

In 2011, New Zealand welcomes 20 teams and hosts 48 games during the Rugby World Cup (RWC). Lauded as one of the world's three greatest sporting events after the Olympics and Soccer World Cup, the 2011 RWC runs over a six-week period in September and October, with the final taking place over a long weekend at Auckland's Eden Park on Sunday, 23 October.

The 2011 RWC is the largest sporting event ever held in New Zealand, with over 85,000 visitors pouring into the country during the tournament, slightly higher than the numbers that attended the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and 2003 RWC in Australia. In all, 11 venues – eight in the North Island and three in the South Island – are hosting most of the visitors and at least one of the 20 participating teams, and each has a cultural program of events and activities to showcase the region.

Rugby is New Zealand's national sport. Correction – it's an obsession.

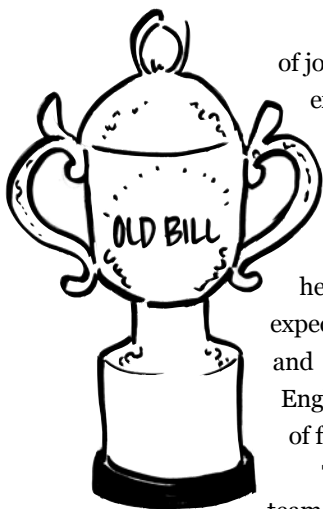
Pretend all you like that their excellence is because there is bugga all to do in a New Zealand winter. The reality is that rugby is embedded in the psyche of every New Zealander and its influence is all around: from kids playing touch in country parks, to rugby shirts worn as fashion

In 1823, William Webb Ellis first picked up the ball in his arms and ran with it. And for the next 156 years, forwards have been trying to work out why.

PRESIDENT OF THE WELSH RUGBY UNION SIR TASKER WATKINS.

statements, to the unmissable “Cake-Tin” of the Regional Stadium in downtown Wellington. More than 141,000 men, women and children play the game in New Zealand, and nearly half of those are aged under 13. For the 2011 RWC, games are being staged from Whangarei at the tip of the North Island to Invercargill at the bottom of the South Island, and you can bet your bottom dollar each ground will be packed with the most knowledgeable rugby folk on the planet.

If New Zealand does the “unchokeable” and goes on to hoist rugby's most coveted prize, the William Webb Ellis Cup, expect paroxysmal eruptions



of joy across the country. But if it all turns to custard, expect depression to rapidly descend upon the inhabitants, followed by massive knee-jerk reactions, including calls for the immediate sacking of coaches' Graham Henry, Steve Hansen and Wayne Smith – all bullet-worthy heads above the nation's rugby union parapet. Also expect a heavy player exodus, headed by Dan Carter and Sonny Bill Williams, to cashed-up French and English clubs. New Zealand, the rugby-mad "stadium of four million", is holding its collective breath.

The All Blacks, New Zealand's national rugby team, are the most feared and respected opponent in the rugby playing world. With their black jerseys emblazoned with the silver fern, they are also one of the most recognisable global sporting brands, drawing comparisons as the "Manchester United of rugby". Forget their atrocious record in RWCs; the All Blacks remain the benchmark, despite the quadrennial accusations that they are superb only in between the global tournaments.

The 2011 RWC event is being marketed as an opportunity to experience "authentic" New Zealand. Almost every part of the country is hosting a rugby side during the pool phase, with communities encouraged to adopt it as their "second team". In fact, the 20 competing teams are training at rugby clubs, schools and suburban grounds, so they'll be highly accessible to Joe Public. Throughout the tournament, for example, Tonga and Samoa are scheduled to train at the Ponsonby Rugby Club, one of the oldest clubs in the country and boasting All Blacks such as Bryan Williams, Andy Haden, Joe Stanley and Carlos Spencer as former players.

Throw in five thousand volunteers to ease visitors from one place to another, some nifty accommodation options (including homestays and three cruise ships), hefty ticket sales and a new fleet of Air New Zealand planes sporting the All Blacks colours and the silver fern and

you can understand why the country believes it's on track to stage a memorable event. Hell, New Zealand has even survived two massive earthquakes in Christchurch with renewed spirit and purpose.

All told, there's a good balance of kickoff times, despite only 10 matches being played in the afternoon and a preponderance of late-night games – 19 of the 48 matches begin at 8pm or later, with the two semi-finals and final kicking off at 9pm. These late-night matches have been pushed

Rugby World Cup fast facts...

- Australia (1991 and 1999) and South Africa (1995 and 2007) have won the RWC twice, with New Zealand (1987) and England (2003) victors once.
- Jonny Wilkinson from England is the highest points scorer in RWC history, with 249 points in 15 matches.
- Simon Culhane has scored the most points in one game (45), when New Zealand beat Japan 145-17 in 1995.
- New Zealand has scored the most RWC points, with 1,711 points in 36 matches.
- The highest winning score in a RWC match is 142, when Australia beat Namibia 142-0 in 2003.
- In 1987, 0.23 billion watched the RWC on TV; in 2007, the television audience was 4.2 billion.
- The 2011 RWC will draw 85,000 international visitors, whose average length of stay will be 23 days, and gross over US\$150 million, with 1.45 million ticket sales across 48 matches.

back as far as possible so they can be beamed into the sizeable UK and Europe breakfast television audience. And better still, there won't be the droning sounds of vuvuzelas to put up with – they've been banned from the tournament.

Away from the rugby, New Zealand's raft of assets include some of the finest scenery in the world, political stability, a good health system, an easy-going lifestyle, famed hospitality and, just in time for the 2011 RWC, the nation's biggest ever festival – the REAL New Zealand Festival – with more than 1,000 events up and down the country. No wonder the 2010 UN Human Development Report voted New Zealand the third best country to live in the world.

Don't worry about choosing arts or sports, or between culture or rustic wilderness, because the prospect of hosting the RWC tournament has seriously woken up the country, so it's all there.



Quake-devastated Christchurch misses out on RWC

In September 2010, a large earthquake registering 7.1 on the Richter Scale caused havoc to Christchurch, the second largest city in New Zealand and the largest in the South Island, levelling buildings and causing superficial damage to fixtures and fittings at Stadium Christchurch, where England was due to open their RWC campaign against Argentina. The city had been beavering away to repair the damage, and was in good shape before a second earthquake (6.3 magnitude) struck on 22 February 2011 with tragic consequences – at the time of publication, an estimated 182 people had died and many people are still in need of assistance. Contingency plans had been drawn up after the first earthquake, but after a meeting with IRB officials on 16 March 2011, it was decided that Christchurch was finished as a venue and that the seven matches (including two quarter-finals) would be shifted to Auckland and other venues. Pending further decisions, it is still hoped the All Blacks will play one game in the South Island.