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What It's Like WWOOFing Through New Zealand

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In August 2018, after a year of researching, planning, and saving, I was on a one-way, non-stop flight from Houston to Auckland for my year-long working holiday in New Zealand. My initial plans involved me looking for some type of temporary job when I got there, maybe at the front desk of a hostel in one of the country's bigger cities. Once I had actually arrived, however, it didn't take me long to shoot down that idea by asking myself one question: "Why did I just quit my office job and fly across the world to immediately start more desk work?" Instead, I decided to zero in on WWOOFing, a popular option utilized by many backpackers traveling on a budget in New Zealand.

WWOOF started back in 1971 in England as Working Weekends on Organic Farms. These days, the acronym has come to signify Willing Workers on Organic Farms or Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, and it exists in more than 100 countries around the world. Volunteers (known as WWOOFers) pay a yearly fee to access the platform for the specific country of their interest (it's NZD\$40 for New Zealand).



platform for the organic economy of their market (the main one for them community), where there they can find and connect with hosts on organic properties. In exchange for working four to six hours a day, WWOOFers receive food and accommodation—plus a unique, hands-on, learning experience.

To me, WWOOF encapsulated everything I was looking for in my year abroad: a way to see more of the country besides the well-known tourist spots, to challenge myself with work outside of my own professional sphere, to take a break from focusing on the corporate ladder, to connect with the outdoors—all without having to eat through my savings too quickly.

While some people on tourist visas in New Zealand may want to try WWOOFing, the New Zealand government requires WWOOFers to have [an appropriate work visa](#) like the working holiday visa I had. That's because even though WWOOFers aren't getting paid a wage, what they do is still considered "paid work" as the food and accommodation they receive in exchange has value.

At my hostel in Auckland, I searched through one WWOOF profile after another to find a place that had a large number of positive reviews and wasn't too far away. This was partially because I wanted something well-vetted for my very first stay, and partially because it would be my first time driving alone on the left side of the road and I wanted an easy trip. I came across plenty of sheep farms listed on the WWOOF site, but I was quite surprised at the incredible range of opportunities, including vineyards, a cheese producer, and an emu farm. After sending messages to a couple of hosts (some who responded and some who didn't) about my eagerness to learn and willingness to work hard, I ended up setting up a two-week stay at a macadamia nut farm 30 minutes west of the city in Waitakere.

After winding through a forested area with my recently purchased used Toyota Carib, I followed my directions down a gravel road to the farm where I met my hosts, Sue and her partner John. Based on the reviews on their online profile, Sue and John's farm seemed to be the spot for first-time WWOOFers, and when I got there, there were already two young women working, one from Japan and one from Singapore. By the time I left, I had worked with a rotating group of WWOOFers, growing as big as six people from four different countries at one point.



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Most likely due to the fact that they were so experienced with WWOOFing and regularly housed comparatively large groups of WWOOFers, the macadamia farm had their system down. All the WWOOFers stayed in a separate sleep-out, we tracked the hours and days we worked in a journal, and we gave our hosts grocery lists in order to cook communal meals for ourselves. Given that I was there toward the end of winter, our tasks were divided between harvesting the macadamia nuts from the trees and sorting the nuts inside their processing facility. During harvesting, we used long, hand-held pickers to snip the macadamia nuts from branches to fall onto the large tarps we laid on the ground. On sorting days, we listened to dance music on the radio while we picked away shell pieces and any uncracked nuts rolling by on the conveyor belt. And throughout it all, we ate plenty of macadamia nut butter on toast for breakfast.

With each day, we all became better friends, spending our off-time exploring nearby attractions together, and got better at our jobs, working faster and faster. When I drove away from the farm after my two weeks were up, I felt grateful for the experience, including the kindness of the hosts and camaraderie of the other WWOOFers, and I felt excited about the new activities I would try and the people I would meet at future farms.

As my working holiday year went on, I fell into somewhat of a routine. I would spend around 10 days to two weeks at each farm, totaling 10 farms across the North and South Islands by the end of my time in New Zealand. While other WWOOFers I met would spend a month or more at a place they really loved, this timeframe proved to be the sweet spot for me in terms of building a relationship with my hosts, gaining enough training to be helpful, and giving me enough time to explore the rest of the country. Once my scheduled stay was over, I would take a week or so for myself to travel and find a new farm in the general direction I wanted to explore next.

Given the sheer number of farms across New Zealand, both in towns and far outside of them, it's easy to hop from one place to the next as a means for supporting your personal travel. Also, WWOOF is such a commonly known program and New Zealand such a friendly country that you could easily ask others for farm recommendations.



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Each farm I visited was an entirely different experience. While at a flower farm in Kumeu, I spent all my time weeding in a hot tunnel house, knocking out hours and hours of podcasts in the process. At a mushroom farm in Mangawhai, I helped grow and pick beautiful, flower-like mushrooms and spent my free time exploring the many white-sand beaches nearby. During my stay at a saffron farm in Te Anau, I held in my hands bright red saffron threads that were worth more than I felt comfortable thinking about, and then spent other days putting up livestock fencing along an isolated hillside and taking care of beehives.

Having grown up in the suburbs of a large city, my prior knowledge of the ins and outs of farm life was limited. Stemming from this lack of experience, I came to New Zealand generally feeling intimidated by certain manual labor tasks. Then, here I was cutting sheetrock and installing insulation to restore a century-old home; taking the lead on feeding an assortment of chickens, ducks, and pigs; and leaf plucking grapevines to prevent fungus growth. With each new farm activity I helped out with, I gained more confidence in my ability to push past discomfort and expand my skill set as I saw what I could achieve with my own two hands and a real desire to grow.

The differences between farms weren't just in the kind of work I was doing, though. Every place had its own schedule (from strict starting times to flexible rules depending on our moods or weather), type of accommodation (including private and shared rooms either part of the host's living area or completely separate), and other WWOOFers there (sometimes I was the only one). More than that, each farm had its own rhythm that I had to adapt to. It was a privilege to be welcomed with open arms into my hosts' lives, to experience their day-to-day existence not just in terms of their profession but also little things like the food they cooked and ate and how they spent their free time. I vividly remember the delicious real fruit ice cream, a Kiwi staple, we made and snacked on during our breaks at the raspberry farm, and the evenings spent watching "Married At First Sight" with my older saffron farm hosts.

All in all, WWOOF presented the unique opportunity to understand someone else's way of life by living it. While I never had plans then or now to pursue agricultural work after New Zealand, I knew that this invigorated sense of empowerment and awareness of what can be gained when you step outside of your comfort zone would continue to prove its worth throughout my future. You don't need to be a farmer (or future farmer) to get something out of WWOOF. I would argue that you get even more out of it by not being one. All you need is a willingness to learn and challenge yourself, and you'll be guaranteed a memorable adventure.





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WWOOFing Basics

- Be selective with the photos you choose for your WWOOF profile. Pictures of you enjoying the outdoors, being active, and even working on other farms will help potential hosts see you're ready to get out there and get your hands dirty.
- Personalize the messages you send to hosts. It's tempting to copy and paste the same formulaic letter to multiple places when looking for a gig, but it's in your favor to add a couple of notes about why their farm in particular interests you rather than it seeming like you just really need a place to stay.
- Be clear on expectations. It'll make your stay a whole lot more pleasant if you and your host have set ground rules from the beginning about your work schedule, breaks, and living arrangement. Each host has their way of doing things, so by taking the time to have an open, honest conversation in the beginning, you can both avoid feeling misunderstood or taken advantage of.
- Request feedback from your host after your first gig. Depending on where you are, it can be difficult getting accepted for your first WWOOFing gig as a new member of the platform. Once you have some positive feedback on your page, it should make things a little easier since you'll be vetted for future hosts.

How to Be a Good WWOOFer

- Ask questions. If you're not sure about how something should be done or you need instructions repeated, don't be afraid to ask your host. Otherwise, you may be putting yourself, other WWOOFers, or your host's livelihood at risk.
- Don't always wait to be given tasks. When you're finished with all of your assignments and still have some work hours left, check in with your host to see how else you can be helpful—they'll appreciate your proactiveness.
- Keep a close eye on how your host does things. While they should be giving you the instructions you need, you'll be able to learn a lot (and make their lives easier) just by following their example.
- Check with your host about internet usage. Unlimited internet isn't always a given, so you don't want to run up your host's internet bill by streaming Netflix every night because it may be normal for you back home.

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