

A River Runs Through It

Sarah Lang rediscovers Whanganui, the city of her childhood.

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Whanganui or Wanganui? The battle over an “h” is a metaphor, you might say, for a town divided, and a reason not to visit.

You think of Ken Mair and the Moutoa Gardens occupation of 1995. Or perhaps you remember the drive-by gang shooting that killed a two-year-old in 2007. The ban on gang patches in 2009. The 2004–2010 reign of maverick, mascara-ed mayor Michael Laws.

This is a town with a bad rep but one it doesn’t deserve.

Sure, Whanganui/Wanganui – they’re now dual names – has had its share of trials and troubles, just like any town. But sensationalist

newspaper headlines like “A City Driven by Gang Rivalry” and saturation coverage of the bill banning gang patches from particular public places have distorted perceptions of the town. Local historian Kyle Dalton, a former cop and soldier, reckons gangs are no worse in Whanganui than anywhere else. Over his years helping out at a friend’s petrol stations, Dalton’s dealt with trouble from drunks and teens, but never gangs. “In fact, gang members have helped break up fights. The other week I was doing a shift at Challenge in Castlecliff, and guys from the Hells Angels, Black Power and the Rebels [Motorcycle Club] came in at the same time, wearing their patches, and said, ‘Hi, mate’ to each other.”

I think Whanganui has less a gang problem, more an image problem – and that’s no ignorant outsider’s opinion. This is the city of my childhood.

As I drive through town, memories swirl. There’s the grand old opera house where I tripped over in a ballet production, Kowhai

Clockwise (from top left): The Davies Theatre entrance at the Whanganui Regional Museum; the Sarjeant Gallery; Wanganui War Memorial Conference & Convention Centre; the Waimarie paddlesteamer; Riverboat Museum; Old Town Whanganui.

MICHAEL HENRY



Above: Glass blower Katie Brown wields a fire-breathing blowtorch.

Opposite page, top: The Ranana Marae on the banks of the Whanganui River. Opposite page, below: St Joseph's Church, and outhouse, Jerusalem.



Park playground where I'd beg Mum to take me, the Cosmopolitan Club that a small girl thought the height of sophistication, the flat where I met my first boyfriend, that damn office I cleaned five days a week – and my old haunt, Wanganui High School, across the field from the bubble-wrapped pocket of privilege that is Wanganui Collegiate.

Much remains the same. The heritage buildings on mainstreet with their old gas lamps and hanging flower baskets. The extravagantly wide streets and verges with their manicured front gardens. The poorer suburbs with their state houses and peeling paint. The sense of community. The relaxed pace. The temperate climate. The wild black-sand beaches with driftwood and cliffs gouged away by the sea. The hill country pocked by millions of hoof-prints.

Coming back here, eavesdropping on the town's secrets, I've realised what Whanganui's about. Not gangs. Not controversial mayors. Not flower baskets. It was, and is, about the river.

Once known as the "Rhine of the South Pacific", the 290km waterway snaking between the Central Plateau mountains and the Tasman Sea is why the town sprang up from 1840 onwards. The river enabled trade

before the Desert Rd was opened.

The Whanganui iwi, Te Atihaunui a Papa-rangi, lived in pa along the river for at least 40 generations, their nine-metre manuka poles propelling their waka along to trade with iwi north and south. Then came the Europeans, who turned the sheltered valley at the river mouth into a trading post and base for soldiers fighting the New Zealand Wars.

By the late 19th century, Whanganui with its lazy riverboat cruises was an international tourist mecca, luring the likes of Mark Twain. By 1924, when it became a city, Whanganui was our fifth-largest metropolis.

Few know more about local history than 44-year-old Kyle Dalton, with his single earring and infectious enthusiasm for the town. After finding Auckland and Wellington not quite his thing, the one-time South Islander found Whanganui – and a fiancée. "Whanganui's beautiful, relaxed, five minutes to drive anywhere, big enough to have everything you need and small enough that nearly everybody knows your name." The town's past so captured him that it's now the topic of his history masters and his new central-city walking tours.

Told with panache, Dalton's stories are stranger than fiction. We learn that on the Queens Park hill where the cottages of the New Zealand Wars soldiers once stood, bits of china – mugs, handles – now emerge eerily from wet ground (the rational explanation: that's where they threw their rubbish).

We learn it was Whanganui's Sarjeant Gallery where, in 1920, married mayor Charles Mackay made advances on young poet D'Arcy Creswell after their private viewing of *The Wrestlers*, a copy of an ancient-Greek statue of intertwined nude men. When Creswell threatened to expose Mackay's homosexuality, the mayor shot the poet, and, believing him dead, placed the gun in his hand to suggest suicide. However, Creswell (who survived) threw a chair through the window,



Above: Bridge To Nowhere jet boat driver Doug Camron sweeps up the Whanganui River. Opposite: The Bridge to Nowhere, built in the mid-1930s to service the ill-fated Mangapurua Valley settlement.

alerting passersby and landing Mackay a jail term, bankruptcy and a divorce.

The Wrestlers statue is still the centrepiece of the Sarjeant Gallery in Whanganui's cultural heart, Queens Park. Shaped as a cross and clad in cream stone, the neoclassical building with its high, light-flooded dome is as much a work of art as the 6000 pieces and exhibitions inside.

The other two points of the Queens Park triangle are nationally important institutions the Whanganui Regional Museum, particularly known for its natural history, colonial and Maori collections, and the surprisingly fascinating Alexander Heritage & Research Library, where I find archived information on my family.

Across from the museum is the Wanganui War Memorial Conference & Convention Centre. To build it in the 1950s as a "living memorial" to WWII's dead, locals chipped in a shilling each, and resident businesses two shillings sixpence, for 80 weeks.

The buildings are beautiful, too, in "Old Town", the former commercial hub home to many of Whanganui's 150-odd heritage buildings, now carefully preserved and protected. Over the past 15 years, the influx of students and artists for the leading fine arts, glass art and graphic design courses – and the cheap studio rentals – has breathed life into Old Town, especially since the UCOL campus opened here in 2005.

Here's the 1912 Chronicle building that once housed the local rag, hacks working in the mezzanine space above, the printing press rumbling in "the pit" below.

A century on, passersby wander in to watch acclaimed artists Katie Brown and Lyndsay Patterson sculpting their glass creations in a spectacle involving blowpipes, giant shears and a blazing furnace. Patterson, a former bank clerk, moved here from Wellington to attend Wanganui Glass School in the 90s, and never left: "I love it here. I'm part of a community of like-minded individuals. Look next door – there are 15 artist studios in that building."

A block away, the riverfront has had a welcome makeover – a new visitors' centre, wooden walkway, sculpture trail, waterside cafes and a century-old tram, restored and running. More important, the river's looking good. It's unfathomable today, but for more than a century the river was the dumping ground for raw sewage, and farm and freezing works run-off. In 1979, the council began a long, complicated clean-up effort. Recently pronounced healthy, the river's luring back fish, birds and swimmers.

I'd never been upriver. It was time to remedy that.

As we drive along the Whanganui River Rd in the early morning, the clouds swirl low over forest and water, framing the church steeple at Jerusalem, the village once home to James K. Baxter. The road hugs the river as far as Pipiriki, where we meet Brent Hirmin for a jetboat tour along a river that, bizarrely enough, is listed as one of the nine Great Walks of New Zealand, even though there's no track. "This is the only Great Walk you have to paddle," Hirmin says, powering up the jetboat. "Not a bad office, eh?"





Above: A guest at The Flying Fox enjoys breakfast under trees, possibly planted by Mother Aubert, Jerusalem’s founder. Opposite page (clockwise from top left): John Main operates the flying fox mechanism; one of the Flying Fox cottages, built by Main with great ingenuity, given the difficulty in getting building materials over the river; the flying fox in action.

Descended from the Whanganui iwi, the young Brent spent childhood holidays along this river, later helping his dad with a jetboat business: washing the boat, carrying the gear. After years at the freezing works and a midlife crisis, he returned to the river. The pig hunter married the girl next door, became stepdad to four and dad to two, and started raising animals and veges on a few hectares. Now his “young fella”, three, is helping hose down dad’s boat.

Waving his tattooed arms – one represents his iwi, the other his European heritage – Hirmin tells us about the river, its history, its geography, its secrets, the Maori betrayed by the Europeans, the great-grandmother who birthed 10 children in the river. He knows every tributary, bend and all the other boaties, stopping to deliver a spark plug to one. As we drink in the otherworldly beauty, kayakers stop to wave; one is the family GP who delivered me.

A 40-minute stroll through Whanganui National Park takes us to the Bridge to Nowhere, born from bureaucratic idiocy. After

WWI, the riverside land allocated to veterans turned out to be too unproductive and remote – the government never delivered the promised road – so by the time the bridge was built in 1936, nearly all the 30 to 40 families had given up and left.

Hirmin left Whanganui once, to rendezvous with a German girl in Frankfurt. But he didn’t like the crush of people. He prefers this town and its river. He kills the engine, looking up at the impossibly high cliffs where his ancestors climbed vine ladders back to their pa.

“Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au. I am the river, the river is me.”

Best To Dos

Spirit of the River Tours You won’t find a better or funnier tour guide than Brent Hirmin, whose award-winning family business Spirit of the River runs jetboat, canoeing, waka, hiking and cycle-trail tours and even marae stays. 0800 JETTOUR, www.spiritoftheriver.co.nz

Bridge to Nowhere River Tours

Ben Adam and his father Joe own the only farm inside the Whanganui River National Park, and the personable and well-researched Ben offers insights from a farmer’s perspective of that stunning folly the Bridge to Nowhere. Check out their popular and well-run jet boat and canoeing tours, and overnight accommodation upriver.

www.bridgetonowhere.co.nz or

www.whanganuiriveraccommodation.co.nz.

The River Traders Whanganui Market

Browse stalls proffering baking, specialty foods, fresh produce, arts, craft and coffee on a former Maori trading site, from 9am-1pm, Saturday. Moutoa Quay, www.rivertraders.co.nz.

Waimarie Paddlesteamer Imagine yourself back in Whanganui’s 19th-century riverboat era while cruising upriver on the country’s last operational paddlesteamer. From \$35. The Riverboat Museum, 1a Taupo Quay, ph 0800 STEAMER, www.riverboat.co.nz.

Whanganui Historical Walking Tours

Let history buff Kyle Dalton regale you with Whanganui’s stories and secrets. Ph (027) 848-0089 or (06) 347-6781.

Chronicle Glass Studio and Gallery

Watch glass artists at work, browse the on-site shop, or book in for a workshop or make-your-own-paperweight lesson. 2 Rutland St, ph (06) 347-1921, www.chronicleglass.co.nz.

Kowhai Park The best playground in the land. Swings, slides and the rest resemble giant fairytale/storybook characters, animals and vegetables; there’s also a pirate ship, flying fox, water maze, miniature railway and barbecues. Anzac Parade (by Dublin St Bridge).

McNamara Gallery The world-class institutions of Queens Park aren’t the only place to get your cultural fix. Check out the monthly exhibitions at New Zealand’s leading photography gallery, too. 190 Wicksteed St, ph (06) 348-7320 or (027) 249-8059, www.mcnamara.co.nz.

Durie Hill Elevator

Travel up 65m in one of the world’s two earthbound elevators, and savour the view. Anzac Parade (by Whanganui City Bridge).

Virginia Lake

The relaxing walk around this lovely lake is even better at dusk when the fountain lights up, illuminating the trees. Great North Rd.

Paloma Gardens Out in farming country, you’ll find an unlikely oasis of exotic and tropical plants, bamboo forests and the tongue-in-cheek Garden Of Death with plants that harm humans. Pohutukawa Lane, Fordell, ph (06) 342-7857, www.paloma.co.nz.

Events & Festivals Whanganui’s jam-packed events programme just about rivals the capital’s. www.wanganui.com

Best Sleeps

The Flying Fox Catching a cable car across the river just adds to the fun of staying at The Flying Fox. Home to

self-confessed hippies John and (mayor) Annette Main, this sustainable lifestyle property couldn’t be any more relaxing, and the recycled-chic cottages and hand-built cabin on wheels couldn’t be cuter. From \$100 per night. 3081 Whanganui River Rd, ph (06) 342-8160, www.theflyingfox.co.nz.

Rutland Arms Inn Built in 1849, the then-Rutland Hotel was known as the finest place to stay between Wellington and New Plymouth – and that hasn’t changed. The spacious suites are all Victorian elegance; the public restaurant serves up hearty pub fare and beer-tasting trays. From \$150 per night, including breakfast. 8 Ridgway St, ph (0800) 788-5263, www.rutlandarms.co.nz.

The Anndion Named after owners Anne and Dion Ngatai (geddit?), this smart boutique lodge has every kind of room and everything you could possibly need, including pool, spa and sauna, without blowing the budget. From \$75 per person. 143-145 Anzac Parade, ph (0800) 343-056, www.anndionlodge.co.nz.

Best Eats

Element Cafe & Bistro Happily, the beautiful old BNZ building with its light-flooded dome has been restored to its former glory and now houses this fine-dining hotspot. 26 Victoria Ave, ph (06) 345-7028, www.elementcafe.co.nz.

French Delice All French décor and flowers spilling from wrought-iron baskets, this cafe-bakery transports you to a Parisian back street. As for the especially imported French baking, the only problem is trying to choose. Corner Carlton Ave and Alma Rd, ph (06) 345-7177.

Jolt Coffee House Nab the red lounge suite and one of the many magazines and you’re set for lunch or brunch with the best coffee in town.

19 Victoria Ave, ph (06) 345-8840.

Georges Fisheries They peel the spuds, hand-cut the chips – and they taste all the better for it. Eat them down by the river. 40 Victoria Ave, ph (06) 345-7937.

Converge Coffee Cart The latte, flat white and friendly chitchat we got from this humble cart was better than many coffee houses. Majestic Square, Victoria Ave. **Dotto Catering** Heading upriver but pressed for time? Picnic hampers supplied by Dotto’s Jane Lillington are, delicious, easy and good value. Ph (022) 312-7420. +