

## The Journey Begins

I am sitting in the plane to New Zealand. It's 7 o'clock in the morning, a Saturday in September. Only three hours separating me from Auckland, the biggest city in the country.

Instead of watching the on-board entertainment program, I close my eyes. As if in time-lapse, parts of my life emerge – life experiences and encounters that have clearly brought me in the here and now, to be sitting in an airplane that inexorably approaches its destination and with it, my heart's desire.



I am 13 years old, when all of a sudden a girl from an island at the other end of the Earth appears in my world. Through an international exchange organization, she spends a year in an Austrian school, and at the end of it, she comes to Vienna for one week. Host families are taking care of young people from all over the world. My mother, herself a mother of five, agrees to accommodate one student.

In my childlike curiosity, I am yearning to encounter this stranger, a 17-year-old foreigner from overseas who has already learned German in Austria for one year. And then there she is, standing right in front of me: Barbara from New Zealand. A tall, broad-shouldered, fair-skinned girl with braids. Countless freckles cover her round, cheerful face. Her German is impeccable, with a touch of a Styrian dialect. As I hardly know anything about New Zealand, I bombard her with questions; I want her to tell me all about her native country and her life there. Her home is a sheep and cattle farm close to Raglan, a small town on the coast of the North Island. Everything she tells me becomes part of the

minutely detailed image of her home I'm making in my mind, and therefore the number of sheep on the farm is also highly important for me. "About 5000," is her terse reply. It leaves me speechless. Was she kidding me? 5000 sheep? Where the hell did that many animals have space to graze? Unbelievable! And all belonging to one family? Surely this was a wild exaggeration. From the perspective of my childish and limited imagination of the world I do not, I cannot believe her and swear, "I'll have to see this for myself! One day, I will go to New Zealand and verify her claim, even if I have to count sheep day and night!"

When Barbara flew home, my parents thought that they would never see her again, especially since she came from the other side of the planet. I contradicted them vehemently because I had already firmly resolved: One day, I am going to fly to New Zealand!

The years go by and our contact with Barbara continues. Not a single Christmas passes without us receiving a letter from her. We keep each other up to date and our friendship alive.

After my pedagogical education, I immediately step into my professional life. Then I meet my husband-to-be, and three years later, we are the proud parents of two lovely children. Our life in a green and wooded area is carefree and fulfilling. At some point several years later, this happy state has transformed into an intolerable existence. My husband moves out and I stay with our sons in the house.

After 15 years of professional stability, I once more have to look for a job. The turbulent lives of two adolescents, which I try to manage in a supportive way and on top of that my work, are more than a burden.

After 3 years, I ran out of steam from running day in and day out as if I were in a hamster wheel, looking neither to the left nor to the right, just keeping my focus straight ahead in order to keep track. The days are getting longer, the nights shorter and shorter. Around me life was pulsating, within me there was radio silence. I got to the point where I questioned my actions. Where has my joy of life gone? Do I live my life or does it live me? What do I actually want to do? I am a divorced woman, have two grown-up sons, many ideas – and a long-cherished wish: New Zealand!

As I rediscover this wish deep down, a burning, longing desire for the islands in the South Pacific thrills me: 18.157,418 km (as the crow flies) away from my home! My eagerness isn't concentrated on 'counting the sheep' as it was in my childhood. It's about something different, but what exactly is the point? Do I just finally want to fulfill my heart's desire? Did the love of adventure grip me, the longing for the unknown? Am I looking for the meaning, the bounty of life, for spiritual answers? A driving, impelling force overruns all of my questions. It supports me in drawing my deep and innermost buried wish up to the surface, and I unwrap it like a present. At the same time, my heart beats faster and louder and revives me.

Generally, I don't count myself among those people who procrastinate and hope for better times. So what am I waiting for? Life is here! I have it in my hands and am ready to write a new chapter in the book of my existence.

Excited, I surf the Internet for work in New Zealand. Soon the question arises whether I am even allowed to work there. I am too old for a Working Holiday Visa, which young people between 18 and 30 receive without difficulty for one calendar year. This agreement is valid in numerous countries worldwide, but unfortunately very limited in Austria. At the age of 49, I can only obtain a working visa by way of an employment contract with a New Zealand company, but all I can find are unpaid volunteer jobs. What I want is beginning to dawn on me: It's my heartfelt wish to get to know the country and its inhabitants; to gain an insight into their daily lives and the Māori culture; to be allowed to dive and dip into the worries and joys of the people, and to experience New Zealand. This is a dream only I can design and fulfill, in my own personal way, independent and free. For the first time, with this eureka moment, I begin to seriously consider taking a real journey and suddenly it is lying in my consciousness.

As I start to paint a picture of the New Zealand landscape in my imagination, I start looking for arguments to take a one-year leave of absence from home. Innerly, I tune into the country and before I know it, I am in the planning stage. I soon make an agreement with myself to actually begin this journey. My focus is fixated on my preparations. I am acting as if, besides my professional and family life, there weren't

anything more obvious in this world to do.

Why do I want to drop out for one whole year, right from the beginning? To experience a country and get to know its people and its culture to the very core takes time. I sense that the time for an intensive, attentive dealing with myself and my heart-felt wish has now arrived. But there is also an irrational reason for my actions. I am afraid of flying. When I arrive in New Zealand, I want to be truly, mentally and physically there, with all my senses, and not immediately start counting the days until my departure. In this moment, I am convinced that the journey to the other end of the world will be something unique and that I will never again, for the rest of my life, cover such an enormous distance by plane. Nor would I want to.

Finally, I am ready to fly. The wish and the longing are greater than my fear. However, when I see the facts about the flight to New Zealand in black and white on the Internet, my head spins. The journey takes 30 hours, with stopovers. In this moment, the very thought is unthinkable for me. I start looking for a solution – and find a compromise. Again irrational, but for me a solution. I decide never to be in the air for longer than 12 hours. Although I worry about descending into panic after just a few hours. Sitting at my computer, I track down those countries that might be suitable for a short layover. In Thailand on the way over, and on Hawaii for the return flight, I find two four-week volunteer projects, and before long, the itinerary is fixed: Vienna – Thailand – Australia – New Zealand – Hawaii – New York – Vienna.

As I hold my around-the-world ticket in hand, it gets serious. Two weeks before my departure, I start applying an intensive self-help treatment, a meridian tapping technique that promises to take away my fear of flying. There is no turning back anymore. I want to get to New Zealand and it should run like a charm. The little green turtle, a present from my children, is coming with me.