



23 MAR, 2024

Sunny side up

Newcastle Herald, Newcastle

Sunny *side up*

In New Zealand's Top of the South, KATRINA LOBLEY follows a trail custom-made for lovers of wine, adventure and sunshine.

IN THE middle of Middle-earth - New Zealand's Cook Strait - I'm dazzled not by a golden Ring but a downpour of sunshine. No offence, Wellington, but you were wet, wild and windy. As I'll discover, though, a short journey by ferry from the bottom of the North Island to the Top of the South brings you to the land of milk and honey.

Or perhaps it's more like fine wine and tasty times. I'm sliding in to the Marlborough region, which produces about three-quarters of the nation's wine - including its world-famous sauvignon blanc, although other grape varieties thrive here, too, thanks to the cool but sunny climate, low rainfall and free-draining soils.

From Marlborough, I'll road-trip westwards to the Nelson Tasman region, which attracts artists and adventurers (Nelson is also the country's geographical centre - its belly button, if you like). My one-way journey of about 200 kilometres would barely qualify as a road trip in Australia but it's perfect if you prefer to clock up holiday experiences rather than hours on the road.

Certainly, you won't need wheels at first if you roll off the Interislander ferry in

cute-as-a-button Picton and head to Lochmara Lodge. You can reach the road-less lodge the hard way - hikers and bikers conquering the Queen Charlotte Track can detour 3.5 kilometres to the lodge - or the easy way. Chopper in if money's no object, park a jet ski or take the lodge's own water taxi from Picton.

You can visit Lochmara just for the day. Picton is tiny - with just 4300 residents - but the lodge cocoons you in even more serenity. People come to lunch at this scenic spot, to paddle kayaks and paddleboards through water as shimmery and iridescent as a paua shell, to show their kids the native red- and yellow-crowned kakariki parakeets and resident kunekune pigs, to visit the underwater observatory or to explore the 4.5-hectare property's walking trails dotted with quirky sculptures.

OF SOUND MIND

As I'm staying overnight I roam the property at leisure, drinking in the candy-floss skies at sunset and sunrise. I also spot Glow Worm Gully and, further up the hill, star-gazing hammocks that you could visit after dinner. At the onsite Lochmara Cafe, I wolf down a bowl of fragrant green-lipped mussels, steamed and served with nduja cream,



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preserved lemon and chorizo, and sip a glass of riesling from Caythorpe Family Estate near Blenheim. It's hard to believe that back in 2021, Lochmara's then new owners, Chris Bensemman and Niki Penberthy, were desperately trying to divert a biblical deluge from sweeping right through this cafe.

Back in Picton, I farewell the Lochmara water taxi and, after a quick squiz over the marina from the Coathanger Bridge and a visit to the park's futuristic public toilet that plays music while you visit, I board another vessel - this time to cruise through the sounds to Ship Cove. This sheltered anchorage is where Captain James Cook took refuge five times between 1770 and 1777, watering his vessels from the stream and putting sick sailors into tents on the beach to recuperate.

Beachcomber Cruises skipper Jason Wells, whose ancestors traded with Cook at Ship Cove, gives a fascinating Maori perspective on the sounds. He points to a low saddle with a beach behind it, and tells me how Maori would drag their waka - or canoe - over that point.

This cruise isn't only for day-trippers; it also provides an essential service in a region that's often too rugged for roads. We pull in at tiny jetties to drop supplies at remote lodges tucked into Endeavour Inlet and ferry hikers and cyclists tackling the 73.5-kilometre Queen Charlotte Track. One of New Zealand's premier trails, it's based on a network of pioneer bridle paths that connected rainforest, pretty bays and skyline ridges. Ship Cove marks both the trail's end and our cruise's turning point: we have just enough time to race to the Cook monument before returning to Picton, accompanied part of the way by dolphins.

ARTIST HAVENS

Before farewelling Picton, I grab a four-cheese toastie and pop into The Diversion Gallery to learn more about the South Island's vibrant contemporary art scene. More art is on my radar as I'm tootling 27 kilometres down the road to Blenheim, a

town six times larger than Picton but exuding the same snuggly vibe.

My first stop is Te Kahu o Waipuna - Marlborough Art Gallery and Library, a new building that reflects its surrounds. Exterior panels mirror the nearby Wither Hills while, inside, the ground floor channels the colours of the land and the first floor reflects the colours of the sky. No wonder 1600 former library members renewed their memberships within seven weeks of the building's opening. The gallery, meanwhile, no doubt attracts some of these bibliophiles with

its statement gold interior entrance.

As well as institutions such as the Marlborough Art Gallery, Blenheim is home to more community-led cultural initiatives. Pluto Projects Artspace is an initiative from three artistic go-getters - Gabe Bertogg, George Waterhouse and Clayton Morgan. While the Pluto mother-ship, an industrial space near Blenheim's tiny Taylor River, is currently not hosting public events, the Pluto trio continues to create a sense of *whanau* (extended family) with grassroots events in venues including Blenheim bars and a park chapel. This being small-town New Zealand, everyone is welcome. As one of Pluto's Instagram posts says: "You know the drill - tell a friend, bring a friend, make a friend."

There are other ways to make friends in Blenheim. If you're there on a Wednesday night, for instance, you can head to Scott Street's Tabletop Cafe to play board games. I'm staying around the corner at 14th Lane Urban Hotel. It's tempting to linger in my room, which is all very textural with its cosy blankets and mountain of pillows, but a table with my name on it is waiting on Blenheim's outskirts.



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WINING AND DINING

Arbour, set amid rows of grapevines about 10 kilometres west of town, was named New Zealand's Best Regional Restaurant in 2022. The restaurant's signature seven-course dinner menu - "The Many" - might include the likes of a scampi tail, yuzu and leek tart, smoked-curd dumplings with asparagus, apple and brown butter, and Meyer lemon-curd parfait. Wine pairings come at two price points: "things to drink now" and "rare and cellared".

The special selections that end up in my glass include a 2015 Greywacke pinot gris, a 2018 Clos Henri sav blanc, a 2012 Raupo Creek pinot noir and a sweet finish with a 2020 Folium Late Harvest. If you have no idea where to start with the Marlborough region's stellar wines and which cellar doors to visit, spending a night chatting with Arbour's knowledgeable co-owner and front-of-house, Liz Buttimore, will give you a few pointers.

The next morning, a pretty tray breakfast - granola with fresh sliced fruit, milk in a glass bottle, poached pear, wholegrain toast, jam and butter - is brought to my room. Luckily, I've been out and about working up an appetite. Opposite the hotel is a building covered in bird murals. Poke around the side and you'll discover a beaver mural (curious, until you learn that Blenheim was once dubbed The Beaver because of the region's tendency to flood).

A half-hour drive away is Havelock - New Zealand's green-lipped mussel capital. So much for my plan to snack on these delicacies. Thanks to that breakfast overload back in Blenheim, I settle on admiring the beauties on display in Mills Bay Mussels' tasting room. Pick from live mussels, those shucked on the half-shell, smoked with manuka and chilli, or servings of creamy mussel and fish chowder.

HITTING THE BIG SMOKE

It's only 73 kilometres from Havelock to Nelson - but don't rush through this coun-

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try. It so entranced director Sir Peter Jackson that he featured the Te Hoiere/Pelorus River as a setting in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. Pull over at the Pelorus Bridge Scenic Reserve, home to a small population of critically endangered long-tailed bats, and scramble down to the river. It's the same alluring colour as the powerful greenstone that's sourced from South Island riverbeds and boulders, and carved into talisman.

Nelson, with 55,000 residents, seems like a vast metropolis after Blenheim and Picton. To help fit the most into my visit, I'm taking a bespoke tour with Zane Kennedy of Wine, Art and Wilderness. After passing the studio of Jens Hansen - The Ringmaker (of *that* Ring), we hit The Suter Art Gallery - the Nelson Tasman region's public art gallery - with its intriguing blend of cutting-edge and heritage architecture. The gallery is a memorial to Nelson's second Bishop, Andrew Suter. He also shaped what is now Pihopa Retreat - the stunning boutique hotel where I'm bunking down.

The gallery's high-ceilinged cafe cleverly frames a wall of green - the neighbouring Queen's Gardens - but we're heading for lunch with ocean views. The Boat Shed Cafe, built on stilts over the water, has sweeping views that include the decommissioned Boulder Bank Lighthouse. It'd be easy to settle in with another glass of the Neudorf chardonnay but Zane has things to show me.

Like sculptor Michael MacMillan's gallery - a work of art in itself that happens to be on the same road as Neudorf Vineyards - in Upper Moutere. The gallery, with a dramatic outlook onto the Mount Arthur ranges, features not only high art but homewares made from recycled materials such as Neudorf's old French oak barrels.

In contrast to MacMillan's modern gallery is Bartlett and Gold Gallery based in an 1893-built home. Behind it is the original 1870s home, propped up by good luck and an exuberant century-old wisteria that's in bloom



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when I visit. The gallery showcases Katie Gold's whimsical clay art and Owen Bartlett's pottery. Toast the historical village just down the road at the Moutere Inn - established in 1850, it's said to be New Zealand's oldest pub.

WHEELY GOOD TIME

You could spend all your time in Nelson soaking up good eats and drinks: charcoal-fired deliciousness at Parts & Service, ne-gronis and margaritas with a twist at Kismet, beers at The Free House (the pub, in a former church, was NZ's first to gain climate-positive status), coffee and treats at Ruby's Espresso at the Nelson Marina.

Or you can work for the goodies by tracing the Great Taste Trail, one of New Zealand's 23 Great Rides. The Gentle Cycling Company's Bernie Whitaker leads me on an e-bike tour to some of the trail's highlights. One of them is Motueka's Toad Hall - famous for its real-fruit ice-creams and fresh produce. The clever move is to source picnic supplies from Toad Hall and bike them, via the Mapua ferry, to Rabbit Island. Here, you can make like the locals frolicking along the 13-kilometre beach and plucking drinks from their chilly bins. This wheely is the real deal.

The writer travelled as a guest of Destination Marlborough, Nelson Regional Development Agency and Tourism New Zealand

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Fly non-stop to Wellington from Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane with Qantas or Air New Zealand. After exploring the New Zealand capital at the bottom of the North Island, cross to Picton at the top of the South Island as a foot passenger on the Interislander ferry. Considered one of the world's most scenic ferry rides, it glides through the sea-drowned valleys known as the Marlborough Sounds (although it might feel like you're cruising south, Picton lies west of Wellington). Upgrade your 3.5-hour journey (from \$NZ64 [\$59] adult) with access to food and drinks in the premium lounge (add \$NZ86 a person). [qantas.com](https://www.qantas.com); [airnewzealand.com.au](https://www.airnewzealand.com.au); [interislander.co.nz](https://www.interislander.co.nz)

Getting around: Multiple car-rental companies are located near Picton Ferry Terminal. Hertz's rate for a five-day one-way Picton-Nelson rental, for a driver aged over 30, starts from \$NZ824. [hertz.co.nz](https://www.hertz.co.nz)

Staying there: At Lochmara Lodge in Queen Charlotte Sound, rooms start from \$NZ150 a night. In Blenheim, the eight-room 14th Lane Urban Hotel is fashioned from a 1940s wood and coal merchant store; rooms start from \$NZ276 a night. In Nelson, suites at Pihopa Retreat, which feels like a luxury lodge, start from \$NZ1380 a night and include breakfast, afternoon tea (think mandarin cake placed in your room), pre-dinner drinks and canapes, and free taxi service to and from downtown. [lochmara.co.nz](https://www.lochmara.co.nz); [14thlane.nz](https://www.14thlane.nz); [pihoparetreat.nz](https://www.pihoparetreat.nz)

Playing there: Beachcomber Cruises' half-day Ship Cove cruise costs \$NZ101 adult. Wine, Art and Wilderness offers private and small-group tours focused on wine and food, nature or Nelson's arts scene. Hire an e-bike from The Gentle Cycling Company from \$NZ80 for a half-day. [beachcombercruises.co.nz](https://www.beachcombercruises.co.nz); [wineartandwilderness.co.nz](https://www.wineartandwilderness.co.nz); [gentlecycling.co.nz](https://www.gentlecycling.co.nz)

Eating there: Arbour's degustation menus highlight the Marlborough region's growers, hunters and producers; book for dinner Thursday to Saturday or Saturday lunch at this fine diner on Blenheim's outskirts. Mills Bay Mussels is open Wednesday to Saturday. In Nelson, dine at the Boat Shed Cafe and Parts and Service; enjoy drinks at Kismet and The Free House. [arbour.co.nz](https://www.arbour.co.nz); [millsbaymussels.co.nz](https://www.millsbaymussels.co.nz); [boatshedcafe.co.nz](https://www.boatshedcafe.co.nz); [partsandservice.co.nz](https://www.partsandservice.co.nz); [kismet.co.nz](https://www.kismet.co.nz); [thefreehouse.co.nz](https://www.thefreehouse.co.nz)

Explore more: [newzealand.com](https://www.newzealand.com); [marlboroughnz.com](https://www.marlboroughnz.com), [nelsontasman.nz](https://www.nelsontasman.nz)



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The town of Blenheim; Katie Gold clay art; the Mussel Pot at Havelock; ringmaker Halfdan Hansen. **Pictures: MarlboroughNZ; nelsontasman.nz; Miles Holden; supplied**



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Clockwise from left:
Toad Hall; green-lipped mussels; Beachcomber cruises; Marlborough vineyards; fine dining at Arbour.

ON THE COVER:
Historic streetscape in Nelson. **Picture: Shutterstock**



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COVER STORY





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From top: Cycling on the Great Taste Trail; Suter Art Gallery in Nelson; paddling to Split Apple Rock.

