

canterbury trails



Restaurants, hotels and attractions are reopening in Christchurch after recent earthquakes. Once you're done exploring, the city is an ideal gateway for excursions around the greater Canterbury region. By Kerry van der Jagt



ANIMAL ATTRACTION
Swimming with fur seals at Kaikoura
Inset: Daly's Wharf stretches into Akaroa Harbour

If a New Zealander tells you a hike is going to be easy, don't believe him. He's lying. Not a fib, but a whopper as big as the Southern Alps themselves. The mountain path we've been climbing for the last few hours has gradually morphed into a steep scree slope with a dizzying drop to one side. With legs and lungs on fire and the slate slipping under my boots, I'm grateful for my guide James' reassuring hand. "Not much further," he says, his nose growing by the minute.

Finally, breathlessly, we make it to the summit of 1,522-metre Surveyors Peak, deep in the privately owned Puhī Peaks Nature Reserve on New Zealand's South Island. The clouds part like a stage curtain and a great splash of light reveals the craggy peaks of the Seaward Kaikoura Range sparkling with their tiaras of snow. I can see as far south as Christchurch and across the ocean to the Kaikoura Peninsula while, in the distance, the legendary 2,590-metre-high Te Ao Whakere, or "World of the Gods," stands like a signpost to the heavens.

I add a small pebble to a rocky cairn and say a silent prayer for those who have walked before me, for those who will follow and for those who will never make it. On February 22, Christchurch was hit by a magnitude-6.3 earthquake, then hundreds of aftershocks, and New



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT
 Clockwise from left: Patriotic Christchurch locals; overlooking the beautiful Akaroa Harbour on the Banks Peninsula; kayaking Kaikoura, where the mountains meet the sea

Zealanders are still in mourning.

Seven blocks of Christchurch's central business district were destroyed or damaged by the earthquake but rebuilding is underway, and the greater region remains unaffected and is well and truly open for business.

Canterbury is the largest designated region in New Zealand; anchored by Christchurch, it spreads from the Pacific Ocean across the braided rivers of the Canterbury Plains as far as the Southern Alps, the backbone of the South Island.

I first visited Canterbury in the mid-'80s – lured, as many Australians are, by the promise of powdery snow. I've been a regular visitor since. There are 18 ski areas in the region, from small, friendly club fields such as Porters Ski Area, Mount Cheeseman and Broken River to the internationally renowned Mount Hutt Ski Area.

And 10 of them are within two hours' drive of Christchurch.

Porters, just 89 kilometres from Christchurch airport, is a small field with a big heart and includes the legendary Big Mama, one of the longest and steepest single runs in the country. The Licence to Chill ski pass, which gives skiers and snowboarders access to 11 club mountains, is great value.

Mount Hutt, on the other hand, is a vast commercial ski resort that enjoys one of the longest and most consistent seasons in New Zealand. With its wide, well groomed runs, double black-diamond chutes and back country, it has something for everyone: Skiiland Early Learning Centre for children, the UP & GO Terrain Park for the cool crowd and plenty of challenging chutes on the south face for the certifiably insane. In 2011, the ski-field has created its first automated snowmaking line,



with the addition of 16 snow guns on the International Trail.

The region also does luxury lodges better than anywhere else in the country. At Terrace Downs High Country Resort, winner of the 2010 World Travel Awards as New Zealand's Leading Golf Resort, it's possible to heli-ski straight from the car park in the morning, jet-boat on the Rakaia River in the afternoon and finish the day with an Asian-style massage in the resort's newly opened spa.

On this visit, just one month after the earthquake, I swap ski boots for hiking boots as I head southeast from Christchurch past copper-tinted trees and sun-burnished fields for the easy 90-minute drive to Akaroa, a historic French and British settlement nestled in the heart of an ancient volcano. Set on a sheltered harbour and flanked by steep hills, this resort village

has been dubbed "New Zealand's Riviera", and it's easy to see why.

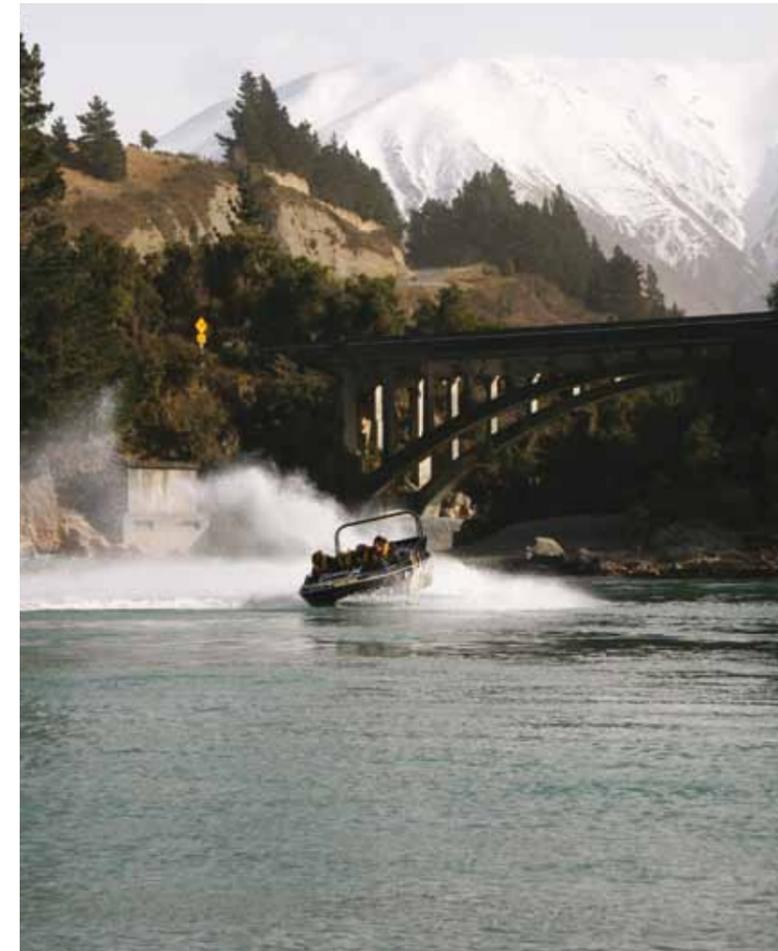
In 1838, French whaling captain Jean Langlois negotiated with the local Maoris to buy the Banks Peninsula with the aim of setting up a French colony. By the time the French got their act together and sailed into Akaroa in 1840, they were met by the British, who had hoisted the Union Jack just 10 days earlier. After a brief tête-à-tête, the French were allowed to stay and today, the town has a distinctive Gallic flavour. I pass streets with names such as rue Benoit and rue Lavaud and bistros serving up cassoulet and pommes frites.

Akaroa is a Maori word meaning "long harbour" and, for me, this is where the city truly dazzles. Black Cat Cruises offers Akaroa Harbour nature tours on which visitors can swim with Hector's dolphins – the world's rarest and



POWDER PERFECT

Clockwise from above: Mt. Hutt enjoys one of the longest and most consistent ski seasons in New Zealand; jetboating on the Rakaia River; punting on the Avon River is back on the tourist roster in Christchurch



“On Akaroa Harbour, visitors can swim with Hector’s dolphins or go in search of fur seals, blue penguins and sea birds including oystercatchers and albatrosses.”



smallest dolphins – or cruise the harbour in search of New Zealand fur seals, little blue penguins and sea birds including oystercatchers, terns and albatrosses.

Akaroa is an easy daytrip from Christchurch, but is even better as an overnight stay. A couple of hotels have teamed up with Black Cat Cruises to offer value-added “snooze and cruise” deals.

Back in Christchurch, I board the TranzAlpine train offering a scenic rail journey from the east to the west coast of the island. Departing Christchurch daily at 8.15 a.m. and arriving at Greymouth four-and-a-half hours later, the train passes through 19 tunnels and four viaducts, the highest being the “Staircase,” standing at 73 metres.

Passengers can recline in comfort inside or ride the rails in the open-air viewing carriage. I alternate between the two and, with my hair spinning wildly around my head,

watch the countryside thunder by: aquamarine gorges, towering waterfalls and moody, mist-laden mountains. When I am old and grey and have forgotten just about every train ride I’ve taken, I’ll remember this one. Passengers can make the return journey the same day or do as I did and head south for a few days on the west coast, exploring the Franz Josef Glacier and Westland/Tai Poutini National Park.

On the final leg of my journey, I return by TranzAlpine train to Christchurch for the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Kaikoura to join a three-day guided walk through Puhi Peaks Nature Reserve.

From Christchurch I travel north along Highway 1, the azure waters of Pegasus Bay clinging to my right shoulder. I’m in the heart of Hurunui now, a nature-lovers paradise with vast, deserted beaches and lush wilderness parks. I take the Gore Bay Tourist Drive past

but then again, I'd been distracted by the luxurious eco-lodges, gourmet meals and fine South Island wines that greeted me each evening after a day of hard trekking.

Back in Kaikoura, the first community in New Zealand to be Green Globe benchmarked and only the second in the world to receive this accolade, I spend a few days enjoying everything this seaside village has to offer: swimming with dusky dolphins, snorkelling with fur seals, whale-watching, kayaking and feasting on fresh crayfish, for which the region is justifiably famous.

While each visit I've made to Canterbury has changed me – filling me with awe and wonder, uplifting and strengthening me – this trip has been more humbling. Being welcomed by the Canterbury people with smiles and “no worries” attitudes, so soon after the disaster, has softened me. Christchurch is shrugging off its heavy cloak and blooming again, and I'll be back to check on its progress soon. •

Photography by Kerry van der Jagt, Miles Holden and courtesy of Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism.

the surfing beach of Gore Bay, the eroded siltstone pillars of the Cathedral Cliffs and through historic Port Robinson before arriving at Puhi Peaks, just north of Kaikoura.

Puhi Peaks is the highest freehold land in the country, and one of only two remaining places on earth (both within the Seaward Kaikouras) where endangered Hutton's shearwaters breed and nest. “They have been recorded travelling at 150 kilometres per hour,” says James. “So it takes them 38 minutes to get up and only seven minutes to get back down to the sea.”

My journey takes a little longer



travelfacts

gettingthere

Air New Zealand, Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Australia fly from select Australian cities to Christchurch.

- Air New Zealand. 132-476; airnewzealand.com.au
- Jetstar. 131-538; jetstar.com
- Virgin Australia. 131-645; virginaustralia.com
- Qantas. 131-313; qantas.com
- Qantas Holidays. 131-415; qantas.com/holidays

whentogo

Canterbury is a year-round destination, depending on the activities you want to partake in. Hiking is at its best in the warmer months from October through March, while reliable snowfalls attract skiers and snowboarders in winter.

gettingaround

The best way to explore Canterbury is by car. Avis has a number of outlets around New Zealand, including several in Christchurch. 136-333; avis.co.nz

Kaikoura Wilderness Walks run from September to early April. The three-day walk starts on Fridays and costs AU\$1,395; a two-day option, starting Wednesdays, is also available. 64-3/319-6966; kaikourawilderness.co.nz

The TranzAlpine train departs Christchurch and Greymouth. 64-4/495-0775; tranzscenic.co.nz

wheretosleep

The Fairways at Ocean Ridge, Kaikoura offers a stunning location; its one- and two-bedroom apartments have fully-equipped kitchens and all accommodations have deep baths for soaking tired limbs. 64-3/319-3055; thefairways.co.nz

If you're keen to stay close to the snowfields, try Terrace Downs Resort – luxurious accommodation just 20 minutes' drive from the Mount Hutt access road. 64-3/318-6943; terrace Downs.co.nz

The George, recognised as New Zealand's leading boutique hotel in the World Travel Awards for the past five years, is situated in Christchurch city, opposite Hagley Park and the Avon River. 64-3/379-4560; thegeorge.com

furtherinformation

Nothing is too much trouble for the friendly folk at Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism and Hurunui Tourism. 64-3/379-9629; christchurchnz.com or visithurunui.co.nz

CHRISTCHURCH REDUX

The iconic punts are back on the Avon River; the Botanical Gardens is awash with autumn colours; both the art gallery and the museum will be open by winter; and the International Antarctic Centre is showcasing its new movie experience, *Ice Voyage*. Though some parts of Christchurch are still cordoned off, for safety reasons, the welcome mat is well and truly out.

The Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism website has an update page, growing daily, that lists more than 50 attractions currently open to visitors. “It's been important to us that we get back up on our feet as quickly as possible and, while there is still a significant amount of rebuilding work to be done, we certainly feel we're in a good position to welcome tourists back,” says Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism chief executive Tim Hunter.

Finding a bed isn't a problem either: by May 2011, there were eight hotels, including five-star The George Hotel, 10 lodges and apartments, 105 motels, 17 holiday parks, 15 backpacker lodges and 70 bed-and-breakfasts in full operation.

And dining out is more exciting than ever. The concept of “urban dining” has grown in popularity in

recent months, and several small suburban restaurants are being “rediscovered”; there's Edesia in Addington, tucked away in a quiet cul de sac; Tutto Bene, an Italian pizzeria in Merivale, and Terra Viva in Harewood, dishing up gourmet deli-style food. In addition to the regular farmers' markets, pop-up markets are also appearing all around Christchurch.

Another exciting development is the Fan Zone in Wellington's north Hadley Park. In preparation for the Rugby World Cup in September (the Christchurch matches of which will now be played in Wellington), the zone has been turned into a precinct of bars and restaurants. It's designed to replace SOL (South of Lichfield), the well-known hangout that was damaged by the Christchurch 'quake.

Upcoming events include the popular Christchurch Arts Festival in August; Le Race – the annual Christchurch to Akaroa cycle race in October; New Zealand Cup & Show Week in November; the BMW New Zealand Open (Golf) Championship at Clearwater Resort in early December; and the World Buskers Festival in January 2012, part of Christchurch's vibrant SummerTimes event schedule. •



Award-winning Hanmer Springs Thermal Pools and Spa is the jewel in the crown of a region abounding in natural attractions. Soothe your body in the famous waters, relax with a glass of wine in a local winery, and enjoy the fresh air, space and views of a land made to be enjoyed. Hurunui. Travel well. Visit soon.