

7-Day Scenic South Island Road Trip:

From Waitohi – Picton to Ōtautahi – Christchurch via Whakatū - Nelson, Takaka & Arthur's Pass

Explore the stunning top half of Te Waipounamu – the South Island – on this 7-day road trip from Waitohi – Picton to Ōtautahi – Christchurch.

This route blends golden beaches, creative towns, wild coastlines, and alpine passes. Whether you're driving a rental car or cruising in a campervan, this itinerary offers an incredible mix of nature, culture, and photo-worthy pitstops. Ideal for those who've already taken the Kaikōura coastal route and are after something a little different.

Quick Overview

- Duration: 7 days
- Start Point: Waitohi – Picton
- End Point: Ōtautahi – Christchurch
- Best Time: October to April
- Total Drive Time: Approx. 16–18 hours
- Highlights: Golden Bay beaches, Takaka's creative vibe, Wharariki dunes, West Coast rock formations, Arthur's Pass hikes

Day-by-Day Itinerary

Day 1: Picton → Nelson

Begin your journey with a scenic coastal drive along Queen Charlotte Drive. Stop for a seafood lunch in Havelock, the green-lipped mussel capital, before arriving in vibrant Nelson.

What to Do:

- Stop at Momorangi Bay or Ngākuta Bay for a stretch
- Lunch at The Mussel Pot in Havelock

- Enjoy Tahunanui Beach or explore local art galleries

Where to Stay (Car or Campervan):

- Nelson TOP 10 Holiday Park
 - Maitai Valley DOC Campsite
-

Day 2: Nelson Hike + Day Trip

Explore the sunny city or take a short road trip to nearby gems like Mapua or Cable Bay.

What to Do:

- Hike the Centre of New Zealand Track or Cable Bay Walkway
- Visit the Nelson Saturday Market (if timing works)
- Optional drive to Mapua Wharf or Founders Heritage Park

Stay: Same as Day 1

Day 3: Nelson → Takaka

Wind over the famous Takaka Hill, soaking up panoramic views before reaching the creative hub of Golden Bay.

What to Do:

- Stop at Hawkes Lookout
- Visit Te Waikoropupū Springs
- Easy walk at The Grove or moderate walk to Rawhiti Caves

Stay:

- Pohara Beach Top 10
 - Anatoki Salmon Campground (catch your dinner!)
-

Day 4: Takaka → West Coast (via Wharariki Beach)

A longer drive, but packed with highlights. Don't miss the windswept dunes and seal colonies at Wharariki Beach.

What to Do:

- Morning walk at Wharariki Beach
- Optional: Oparara Arches detour from Karamea (adds time)
- Scenic stops along the Buller Gorge

Stay:

- Punakaiki Beach Camp
 - Charleston DOC Site
-



Day 5: West Coast → Arthur's Pass

Continue down the coast before turning inland at Greymouth to cross back over the Southern Alps.

What to Do:

- Walk the Punakaiki Pancake Rocks & Blowholes
- Visit the short Truman Track
- Stop at the Otira Viaduct Lookout

Stay:

- Avalanche Creek Shelter (DOC)
 - Jacksons Retreat Alpine Holiday Park
-



Day 6: Explore Arthur's Pass

Stay an extra night in this mountain village and enjoy a day of hiking and wildlife watching.

What to Do:

- Hike the Devils Punchbowl Falls Track (1 hr return)
- Stroll the Dobson Nature Walk (easy)
- Tackle the Bealey Spur Track (half-day hike)
- Watch for kea at scenic pull-outs

Stay: Same as Day 5 or Greyneys Shelter DOC Site



Day 7: Arthur's Pass → Christchurch

Your final day winds through the Canterbury high country. Don't miss a final scenic walk before ending your journey.

What to Do:

- Stop at Castle Hill/Kura Tāwhiti for a short walk among the boulders
- Drive the spectacular Porters Pass
- Drop off your vehicle and explore more of Christchurch if time allows



What to Pack

- Light layers for sun and rain
- Sturdy walking shoes or hiking boots
- Swimsuit and towel
- Insect repellent and sunscreen
- Power bank and reusable water bottle
- Camera or phone with plenty of storage



Local Travel Tips

- Fuel up in larger towns like Nelson and Takaka – remote areas have fewer stations
 - DOC campsites may not have mobile coverage – download maps in advance
 - Always check the weather before alpine drives
 - Nelson's Saturday Market is one of the best in Aotearoa – worth planning around
-

Must-Try Local Flavours

- Havelock: Green-lipped mussels at The Mussel Pot
 - Nelson: Fresh juice and dumplings at the Saturday Market
 - Takaka: Locally roasted coffee and artisan baking
 - Punakaiki: Classic fish and chips with a beachside view
 - Arthur's Pass: Grab a hearty pie at the Wobbly Kea Café
-

Need to Know

- One-lane bridges are common – watch signs and give way
- Castle Hill is sacred – stay on paths and don't climb the boulders
- DOC campsites are usually first-come, first-served
- Alpine weather changes fast – carry warm gear, even in summer

TohuTravellers.com – Trust the Journey