

FORCE OF NATURE

If you're yearning for a break from the city to recharge and reconnect with the great outdoors, take a leisurely trip down the West Coast, to Hokitika.

STORY **MATT PHILP**



IT’S GOT WEATHER, the West Coast, and a wildness to match anything that gets thrown its way by the Tasman. Head south down the Great Coast Road, listed among Lonely Planet’s top coastal drives, and marvel at just how much drama is packed into this long, narrow piece of country, with its towering limestone bluffs, pounding surf and prolific, primeval rainforest. There’s dramatic history here, too, all of it worth exploring. So, set your windscreen wipers to staccato, and go west.

DENNISTON

It was known as the Westport Coal Company’s “burning star”, a reference to the quality of coal produced by the Denniston Plateau operation. It did quantity, too, more than 10 million tonnes mined between 1879 and 1967, all of it sent down the famously precipitous Denniston Incline in wagons.

This page from top: Cape Foulwind; the lighthouse at Cape Foulwind. Opposite page: Hokitika Gorge. Previous pages: Pancake Rocks, Punakaiki.



This was a dangerous workplace in a harsh setting – a windswept plateau 600m above the coast. Visiting is an experience best served cold, ideally with black raincloud overhead – exemplary Coast weather for a legendary West Coast location.

CAPE FOULWIND

West of Westport lies Cape Foulwind, so named by Cook because its prevailing westerlies blew the *Endeavour* off course. Wind, then, is anticipated. But what you don’t expect is the spot said to be the Coast’s only safe swimming beach – Carters Beach, tucked sweetly in the lee of the cape.

Drive on and you reach the northern end of the 3.4km Cape Foulwind Walkway, named one of New Zealand’s best Short Walks because of its scenery and the fact it takes in both a heritage-listed 1920s

lighthouse and a fur seal breeding colony at Tauranga Bay.

It’s also a bird-watcher’s paradise, with nearby Wall Island one of the Coast’s most important seabird colonies. From the clifftop, you’ll see Hitchcockian levels of bird action, with prions, terns, red-billed and black-backed gulls, skuas, gannets and more.

NILE RIVER VALLEY

The Nile River Valley is a striking introduction to West Coast karst (a type of rock formation) country, with its towering striated cliffs and primeval rainforest. What lies beneath is arguably even more spectacular. Described as a “calcite paradise”, the Nile River cave system winds through a series of chambers, some snug, others hall-like and strung with extravagant calcified formations, that descend to a subterranean river.

You can’t explore the system without a guide, and the go-to guides are Underworld Adventures, based in nearby Charleston (caverafting.com). The pick of its tours starts with a rainforest train and concludes with you floating into daylight on an inner tube.

THE GREAT COAST ROAD

The stretch of State Highway 6 between Westport and Greymouth has been branded the Great Coast Road, but it’s the section immediately north of Punakaiki that really earns superlatives. This is one of New Zealand’s most thrilling drives, tracing the route taken by the Coast’s earliest European explorers, hedged by the limestone bluffs on one side and the Tasman on the other.





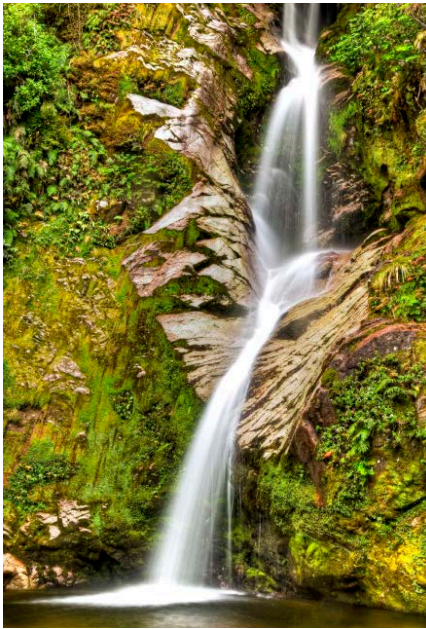
PUNAKAIKI

Punakaiki is synonymous with the Pancake Rocks – and for good reason. Sculpted into pancake-like stacks, the limestone formations at Dolomite Point are geological eye candy of the first order. The blowholes aren’t bad, either. Visit at high tide and you’ll see a display of pure oceanic power as the sea surges in and is forced upwards, blasting the air with an arresting whoosh. Sunsets from the viewing platform can be equally spectacular.

Punakaiki is also the gateway to the Paparoa National Park, 30,000-odd hectares of wall-to-wall native vegetation in the heart of karst country. This exceptionally lush belt will span New Zealand’s latest Great Walk (doc.govt.nz/greatwalks), the 55km, shared-use Paparoa Track, scheduled to open in October this year. It will traverse the Paparoa Range between Punakaiki and near Blackball to the south.

The first Great Walk designed to be used by both mountain bikers and walkers, it will include alpine tops, karst landscapes, mixed beech podocarp forest and nikau-dominated coastal bush, and offer views of the Alps and coast. The region’s native wildlife will also receive a boost over the coming years as Air New Zealand works together with the Department of Conservation to nurture bird life and other key species along the route.

At the track’s midway point it will link to the Pike29 Memorial Track, which was formed to honour those who died in the 2010 mine disaster.



You can get a taste of what the park offers from just north of Punakaiki, where the beautiful Pororari River reaches the Tasman. One option is to hike the three-hour Pororari River Track, following the river inland, then south on the Inland Pack Track to Punakaiki village.

For a more laid-back and, frankly, dreamy experience, hire a kayak from Jeanette Ashby and Ken Ririe at Punakaiki Canoes (riverkayaking.co.nz) and paddle up river. From the middle of the slow-moving waterway, you get a better sense of the dramatic heft of the landscape, another of those otherworldly West Coast limestone gorges. It’s easy paddling, too.

“We’ve had 90-year-olds,” says Ashby. “The further you go, the more challenging it gets, but if you get to a point where you’re uncomfortable you can just float back down.”

GREYMOUTH

It has been known to rain on the West Coast, so why not cash in? On Yer Bike! Off Road

Adventures (onyerbike.co.nz), has a motto “the wetter the better”, and offers guided self-drive off-road quad-bike and buggy adventures on 60ha of bush-clad land near Greymouth. With tours such as the Bush ‘n’ Bog you can expect mud, but the operator provides coats, boots and everything else you need to keep dry.

Speaking of getting on yer bike, Greymouth is the northern trailhead for the acclaimed four-day West Coast Wilderness Trail (westcoastwildernesstrail.co.nz), which incorporates 135km of off-road cycling on well-formed gravel trails.

HOKITIKA

Pick your moment, and you’ll arrive in Hokitika to see whitebaiters lining the river bank, all hoping for a bumper harvest of “white gold”. In the 1860s, it was the yellow stuff that drew people here – so many of them that, by 1886, Hokitika was not only the centre of the West Coast gold rush, it was one of the most populous places in



This page clockwise from top: On Yer Bike! Off Road Adventures; Hokitika; Dorothy Falls at Lake Kanierie. Opposite: West Coast Treetop Walk.



Pancake Rocks and blowholes at Punakaiki.

New Zealand. After the rush came forestry, coal and greenstone, and now eco-tourism is helping to revive the town's fortunes.

One of the flagship operations is the West Coast Treetop Walk (treetopsnz.com). Opened in 2012, it's sited in stunning podocarp forest alongside Lake Mahināpua. Visualise 450m of mesh-steel gantry suspended 20m above the forest floor in a canopy of rimu and kāmahī, and with a 40m tower with views to the Southern Alps. Depending on the season, you may also see flowering native orchids in the treetops; you'll certainly spy plenty of birds, including tītapu/bellbirds, tūi and the occasional kererū.

Lake Kaniere tends to be overshadowed by Lake Brunner, its larger cousin to the north, but it's equally gorgeous. This is kahikatea country, with some terrific short bush walks. Check out the Kahikatea Forest Walk, a 10-minute loop through virgin forest and back via a boardwalk through flax swamp. For a longer hike, the Kaniere Water Race Walkway follows an 1875-built waterway to Kennedy Creek, site of a 1907 hydro station. And don't miss the Dorothy Falls on the lake's eastern side.

Strike sunshine after a period of dry weather and the sight of the Hokitika Gorge will bowl you over. Picture the milky turquoise of a Mackenzie Country lake – there's glacial flour working its magic here, too – but in a rainforest.

Encounter the gorge after a deluge, however, when the water has assimilated the tones of its granite and podocarp surroundings, and it's a moodier, more sullen place. Whatever the weather, it's a knockout, and the short bush walk is a beautiful thing in its own right. westcoast.co.nz

Sleep

WAVE WATCHERS RETREAT

Accommodation doesn't get more coastal than Wave Watchers Retreat, a charming two-bedroom beachside cottage at Punakaiki. If you can tear yourself away from the view, there's a laptop for your use, free wifi, Sky, a well-equipped kitchen and a barbecue. The bedrooms have French doors to the deck and sea views, and both have ensuites. You will want to come back. wavewatchers.co.nz

RIMU LODGE

Ten minutes from Hokitika is Rimu Lodge, the West Coast's only Qualmark five-star B&B. With jaw-dropping views over bushland to the Hokitika River and beyond to the Southern Alps, it's beautifully located. The four elegant rooms all have large ensuite bathrooms, flat-screen TVs and free wifi. Delicious and generous gourmet

breakfasts are served in the "Great Room", which has a large open fire and more of those wonderful views. rimulodge.co.nz

Eat

PANCAKE ROCKS CAFE

At Punakaiki, the Pancake Rocks Cafe serves counter food and stone-oven pizza, among other things, but the specialty dish is indisputably the "world famous" pancake stack. pancakerockscafe.com

JACOB'S GRILL

For dinner with sea views, check out Jacob's Grill at the Punakaiki Resort. The beer-battered fish is recommended. punakaikiresort.co.nz

FAT PIPI PIZZAS

For a casual meal in lively surroundings, try Fat Pipi Pizzas in Revell Street, Hokitika. And yes, they really do serve whitebait on a pizza. 🍷

Getting there

HOKITIKA



Air New Zealand operates daily non-stop flights to Hokitika from Christchurch, with connections across the domestic network.



Contact Centre
0800 737 000



Holidays Travel Brokers
0800 737 767



airnewzealand.co.nz

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