

# How to Move to New Zealand

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Credit: Robin Smith / Getty Images

America is the birthplace of "We're Number 1" foam hands, so it's little surprise that the idea that there might be better places to live is a bit foreign to us. Ex-Seattleite Chris Eyerman knows better. As a speculator and business consultant he earns his money by having informed opinions and betting on them. So when he says that "[New Zealand](#) is absolutely the best country in the world for the times we're living in," take notice.

When Chris, his wife Kelly, and their young twins moved from the Emerald City to [Motueka](#), a town of about 7,000 people at the top of New Zealand's South Island, they joined a tiny exodus. Thousands of Americans move to New Zealand every year, but more move the other way.

In 2002, when Chris was courting Kelly, they vacationed in [New Zealand](#) for two and a half weeks. They sailed, climbed Avalanche Peak (near the summit they met a couple with a baby in a backpack – "typical Kiwis," says Chris), and took a helicopter flight over Franz Josef glacier.

When they got to Lake Wanaka, an alpine playground in the heart of the South Island, Kelly said something to Chris that she'd never said about anywhere in the world outside the U.S.: "I could totally live here." Chris agreed. "Let's move," he said. Five years later they did. In the meantime they "changed 4,000 diapers" and kept dreaming of New Zealand, of "living where it's safe enough that no streetlights are needed and you can see the stars at night," as Chris puts it.

Motueka, with no traffic lights or high-rises, looks like a lot of rural towns in New Zealand. The surrounding areas are dotted with boutique wineries, olive groves, and pottery studios. Chris and Kelly say it reminds them of a tropical Napa, if Napa were still a small town. If you want to join Chris on a mountaintop or sailing on the Tasman Sea, you'd better do it soon. The greenback is stronger than the New Zealand dollar, but may not stay that way for long if trends hold.

## Step 1: Update Your Resume

Although New Zealand has a [shortage of skilled workers and needs the immigrants](#) – especially "low-risk, high-quality" ones, as an immigration official characterizes American migrants — the process is not exactly easy. Chris and Kelly figure they've paid \$5,000 in fees. "Hats off to New Zealand for paying attention to their immigration," says Kelly, pointing to their eight-inch-thick

concertina file of paperwork as evidence of the arduous process. The Eyermans applied for residency under the skilled migrant category and had to fill out a 40-page "expression of interest," answering questions such as: Do you have TB? Have you ever been a member of a racist group? What job qualifications do you have? To gain permanent residency immigrants must accrue a total of 140 points in various categories such as health, job qualifications, and evidence of a job offer. The Eyermans earned points for age (skilled migrants must be under 56), health, and skills in industries New Zealand needs (IT, education, and health, among others). They tallied 240 points, well over the threshold, so they received an invitation to apply. Next, Kelly says, it was: "Okay, you've told us about yourself, now prove it." They had to provide chest X-rays, fingerprints, proof of job skills, and seemingly endless paperwork.

### **Step 2: Pack Clean Shoes**

A year after making their decision, the Eyermans were off-loading via garage sales and donations, but also stocking up for the unknown. "It's not that you can't buy socks in New Zealand," says Kelly, "but I didn't know how long it would take me to work out the best place to do it."

They shopped around for a shipping company, eventually picking [Rainier Overseas Movers](#) because the firm had done some moves to New Zealand before. A 40-foot shipping container was brought to their house; five days and 6,800 pounds later, they were done. In retrospect, says Kelly, the \$3,000 they saved packing it themselves "would have been the best money I ever spent in my life."

More good advice led them to leave wicker furniture behind because of New Zealand's strict biosecurity rules, and they packed all their camping gear near the door of the container because it's one of the first things immigration officials want to see. The Eyermans also diligently washed all their boots; officials will do it for you, but that's just one more delay on the other end.

### **Step 3: Hire an Accountant**

Unfortunately, escaping the U.S. does not mean escaping the IRS. American citizens are obliged to file federal tax returns even if they also pay taxes in another country. New Zealand residents are liable for tax on all global income, so American immigrants pay taxes to New Zealand on all work income, interest, and dividends earned on U.S. investments. Chris advises getting a good accountant to explain NZ's new four-year tax exemption on foreign income, a recent measure designed to lure immigrants and expatriate Kiwis that exempts foreign interest, dividends, and foreign trust and business income (but not earnings). It helps take some of the sting out of New Zealand's comparatively high personal income tax rates, which start at 19.5 percent and quickly hit the top bracket of 39 percent at \$60,000. But even a dedicated libertarian like Chris is impressed by what Kiwis get for their contributions: excellent schools and roads, virtually free health care, and very little red tape.

For Chris and Kelly, two of the best returns on their taxes will be 20 free hours of childcare per week and the [Working for Families Credit](#), which gives families money based on earnings and how many kids they have. For example, a family with three children earning New Zealand's median household income of \$56,000 gets a check for \$175 every week, tax free.

### **Step 4: Learn to Slow Down**

Six months after the moving process began, 7,300 miles across the Pacific, on the docks of Nelson, Motueka's nearest city, the Eyermans met the contents of their home again. Standing next to them were officials from New Zealand Customs and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's biosecurity division. "As Americans we were terrified of the bureaucratic experience," says Chris, "but it turned out to be the most pleasant government experience I've ever had. I'd be happy to play golf with the MAF inspectors, and you've got to like any country where you get off the plane and an 80-year-old man in a cardigan offers you a cup of tea."

Chris admires New Zealanders' "wonderful expectation of people to act honorably." He loves buying fruit and vegetables from unmanned roadside "honesty boxes" and was floored by the trust displayed by the local equipment rental place. "Not only did they not ask for my driver's

license, they didn't even write down my last name. It was just 'Chris.'" Compared to the U.S., he says, "it's like coming out of the woods after three weeks and taking a shower." The simplicity of life in New Zealand is sometimes overwhelmingly affecting. "Even the mail carriers riding their bikes almost made me cry," says Kelly. On the day they moved into their cottage, neighbors turned up to ask how they could help them unpack.

Not all U.S. immigrants meet such a warm welcome. A property developer from Southern California who plans to re-create south Orange County on his 500 acres of prime coastal property 10 miles south of the Eyermans' home was particularly reviled. Such ostentation is a turn-off for New Zealanders, who are quick to blame Americans for the skyrocketing price of coastal land. Still, Kelly says avoiding the ugly-American stereotype is simple. "Listen. Ask people questions about themselves," she says. "And don't tell people how we do things in America."