

ROLLER COASTER

THERE ARE PLENTY OF THRILLS TO BE HAD ON THE WEST COAST. THE HIGHS ARE THE MOUNTAINS AND THE GLACIERS AND THE LOWS – WELL, THERE REALLY AREN'T ANY UNLESS YOU COUNT GOING DOWN A COALMINE

WORDS YVONNE VAN DONGEN PHOTOGRAPHS DANIEL ALLEN



Yvonne (left) at the dizzying top of Fox Glacier



Coal-haulage cart at the abandoned Denniston mine



At 27 kilometres, the Tasman is New Zealand's longest glacier.

THE MAN ON THE PHONE from Fox and Franz Josef Heliservices says it will take three hours to drive from Arthur's Pass to Franz Josef and that's allowing for stops to view the scenery. It's possible he's been there too long. Or maybe he's having a bad day. Or perhaps the dog ate his girlfriend. These are some of the possibilities I consider after driving only 30 minutes, stopping twice and realizing that at this rate I won't get there till midnight. The gob-stopping, eye-popping combination of bush-clad mountains, tumbling rivers and kingfisher-coloured sky demands that viewers, especially refugees from elsewhere, pay homage. Respect. Yes, sir.

Us refugees take time to absorb it all. Nature. New Zealand nature. Unmediated, raw, unphotoshopped and unpeopled. What's more – or should that be less – not a building in sight. Plus it's sunny. Bloody miracle. My memory of childhood West Coast holidays is basically drip, drip, drip. But then children do catastrophize. One day's rain and it's all you remember.

Oh hell, I have to stop again just to take one more pic of that angle of mountains, bush, sky and river. And when I see the Taramakau River pouring into the Tasman Sea, I'm about ready to blub. Now I will be late. Swallow soppy emotions and drive hard-heartedly past more river-deep, mountain-high marvels and now a few dinky settlements. Even the white-capped sea looks harmless. I know this isn't true but sea spray and sunshiny skies polish everything anew.

Closer to Franz Josef there's more settlement. More smart, newish houses. Signs that some people have done more than take pictures of God's own country. They've moved in. At Franz Josef, the little town fair hums with tourists and space-gobbling road maggots (camper vans to you, road maggots to anyone who has followed a convoy). I like it. The food is good. Also I like the sound of all those jabbering foreign tongues and the sight of dreadlocks swaddled in headbands and all kinds of folk toggled up in expensive

outdoor clobber. The bustle of prosperity and tourist commerce cheers my recessionary heart. I can hardly wait to try the latest tourist additions.

I'm in such a good mood I don't tackle the rotter who told me this trip would take a mere three hours by car. I just slide into his helicopter and then it's up, up and away. And now I see why that eejit said what he did. If this is what he sees on a daily basis and if this is his office, the road in is just a warm-up. This is, well, it's – it's, I dunno. I'm lost for words. Just believe it. There's a bluey tinge over everything – blue-white snow, depthless blue skies, jaggedy blue-grey peaks. An ice-cold beauty.

We swing by Mt Cook in our airborne mosquito. Just by pointing at it, we feel as if we've landed. And when we do land at the top of the Fox Glacier, the whole experience goes completely to our heads. Some of us throw snowballs, some squeal, others run around like toddlers on a sugar rush. One chap shouts to his mate that it's like doing a fat line of coke. I have no idea what he is talking about.

The poor pilot tries to tell us how dangerous this thrilling glacier is and can we please step away from the edge. Imagine doing his job every day. Could even this scenery make up for the bonkers guests? He tries to calm us with facts. This 13-kilometre-long glacier is one of 320 named glaciers in the area. Nearby Franz Josef is 11 kilometres long and the longest is the Tasman at 27 kilometres.

Back on land, decompressing from this scenic high, we opt for something low key. You can't get more low key than the old *apteryx australis*. Well, in this case the *apteryx rowi*. That poor flightless, whiskery, long-snouted beastie has only killer claws to protect it. No wonder the Okarito brown kiwi is critically endangered. Only 375 left. At the new West Coast Wildlife Centre, staff give them a helping hand. They take eggs from the wild, incubate, hatch and protect the wee birdies until they're a year old when they're strong enough to fight predators in the big, wide, kiwi-eating world. Staff won't be happy until there are 600 rowi because then they will be genetically diverse enough to survive. We learn a lot about the nation's bird here but the best reason to visit is that we're able to eyeball one close up. That's pretty spesh when you're a Kiwi yourself but normally never get within cooee of them.

Brains buzzing with kiwi factoids, it's time for a soak in the also-new Glacier Hot Pools. The water is gas heated but the landscaping is pretty and the facilities very swish. It's a lovely way to warm up before dinner in the fab restaurant at the Te Waonui Forest Retreat. The surrounding bush still looks to be in shock after the building's construction and there's a strange empty feeling inside the lodge but the nosh is top dollar.

Another drive awaits us the next day. We're off to Denniston and we curve and swoop north around cliff-hugging coastal roads lined with shuttlecock nikau. They're too eccentric to rate as grand but nikau here are a subtropical miracle anyway. ▶

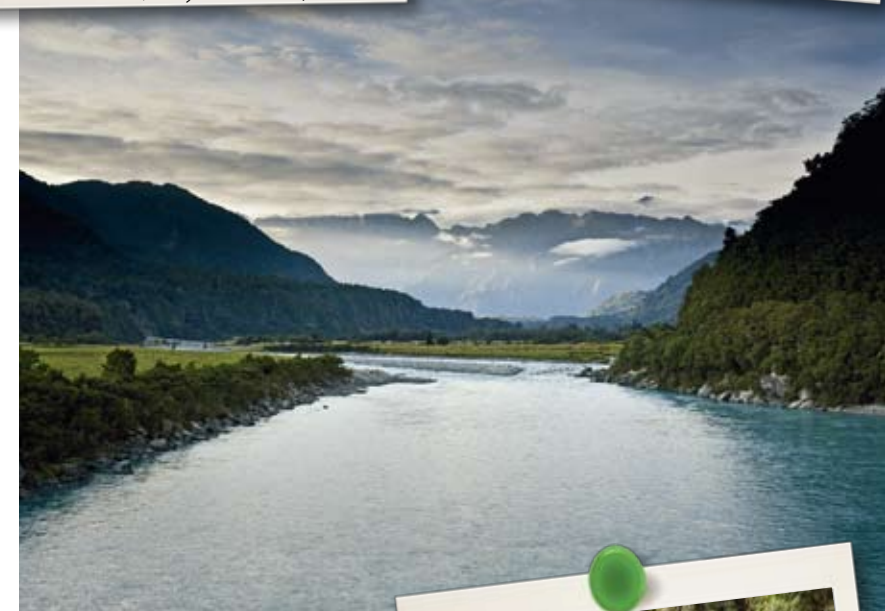
Te Waonui Forest Retreat (right) is Franz Josef's first five-star hotel although visitors of all budgets are drawn to the West Coast settlement by views such as that of the Whataroa River just north of Franz Josef (middle); giant sails protect bathers from the elements at the Glacier Hot Pools (bottom) so they can enjoy the 36-40°C warm water.



Franz Josef township



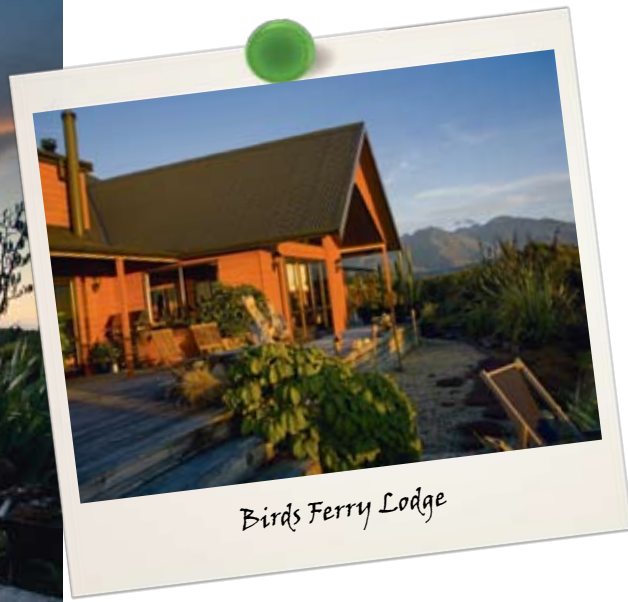
Te Waonui Forest Retreat



Surf's up on the West Coast



Glacier Hot Pools



FROM TOP: Sunset at Birds Ferry Lodge; John Green, local DOC programme manager community relations, points out old miners at the interpretation panel at Denniston; pretend kiwi lure visitors to the West Coast Wildlife Centre while inside the real thing is held by guide Kim Bryan-Walker.



NOTEBOOK
TRY THESE NEW ADDITIONS TO THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE ON THE COAST:
West Coast Wildlife Centre, run in conjunction with DOC, Cnr Cowan & Cron Streets, Franz Josef, www.wildkiwi.co.nz
Glacier Hot Pools, Cron Street, Franz Josef, phone 0800 044 044, www.glacierhotpools.co.nz
Te Waonui Forest Retreat, 3 Wallace Street, Franz Josef, phone (03) 752 0555, www.tewaonui.co.nz
The Canopy Restaurant at Te Waionui deserves your attention.
Birds Ferry Lodge, Birds Ferry Road, 8km north of Charleston, Westport, phone (03) 429 1604, www.birdsferrylodge.co.nz
Denniston Mine Experience, Department of Conservation, 72 Russell Street, Westport, phone 0800 881 880, www.dennistonmineexperience.co.nz
 For information on Denniston's walking tracks go to the Department of Conservation website www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/west-coast/buller-area/denniston-walking-tracks/
NOT NEW BUT A BRAIN-BUZZING MUST:
Fox and Franz Josef Heliservices, Alpine Adventure Centre, Main Road, Franz Josef, phone (03) 752 0793, www.scenicflights.co.nz
For more information contact Tourism West Coast, www.westcoastnz.com

The rhapsodic music in my head comes to an abrupt halt when I reach the Denniston Plateau. No place for romantics this. Unless you can romance underground coalmining and god knows the locals are trying. The Banbury Mine at Denniston hasn't been working for more than 100 years but the good folk at the

Department of Conservation have worked hard to make it a tourist gold-mine. They've come up trumps with jazzy interpretation panels, a gorge express and lots of walks.

Banbury was mined for a short time but used as a haulage route until it was abandoned in 1904. Of course the town of Denniston doesn't exist any more but the remains are here, looking like an ancient archaeological dig with leftover mining equipment, brick foundations and steps to nowhere. The place is famous for the Denniston Incline, an engineering feat allowing coal to be carried from the plateau in a 518-metre drop almost two kilometres down the hillside. The steep bridle track next to the line can now be walked.

Much easier is to travel by train into the hillside. There's the scenic tour and the work tour and for the life of me I don't know why but we end up on the work one. After reporting to the mine office we are each given a union membership card, lamp, hard hat, raincoat and a job. Then it's by train along the Waimangaroa Gorge into the mine where it's dark as a dog's guts and lordy, what a racket – shouting, explosions and creaking timber. We join in swinging banjos, clipping coal tubs and putting up pit-props and if you don't know what any of that means you have to take the tour. The trip ends with a hologram of a union meeting. It's a cracking good yarn but I'm not sorry to leave the mine and blink in the light outside.

It's only right we end the day in yet another hot tub. This time we're embedded at the Birds Ferry Lodge near Charleston where the view from the outside tub is over many hectares of low-growing scrub to the sea. Chin chin. Job well done, dinner well eaten, bed well slept in and next morning garden inspected before the drive home. Birds Ferry is home to two refugees from elsewhere who wouldn't live anywhere else now. One is an Austrian but he's been around for a while. The other is a newer import – a doughty Scotswoman who feeds us lavishly from the huge organic garden she shares with guinea-fowl, pheasants, chooks, kakariki and ducks. Not so much a garden as an enterprise.

And now it's time to drive back over Arthur's Pass to Christchurch. How long will it take? Hey, how long have you got?

YVONNE VAN DONGEN AND DANIEL ALLEN TRAVELLED TO THE WEST COAST WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF TOURISM WEST COAST, WWW.WESTCOASTNZ.COM

