



[EDITED BY SUSANNA ANDREW]



GLORY DAYS

One of the best things about not living in Wellington is that it's such a good place to visit — especially when the arts festival is on.

STORY **SIMON WILSON**

THERE NEVER WAS a wind like it. True, the sun was shining, but this was a wind that flung itself at the city, hurling pigeons across the sky, shredding the posters off walls, smacking you in the face as you rounded every corner. People bent their bodies and laughed, teeth bared to the gale, hands clutching their heads. It bounded down Taranaki St, tree to tree, each pohutukawa seized and shaking itself like a dog.

On the waterfront promenade, there's a railway sleeper cantilevered over the water, and three girls in their underwear, and a fourth still in school uniform, were jumping off. Spredaeagled, held aloft in a fistful of wind, then thrown down into the cold, churning sea. And out, gasping, shrieking, to do it again.

Springtime in the glorious capital. There's nothing else like it. The evening before, when I flew in from the south, the water had a gentle glassy swell and the air was bright and clean; as the plane did that steep banking thing round Red Rocks, you could see right down into the scree-drenched ravines of the south coast.

We straightened and dropped, glump, as if the plane had slipped off a step and fallen to a lower one. I knew just what it looked like from land: I used to work in a building on the Lyall Bay foreshore, and I know that all the planes, as they enter the airspace above the bay, drop suddenly. On board, in a big wind, it feels scary. Watching from on land, you can see that it's just fine.

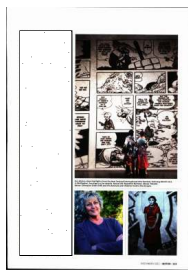
Sometimes, there are southern right whales in that bay.

Wellington's got everything you need for a few days in the city, including optimism. At the start of Oriental Parade, there's a sign saying, "Classic Wine Trail". Possibly it means you are allowed to drink on the beach.

Oriental Bay was resanded with Golden Bay's finest several years ago and it's still resplendent in the bright yellow stuff. There's a platform to swim out to and a fountain to swim around, excellent ice creams across the road (at the famous dairy and at Kaffee Eis) and, like its newer twin by the Freyberg Pool, it's so close to the city you'd be a fool not to throw your togs into your bag on any hot day and get in a dip. The water is clean. Yes, of course it's cold. But not Dunedin cold.

THE THING ABOUT visiting a city as opposed to living there is that you get to spend as





much time as you like in the best bits. Take the Cable Car to the top of the Botanical Gardens and wander down through native bush to the Rose Gardens. Explore Kirkaldie and Stains, where they really do try to observe the department store pieties of old. Lose yourself in Unity Books, the best bookshop in the country, with the best backlist and the best displays of new fiction, New Zealand books and books of ideas. Buy a coffee and settle yourself onto a bench in Civic Square to enjoy the marvel of a beautifully proportioned, architecturally graceful, functional public space.

If there's something big on at the Cake Tin, go to it. The crowd experience — walking up along the raised promenade, getting into the action in a full oval amphitheatre — is exceptional. It's a cold trap in there, though, so dress warm.

Parliament's good, if it's sitting and if you're titillated by that peculiar synthesis

of silly self-aggrandising rituals and very real power. It's the heart of this city, although only in some senses. In others, you'll find that heart at the other end of town, where rituals of a different kind play out at Caffé L'Affare.

L'Affare is an astonishing place: warm, expansive, full of the smells of roasting beans and good food, and it's always full of underemployed artistic types, clutches of young mums with their tots, sharp suits and schoolteachers playing hookey. A remarkable mashup of the tribes of Wellington, all enjoying the mash: there's nowhere else in the country like it; quite possibly in the world. Then, wander over the road to Moore Wilson's and soak up the busy life of our best food emporium. It's so exciting in there, it's like they pump in extra ozone.

Every visit to Wellington, you'll find more good cafes, restaurants, inspired new architecture, knicky-knacky shops. In the

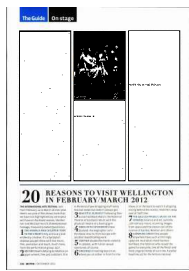
few blocks of upper Cuba St, the shops are now so relentlessly cool, it's as if they were designed by some team in a museum: a representation of coolness in the modern city, as opposed to a city itself. That, of course, in this town, is quite possibly true.

I'm not complaining — it's all part of what makes Wellington so good to visit. And there are exceptions. I was delighted to see the Munchener is holding out: no new décor, still the best spicy European sausages, still the same enormous-value-for-money lamb rolls they've been serving for over 30 years.

Across the road and down a block is Floriditas, where the European flavour is vastly more sophisticated. It's a cafe/restaurant serving excellent food, but the bonus is their five-grain bread, loaves of which you can buy and take away: tasty, chewy, moist, better than cake, quite possibly the best bread I've ever eaten.



Our photos show highlights from the New Zealand International Arts Festival, February-March 2012 in Wellington. See page 114 for details. Above left: Beautiful Burnout. Above: TeZuka. Below: Germaine Greer (left) and The Animals and Children Took to the Streets.



For the best posh meal in town, book at Martin Bosley's. The restaurant sits in the simple and quaintly parallel-universe surrounds of a yacht club, but he's the real deal. Every chef in the country worth their salt will blather on about local and seasonal and artisan and all that, and so does Bosley, but when it comes to what they do with all those good ingredients, he is an actual magician.

For a pre-show meal or lunch-time *prix fixe* special, though, it's hard to beat Logan Brown in Cuba St (around \$40 for three courses).

There's much more to choose from, of course. Deserved local favourites include Arbitrageur, Capitol, Matterhorn and Ortega Fish Shack, and the hot new place is Ancestral in Courtenay Place (reviewed next issue). If you start to miss the celebrity-bar-hopping scene, try Mighty Mighty and Motel. If it's craft beer you're after, seek out Hashigo Zake in lower Taranaki St. They reckon they've got the best drinks list in the country, but I've lost count of the number of places — here and there — that say that.

And the place to stay? I kind of like it high in the Intercontinental, because most of the buildings you look out on are rather lovely, because the harbour is right there, because in the morning the streets far below fill with people scurrying along to work and you don't have to join them. I have also enjoyed a stay at ohtel, a friendly 10-room boutique hotel on Oriental Parade with a serious commitment to designer chic.

This is an easier town to visit if you haven't lived here, perhaps. Sometimes I feel I know half the faces I walk past. Though with the young adults in Courtenay Place, close to where I lived and my kids went to school, I find myself peering, wondering which of them I used to know when they



were six. Honest, I try not to make it creepy, but it's not easy scrutinising passers-by and hoping they won't notice.

ALWAYS, YOU GO TO Te Papa. Still a monstrous building, from the outside, although familiarity means that's easier to overlook these days. And inside, still a treasure trove. Partly, this is on account of the exhibitions and displays, but only partly. Te Papa, internally, is an endlessly rewarding three-dimensional maze of spaces to look through and down and along, with so many nooks and crannies crammed with more things to discover. And then there's the people, the pleasure to be got from watching others getting such evident pleasure in the place.

Not that all is well inside Te Papa: the gallery of new acquisitions, which will be on show right through the festival, feels like a morgue. Everything's so very spaced out and much of it is so dull the languor infests even the occasional striking piece.

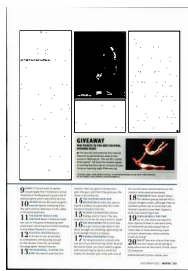
One example: Lisa Walker's jewellery — two pieces including a necklace made on a jandal — is surely a serious attempt to both subvert and entertain, but here it's stuck in an isolated display case and reduced to the status of a glum artefact. Peter Robinson, Shane Cotton, they've got the big names, but it just feels barren.

This is supposedly an exhibition of the best they've acquired since 2006, but oh dear. They say they're going to refresh the lineup for the festival. Clean it out and start again with a curator who understands vigour would be better.

WHEN YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH of the city, hire yourself a car, or a bike. If it's a car, drive over the Rimutaka Hill for a day in the southern Wairarapa: Greytown has most of the best antique shops and eating; Martinborough is the start point for an excellent wine trail; the pub at Lake Ferry does awesome fish and chips and the beach there is a strange and scary thrill: the surf pounds and rages away against the steeply raked sand, and just when you realise you've misjudged and that next wave is going to break you to pieces and drag you away, the vicious undertow sucks it back out to sea. For even more wilderness, head along the coast road, which is falling into the sea in a most picturesque fashion, to the primeval fishing village at Ngawi. There are cottages for rent out there.

If it's a bike you've hired, get yourself up into the Brooklyn hills and ride the trails behind the windmill. Drop down through those scree-filled ravines to the south coast, head round the road back to Owhiro Bay and then keep going all round the coast, right round the Miramar Peninsula and Evans Bay. There are several great lunch/coffee stops along the route: just past Island





Bay at the Brass Monkey, in Lyall Bay at the Maranui Surf Club and in Miramar's old Airforce base at the Chocolate Fish Cafe. When you get back to the city, you'll have earned a beer. Beach Babylon in Oriental Bay and the Mac's BrewBar at Taranaki St Wharf are both good waterside options.

AS FOR THAT WATERFRONT, the remarkable thing is how much better it is than Auckland's — how much better it continues to be, in fact, despite the improvements of Wynyard Quarter and the existence of the Cloud. There are so many great things about it that you wish the Auckland planners would just stop for a moment and take a proper, inspirational look.

The holes cut through the wharf, say, so that you can see down, walk down, to the water underneath the pier. These are fun, but surely just the beginning of the idea. What about a restaurant hanging under the pier? A kids' adventure playground? Hell, if we're talking Auckland, why not a row of shops?

Waitangi Park, with its meandering swamp walk and its large open commons, ready and waiting for games and concerts and circus tents and crowds, all of which it quite frequently gets. The stand of 40 karaka trees, the impressively defiant kitsch of the Kupe statue, and Te Wharewaka o Poneke — a new home for local waka. What, they've got a serious Maori presence on the waterfront? Who thought of that?

The art, and the celebration of art. Many gifted and single-minded individuals and groups have established the cultural life of the Wellington waterfront, but beyond that the city was so uncommonly lucky when it commissioned Para Matchitt to design the footbridge linking the Civic Square with the lagoon.



Let's be honest, commissioning public art has got to be just about the highest-risk public development planners can do. We got the Kate Sheppard steps in Khartoum Place — although Wellington has its equivalent in the ludicrous slippery tilework of Te Aro Park — but they also got Matchitt's exuberant, glorious wooden overbridge. How come? Well, it was in the last days

before public consultation: submissions and committees of the dull-witted could never produce anything half as good.

And the buildings: the old Herd St post office, a gracious art-deco building now serving as apartments for a few and a focal point for everyone else; the Overseas Passenger Terminal, also about to become apartments; the hotel that's to come; all the converted warehouses; the new BNZ down past the railway station. You need buildings by the water, to bring people, to provide focal points, to anchor the whole endeavour.

Wellington is a brilliant case study in how, despite all the usual stupid arguments about the contest of public space and private commerce, the mix of the two is essential for the enhancement of both.

Because what's really great about Wellington's waterfront, sprawling right along the edge of the city, is its sense of proportion. The focus is not on bars and restaurants, but on promenades and public spaces. The whole long stretch has segments loaded up with places to eat and drink, and so it should, but you get the sense, even when you're sitting in the middle of a rowdy pile of drunks, that the place is about something larger. That sense eludes Auckland. ■