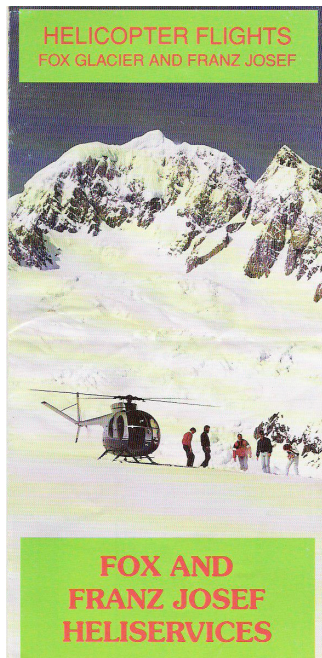


Chapter Six

The Magical History Tour

"For those of you who've just joined our tour, welcome to the Magic Bus, the bus that cares. My name is Andrew, unless you have complaints. If you have a complaint, my name is Lofty."
--Andrew, the bus driver.



One of the biggest attractions on the trip wasn't an attraction at all. Instead, it was watching and listening to the Magic Bus drivers. On the first day out, for example, one driver got stuck when he pulled into a parking lot to turn around, and couldn't maneuver back out. This driver also loved the rock group, The Pogues, and repeatedly played a CD of the group's greatest hits. Unfortunately, the band's, off-key rendition of "Waltzing Matilda" sounded groaned out, not sung, prompting many passengers to moan in time and yell for a new CD.

Then there was Andrew, a truly odd duck.

Although he had earned his law degree in the mid-1990s, he continued to drive buses and kept passengers amused along the way. When we passed herds of sheep, he would honk the horn until they were so riled up they ran in fear for their lives. Given that there are more sheep than humans on both islands, there were plenty of chances he to whip the herds into a wild, wooly, froth. He also gave brief travelogues and told stories from his youth.

One of my favorite tales centered on a car accident he had when he was in college. He and his friends had spent the night drinking, but decided to drive home anyway. Since Andrew was most sober, he was elected to drive. Unfortunately, driving from town-to-town in many parts of the South Island is difficult under the best of circumstances, and this wasn't even close. It was raining, most of the island's windy roads cut through hills with steep drops where shoulders should be and Andrew was driving a small sports car. With each turn he successfully negotiated, he gained confidence, until 100 miles per hour

didn't seem too far-fetched. He had a close call when he almost missed a hairpin turn at 100 mph, but that only made him cockier, and prompted him to increase his speed as he approached the next curve.

Not too surprisingly, the car missed the turn, rolled to the bottom of the hill and ended up on its top. Andrew was the first passenger to regain consciousness and realize the gravity of the situation. Which is why he immediately got out, reached into the trunk, pulled out a bong and hid it so the police wouldn't get the wrong impression, even though there were beer bottles scattered throughout the car. Not wanting to waste a perfectly good bong, he hid it close enough so he could remember where it was, but far enough away so the police weren't likely to trip over it. In order to find a good hiding place he walked a few paces, went left a few more, then zigged and zagged several times before digging a hole with his hands and covering it back up. Since he was still drunk when he hid the bong, he couldn't remember where he hid it when he sobered up.

When he told the story a few years later, Kiwi Experience passengers had him stop the bus at the accident site and helped him look for it.

At last report, the bong remained missing.

To the delight of his passengers, Andrew started every day off by saying, "Welcome to the Magic Bus, the bus that cares..." Veteran riders laughed uproariously because we all knew our 20-something driver with an Einsteinian shock of brown hair was being sarcastic.

Andrew also had witty observations about the attractions we visited along the way. The best was his take on an overnight near the Franz Josef Glacier in Westland National Park. Franz Josef is one of the few places in the world where a glacier meets a rain forest. So many people visit every year that there's a booming industry offering half-day and full day hikes, helicopoter rides over the glacier and even hour long ice hikes for people who want to tramp around in the cold for 60 minutes. As we neared Franz Josef a passenger asked what else there was to do in the town.

Never one to miss an opportunity for a wisecrack, Andrew retorted, "There's really no reason to spend more than a day in Franz Josef. The whole town covers two blocks and there's not much to do. You can look at the glacier, you can walk on the glacier, you can play on the glacier, you can do pull-ups on the glacier and, when you're through, you can take pictures of the glacier."

After such a glowing report about nightlife in Franz Josef, I couldn't help it. I figured if I had to spend the night in such a quiet town, I might as well hop a chopper to the glacier and go ice hiking, giving this part of the trip a real Outward Bound flavor.

I'd never been in a helicopter before, but that wasn't what scared me. Nor was the rapid drop down to the ice field the tour guide warned me about before I boarded the plane. Admittedly, the descent was faster and more wrenching than the ones I'd felt on roller coasters, but the thought of falling into a crevasse frightened me more.

As the glacier came into view and the helicopter spun into a drop that seemed just short of a free-fall, all I could think of were the newspaper stories I had read about ice hiking accidents at Mount Rainier where many people have gone hiking and never returned. Sometimes the disappearances were due to avalanches, mis-steps, slips or falls into holes hikers couldn't see until it was too late.

So, when the guide gave ice axe lessons, I listened and watched as closely, even though I was shivering from the cold and my own fear. I knew the ice played for keeps and that, even under the best of circumstances, the nearest hospital was a 30-minute helicopter ride away.

Just learning the ropes kept me busy. After all, I've never been too coordinated, and once I landed the instructor told me the best way to handle an incline on the ice was to put the axe I used for support on the ice in the direction of the incline, then cross my back foot in front of my front foot as I continued down.

After hearing this instruction, I was sure I was going to die during my hour on the ice, either from an uncontrollable slide down an incline, falling into a crevasse, or tripping over my feet.

The guide wasn't much help when I asked how to prevent a fall or recover from an uncontrollable slide.

"Try to go down head first," he said. "That way we can get our boots back."

The hike was better than I expected. The slick ice made it difficult for me to maintain traction, and my concern over each minor incline kept me from feeling that my heartbeat had moved into my lungs, but I stayed upright.

The adventure continued the next day when we headed into Queenstown—adrenaline capital of New Zealand—and Andrew asked passengers if they wanted to take the main road into town or the more interesting route. The riders voted for the detour until we saw the bus approach a 20-foot long, narrow wooden bridge and realized there were only a few inches of clearance on either side and the only way to make it was to drive straight down the middle. If we had been in a movie, we would have crossed in slow motion and that would have been too fast to show how long it took to cross. It may have taken 30 seconds, but I swear I could hear the tire make contact with each successive plank.

Once we reached the other side, the riders broke out into a loud, grateful round of applause.

"Wait until I get to the really narrow bridge," Andrew replied.