



New Zealand

by Andrew Matzner

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Known as Aotearoa (The Land of the Long White Cloud) by its indigenous Maori inhabitants, New Zealand is a country of relatively sparse population and stunning beauty, whose natural resources range from rain forests and thermal ponds to glaciers and active volcanoes. In recent years New Zealand has distinguished itself for its liberal attitudes towards those of diverse genders and sexualities, as well as for its progressive anti-discrimination policies. In 2013, it became the 13th country to extend equal marriage rights to all its gay and lesbian couples.

Located to the southeast of Australia, New Zealand consists of two large land masses--the North and South Islands--along with some smaller islands, and stretches 1600 kilometers from north to south. With a population of only approximately four million people and five major cities, the country boasts plenty of broad, open space.

New Zealand was originally settled by Polynesians (the Maori) about one thousand years ago. During the Age of Exploration, the Dutch, French, and British all made contact with the Maori, although it was the British who would eventually fully colonize the country and develop it into a constitutional monarchy. Today, along with Australia, New Zealand is a magnet for immigrants from Asia and the Pacific Islands; the city of Auckland has the largest population of Polynesians in the world.

New Zealand has a long history of liberal social reform. For example, it gave women the vote in 1893, a quarter of a century before the United States and Great Britain did. However, glbtq activism in response to legislation criminalizing same-sex sexual activity between men (there were no laws regarding sexual activity between consenting women) did not get underway until much later.

Influenced by the Stonewall Riots and the burgeoning lesbian and gay movements in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, New Zealand's Gay Liberation Front publicly emerged in April 1972 at the country's first gay rally.

Political activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s finally led in 1986 to the decriminalization of sexual acts between consenting males over the age of 16. After this breakthrough came other progressive legislation.

In 1993, for example, the government passed the Human Rights Act, which makes it illegal to discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation. This legislation also protects people who are HIV-positive or have AIDS from unfair practices in regards to employment, educational opportunities, treatment by doctors, dentists, and hospitals, access to accommodation, and reception of goods and services.

Legislation passed at the end of 2004 that went into effect in April 2005 established civil unions for same-sex couples. As a result of that legislation, heterosexual and homosexual couples--whether married, in civil



Top: New Zealand in 2004.

Above: Member of Parliament Georgina Beyer. Beyer is reportedly the first transsexual in the world to achieve national office.

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unions, or in de facto partnerships--were extended basically the same rights and obligations with the exception of joint adoption.

Other recent legal advances have included the adoption of a hate crimes bill and a law that repeals the use of the "gay panic defense" in criminal trials.

That liberal attitudes towards alternative genders and sexualities exist in New Zealand is also illustrated by the success of politician Georgina Beyer. Originally born George Beyer, Georgina, who is of Maori descent, reportedly became the first transsexual in the world to be elected to a national office when she was voted in as a member of Parliament in 1999.

Although she was open about her transgenderism and her past as a sex-worker, Beyer received the support of New Zealand's largely white, rural, and otherwise conservative constituency. A feature-length documentary film about Beyer's life called *Georgie Girl* was released in 2001 (distributed by Women Make Movies). Directed by Annie Goldson and Peter Wells, it was featured in international film festivals, as well as broadcast on public television in the United States.

A number of openly gay or lesbian politicians have served in New Zealand's Parliament. Chris Carter became the first openly gay MP when he came out shortly after the 1993 election. He lost his seat in the 1996 election, but won it again in the 1999 election and became New Zealand's first openly gay cabinet minister in 2002.

In 1996, Tim Barnett became the first MP to be elected as an openly gay man. Although in 2005 Maryan Street became New Zealand's first openly lesbian MP, she had been preceded by Marilyn Waring, whose lesbianism had been considered a private matter. Waring is now known as one of the world's leading lesbian feminist economists.

In 2005, Chris Finlayson became the first openly gay National Party MP. Other openly gay MPs include Charles Chauvel and deputy leader Grant Robertson of the Labour Party and Kevin Hague of the Green Party.

In 2011, the openly lesbian Louisa Wall of the Labour Party and openly lesbian Jan Logie of the Green Party were elected.

In 2012, Wall sponsored a private members bill to define marriage as a union of two individuals regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The bill, endorsed by Prime Minister John Key, was adopted by a 77-44 "conscience" vote on April 17, 2013. The passage of the bill made New Zealand the 13th nation to extend marriage equality to all gay and lesbian citizens.

New Zealand's largest glbtq pride celebration is the HERO Festival, which takes place every February in Auckland. Events include film festivals, plays, cabarets, sports competitions, and parties of every sort. The culminating parade is witnessed by more than 200,000 spectators. The unique atmosphere of the HERO Festival reflects New Zealand's distinct cultural mix of Maori, Pacific Island, Asian, and European influences.

Another important glbtq event is the Big Gay Out, which is held annually in Auckland at Pt. Chevalier's Coyle Park and has featured appearances by leading politicians.

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