

FOLLOWING THE COAST

Kathryn Webster journeys from Christchurch to Picton.

“THE DAY I SAW A BUSKER in the city, I knew Christchurch had come back to life,” says Stu, the owner of Vintage Peddler. He’s referring to the earthquakes, of course, and the time it’s taken for the city to catch its breath. Although I’m happy to take the man at his word, he goes on to prove that the city has indeed risen from the ashes.

He escorts us on a cycle tour around town to shows us some of the best bits.

We zip down city streets, past the art gallery, into Hagley Park where we pedal happily under a blue sky along wide paths, to see the cricket oval and the gardens behind the hospital. Then back into the city, past precincts built with sheltered laneways and pedestrian malls, to High Street, which has changed radically but in its new form is open and welcoming; to Little High which

features an upmarket, modern take on the food hall concept. We stop for coffee, then off to see the site of the new library, the work being done on the town hall, through Margaret Mahy Park, full of kids in the autumn sunshine. See? The city is coming back to life. Locals are out, hotels are open, tourists are coming.

It seems a shame to be leaving but we have an itinerary to stick to. Despite all appearances to the contrary, we are on a road trip.

We collect a rental and drive one a half hours to Hanmer Springs. We’re booked into the very stylish Heritage for the night and luck in with a balcony suite overlooking the hotel’s back garden. It’s early evening and a pretty golden light is soaking the town, so we walk and, of course, end up at the pools. This is a

highlight, the luxurious long soak, and the best bit? Being able to amble home, tired and warm, all our creaks and cricks sorted from time under the jet streams.

Hanmer Springs is busy, but in a very relaxed way. People meander and stroll. They take their time in warm and friendly family restaurants, or at outside tables in the morning sun, ordering more coffee. Everyone is in holiday mode.

We venture into the hills behind the town, driving to the edge of Molesworth Station and the start of the St James Cycleway. Up high, silver, gold and muted green grasses shift in the wind.

A sharp blue river tumbles through. We walk away from the car for a bit, to get a taste of the peace and wide-openness.

Then down, into the valley of autumn colours, through farmland and across to



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHRYN WEBSTER

Waiau before linking to SH1. We swing off at Conway Flat for a walk on the wild, dumpy Claverley Beach.

The road to Kaikoura involves many stops and slow driving for roadworks but the work is so impressive and everyone encountered so cheery with their waves and big smiles, it is impossible to mind. That wonderful, dramatic coastline is such a sight; such an encounter - I am conscious that it's not something to take for granted anymore. Clearly it is a major undertaking to restore the route and I feel genuine gratitude that it's being done.

A vibe of relief permeates Kaikoura, too. People are back. We check into The White Morph, chuffed with uninterrupted views over the bay from our upstairs balcony, then take a walk. Kaikoura is bristling with activity; bustling, energised.

Early the next day, we launch off the South Beach with Kaikoura Kayaks. It is a glorious, calm morning - perfect for such sport - and we paddle easily around to The Hook and to Whaler Bay to see seals.

Kaikoura is famous for its access to sea life; just off shore is the very deep Kaikoura Canyon. Where the



trough meets the land mass is rich pickings for hunting creatures and something of a highway for various migrating and transient species. Most famously: whales. Sperm whales, orca, humpbacks, pilot and blue whales visit at various times of year. Whale watch boats and small planes head for the horizon, following signs and sounds, each tour a cocktail of excitement, wonder, promise and thrill.

We see two magnificent sperm whales - huge and miraculous.

It leaves us speechless until later in the day. Eating whitebait fritter sandwiches for an impromptu picnic in the foothills above the town, we phone family back home. Seeing whales is something everyone should do, we say to them. Come and witness this miracle, marvel at these beasts, watch them disappear into the deep with their elegant, effortless dives.

To end the day we drive to Kaikoura's Point Keen to walk over the reef recently pushed up by quaking earth into the sunlight and now home to seals and seabirds. Many other tourists are also enjoying the slightly surreal landscape. »

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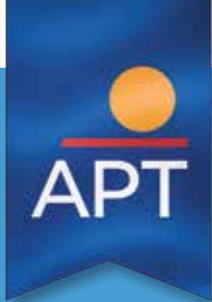
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From Kaikoura, the road follows the rugged, rocky coast where more earthworks buzz with the business of fixing earthquake damage. Then the coast calms and sand hills between the road and the surf echo the rolling shapes at sea. Further along, the land changes again, becomes smoother and the mountains become backdrops, no longer looming over us.

Just north of Seddon we turn inland up Awatere Valley Road which could, with more time available, lead us back to Molesworth Station behind Hanmer Springs, but instead we turn up Taylor Pass Road to where we've booked a farm-stay cottage. Tucked under trees, with views of a bubbling stream and paddocks thick with green, we find a sweetheart of a hut, furnished with homely warmth and welcoming touches – board games, flowers, a platter for dinner. We take a slow walk, past the chooks and the calves, up the hill.

Tour operators Explore Marlborough collect us in the morning and drive us to nearby Blenheim. At the Vine Village we pick up rental bikes and pedal off to taste the glorious efforts of Nautilus, Framingham, Bladen and Wairau River vineyards, cycling between them on wide, flat and safe cycle paths. We stop for a long lunch in the sunshine at Wairau River winery.

While in Blenheim, we also visit the Omas Aviation Heritage Centre for a look through two history-laden halls. One houses Sir Peter Jackson's collection of WWI memorabilia, including original and replica planes displayed in scenes like movie sets, stories of heroics, theatre to relate to. It's poignant, clever and compelling. The second hall covers WWII in the 'Dangerous Skies' exhibition. Around 9,500 personnel were stationed in the Blenheim area for the war so it's locally significant and resonates on both a personal and political level. A short drive away is



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Picton where we check in to our hotel then find the very good Diversion Gallery before heading to Le Café for a meal and the treat of live music.

Considering this was a road trip, we've indulged in a lot of alternative modes of transport: bikes, planes, kayaks – and now a water taxi. We want to experience the Queen Charlotte track. Being dropped at Resolution Bay means we avoid the strenuous first-day hill. Instead, the 10-kilometre walk to Furneaux Lodge is easy and very pleasant. After hot chips and coffee at the lodge, we meet the water taxi again for a ride home.

And then the ferry. Early morning, it heads out of port into the Sounds, clouds shrouding the tops of the hills, the leaden sky pushing the waves in Cooks Strait flat and calm. It's a lovely end to the journey. **AA**



Visitor information

Kaikoura's Pier Hotel, a warm and happy pub with dining room windows looking out to the bay, provides the perfect seafood menu.

Fyffe House is a fascinating remnant of Kaikoura's pioneer whaling station – built in 1844 and open for visitors. Check Heritage New Zealand's website for details.

WHERE TO STAY

Heritage Hanmer Springs, The White Morph in Kaikoura, Taylor Pass Hut on the outskirts of Blenheim and Picton Yacht Club suited us well. Many accommodation options can be found and booked at:

aatraveller.co.nz

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