Lying in the South Pacific Ocean about 1,000 miles southeast of Australia, New Zealand consists of North and South islands—separated by the narrow Cook Strait—and several smaller islands. The climate is temperate and fairly wet. In most of New Zealand, daytime high temperatures in summer (December to February) generally rise above 70°F, while in winter (June to August) daytime highs rarely dip below 50°F. Reflecting its volcanic origins, the nation's spectacular terrain features mountains, fjords, lakes, glaciers, rain forests, and beaches. North Island is the warmer and more populous island. Within New Zealand's population of more than 4 million, Europeans make up about 80%, indigenous Maori almost 8%, other Pacific islanders about 4%, along with more than 10% mixed or other groups. More than half of all New Zealanders are Christian, and the nation's official language is English. New Zealand's capital is Wellington, on the southern tip of North Island.

**Government and Politics**

New Zealand was first settled about 1,200 years ago by the Maori, an eastern Polynesian people. Because these people had no name for themselves, they began calling themselves Maori (meaning "Normal") to differentiate themselves from British migrants, who began arriving in 1840. In 1907, the country became a British dominion; and in 1947, New Zealand became an independent member of the Commonwealth of Nations. Beginning in the 19th century, New Zealand was known for its social experimentation, and it retains a liberal, egalitarian political tradition. In 1990, welfare reform began, leading to increased discontent with the radical reforms of the dominant political parties—the conservative New Zealand National Party (NP) and the more liberal Labour Party. Tensions between the government and the minority Maori community were slightly alleviated during the 1990s by a settlement related to fishing rights in addition to land and financial compensation to the Maori, whose rights were first guaranteed in the largely ignored 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. In the late 20th century, New Zealand's parliamentary democracy underwent electoral reforms that ushered in proportional representation and strengthened the presence of minority parties in government. The NP won several national elections in the 1990s, leading to NP prime ministers James Bolger and Jenny Shipley.

However, in 1999 elections, the pendulum swung back to the Labour Party, whose leader Helen Clark was thereby elevated to premier. Clark's party also won parliamentary elections in 2002. Three years later, the Labour Party won an even narrower victory in September 17, 2005 elections; forcing Clark to negotiate with smaller parties to form a government for her third three-year term. In the early 21st century, one of New Zealand's biggest controversies again involved its indigenous Maori people, as the government continues to advocate a controversial policy that would strip the Maori of claims to the country's coastal areas. Clark continued to be one of the Pacific region's staunchest opponents of U.S. president George W. Bush's policies, including the Iraq War. However, during November 2008 parliamentary elections, her Labour Party was defeated by the more conservative NP, and NP leader John Key soon replaced Clark as prime minister of New Zealand. In August 2011, Sir Jerry Mateparae became the country's first governor general descended from the indigenous Maori people.

**Economy**

New Zealand has a strong agricultural sector and tourist industry. During the1980s, New Zealand instituted a controversial privatization program to transform its strictly regulated agrarian economy into a free-market system, and also decreased its dependence on the United Kingdom. Those reforms have given New Zealand one of the most open economies in the world. Wool, cheese, butter, and meat are its strongest exports, but the nation has also excelled at kiwi fruit cultivation and fishing. The manufacturing industry, specifically high-technology goods, continues to grow, and trade links with the Pacific Rim have expanded. The nation's recent unemployment figures have hovered around 4%—the lowest in decades.

During the early 21st century, the nation's burgeoning film and TV production industry gained worldwide recognition due to director Peter Jackson's three New Zealand-based film versions of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* novels. New Zealand's largest trade partners include Australia, Japan, China, and the United States. The country's energy resources include coal, oil, natural gas, and significant hydroelectric potential. New Zealand's per-capita income has steadily risen since the turn of the 21st century and reached $26,000 in 2006. New Zealand's economy declined by 1.7% in 2007 but by 2010 had achieved a 2.1% growth rate. Consumer and government spending have driven the nation's growth in recent years, though the two 2011 Christchurch earthquakes and the global recession continue to have some effect on the nation's economy.

"New Zealand." *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2013. Web. 17 Sept. 2013.