Dancing in New Zealand

by Gaye Fifer

The organizers of the New Zealand dance trip have a mission: to bring the joy of contra dancing to local communities in New Zealand. In order to make their vision a reality, they have taken groups of North American dancers and musicians to New Zealand numerous times. Ron and Cathy Arps, from Sylva, North Carolina, originally traveled to New Zealand on their own. They missed contra dancing while on their trip (six months) and noticed lots of community halls that would be perfect for dances. Since then, they have organized month-long trips for groups of about thirty to see the beautiful scenery and dance with local folks. We joined them this past February for a wonderful adventure of travel, dance and community building.

As far as I know, Ron and Cathy do no publicity for their trips. People hear about it from others who have joined them. We put our name on the list of potential travelers two years ago. Since the trip only happens every two years, some planning ahead is required. As the time approaches Ron notifies interested people and decisions are made about committing to the cost and timing. Our group this year included some who had been on the trip before, but a majority of us had never been to New Zealand. Ron made most of the arrangements: booking our flights from Los Angeles, planning our trip itinerary, arranging for a bus and driver, and reserving rooms at hostels for the trip.

Cathy is an organizer extraordinaire and took care of keeping us well fed. She came prepared with lists from previous trips about quantities of food that we would need. At each stop she led trips to the grocery store to purchase food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Each day we would meet in the dining/kitchen area and eat breakfast together, pack our lunches for the day, and either get on the bus to travel or disperse to hike/kayak/adventure on our own. Individuals cooked dinner for the group, taking turns providing nutritious, tasty meals for all of us. Everyone pitched in to help in various ways: shopping, cooking, washing dishes, cutting and chopping veggies, etc.

We travelled around the South Island for three weeks, in the very capable hands of our bus driver, Kelvin. (Not only was Kelvin a great driver, he became one of the group, learning our personalities and interests. He was usually on the dance floor at night, too.) Most travel days were only half a day, but it was lovely to have Kelvin thinking about where we were going and how to get there, as we relaxed, visited, ate chocolate, napped, sang and played music. Typically, we travelled to a new town, got settled in to our rooms and headed out to explore. Members of the group would tell locals about the contra dance to be held locally that evening, recruiting everywhere we went. After dinner, we would go to the local hall, set up and introduce any beginners to the joy of dancing. Our musicians provided music that made us want to dance, and four callers in the group shared the teaching/calling. I was impressed with the responsible way in which members of our group involved and included new people. I could see how new contra dancers were being born as we travelled through communities. One evening we met a family group in our campground who was celebrating their grandmother's birthday. We joined in singing "Happy Birthday" to her and lots of her family members showed up to do English country dancing with us later that evening.

There are now three well-established contra dances in New Zealand, and I believe that they attribute their inception to Ron and Cathy's trips. Those communities welcomed us to their regular dances (or scheduled special dances for us). On this trip, the local dance communities in Christchurch and Hokitika organized the first New Zealand dance weekend. Folks came from many communities on the South Island, and from the North Island, Australia and England!

During the days, we experienced some of the natural beauty of the South Island. We hiked through the valleys and up into the mountains around Mount Cook, walked to see glaciers, spent a night on a boat in Milford Sound, a fjord on the west coast, walked along beaches, took wildlife tours (penguins, sea lions, seals, albatrosses, dolphins, and lots of birds), and spent time at National Parks. We also spent some time in cities, going to farmers' markets, museums, botanical gardens and thrift shops.

I'm sure each member of the group had his/her own highlights. I especially enjoyed getting to know group members and locals, connecting over a card game or meal. We had some great conversations with New Zealanders, saw glow worms, laughed and danced with lots of people, and learned to play "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" on a sheepdog whistle. All this, and contra dancing across the island, too!

Gaye Fifer has been a contra dancer for thirty years, first in St. Louis, then Charlottesville, and now Pittsburgh. As a caller, she is known for her energy, enthusiasm and sense of fun. The next trip to New Zealand will be in February 2014; for details, write Ron and Cathy Arps, ronandcathy71@frontier.com.