

NEW ZEALAND 2025 - PART XII

CHRISTCHURCH - LAKE TEKAPO - OAMARU

It was a pretty short drive to our next destination, Christchurch, so we found a couple back roads to take and stopped to enjoy the scenic views and do some birding along the way. Soon after leaving Akaroa we headed slightly inland and up along a ridge road, stopping to enjoy the views back towards Akaroa Harbor, French Bay and the Banks Peninsula on the other side.



All across New Zealand, arrows on the roads after pullouts, intersections, one lane bridges, and many other driving distractions were a helpful reminder of which side of the road one should be positioning ones' self.



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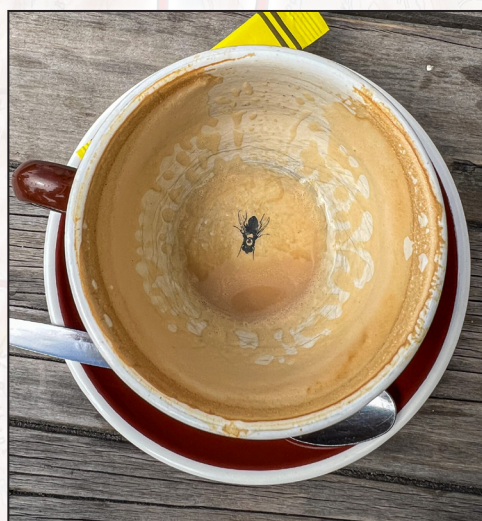
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We passed back through Little River and stopped to have brunch, visit an art gallery and check out the SiloStay accommodations. You can check it out further in this YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oiz3YBLW148&t=53s>

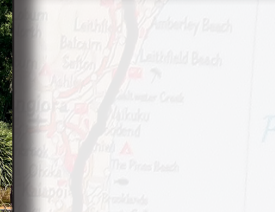
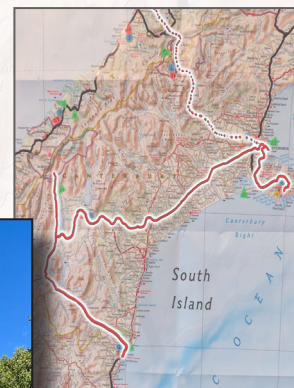
(just click the text or one of the images)

The garlic adorned toast was great. It became an easy add to our garlic buttered, toasted baguette rounds we have most nights at home. Since I started making our own salt-free (less tasty) baguettes at home, additional garlic seems appropriate to make up for what salt had added to the taste.

Wendy's latte had a surprise ending too. When I have my own cafe this is the sort of cups some customers can expect.

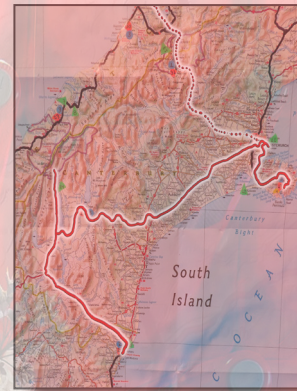


We took some back roads into Christchurch, stopping to offer some help to this fellow working on his truck. Seems he had been waiting for some parts to arrive for some time.



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Christchurch is still rebuilding from the 2011 earthquake. Fancy man hole covers celebrating the city with it's place name on them are not part of that plan, but... we did find some rather plain ones with 'Christchurch' name on them.

Christchurch is the largest city in the South Island and the second-largest city by population in New Zealand with about half a million people.

The city suffered a series of earthquakes starting in September of 2010, with the most destructive occurring in February 2011, in which 185 people were killed and thousands of buildings across the city suffered severe damage, with many central city buildings collapsing. There is still ongoing recovery and rebuilding which is easily seen.

The 2011 earthquake was a 6.3 magnitude earthquake. Christchurch's central city and eastern suburbs were badly affected, with damage to buildings and infrastructure already weakened by the 2010 Canterbury earthquake and its aftershocks. Significant liquefaction affected the eastern suburbs. The earthquake generated a significant series of its own aftershocks. More than 361 aftershocks occurred in the first week following the magnitude 6.3 earthquake. The Anglican Christchurch Cathedral to the right was severely damaged in the earthquake and is still a restoration or rebuild or nothingness... mired in controversy and funding issues to this day.



We went to Quake City, a special exhibition put on by the Canterbury Museum about the earthquakes. Canterbury is the region, the largest in New Zealand, where Christchurch is located.

There were lots of interesting information, displays, videos, and photographs. Particularly poignant to us were the video interviews of those who lived through the earthquake and those that came to help.

Click here or on the image to the right to see a short YouTube introduction video to the exhibition.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myTgv94OzjQ&t=7s>



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The city has been recognized as an Antarctic gateway and is nowadays one of the five Antarctic gateway cities hosting Antarctic support bases for several nations.

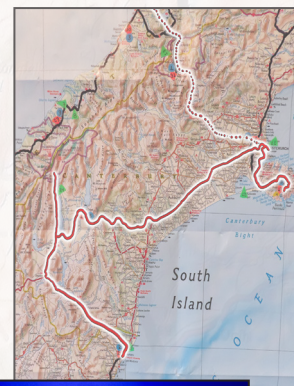
Since Wendy was not able to get off the ship on our trip to Antarctica in 2023, we went out to the International Antarctic Center for a visit. They have an indoor polar storm room that is chilled to -8 degrees Celsius and buffeted by a -18° Celsius wind chill machine. We felt this would be as close as we were likely get to Antarctica weather again.

Even though we had to pass on the *Polar Plunge* experience on our 2023 Antarctica trip, we again had to pass on the Christchurch International Antarctic Center Polar Plunge Challenge into icy cold Antarctic-like water. We had not thought ahead very well and did not bring our swimsuits on this trip. Oh well, some things are not meant to be.

We happened to visit Christchurch during the 2025 World Buskers Festival and caught a few of the public performances as we walked around the city.



Christchurch has a hop-on hop-off tramway that we took advantage of, visiting some areas that were a bit too far to walk to and to see some of the downtown areas from the comfort of padded seats and shade.



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Across the street from our Christchurch lodging the new multi-use sports arena Te Kaha (meaning "*the strength*" but now known as One NZ Stadium for sponsorship reasons) was under construction. The facility is designed as a replacement for Lancaster Park, which was damaged in the 2011 Christchurch earthquake and then demolished in 2019. It is part of the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan developed by the government in 2012. It was an interesting skeleton of a structure when we were there. Luckily, at night construction stopped so noise was never an issue for us.



This building's facade reminded us of the kind of work our artist friend David Franklin has designed and installed on several buildings and other structures in the USA.



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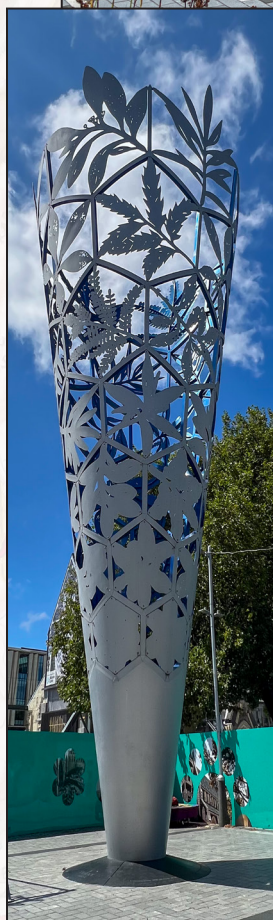
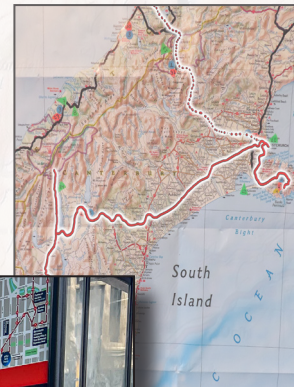
CHRISTCHURCH PUBLIC ART PAGES



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While in Christchurch we took the TranzAlpine train across to the small coastal harbor town of Greymouth on the west side of the island. One way, the train covers a distance of 139 miles (223 kilometers) taking about five hours. This scenic journey offers stunning views of the Canterbury Plains and the Southern Alps. Most people make the train a one way trip and fold it into their itinerary that way. For us it made sense to make it a round trip, returning to our Christchurch lodging and rental car and then continue our travels on from there. This left us a couple-three hours to explore a little bit of Greymouth before re-boarding the train and taking the trip back. It provided for a different view of the same scenery and in a bit different light.

Crossing the Canterbury Plains we saw lots of cows, now more abundant than sheep in New Zealand as they are more profitable to raise.



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We found the entire trip provided great views, but the area we passed through here (the B&W photograph to the right) was the primary reason most people take this train trip.

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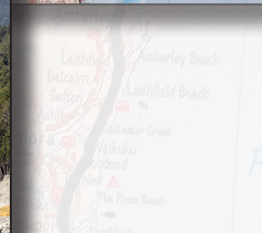
Soon we started dropping down out of the New Zealand Alps and following valley river routes.



We made brief stops for passengers at Moana (Lake Brunner) going both ways. Moana is the largest lake in this region and is one of New Zealand's most significant brown trout fisheries, often referred to as "*the place where fish die of old age*".

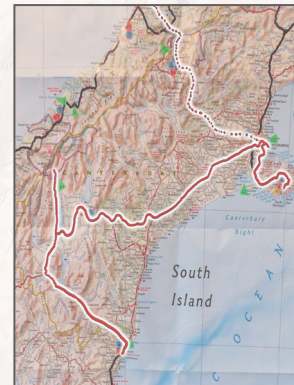
Swimming, kayaking, waterskiing, and jet skis are all popular at Moana. Because the lake is fed from surrounding forest, not snow, it can reach what South Islanders might consider pleasant temperatures in summer. The lake is also surrounded by bush walks (hiking trails) that are popular.

This house boat, being the only oat we could see on this large lake, sure seemed inviting and tranquil.



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The Greymouth Bar is a sandbar at the mouth of the Grey River. It is notorious in New Zealand and more than 44 ships have been wrecked there while entering, leaving or mooring in the harbour. We didn't have the time to go explore that area as it was a bit too far from the train station by foot, but there are still three remaining wrecks one can see there.

Greymouth was founded during the West Coast gold rush of the 1860s, but for 150 years after the gold rush the Greymouth area economy was based on coal mining and native timber forestry. These brought prosperity to the town which at one point had 47 hotels (today it has only six). Most of the coal mines have now closed.

Beginning in the 1960s, forestry and coal mining began to decline. In 2008, the opening of a new coal mine, the Pike River Mine, spurred new investments and upgrading of the port facilities at the town. The opening of the new mine was called the biggest investment happening in the area for a hundred years. Coal barges travelling to and from reshipment facilities would have carried containerised cargo to the town and saved the port from closure but in November of 2010 there was an explosion at the Pike River Mine, trapping 29 miners. Attempts to rescue the trapped miners were repeatedly delayed due to high levels of methane gas, until a second explosion a few days later dashed all hope of survival for the miners. Pike River Coal went bankrupt in the wake of the disaster, was purchased by another company, which then closed the mine in 2012 and finally went bankrupt itself in August 2015.

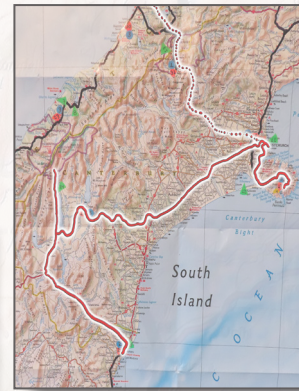


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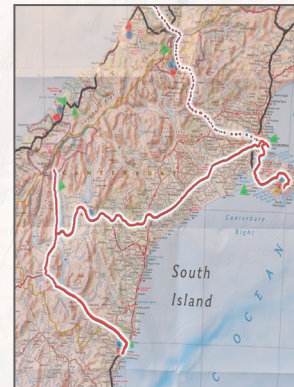
After the decline in coal mining and forestry, the West Coast economy became increasingly dependent on ecotourism. Thousands of coal mining jobs had declined to around 50, and hundreds of tourism jobs had replaced them. During Greymouth's boom years, much of the center of town was built up in brick Art Deco buildings.. After regulations were tightened following the 2010 Canterbury earthquake, many of Greymouth's heritage buildings were found to be unsafe, and the combination of earthquake-strengthening costs and being on lease land makes many of them uneconomic to restore and occupy.

Greymouth is also known for its pounamu (a form of jade called *greenstone*) carving industry which goes back to Māori origins.



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We returned to Christchurch in early evening. It was the last day of our five day stop in Christchurch so we prepared for our exit the next day to our next stop at Lake Tekapo.

One of the things I admire about New Zealand politics is it's ability to try to solve their problems in a timely manner, and if it doesn't work admit it and try something else. Certainly there are things not to agree with and there are extremists-like views on many sides in New Zealand too, but they seem to be able to move forward in ways we in the United States have not been able to.

For example, in a late 1960s high school civics class I remember giving an oral report on the arguments of both sides of gun control in the United States. That debate about gun control in the United States has lasted my entire life without much significant change on either side or in the laws.

In March of 2011 Christchurch suffered the worst terrorist attack in New Zealand history. Altogether, 51 people were killed and 89 others were injured in the attack that targeted two mosques. The Australian attacker live-streamed the first attack on FaceBook. Police recovered two AR-15 style rifles, two 12-gauge shotguns, and two other rifles. The attacker was granted a firearms licence and then purchased the weapons and more than 7,000 rounds of ammunition. He used four 30-round magazines, five 40-round magazines, and one 60-round magazine in the shootings. Additionally, he illegally replaced the semi-automatic rifles' small magazines with the higher capacity magazines purchased online, against the conditions of the gun licence.

Philip Alpers of GunPolicy.org noted at the time, "New Zealand is almost alone with the United States in not registering 96 percent of its firearms ... one can assume that the ease of obtaining these firearms may have been a factor in his decision to commit the crime in Christchurch."

On the day of the attack, Jacinda Ardern (Prime Minister of New Zealand at the time) announced that gun laws would change. Within one week Ardern announced a ban on semi-automatic weapons. As an interim measure, the government reclassified some semi-automatic rifles and shotguns, requiring police approval to buy them. The Arms (Prohibited Firearms, Magazines, and Parts) Amendment Act House was later introduced to the New Zealand legislature and it became law shortly afterwards. All legally obtained semiautomatic and military-grade firearms and their relevant ammunition were able to be handed over to police in a buy-back scheme. The scheme lasted six months and 33,619 hand-ins were completed, 56,250 firearms had been collected, 2,717 firearms had been modified, and 194,245 parts had been collected. The buyback was hailed as a success by some. In contrast some said the buyback had been a failure, claiming that there were 170,000 prohibited guns in New Zealand, so "50,000 was not a number to boast about".

Meanwhile, my observances here in the United States (regardless of one's own opinion) is that the debates around the various issues of firearm ownership continues, the divide of opinions increases, the likelihood of legislative change decreases, and the tolerance of the consequences of liberal firearms ownership continues.

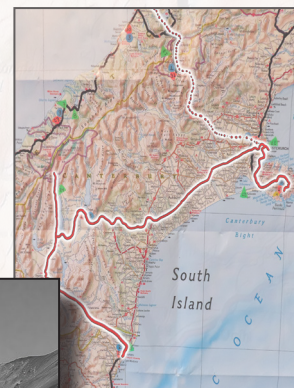
On a lighter note, on our drive to Lake Tekapo we stopped and had bacon for lunch



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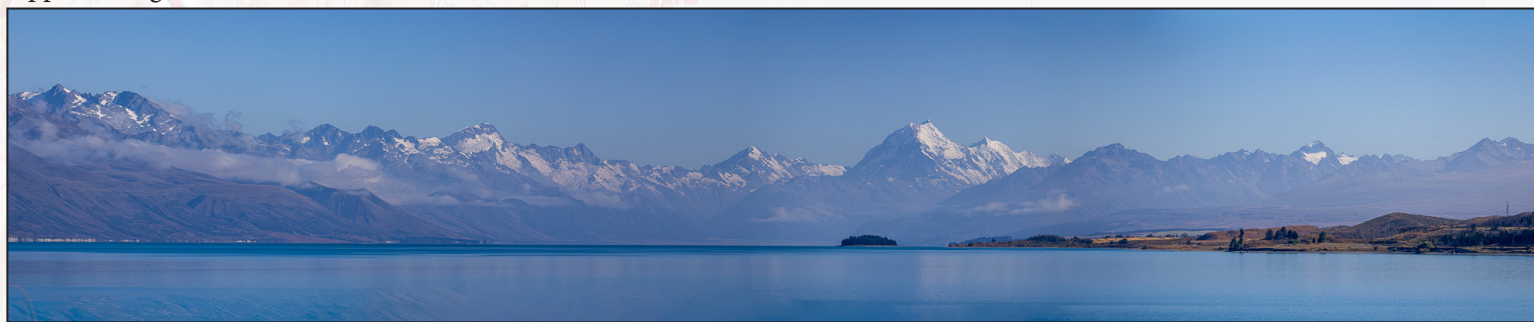
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From our room at Lake Tekapo we could walk across the street for great views.



"Tekapo" is a misspelling of Takapō, the name of the lake in the Māori language. Takapō means *"leave in haste at night"*. Takapō is the second largest of three roughly parallel alpine lakes running north-south in this area of the South Island (the others are Lake Pukaki and Lake Ōhau). Takapō covers an area of 32 square miles (83 square kilometers) and is at an altitude of 2,330 feet. (710 meters) above sea level.

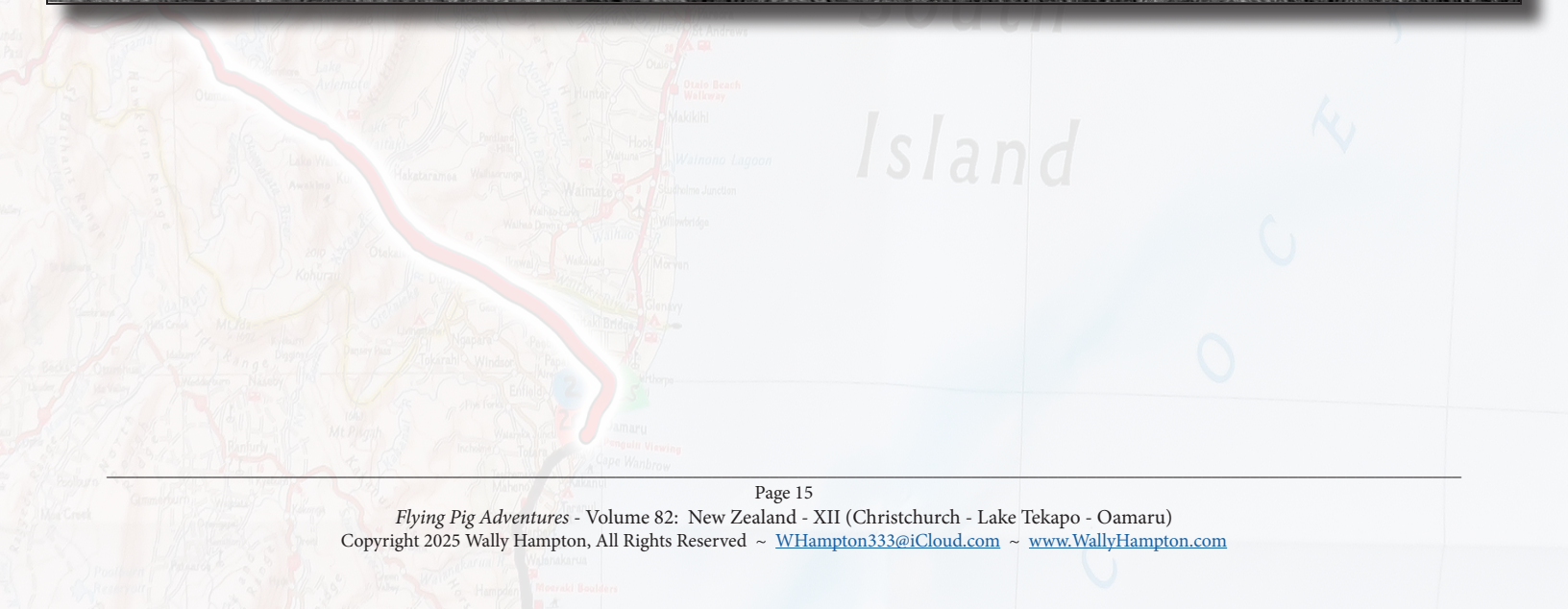
From Takapō we visited the Aoraki / Mount Cook and Lake Pukaki area. Lake Pukaki is the largest of those three parallel alpine lakes. All three lakes were formed when the terminal moraines of receding glaciers blocked their respective valleys, forming moraine-dammed lakes. Lake Pukaki covers an area of 69 square miles (178.7 square kilometers) and is at an elevation that normally ranges from about 1,700 to 1,745 feet (about 518 to 532 metres) above sea level, making it a bit lower in altitude than Takapō. Aoraki / Mount Cook, the tall peak in the distance below is about 43 miles (70 kilometers) north from where I took this photo. We drove up the west shore line of the lake to the base of Aoraki / Mount Cook where there is a hotel and small support village.



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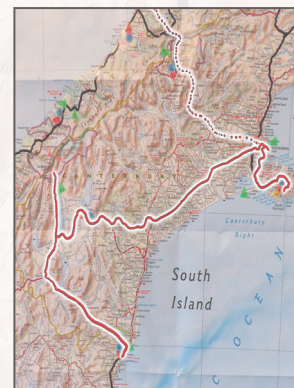
Aoraki / Mount Cook is the highest mountain in New Zealand. Its height is 12,218 feet (3,724 meters). A popular tourist destination, it is also a favorite challenge for mountaineers. Aoraki / Mount Cook consists of three summits: from south to north, the Low Peak (11,788 feet or 3,593 meters), the Middle Peak (12,195 feet or 3,717 meters) and the High Peak. Aoraki / Mount Cook is ranked 10th in the world by topographic isolation.



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The Aoraki Mount Cook National Park Visitor Center was interesting to visit. They had these really nice leaded glass windows of bird and nature themes. They were large, at least 8 feet tall.



We had a refueling adventure to remember our Aoraki / Mount Cook drive by. Our hybrid rental car needed fuel, but I wasn't concerned as I'd read ahead of time that there was a self-service pump somewhere there. We found the pump, but could not get it to work. NOT GOOD! The next nearest fuel was in the town of Twizel, 40 miles (65 kilometers) away. I did the miles vs fuel vs mileage math... it did not produce a very desirable result. To say the least it was a rather tense drive back down. Watching the fuel level indicators and our mileage indicators as we drove back did not give us confidence we would make it. Then the fuel information display just blanked, evidentially the fuel level was so low measuring was not possible. Now it was even a more tense drive. I kept looking ahead, keeping the next safe place to pull over within rolling distance WHEN we ran out of fuel. Somehow we made Twizel rolled into the first fuel station we could see and filled up. I pulled out the manual later to see what the actual fuel capacity was of our rental and found we had put a couple liters more fuel in it than it held... so... we were running on fumes as they say. In addition the manual said NEVER run out of fuel or serious and permanent engine / electrical system damage can occur. Breathing deeply for the first time since leaving the non-functioning gas pump at Aoraki / Mount Cook we enjoyed lunch in Twizel.

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Not all our Aoraki / Mount Cook adventures provide the sort of drama that *running low on fumes* did. We made a stop to bird for Black Stilts at a location I'd researched along the Tasman River, the headwater of which is Aoraki / Mount Cook. The Black Stilt (kākī in Māori) is one of the world's rarest birds, with only 169 adults surviving in the wild as of May 2020 and only breeds in the Mackenzie Basin, the area we were in. There was a spot along our drive that was supposed to be a place they breed so we stopped on the way up to Aoraki / Mount Cook to try to see them. After a short walk into the delta we got some quality time viewing some Black Stilts among other species as well. I got a few photos too, but at a distance. It was another time I wish I'd brought my longer focal length lenses with me (but I wished so only until considering the logistics of almost doubling the amount of our luggage). Photographs of the Black Stilts and other birds on this trip will be in the last *Flying Pig Adventures* travelogue in our New Zealand series.



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On our way to our next stop in Oamaru we passed the Flying Pig Cafe. It was a public holiday that day so we didn't go in. As it turned out, the place was for sale too! You can imagine the thoughts and day dreams we had about buying it? It is probably just as well that it was closed, but what a story book ending to all our *Flying Pig Adventures* it would have been.



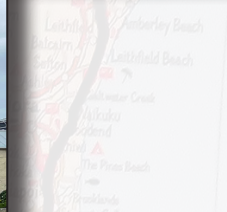
Oamaru weather was a cool and cloudy for our two day visit, the typical Pacific Northwest Weather we have here most of the year.

Oamaru has been built between the rolling hills of limestone and short stretch of flat land to the sea. This limestone rock is used for the construction of local "Oamaru stone", sometimes called "Whitestone" buildings.



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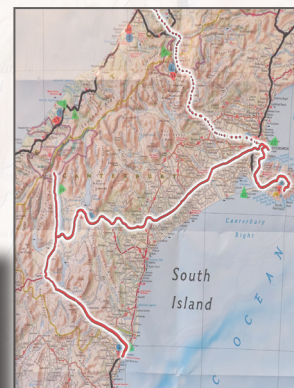


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In Oamaru we saw the elusive Little Penguins Blue Penguins (more commonly known as Blue Penguins or Kororā in Māori). The Little Penguin is the smallest species of penguin which originates from New Zealand. It is a marine neritic species that dives for food throughout the day and returns to burrows on the shore at dusk.

In Oamaru, visitors can view the birds returning to their colony at dusk in special built viewing bleachers within a Little Penguin conservation area created from an old quarry. No photography is allowed there but was still a good birding experience. Of course we opted for the 'premium' viewing but the Little Penguins could have cared less.



The photo of the viewing area is from the Oamaru Penguins web site, not one I took.

In Oamaru it is common for penguins to nest within the cellars and foundations of local shore front properties, especially in the old historic precinct of the town near where we stayed. We walked to and from the night viewing from our lodging. On our way back it was dark and we ran across Little Penguins under an old building as described above. We walked back through a deserted waterfront park and heard what seemed like many but we could not see them over some protective fencing and barriers they were behind. A little further on in a more industrial / warehouse waterfront area we heard more Little Penguins and here there was no fence. I had a tiny penlight we were using to find our way back and used it to see a few more. My little penlight was just enough to see them, at distance and not be intrusive (as well as see where the heck we were walking).



This photo was taken at a zoo and not be me. I have no Little Penguin photographs of my own to share.

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We spent some time in the amazing Steampunk HQ, an art collaboration and gallery that promotes sustainability and recycling in the historic Victorian precinct of Oamaru.

It is its own industrial take on steampunk via an array of contraptions and sculptures, complemented by audiovisual installations. A yard also contains a collection of other industrial parts and projects in various stages of completion.



I caught Wendy and her friend doing a little Steampunk hacking.

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