

Wild west

Grant Smithies immerses himself in the wild beauty of the West Coast.

"WHERE CAN I get a newspaper around here?" snarls a grumpy tourist at the Pancake Rocks Cafe in Punakaiki, expecting the woman behind the counter to hand him one.

Her answer? "Greymouth."

Brilliant. If you want to read about the outside world, you can drive for 40 minutes to do so, but if you want to immerse yourself in wild beauty, then you, sir, have come to the right place.

So, after piloting our misfiring stationwagon through the mighty Buller Gorge, we're finally here, in an area the tourist board calls "South Buller" and locals simply call "The Coast".

When I was young and carefree and foolish, I spent a lot of time here. The word, I believe, is carousing. I took girlfriends here, and we swam naked at beaches with more rips than a dog blanket. I got thrashed at pool in various ramshackle taverns. Life-threatening hangovers were experienced under a non-judgemental canopy of rimu, beech and nikau palm. I paddled a leaky kayak up the Pororari River. A dangerously casual mate took me caving with nothing but a faltering kids' torch and a disposable lighter.

Back then I crashed on lumpy couches, in damp tents, on dusty floors. I slept outside one clear

These giant wonky towers of stratified limestone began to form 30 million years ago – what's another half hour? But she persists, and when we get there, it's the perfect day for it, with the combination of strong wind and high tide sending spumes of spray hurtling out of the blowholes. The so-called "Devil's Punchbowl" roils with furious foam. Kelp lashes against the rocks. Huge fields of flax applaud in the wind. There's even a highly scenic little pile of steaming chunder next to the track – a peace offering to the local bush gods from a carsick tourist.

The next morning, after the obligatory pancake breakfast, we drive north. To our left, one of the most beautiful stretches of coastline I've ever seen – a succession of broad rocky bays ringed with rainforest, with a band of golden sand looping away into the distance and gleaming in the thin winter sun like a dropped necklace. On our right, huge limestone bluffs rise up through the bush, with the Paparoas behind them, thickly iced with new snow. A few minutes out of Punakaiki lies the Truman Track, a short walk that threads down past giant matai and rimu to arrive at the sea.

It is here that my daughter invents a game based on

Coming up:

West Coast Whitebait Season Festival

What: The West Coast is known for its rugged yet stunning scenery and warm local hospitality – whitebait season is a great opportunity to experience both. Festival activities will include a photography competition, a whitebait menu challenge, a rugby video competition with airline travel to the Coast and glacier activities as prizes, a history of whitebait competition and lots of chances to sample the delicacy.

When: Until September 23 at venues around the West Coast.

Heartland Championship:

West Coast v Whanganui

What: The West Coast v Whanganui Heartland Championship rugby game is on September 17, 2011, at Rugby Park in Greymouth. The Heartland Championship is a grassroots provincial rugby tournament featuring 12 teams from throughout New Zealand.

When: Saturday, September 17, 1pm.

New Zealand On Screen

What: A travelling cinema showing solid-gold Kiwi film and telly classics. Entry is free and hosts will be on hand to answer any questions about NZ film and television.

When: NBS Theatre, Westport, September 18; Greymouth Railway Station, September 19-20; West Coast Historical Museum, Hokitika, September 21.

Anika Moa & Barnaby Weir: The Acoustic Tour

What: Kiwi singer/songwriters Anika Moa and Barnaby Weir will perform at the Regent Theatre in Hokitika as a part of their first acoustic tour together.

When: Friday, October 7.

These events are part of the REAL New Zealand Festival, a nationwide celebration of New Zealand with more than 1000 events and experiences taking place during Rugby World Cup 2011. See www.realnzfestival.com for more.



Whitebait season: Sample both the delicacy and the West Coast's warm hospitality.

bread on the counter. The casseroles contain unlucky chickens, olives and capers, and are served up after you've got your boots roaring. As the sun sets, I put your exhausted ("a four-poster, d...") beside your beloved stars, in a matchless outdoor bath, looking huge regenerating out to sea with the Ranges peeking over the shoulder.

After breakfast, Foulwind, or as my mate prefers to call it, C... Today the lashing by that name are seen. There's a gentle breeze as we move towards our destination, a cottage on the cliffs. After our 20-minute walk to the colony, owners Paul and fire up the barbie. The delicious fritters and whitebait they caught. We hoe into them, slabs of buttery whitebait when he leaves, but the rest "for breakfast".

A trip into Westport morning is a reminder of the harsh reality of Westport, away from the scenic Surly adolescents and hoonmobiles down the road of near-empty shops. It is strictly enforced businesses. An electronics store has a sad little display of blank VHS tapes and a display. Inept painkillers hang hopefully in the galleries. On the pl... Middle Break cafe, coffee, the check-out supermarket are here. An elderly woman...

...and hikau paim. I paddled a leaky kayak up the Pororari River. A dangerously casual mate took me caving with nothing but a faltering kids' torch and a disposable lighter.

Back then I crashed on lumpy couches, in damp tents, on dusty floors. I slept outside one clear summer's night in a sleeping bag and became a plump pincushion for delighted mozzies. Now I am back, with my wife and seven-year-old daughter, and there'll be none of that primitive carry-on, thank you very much.

We check into the Punakaiki Resort, a hotel so close to the beach you could throw a stone into the water. I know - I did it. Our windows are filled with grey-green sea, our ears with the boom of wild surf. It's almost painfully beautiful, with the sea fading purple at the horizon and fingers



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of light breaking through the clouds, the froth on the waves turning luminous as the sun sets. When nature palls, there's a great beachside restaurant and bar, too. Interesting decorating decisions have been made. Above the men's urinals are huge photographs of women peering towards your privates, looking shocked. One of them even has a camera. I like this place a lot.

But my daughter Rosa is desperate to visit the fabled Pancake Rocks, just 300m away up the hill. What's the hurry?

the bush, with the Paparoas behind them, thickly iced with new snow. A few minutes out of Punakaiki lies the Truman Track, a short walk that threads down past giant matai and rimu to arrive at the sea.

It is here that my daughter invents a game based on survivalist TV show *Man vs Wild*. Her version is called "Man vs Child", and it involves the two of us competing to find disgusting half-rotted crap on the beach that we can pretend to eat to stay alive, between bouts of licking fresh water from dripping rock faces, building hammocks from pongy strands of kelp, and looking intrepid in small caves that might save our lives in a storm. Then it's up the track, back in the car and off to our next adventure, in a tiny town densely populated by ghosts.

One hundred and 14 pubs. New Zealand's first casino. A dance hall, with shapely lasses shipped in from Melbourne. That's what you would have found if you'd washed up in the tiny coastal enclave of Charleston in 1860, along with more than 30,000 desperate souls hammering away at every available rock in the hope of striking it rich. But gold rushes are like every other high-risk economic activity - bust follows boom, as surely as night follows day. After the most accessible gold was extracted, Charleston



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Spectacular Punakaiki and, left, Birds Ferry Cottage.

emptied out. Today just 150 hardy individuals remain, their houses scattered in the scrub between the main road and the sea.

Even the local pub has closed, and is now occupied by local caving outfit, Underworld Adventures. Co-owner Ray Moroney tries to convince me to send my porky frame sluicing down an icy underground river through a network of glowworm caves on a tractor inner tube, dodging stalactites in the dark. Or is that stalagmites? No matter; if you had ever seen me in a wetsuit, you'd know why this was a bad idea. But Moroney's company also runs a miniature train up the Nile River Canyon to get to the caves, so we took a ride, clanking through primeval rainforest to an unlikely little station in the bush where we ate oatcakes and fed crumbs to native bush robins intent on sitting on our boots.

Laced Wyandottes, Silver Spangled Hamburgs, a comically macho Rhode Island Red rooster. Birds of a more exotic feather greeted us at our next stop, squawking and tut-tutting like gossips. Turn left up Birds Ferry Rd north of Charleston, drive along a metal road for a few Ks and you'll find Ferry Man's Cottage, part of Birds Ferry Lodge, set on 33 acres beside its very own quacktacular duckpond. There are extensive organic gardens and orchards, populated with all manner of splendid poultry; Chinese silkies bantams dressed

businesses. An electrical goods store has a sad little stack of faded blank VHS tapes as its window display. Inept paintings of pukeko hang hopefully in tiny tourist-trap galleries. On the plus side, the Middle Break cafe makes a decent coffee, the checkout ladies at the supermarket are hard shots and an elderly woman in the Sally Army op shop cracks an astoundingly rude joke while hanging up a moth-eaten fur stole. I'm still laughing as I ferret through a box of old LPs and strike gold: a battered copy of classic 1975 soul album *Al Green is Love*, with the previous owner's name - "FUZZ" - scrawled across the cover. Two dollars and it's mine. We pile into the car to head home, having confirmed that, yes, despite all evidence to the contrary, Westport has at least a little bit of soul.

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