The psychology of road trips ought to be studied. The cycle of emotions seems consistent. First, getting out the door is always challenging enough that I wonder, 'Is this really worth it?'. And then after a day of driving, I find myself in some beautiful spot wondering, 'Why don't we do this more?' This early elation lasts for a while, and my appetite for sites and activities seems endless. But inevitably exhaustion and over-stimulus begin to creep in, leading to the inevitable low-energy periods of the trip. And then at some point, the end begins to exert its pull, forcing you to focus on what's in front of you, and the elation comes and goes as you experience new places and fun. Finally, on the journey home, a feeling of sweet melancholy settles in, because it was great to get away, and yet you have to return to normal life, which can't be lived with the same intensity.

We ended our New Zealand summer break this year with a road trip. We drove a loop, first north to Christchurch, then west to the West Coast, then south to Wanaka, and finally home. We did it in one action packed week.

First, we caught the last day of an art exhibit by world renowned contemporary sculptor Ron Mueck at the Christchurch Art Museum. It was a mind-altering exhibit: hugely ambitious, flawlessly executed, capturing the human in lifeless sculpture (christchurchartgallery.org.nz/exhibitions/ron-mueck). The quality and affect of the work brought to mind the experience of seeing the great sculptures of Michelangelo in Italy this past summer. I left the museum inspired to do my best in my own small niche of human endeavor. This is what great art does and why it's important.

We spent our first night at a holiday park in the Christchurch beach community of New Brighton and surfed in the morning (it was a choice day) before heading west up into the mountains at Arthur's Pass. We camped near the renowned rock climbing spot Castle Hill and did a bit of climbing. This area brings to mind Montana: high and dry and relatively devoid of people.
The next day, we happened upon Cave Stream, which was one of the best surprises of our NZ travels. After donning our wetsuits, we walked for 20-30 minutes upstream with our headlamps shining through the complete dark of the cave, coming out the other end. Need I say more. It was a ball.
After that good fun, we drove to the West Coast and a small bach (the Kiwi word for cabin) in the small artsy community of Hokitika. We spent two nights there, relaxing at the bach and exploring the area. Alex and I surfed a few times -- the surf was calm and fun -- and Jen and Ellie worked on a driftwood sculpture for a local competition the town was having that week.

From Hokitika, over the next two days, we drove south and saw both Franz Joseph and Fox Glaciers, two major tourist attractions. These were the low energy days, and though we found the glaciers beautiful, they didn't quite compare with the previous 'off the beaten path' experiences that we'd had.

Our last stop-off on the trip was Wanaka, which is in central Otago. Most Montanans would find Central Otago familiar: dry, mountainous, with clear air and beautiful scenery. We rock climbed for two days at Hospital Flat, which was great fun, explored the town, and met up with some friends for dinner one night. Wanaka left me hungry for a speedy return.
On the drive home, from Wanaka to Dunedin, we stopped at our landlady's place and picked a bunch of apricots. Remember, it's summer here!