

# A Glorious Sporting Holiday - 2003

by Peter Adams

The XL 2003 Tour party assembled at Heathrow at the crack of dawn on February 5 anticipating what, for many, would be the trip of a lifetime.

The 42-strong group knew that, thanks to Ron Hart, there lay before us a month in which we would stay in only the very best hotels, marvel at some of the world's greatest scenery and architecture and have plenty of spare time for sightseeing, golfing and shopping. To be able to do this in addition to twelve cricket matches to be played on top class grounds where the hospitality would be unsurpassable made this an affordable adventure too good to miss. *Captain Hart informs the 18-player squad that he expects better than 50% on overall results. He remembers to say it loudly enough to be heard by the 8-person team of umpires, scorers and scoreboard managers!*

**First Leg** -San Francisco Where was that "foggy bay" where Tony Bennett left his heart? Even the locals could not account for why our group enjoyed such unbroken sunshine at the unlikely time of the year. Perfect cricket weather, but no one was complaining about having no matches during the first four days of our trip. This organisational touch of genius afforded us the opportunity to bond as a group whilst exploring this beautiful city. Those who had not been before seemed pleasantly surprised at the cleanliness and the charm of the place. It wasn't cheap but it was very classy and we all enjoyed tram rides and guided tours, including the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz Island. Our excellent hotel was on Fisherman's Wharf, very near some characterful fish restaurants - and we even timed our visit to coincide with the Crab Festival weekend!

**Second Leg – Auckland.** New Zealand's North Island, at last! Long flights, changing at Los Angeles and Sydney, left many of the group more than a little droopy and one or two of us picked up unpleasant chest infections en route. Simple jet lag was soon shaken off by the thought of five nights in a wonderful hotel situated under the Sky Tower (one of the tallest buildings in the Southern Hemisphere) and a stone's throw from Auckland Harbour, where hype was high for the imminent America's Cup yachting series. Our group breakfasted on the 28th floor, reached by several lifts, one of which appeared to be made of glass and ran at great speed up the outside of the building. This was also the venue for complimentary late afternoon drinks - and it was interesting to note which of our party never could manage to stay out late in the afternoons!

Cricket started in the splendid setting of Eden Park, where we didn't really do ourselves justice. Conceding a few too many runs against The Cricket Society, we were unable to threaten the required run rate. Nevertheless, the hospitality was first class - as one might expect in a pavilion that had its own well stocked cricket library. We also enjoyed going behind one of 'our' grandstands to look at the main stadium, where the 'drop in' pitch was being put down for the following week's international. *Captain Hart not amused by first defeat.*

The next day saw us arrive in ties and blazers at Dilworth College, a school started in 1906 by an Irish philanthropist who bequeathed money to educate boys in need. Superb facilities and a high standard of education turned out young men who were ready to take on the world. But they were not quite ready to take on The Forty Club, who played capably on the day. *Captain Hart better disposed, if not actually playing. Inevitable banter ensues about this being the proper First XI.....*

A day off allowed us to tour the city and its surrounds, including an underground Antarctic SeaWorld and the impressive Auckland Museum. Other free time saw many of us up the Sky Tower, doing a harbour cruise or simply sitting by the quayside enjoying more glorious sunshine. The third match at the beautiful Comwall Park pitched us against Mel Brown's XI. Mel was playing his last game before retiring to a tiny island off Australia and he apparently decided to dispense with all superfluous cash by providing some wonderful hospitality for us. Despite being out -aged by the opposition (691 years v 701 in a 12-a-side game), we achieved much the better of the draw. *Captain Hart still happy, especially after vanquishing the host in a jolly drinking game.*

**Third Leg – Napier.** Another flight and another new hotel - this time four nights right by the sea in Napier, which had been flattened by an earthquake in 1931 and rebuilt in the Art Deco style. Every year there is a special weekend, in which people come from miles away to dress in period costume, pose by vintage cars and generally enjoy themselves. Amazingly, we arrived just in time for the fun and some of us found that our cases contained clothes old enough to be almost perfect! After a much-needed rest day we were off to another Comwall Park (this one in

Hastings) for the first of two matches. A comfortable victory in a truly beautiful park put us ahead on the win: loss ration. *Captain Hart makes bullish speech. ("We're on a roll, lads!")*

Our return to the same venue followed a glorious day in which we toured four of the finest vineyards and some of us sought to use this as an excuse for a thorough thrashing. The truth is we could have got at least double our score and Mark Greatbatch, the NZ player who appeared in 41 Tests, would still have knocked them off! We felt somewhat alarmed when an (out-of-practice!) opening batsman clattered the distant pavilion a few times on the full: then enter the too-soon-retired Test star. Tidy bowling was again dispatched in the direction of the pavilion and over it as this very nice man spoilt what might have been a close match. *Captain Hart makes gracious speech. Some suggest quitting while we're level.*

**Fourth Leg – Queenstown.** Two more flights in very small planes and there we were in South Island for five nights in a fine hotel overlooking Lake Wakatipu, a minute from the centre of town. The scenery here is just stunning and I realise as I take them that my pictures cannot do it justice. Our first match was close to nearby Arrowtown, which made it big during the Gold Rush. A glorious mountain setting and plenty of sunshine but the opposition commented on how low the snow levels were for the time of year. It was summer and it was so cold we lost! No pavilion here, by the way, just charming little tents. *Captain Hart not playing and obviously unimpressed.*

We were better prepared next day, when the tents were re-pitched at The Queenstown Events Centre, adjacent to the site of New Zealand v India in January. We totally outdressed the opposition in biting cold, some of us resorting to six layers of clothing above the waist and at least four below. Carefully avoiding our hosts' kind offers of ice cold beer we looked forward to a warm response from Captain Hart, who played the match in a dark blue jacket under a sleeveless sweater. "We're back on track, lads!"

Queenstown is known as 'Lord of the Rings Country' and we saw plenty of it the next day during our visit to one of the most beautiful places anywhere - Milford Sound. To enjoy a wonderful trip on the fjord fully a clear, sunny day is essential -and we got one! Some of our number chose to round the event off by swapping the return coach for a light aircraft flight back through the mountains. The last game in Queenstown was played in fairly indifferent weather, but this time on the main Events Centre ground. Our boys mostly felt we did not fully rise to the occasion and by now the dreaded chest infections were going round several of the team. Even wearers of dark blue jackets were suffering, so *Captain Hart rests his voice.*

**Fifth Leg – Christchurch.** The lengthy coach journey north was simply not long enough as we marvelled at the scenery around Mount Cook. Another small aircraft option was taken up by some, and then it was on to five nights at yet another top hotel in a perfect, central location. Next day we basked in more sunshine as we took on Walter Hadlee's XI at Hagley Oval. The ex-Captain of New Zealand graced us with his presence and did not need to call upon his knighted son as his batsmen swept our bowlers aside and we mostly got ourselves out tamely. *Captain H. whispers disapproval.*

The following day was for many a tour highlight. Mike Dormer, who had been Ron Hart's main contact, helping to arrange hotels and matches throughout New Zealand, invited us to his private ground in a lovely rural setting just outside the city. So much time and money has been invested in the venue that one dreads to think what would be lost if vandals ever struck. Even the toilets are covered in priceless, wall-to-wall cricket memorabilia! Mike's generosity (more food and drink than we could manage) did not extend on to the pitch, where again we failed to match very strong opponents and an embarrassingly early shower was taken by all. Voice now fully restored, *Captain H. threatens to sing unless we improve. The sick list grows for the next game.*

Alas, another nicely-tuned out team could only struggle valiantly the next day against St. Andrew's College. *Captain H. now lost for lyrics.*

Later that evening, again thanks to Mike Dormer and friends, we had our Tour Dinner in the exclusive Christchurch Club. We were delighted to be in the presence of several important characters from New Zealand's cricketing history and Walter Hadlee delivered a most gracious and encouraging speech. Ron Hart replied eloquently for the tourists and XL Club Treasurer, Tim Woodcock, announced the tour fines. The free day which followed enabled a range of activities, including more trams, the cathedral and botanical gardens. Others golfed, or simply rested up ready for the start of the homeward journey.

**Sixth and Final Leg – Singapore.** The return hop to Sydney saw the departure of twelve of our party, who mostly stopped off to visit friends and relations in various parts of Australia. Ken Medlock, however, was on a special mission

to The Bradman Museum, where he kindly lent one of his prized collection of cricket bats. Our three night stay in Singapore was at the Shangri-La, justly described as one of the top five hotels in the world. Singapore Cricket Club was something else! From the natural beauty of grounds set in New Zealand mountains, here we were in sweltering humidity, surrounded by imposing man-made structures. The prestigious SCC has an exclusive membership fee and several rules that are strictly observed. Long designer shorts were banned for ladies so your reporter's wife had to return to the hotel to change. Flags were banned too and XL's improvisation did not equal the MCC's, who had recently draped their flag from the steps of the adjacent Law Courts! We tried very hard to emulate our opponents, who frequently strolled only energy-saving singles if the ball did not make it to the boundary. Several times we saved far too much energy and the target was not attained. Another blazer and tie dinner rounded off a memorable fixture. Captain Hart reflects that we were all square after seven matches but ran out of steam for the last five. Overall, great fun seemed to be had by all, even if a lot of us had chest infections - two of which were diagnosed as bronchial pneumonia. The first sufferer, Alan Perkins, was an inspiration to your reporter, who would willingly undertake the trip again, lurgi and all. This was your reporter's first XL tour and he is on record as saying that no other tour could better this one. Opinions of more experienced tourists, however, seemed to support the view that things just keep on getting better. So if you have it in mind to do it 'one day', why not contact Ron Hart while you are still young and virile?

The results point to the fact that to take on strong opposition we must have good cricketers in their forties. Our fielding, all things considered, was not too bad. The bowlers were heroic, given an obvious lack of youthful aggression: and Peter Robinson again deserves praise for sacrificing his batting to turn back the clock as an opening bowler. The batting was mostly very disappointing. Few of us played to our potential but Roly Walton stood out, almost without blemish.



Vice-Captain Roly Walton congratulates the winning skipper at St. Andrews College



Tour editor Peter Adams behind bars at Alcatraz on stopover at San Francisco



Tour organiser in a state of collapse



Singapore Slings at the New Raffles Hotel. (L-R) Roly Walton, Marian & Tim Woodcock, Chris & Ann Westbrook and Gill Walton.



Robbie Barker and Ron Helyar ready to roll. Our travel editor, Peter Adams, is in the back row (3" from left).