

TRAVEL PEOPLE

A walk in the parks



Inspirational: In one of Suisted's 99 photos that anchor *National Parks of New Zealand*, Mt Taranaki is pictured taking on a mysterious air after dark. Fanthams Peak, on the great mountain's south-eastern flank, is a subsidiary volcanic cone that has erupted more recently than the main cone.

Wellington photographer Rob Suisted roams the world in pursuit of the perfect picture. He told Travel editor **Cameron Williamson** about his travelling life.

IN HIS ninth and latest book, *National Parks of New Zealand* (New Holland) Rob Suisted and writer Alison Dench craft a loving portrait of New Zealand's 14 National Parks.

Interesting surname Rob. Scandinavian? Auld English? Suisted is anglicised Swedish "Sjöstedt". Great Great Grandad Charles Suisted was an early Wellington settler and hotelier (Barrett's hotel), then the first runholder in north Otago. He left a perfectly good home and family business in Sweden to come to the end of the world – maybe he started the

travel bug? Apparently he lost a hotel in Launceston Tasmania in a card game and ended up in Wellington to avoid creditors – I'd love to have met him!

Enviably job, too. How did you come to be taking photos of the world's wildest places for a living? Consciously followed my heart, not the flock: what feels best, rather than what you should do. What I mean is, I probably should have studied law, accounting, business, etc, but instead did zoology, criminology and conservation management because these interested me. I was the national marine mammal advisor for a decade before leaping off to follow my heart.

Do you have to travel much? Yes. When the weather's OK and the season's good I'm off with camera in hand, especially around New Zealand. There aren't many spots I haven't poked my nose into. I also take time off to help guide small high-end niche expedition ships to some pretty neat places in the world.

Where was your first trip? And what gave you the taste for travel? Varsity holidays I'd take my

motorbike to the West Coast for a summer of tramping, hunting and climbing. Covered a lot of the Southern Alps and explored some amazing places; very carefree. It's kind of carried on from there – love exploring new places. Photography has been a means to an end to get there and share with others.

You tweet a lot. How do you see the interface between travel and social media? Tweeting connects people and stuff. For example, I'm facilitating casual free photo walks in Wellington where interested people can participate then have breakfast. Social, sharing, learning – Twitter instantly connects the opportunity with people. Love it. It delivers so many opportunities and shares ideas and thinking. Not so big on Facebook.

What is your favourite destination overseas? Antarctica. Fifteen visits in four years guiding visitors on small expedition ships from New Zealand, Tasmania or Argentina. Interestingly, I took no useful photos in the first season. Antarctica is a very intimidating subject (especially the Ross Sea) – inhospitable climate,



If you're in the right frame of mind, India will give you everything.

sensory deprivation (little colour, sound, smell), and vast scale. I watch first-time visitors wasting a lot of their time struggling to try to photograph it. I often want to tell them to give up and be present to what they're experiencing. My second season was great; my mind must have processed it over the year, ready to comprehend things anew.

And here in New Zealand? Fiordland has my heart. I've spent a lot of time in some very remote valleys on long trips. The last trip I lost 6kg and spent six days trapped in a tent during a storm. She's intimidation one day, elation the next.

Best trip ever? A top trip was a spur of the moment *Shantaram*-esque Royal Enfield motorbike trip in Southern India, a few days with my brother, then a solo ride through Karnataka. The motorbike was illegally hired from a policeman (as you do), it was living on the edge; but if you're in the right frame of mind, India will give you everything. I wrote this up in my blog.naturespic.com, if you want to read. Peter Bush once wrote an article about it calling me the "Indiana Jones of NZ photography" – I quite like that.

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**Go with the floe:**

Rob Suisted navigates a Zodiac through the ice-strewn waters around the Antarctic Peninsula.

**Worst?**

I can't say I've had a worst trip. Frame of mind is the difference. I know that a tough trip in Fiordland can be a mind-breaker. The first few days can be unsettling, especially when you have a 30kg pack in untracked wilderness, and you've become bluffed and stuck as light fades. Going to bed knowing you have to start again in the morning, still wet, still bluffed, and with hours of toil to find a way through is hard. A week later, with a strong mind, you will come through with a feeling of elation and satisfaction. If you'd stopped earlier, it would have been the worst trip.

Is your National Parks book a collection of greatest hits from your library, or did you

shoot it specifically?

My *Majestic New Zealand* book – just recognised in the Whitcoulls book awards – is my greatest hits: heartfelt juicy love-of-New Zealand images that really turn me on. This new *National Parks of New Zealand* book gives easy access to the flavours of our parks. I want it to draw more people into seeing and then enjoying our network of amazing natural assets. It's been designed to carry, not leave on a bookshelf.

What are the five pieces of kit that you never leave home without?

Quality boots, camera . . . with photography the rest are attitudes: respect for your subject, a clear mind open to possibilities, no set schedule.

What is the wildest sight you've

Park wise: The new portrait of New Zealand's national parks is designed to carry, not to leave on the bookshelf. It's published by New Holland on September 1 and costs \$29.99.

witnessed while travelling?

Heaps. In the natural world: 50 fin whales (second biggest creature on the planet) around our ship between Greenland and Canadian Arctic. Aurora Borealis in Greenland and the Aurora Australis playing overhead at Macquarie Island. Leopard seal killing adelic penguins in water I'd just waded through. Driving my Zodiac inflatable boat near a polar bear and cub, with the environment minister from Monaco on board; that was a special privilege and wild sight.

The most heartbreaking?

Seeing the Arctic melt. Two years ago I helped guide a delegation from the Monaco Government in the Arctic. Their historian had photos from Duke Albert I of Monaco's Svalbard expedition in 1906-07. The glaciers are gone. It's fast slipping away and we can't see the creeping nature of it. That's heartbreaking.

If you could be anywhere but here, where would that be?

Taking my Jeep far around the Wellington south coast, diving for puaa, cooking them on a driftwood fire and watching the day end over Cook Strait with good friends and a wine. One of life's treats, and a place that many Wellingtonians haven't sadly experienced. I'd love to be doing that now as snow flurries past my window!

Where to next?

Just bought 20 acres of land near Wellington. Half of it's regenerating forest and it feels great to put profits from nature photography back into looking after land. It takes a lot of my time, but is paying huge satisfaction. I'm slowing down a lot and it feels good and grounding. The movie *Into the Wild* ends saying "Life is nothing if it's not shared" – that has me thinking a lot lately. Better follow my heart again.

. . . anything you'd like to add?

If you'd like to see my work, check out naturespic.co.nz or RobSuistedonCanvas.co.nz.

Rob is offering a casual, free photo walk on the Wellington south coast on the morning of Saturday, September 10, followed by a group breakfast. More at blog.naturespic.com.

TOP DEALS

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