very heavily taxed. Although one shop advertised itself as offering tax free shopping for foreigners, no-one spoke English and nor did they seem to know how to go about the tax refund procedure, so we did not pursue it. We consoled ourselves with coffee at another historic old tea rooms – a very civilised antidote to our horrid experience earlier in the day. Then it was time to check out of the hotel and get a taxi to the quay.

We boarded the magnificent *Star Princess* after the usual formalities and found our cabin to be very spacious and comfortable. We discovered that the Captain, Edward Perrin, was one with whom we have previously sailed, on the *Tahitian Princess*.



The magnificent ‘Star Princess’ at Punta Arenas

An interesting discovery was that, because of the possible perils of the voyage we were to undertake, maritime law required that we sailed under two captains as well as an Ice Pilot.

The Ice Pilot, especially, was a very interesting and experienced chap, who gave an excellent and informative talk about his experiences navigating through pack ice of various sorts, from the North pole to the South (well, almost that far!). He has a fascination with ice but cannot resist breaking it up whenever he sees it which, he says, can cause embarrassment when handed a gin and tonic ... Hmmm – well, we laughed at the time!

Anytime Dining is available on this ship, which we like, rather than the set mealtime, as so often one seemed to be required to go in to dinner just as something interesting was happening outside. It also means that one meets many more fellow passengers than on the fixed seating plan – though one can always arrange to sit with new friends on request, so it's the best of both worlds.

We set sail at about 5, along the **River Plate** en route to Montevideo, Uruguay.

February 15th

Montevideo, Uruguay. Took a long walk round this archetypical South American city and saw the various places of importance as well as lots of very attractive 'ordinary' buildings. The Market Hall was interesting as rather than conventional stalls, it was filled with restaurants with lit, open wood fires and meat set out ready to barbeque, in the manner common to Argentina, Uruguay and Chile.

The Graf Spee monument is much vaunted and we were interested to see it, however it is actually very tatty and we had almost passed it before we realised what it was ... it looked like a scrap yard! As it was Sunday, there was very little open but we did happen upon a ceramics studio and gallery with some very interesting exhibits including some very striking jewellery; Sallie and I benefited to the tune of a necklace each!

We set sail for the Falkland Islands at around 5.00pm.

February 16th

At sea. We greatly enjoyed an interesting lecture on Port Stanley and Ushuaia, the Brazilian lecturer being very talented and witty. We also attended a good lecture about Antarctic wildlife. The English lecturer, Christian Gunn, an authority in his subject and author of a book about Shackleton, had a less fluent delivery but an excellent, dry sense of humour which made up for it. This standard of information and scholarship continued throughout the cruise and added enormously to our knowledge and enjoyment of all we were to see and experience.

An unusually funny Irish comedian entertained in the evening after the first formal dinner of the cruise; we do enjoy getting out the glad rags and dressing up for formal nights.

February 17th

At sea. Christian gave another natural history lecture, specifically about the geography and wildlife of the Falkland Islands, which was extremely interesting and informative. We were still enjoying fantastic weather but there was definitely a bit more 'motion in the ocean' this day.

February 18th

We moored in the Port William anchorage, on an inlet in front of **Port Stanley, Falkland Islands** at 7.30am. It was a beautiful warm (16°C!), sunny day – not at all what we expected. We were warned that it can change in minutes so took coats, gloves, hats, scarves and raincoats ashore for our excursion but needed none of them – shouldn't complain! A very interesting trip by bus took us through the barren landscape, much of it sadly inaccessible because of landmines left by the Argentinians during the 1982 conflict. We then transferred to Land Rovers for very bumpy drive across peat bogs to Bluff Cove penguin colony. There we encountered thousands of Gentoo penguins, many just fledged but not yet able to swim so they were just loitering or playing and fighting with each other while waiting for mum and dad to return with food... just like human adolescents, really! Some babies still hadn't all their feathers and they looked very scruffy with shaggy fur still attached. We were also lucky to see three or four pairs of King penguins, lots of enormous geese and even some dolphins; this is a magical place.



King penguins



Yes, we really did get this close to the Gentoo penguins!

A surprise awaited us at the far end of the beach, in the form of a tiny café, where the very friendly local ladies provided complimentary hot drinks and home made cakes and scones with jam made from a local berry the delightful name of Diddle-Dee. The guides, all Falkland Islanders, born and bred, were very informative about the islands and the 1982 conflict with Argentina and it was quite moving to see and hear of the experiences of the local people's war at first hand. Children stay till 16 then either leave school or get sent to Winchester College in England, at government expense, to complete their education. It is good to know they are not forgotten and that their education is considered so important; most youngsters return to the islands after completing their education and gaining work and life experience in the UK or other countries; there is much optimism for the future, especially as they are enjoying a steady influx of immigrants from Chile, St Helena and other unlikely places... We have to confess to being curious as to the living conditions in those places which make the Falklands a more attractive home, small, bleak and remote as they are.

Stanley is very well kept and obviously prosperous former whaling town, which reminded us a bit of Mangonui. Martin thoroughly enjoyed a pint of 'warm', English bitter in the pub – a taste he has had to forgo in this land of cold, yellow, fizz masquerading as beer! We found a shop selling locally produced gifts and bought fluffy penguin for Charlie, a penguin activity book for Toby and a penguin theme ice jacket wine cooler for Paul. We like penguins! Bad joke alert:

Q: Why does the ship not have a Formal Night when they're at Stanley or in the Antarctic?

A: Because it confuses the penguins. Groan!

February 19th

At sea. En route to the real Antarctic at last! We saw a couple of orcas spouting and cavorting plus lots of penguins 'porpoising'* through the water. We crossed the Drake Passage, reputedly the roughest piece of ocean in the world, but it was very well behaved apart from a gentle swell, which just kept things interesting.

* Porpoising is the term used for penguins' style of swimming. They look exactly like porpoises, or small dolphins, as they torpedo through the water, leaping gracefully out of the sea in the long, arching jumps we associate with those creatures. It is a constant surprise that such ungainly creatures on land become so swift and agile in the water.

February 20th

Awoke to see **Elephant Island**, one of the South Shetland Islands and so named because of the resident elephant seals (and, co-incidentally, it's shape which was discovered to resemble the head of an elephant once mapping was completed). We had formally passed into **Antarctic Treaty Waters** at around 3am, when we crossed Latitude 60⁰S: their northernmost extent. Fabulous ice fields appeared as we sailed round the south-western part of the island, as well as rocky peaks and the **Endeavour Glacier** – four miles wide and really stupendous, with high cliffs and ancient blue ice (the bluer the ice the older it is – this is tens of thousands of years old). There is a very striking change of colour in the sea from deep blue to pale turquoise, almost in a straight line along the width of the glacier, about a kilometre out from its face. We were anchored off a distance of about 1500m, though such is the clarity of the air that it felt like just a tenth of that.



The bluer the ice the older it is

This is the island where Shackleton was stranded in 1915 for 135 days. We cruised for a couple of hours while we watched seal, penguins (Chinstraps and very fast) and even a couple of minke whales.

At approximately 5pm the first floating ice was spotted – an exciting moment, indeed! In the evening we saw two or three very large icebergs in the distance – quite awesome and but a taste of things to come.

February 21st

We crossed **Bransfield Strait** and entered **Antarctic Sound**, reaching the Argentinean scientific research station at **Esperanza** (Hope, in English) in the early morning. The station consists of a cluster of red huts and quad bikes. This is one of the few permanent stations which allow families and it even has a school. The first (and so far only) Antarctic citizen born here. We encountered fabulous ice cliffs and glaciers and there were icebergs everywhere, together with lots of penguins and petrels. After an hour or so at anchor, enjoying the scenery, we cruised to **Admiralty Bay** and the Polish ice station, Arctowski Station (yellow buildings here – I tried to find out if there was a colour code but no one knew) where we picked up some scientists who were hitching a lift to Ushuaia. We saw yet more amazing icebergs – especially some large tabular ones. Lesson in ice terminology coming up:

- Iceberg- Any floating lump of ice bigger than a house, some even as big as a city block, which may be craggy or mountainous with irregular hills and crevices, or sometimes gently rounded. They are often Tabular Bergs (q.v.) which have turned over due to the work of the wind and sea.
- Tabular berg – as above but with a flat top. They are as they were when they broke off the glacier, before the wind and sea flipped them over
- Bergy Bits (yes, really, that is the proper term) – Icebergs which are smaller than a house but bigger than a car
- Growlers – Icebergs which are about the size of a car or less.
- Ice floes or brash – Little chunks of iceberg, or ‘chips off the old block’ which are no longer big enough to compare with anything useful.



Tabular Berg - A small one about 6 times the size of our house



Iceberg



Bergy Bit with Growlers and Floes

NB: Obviously, these pictures are not to scale!

We saw lots more penguins and some whales (at a distance).

February 22nd

This was a particularly momentous day as we reached the southernmost latitude to which large ships are permitted to sail – 65°S. Beyond this point, the ship loses its certification, the Captain his ‘stripes’ and, perhaps most worryingly, all insurance policies are null and void! We marvelled as we enjoyed another day of fantastic ice – a simply enormous iceberg sailed past while we had breakfast. We went through the **Gerlache Strait** to **Anvers Island** and the Antarctic mainland, at the tip of the **Antarctic Peninsula**. The day was spent cruising the area and particularly the **Neumayer Channel**, where we saw the monumental ice cliffs of the **Neumayer Glacier** and lots of bergy bits as well as several big tabular bergs. We encountered a tiny, red, yacht (well, probably not that tiny as yachts go - there were eight people living on board, but in those seas ...) which was dwarfed by the cliffs. We couldn’t help wondering at the courage (?) or stupidity (?) but definitely the fortitude, of those eight men who had ventured so far into such a hostile environment in such a flimsy craft –we were to think of them with even more concern later ... Meanwhile, they made us appreciate the warmth of our heated cabins and lounges as we watched them sail past, huddled in a multitude of layers so they all looked like Michelin Men.

We passed the old research station at **Port Lockroy** which is now a museum for the expeditions which land (two huts!) and also glimpsed **Palmer Station**, one of those belonging to the USA. We encountered some more disobliging whales who were spotted by their spouts only (no iconic swishing tails, or flukes, sadly), a seal and lots of penguins, which enjoyed porpoising through the water, keeping pace with and even overtaking the ship.

We were due to head for **Deception Island** but at 5pm Captain announced a very severe storm was heading our way (which would have resulted in 12/14 metre waves – no thanks!) so the decision was made to miss that and head straight for Ushuaia – hopefully 20 hrs ahead of the storm. Whilst it was disappointing to miss a day of the ice, it would have been a question of ‘more of the same’ and we appreciated the captain’s decision to put safety first. We did wonder how our yachting friends would fare and hoped that they would find shelter to ride out the storm.



We encountered a tiny, red yacht

February 23rd

A very uncomfortable day **at sea** – 3 to 4 metre swells and waves although bright and sunny. This made us doubly grateful that we would not be experiencing the 3 or 4 times greater seas which had been threatened.

There was an excellent presentation by scientists of the Polish research station who discussed the work they were doing and also how the research is shared between the various countries which are members of the Antarctic Treaty so that there isn't a duplication of effort and all knowledge is disseminated with the minimum of 'red tape' or delay. There was also an interesting lecture giving an overview of what we've seen of the Antarctic, putting the route etc. into perspective.

During the course of the afternoon, the Captain announced that we were still ahead of the storm but as a precaution we were running for Lennox Island rather than straight to Cape Horn. We would shelter in the lee of the island overnight and take on the pilot early next morning to track back so we can hopefully round the Horn. No promises were made and there was still a good chance we might not be able to do it – depending on the big storm still coming up fast from the SW.



An uncomfortable day at sea – taken from Deck 15!

February 24th

We had a good night as we made it safely to **Lennox Island** and dropped anchor in the lee. The pilot came on board early this morning and so we made for **Cape Horn**. The sea state was not too bad considering our location so we got to the Cape safely and did a complete circumnavigation of the **Island of Horn (Horn)**, crossing the rough patch where the Atlantic and Pacific oceans meet. It was a little misty and there was intermittent drizzle but this merely added to the atmosphere as we experienced this, historically, most famous and treacherous of sea voyages; it would have just not been the same had it been calm and bright and sunny!



Mist and drizzled added to the atmosphere

After 'Rounding the Horn', we went full speed for the calmer waters between the Cape and the **Beagle Channel**, arriving off **Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina**, at 7.30pm but were unable to berth as another ship was stuck in our space because strong winds prevented her casting off. We finally docked about 11pm but that was too late for us to go ashore. Most of the younger members of the crew did, however, and reportedly had a good time till the nightclubs and bars closed 4am!

February 25th

We woke to a gloriously sunny day and remarkably cheerful restaurant stewards at breakfast, considering most of them had enjoyed less than an hour's sleep after their revels in Ushuaia last night! We met up with some ship-board friends at 10am and took taxi up to the chair lift at the Martial Glacier. Fantastic views, only to be seen from the chairlift, took Sarah's mind off the mode of transport – Martin had neglected to tell her in advance as he knew she would not be very keen to entrust her life to such a flimsy contraption!



Such a flimsy contraption

The scenery was quite breathtaking but the cold wind more so and we were glad of the hot chocolate and coffee to be had at the café by the chairlift base station. We walked round the town and used up the last of our Argentine currency buying a compass for Toby and a penguin and chick puzzle, made of a variety of different coloured woods from Patagonia, for the boys to share (Toby can show Charlie how to do it when he's older)

In the evening we sailed the Beagle Channel enjoying a twilit view of the glaciers we had first seen in November 2007 (*see our previous Travelogue, 'A bit chilly in Chile'*); Italia is still the most spectacular; an ice river running right down to the sea. It was very interesting to see how

little snow there is in February compared to November ... and to think it will all be back again in just a month or two.



An ice river running down into the sea

February 26th

Although due in to **Punta Arenas, Chile**, at 7am, we were still en route, through the **Straits of Magellan**, at 8.30am – it was very rough last night and we were also an hour late leaving Ushuaia due to high winds, so this probably accounted for the delay. We finally arrived about 9am on another beautiful sunny day. We walked into town and had a look around – not any more exciting than last time! Punta Arenas was a major trading port until the advent of the Panama Canal cut off most of its wealth, which had been largely in the hands of two families, called Braun and Menendez. In order to consolidate the wealth, Sara Braun married the scion of the Menendez family. Upon the death of her husband, Sara Braun took over the business with a (male) secretary and between them they built several grand houses. We visited to one of them, which is now a gentlemen’s club, and saw the fantastic décor and furnishings, all brought from Europe around 1830. Even more fascinating was the series of watercolours depicting Shackleton’s expedition and 1915 stranding on Elephant Island. He actually came to this house seeking assistance after his rescue from the island and one picture showed him climbing the very stairs we had just climbed; it gave us a great sense of history.

We had very good coffee and biscuits in the lounge, then wandered back to the ship for a lazy afternoon.

February 27th

At sea. Quite rough and no sign of land! Are we going into the fjords, as planned, or not? No one seems to know! At noon we finally turned into the **Chilean Fjords** and enjoyed scenic cruising for the rest of the day, in spite of misty, drizzly weather. Unfortunately we did not visit the **Amalie Glacier** as we had hoped, having enjoyed the visit on our '07 trip. Apparently this would only have been on the schedule if we hadn’t been able to see the Antarctic glaciers, as it takes a while to divert. Also, more very heavy seas were forecast so we couldn’t spare the time if we were to stay ahead of the bad conditions. There was some drama at lunchtime when the Captain appealed for an O negative blood donor to go to help a medical emergency.

February 28th

At sea with nothing to see. We went to an amusing culinary demonstration given by the Executive Chef and Maitre d'Hotel. They prepared pasta, shrimps and tiramisu ... very easy to follow recipes and I must try them at home. Another formal night tonight, which we always enjoy – though why is it so often rough on Formal Night, just when the richest food is served? Luckily we don't suffer from seasickness!

March 1st

Still at sea but with coast of Chile visible. It was day of packing and farewells today, sadly, but we heard some good news: The medical emergency was recovering well; lots of people had volunteered blood and the Captain issued a statement of thanks.

March 2nd

We arrived at **Valparaiso** in the early morning and disembarked at 10.30am. We met up with another couple wanting a taxi into **Santiago** (2 hours drive away) and agreed to share with them. The Four Points Sheraton Hotel was very comfortable with all amenities. We booked a day tour of the Maipo Valley and a winery for next day with Alunsa Tours situated in hotel lobby – very convenient. We enjoyed an excellent sandwich lunch before going up the San Cristobal Mountain (we got there via subway, having eventually worked out which slot to use for our one-way tickets!). There was a long queue for the funicular railway to the top as the place was inundated with Princess Cruise tour groups (doing it ourselves cost us a total of about US\$4 – they'd paid US\$150-odd, though they did get a city tour thrown in ... but even so!). It was well worth the wait and we had enjoyable hour on top (including yummy mango ice creams). We walked from our hotel to the excellent Restaurant Liguria for dinner and had another huge steak (even bigger than those in Buenos Aires) plus excellent wine (Chocolan's Carmenera), then staggered back to the hotel and slept well.

March 3rd

We tried the hotel restaurant for breakfast but only a huge buffet was available which we certainly didn't want after our superb steak-dinner, so we crossed road to small café and had the ubiquitous ham and cheese toasted sandwich and coffee – excellent. Although it was 8 o'clock in the morning, the waitress wore an extremely abbreviated cocktail tube (hardly a dress!) and diamante stiletto heeled sandals – she was a delightful girl and very perky considering she probably hadn't made it home from a party last night! Our tour guide and driver were ready for us at the appointed hour and we set off for very interesting trip up the **Maipo River** valley, right into the snowy Andes Mountains (although, in truth, they were not all that snowy at this time of year).

Our driver and guide were great chaps and very game, so we went much further than originally planned on rough roads (not even in a 4x4 but a nice new Kia minibus!) and eventually got to an alpine 'hut' which was a hostel and restaurant, where they were more used to hikers and pony trekkers than those arriving by car. We had an excellent lunch of home made soup and pate (the driver and guide each chose spaghetti and home made tomato sauce – still too

heavy for us after all that steak last night) and enjoyed the tranquillity of the mountain scenery on this warm, dry, sunny day.



Not all that snowy (note the 'road!')



Our delightful guide took this photo



We eventually got to an alpine 'hut'

We drove back to Santiago, stopping at **San Jose de Maipo**, a sleepy town, where our driver and guide insisted on treating us to coffee, as we had stood them lunch (apparently they don't expect it). The coffee shop was a ramshackle hut with half a dozen odd chairs and two tables (one of which was obviously the family dining table) We were given cups, spoons, a Thermos flask of hot water, a tin of Nescafe powder and a bowl of sugar and left to help ourselves to as much as we wanted; we don't know what it cost, but no doubt a fraction of what we had paid for our breakfast coffees in the city! It was actually a bit of a high-point of the day, as it was one of those experiences one never has on ones own as we'd never have gone in there, for fear of 'germs', failing to make ourselves understood or committing some sort of solecism (even after we left we weren't altogether convinced we hadn't gate-crashed someone's home!).

We returned via a winery where we took note of the available wines – we didn't buy any because of difficulty with carrying non-duty free bottles on flights... a silly, pointless rule!

The same driver later took us to the airport where we had dinner and bought a couple of bottles of wine (duty free and which we were allowed to hand-carry aboard; as I said, a silly, pointless rule). No upgrade this time, sadly, but we were allocated the bulkhead seats we'd requested so were more comfortable than we might otherwise have been.

March 4th/5th

We crossed the International Dateline during the flight so 'lost' the 4th. It was an unusually smooth flight till about 90 minutes out of Auckland, when we hit very severe turbulence caused by very strong winds – not funny. At least we got breakfast and drinks, even though much of it landed in laps – some didn't get anything as the stewardesses had to hurriedly stow the carts and strap themselves in too... always a bit of a worry! We landed very suddenly and with almighty bang when nose-wheel touched down, possibly due to crosswinds? We were heartily glad to be back on *terra firma*, as was the captain, who apologised profusely for the lumps and bumps, which had evidently taken them all by surprise. We got to the airport hotel in Auckland, where we'd left the car at the beginning of our odyssey, at about 5am and had a couple of hours sleep before driving home to a lovely welcome and dinner with the family.