

# Touch of the south

**Sarah Lang** finds Dunedin is much more than a city of Scots and scarfies — and a special spot for a weekend getaway.

“There’s a baby under the bed,” a girl solemnly tells me at Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, as I walk into a full-size replica of the wattle-and-daub cottage built by Scottish immigrant John Buchanan for his family in 1848. The baby’s wails are obviously a recording but I play along, looking concerned and looking under the bed.

My new friend of perhaps 5 giggles at my gullibility, then proudly shows me the family’s “toilet” (a chamberpot), “oven” (a pot hanging over the fireplace), and “bedtime book” (the *Bible*). As I chase after the disappearing Museum Highlights Tour, I leave her pretending to brush her teeth with a twig.

Fortunately for kids — and adults — this cottage is one of many “touching displays” at the museum, founded in 1898. More than a century later it underwent a \$39-million, 2½-year redevelopment before reopening in December last year as Toitu: which, a little ironically, means untouched.

Toitu brings history alive with interactive multimedia displays that show what settlers’ lives were like. In a replica ship’s cabin, I can just about feel the seasickness, smell the unwashed bodies and hear the arguments. Nearby at Toitu’s Portrait Gallery, hundreds of settlers from the earliest ships (1860-64) stare sternly down at me from black-and-white photographs and a few portrait paintings. I could lose hours looking at each face.

Few modern-day men know more about Dunedin’s history than Athol Parks, who guides three daily tours through one-man band City Walks. “Dunedin was once New Zealand’s first, biggest and most prosperous city,” says Parks, who has sideburns, a laidback air and an astonishing number of detachable zip-up pockets and laminated fact sheets.



Robbie Burns stands guard over the Octagon.

TOURISM DUNEDIN



Toitu Otago Settlers Museum has been redeveloped.

Every building we pass has a story, from the Gothic-revival First Church that was New Zealand’s answer to Notre Dame, through to the railway station designed as a visual spectacle and a showpiece for the might of rail.

This Heritage Highlights Tour is the ideal introduction to Dunedin’s heritage, and how its past informs its present. As Parks explains, local businesses are moving into the largely Victorian and Edwardian buildings, reviving and breathing life into the historic precinct. I can feel the city’s pulse in the Octagon, which hums with the chatter and laughter of alfresco diners, buskers and passers-by. “We’re not a major metropolitan city any more, but Dunedin has reinvented itself as a charming university town, known for its wildlife and heritage,” Parks tells the tour.

Dunedin is also known as an arts-and-culture hub, thanks to students who stay and creatives who return. For visitors, this means a wealth of private art galleries, local fashion labels such as Carlson and NOM\*d, and top-notch theatre and music gigs. And the cafes and restaurants rival those in bigger cities. Food columnist, blogger and cooking teacher Alison Lambert — a chef

who’s worked for Gordon Ramsay and alongside Jamie Oliver — recently took over daytime eatery Delicacy. Its simple, seasonal, locally sourced dishes taste so good you forget they’re healthy. Lambert also “cooks live” at the Otago Farmers’ Market to show shoppers how to take fresh produce from market to table. When I pass by, she’s piling a plate with just-picked baby potatoes to taste-test. Don’t mind if I do.

Dubbed New Zealand’s best farmers’ market by restaurateur Al Brown, this Saturday-morning institution isn’t just a place for locals to restock the fridge and fruit bowl. It also lures visitors to have a snack and a coffee, enjoy the entertainment from musicians and buskers, and buy (packable) produce.

Each stall adds something unique and local to the mix: whiskey, honey, hangi meals, chutneys, cheeses, craft beer, seafood, bread, pork pies, peonies, venison, a vegan cafe, whitebait fritters, artisan teas.

I thoroughly taste-test all four types of ethically sourced, locally-made Ocho dark chocolate before deciding on the Cocoa Nibs. Dang, it’s good.

I could easily spend all weekend in town, but no trip to Dunedin is complete without visiting the Otago Peninsula, a finger of land that points north and ends in the unmanicured fingernail of Taiaaroa Head. Just minutes from the city, I drive along Portobello Rd, which hugs the curves of the harbour and passes villages straight out of a storybook.



Sarah Lang takes to the water with Monarch Wildlife.

PAUL RUSH

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TOURISM DUNEDIN

To see what can't be seen from land, I take a tour with Monarch Wildlife, a three-time New Zealand Tourism Award winner that offers one-hour, half-day or full-day cruises along this world-renowned wildlife corridor. Dashing skipper Ed Ansell provides binoculars, waterproof jackets, interesting commentary, a fact sheet on the wildlife — and tells us where to look and for what.

We sail past Port Chalmers and between two islands where the first settlers were quarantined, towards our end-point on Taiaroa Head, the world's only mainland nesting place for Northern Royal Albatross.

Ansell turns the former fishing vessel to starboard, then to port, then back again, to get us as close as possible to the wildlife without disturbing them. Sometimes I spy some spine-tingling things.

A huge sea lion eyes me suspiciously from the sand. A fur seal aggressively nudges another male away from his harem. I'm spying on the shags clinging to an almost-vertical cliff-face when Ansell suggests we look up. An albatross — 3m long with wings outstretched — soars above me. The majestic sight is made more special by knowing it has returned from the Southern Ocean to reunite with its mate for nesting season.

Like the albatross, I'll be coming back to this city that's much more than the sum of its parts.

● Sarah Lang was hosted by Tourism Dunedin and flew courtesy of Jetstar.



A walk along St Clair beach is a must-do.

TOURISM DUNEDIN



Relax and unwind in the Chinese Garden.

TOURISM DUNEDIN

## Tip box

**Pack:** Layers; it's not just Auckland that has four seasons in one day.

**Stay:** At four-star Hotel St Clair ([www.hotelstclair.com](http://www.hotelstclair.com)), with floor-to-ceiling sea views, its own restaurant, and pole position on St Clair's beachfront dining strip.

**Drive:** Along Portobello Rd through the beauty of the Otago Peninsula, or along the western flank of the harbour to historic, artsy Port Chalmers.

**Observe:** The endangered wildlife at the Royal Albatross Centre ([www.albatross.org.nz](http://www.albatross.org.nz)) which runs tours of the colony, Little Blue Penguins and Fort Taiaroa.

**Dine:** At busy central-city hotspot Ombrellos Kitchen and Bar, retro-themed restaurant and seafood specialists Plato Cafe, upmarket inner-city bistro Two Chefs, or Japanese restaurant Yuki. Delicacy is a must-do for lunch.

**Caffeinate:** At godfathers of the coffee scene Mazagran Espresso Bar and fellow Dunedin institution Modaks. Other favorites are Strictly Coffee Cafe and Roastery and Diesoline Espresso.

**Shop:** At the strip of fashion boutiques stocking local fashion labels on George St and Moray Place.

**Tour:** The Cadbury factory ([www.cadbury.co.nz](http://www.cadbury.co.nz)), Speights Brewery ([www.speights.co.nz](http://www.speights.co.nz)), the stately home Olveston ([www.olvoston.co.nz](http://www.olvoston.co.nz)), or Larnach Castle ([www.larnachcastle.co.nz](http://www.larnachcastle.co.nz)) with its grandeur, ghost stories and scandalous past.

**Visit:** Toitu Otago Settlers Museum ([www.toituosm.co.nz](http://www.toituosm.co.nz)), Otago Museum ([www.otagomuseum.govt.nz](http://www.otagomuseum.govt.nz)), the Dunedin Public Art Gallery ([dunedin.art.museum](http://dunedin.art.museum)), and the private art galleries on Moray Place and Dowling St.

**Relax:** In the exquisite Dunedin Chinese Garden, one of only three authentic Chinese Gardens outside China ([www.dunedinchinesegarden.com](http://www.dunedinchinesegarden.com))

**Plan:** A trip around the Dunedin Fringe Festival, id Dunedin Fashion Week, the Cadbury Chocolate Festival, the NZ International Science Festival or the Otago Festival of the Arts; for details and upcoming events see [www.dunedinnz.com](http://www.dunedinnz.com).

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