

HEARTBEAT CITY

Sarah Lang takes the pulse of central Christchurch and finds the city very much alive and well.

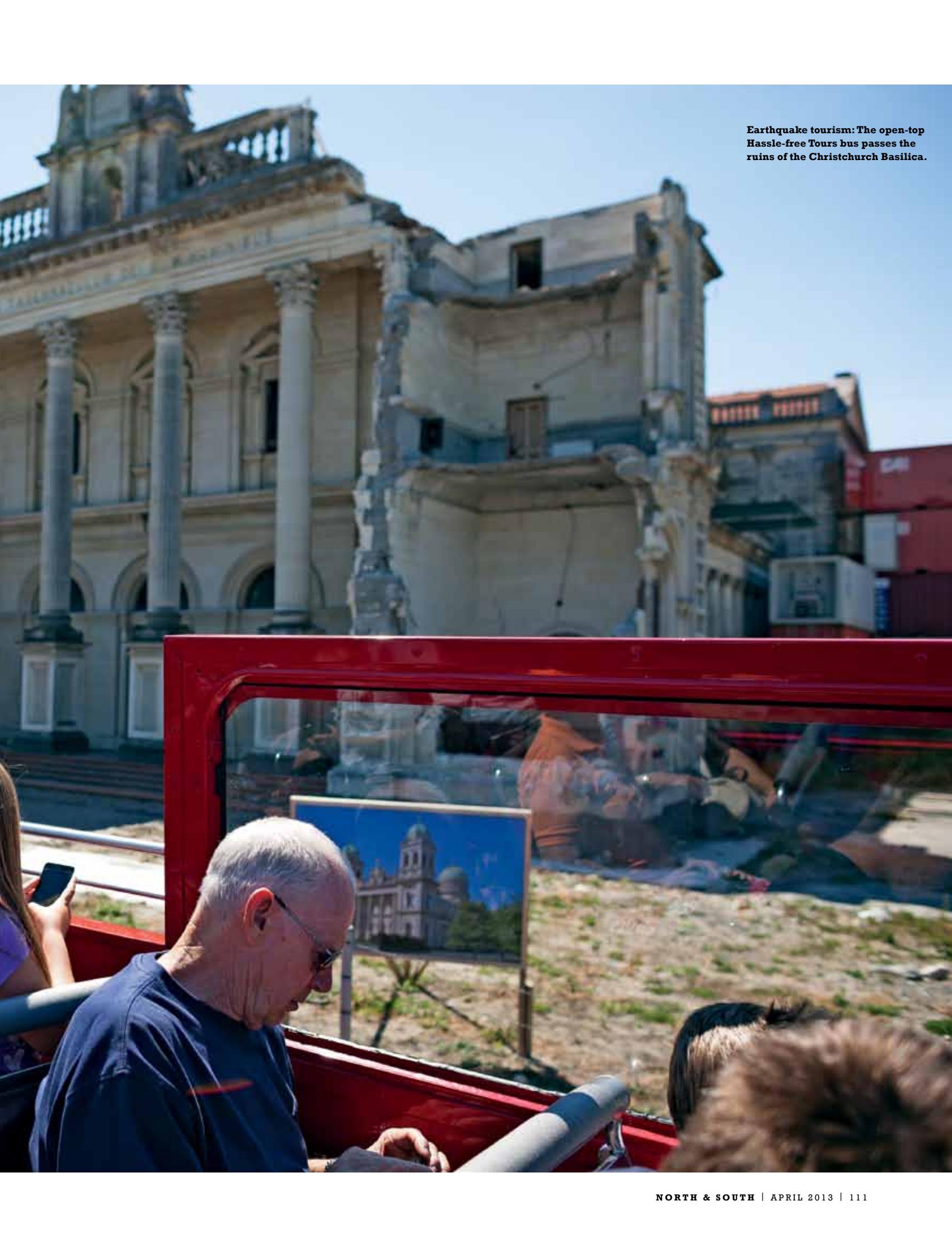
When Lonely Planet's glossy guidebook *Best in Travel 2013* named Christchurch sixth on its list of the top 10 cities to visit worldwide, some thought it was a pity prize. But that's not Lonely Planet's style. The world's foremost travel publisher across both print and web winnowed hundreds of nominations to choose its top 10 based on topicality, excitement, value and X-factor.

How did Christchurch beat, say, Venice, I wondered? Living in Wellington and going by the media, I'd pictured central Christchurch as a bleak, deserted cityscape, pockmarked with husks of old buildings, caved-in churches, diggers combing the rubble, and jagged scars marking the roads.

I had to visit Christchurch myself, for the first time since the quakes, to realise how one-dimensional that perception was. Because restaurants, bars, cafes, public spaces, public-art projects, events hubs, shopping arcades and pop-markets are sprouting here like spring daffodils in Hagley Park after the winter snow. Because

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Earthquake tourism: The open-top Hassle-free Tours bus passes the ruins of the Christchurch Basilica.



Playing Scrabble in the sunshine at Gap Filler's Pallet Pavilion.

alongside the anger and anguish swirling in the city's bloodstream is a pulsing vein of creativity, energy and inventiveness.

Few know Christchurch better than Rex Hayward, a tour guide on Hassle-free's central-city bus tour aboard an open-top double-decker. "My name's Rex – that means king," he says with a wink, "and this is the only air-conditioned bus in Christchurch."

In between quips, Hayward tells us about the city's history, and its quake-shaped present and future. "There's been 11,000 aftershocks, and what you can see here isn't demolition, it's deconstruction," he says, pointing through the window at a digger and its men. "They're recycling at least 50 per cent of materials. And we weren't sure, but they've saved New Regent St: it opens March 22."

As we pass the street's art-deco buildings, Hayward's face lights up like a child. That glow dims when he points out the achingly empty site of the CTV building, where flowers and messages are pinned to the fence.

A former television director-administrator, Hayward lost friends here. "Every building I worked in is gone," he tells me later. "The TVNZ studios, the CTV building. It hurts. You grieve for the city, but then you have to

stop looking back and start looking ahead to the city rising from the rubble. It's an exciting time to live through."

Now 67, he was aboard the double-decker on February 21, 2011, but out of town when the fatal tremors struck the next day. "I've found many tourists want to understand the quake, see what's happened here," he muses. "Visitors have told me they thought Christ-

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church was flattened, based on the news, and they're surprised at everything that's going on. But Christchurch is alive, standing tall, open for business."

Indeed, tourist operators who've lost business to the quakes are wrenching some good from bad in what you could call earthquake tourism. In the air, Helipro offers a

bird's eye view of the turmoil wreaked upon the city. On the ground, the council-owned Red Bus tours the Red Zone. On the river, even Christchurch's trademark punts have started gliding through the cordoned-off area, which keeps on shrinking.

In City Mall, the public precinct shadowed by war memorial archway the Bridge of Remembrance, two giggly Chinese girls are taking photos of a 1929 Austin 7. Posing obligingly beside the tiny automobile is a man with a grey-streaked ponytail, crooked smile, bum bag, Doc Martens and Jan Wong's book *China*.

On Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, Paul Fleming mentors troubled boys through the Canterbury Youth Development Programme; on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays he takes intrigued passersby for a joyride or a tour, long or short, in Myrtle. His other Austin 7, Happy, is at home.

It's amazing how happy he seems given all that he's lost since the quakes: his business, his marriage, his motivation. Until 12.51pm on February 22, 2011, Fleming ran CBD shop The Free Spirit Zippo Gallery, which sold Cuban cigars, case knives, Dupont lighters



Paul Fleming of Happy Tours symbolises Christchurch's reignited spirit.

and accessories, and his own art engraved and sand-carved (sandblasted) on Zippo lighters and homewares. Taking me for a spin in Myrtle, he points out the shell of his shop, just visible from the edge of the Red Zone. He was there when the killer quake struck.

"The building opposite mine buckled as though a wave had smashed into it, its belly out like a pregnant woman," he says, screwing up his face. "It collapsed and came to a shuddering halt just short of my shop."

The Free Spirit was no more. "I can't describe the psychological devastation. Suddenly my livelihood and 11 years of my life were gone. I lost my motivation. I felt annihilated."

He did very little for months. His marriage ended. "We had our issues and the quake was the catalyst. Now I'm on the up. Last month I got back into my vege garden. And after my midlife crisis, I promised myself I'd get one of these," he says, patting Myrtle.

Then, he figured, why not turn his love of vintage cars into a business? He calls it Happy Tours. As well as taking tourists for joyrides, he chauffeurs the Austins for weddings and events, and hires them out. "Life changes on you, so you adapt. And it's

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Nothing makes a greater statement about Christchurch innovation and creativity than Re:START, the open-air shopping precinct just along from Fleming's post. Opened on October 29, 2011, behind Ballantynes, it's constructed from shipping containers painted all the colours of the rainbow. I feel like I've stacked Lego blocks in rows, then drunk Alice in Wonderland's potion and shrunk to fit.

The 50-plus tenants here include pre-quake central-city stalwarts such as Johnson's Grocery Store and Scorpio Books, plus lots of clothing stores and fashion boutiques, gift stores, cafes, even banks. As well as getting retailers trading again, Re:START's got shoppers back into the CBD,

and lifted spirits. There are street performers, a giant blackboard with messages of optimism for Christchurch, a wind-powered light installation (part of public arts project The Social). At the regular night markets and evening events, aromas wafting from the food caravans meld with the live music from the Artbeat stage in one corner. Though Re:START's lease runs out at Easter, it's expected to stay on longer. As long as it's needed.

If Re:START had a prize for best-looking building, it would go to the architect-designed, two-storey Hummingbird Cafe.

Behind the counter during the lunch rush is 28-year-old Nick Cowper, general manager of Hummingbird Coffee, a boutique coffee roaster-supplier and a family business directed by his father George Cowper.

On February 22, Nick was in Pauanui and on the phone to the office when the quake struck. He heard swearing, then the phone went dead, and Nick went straight to the airport. Their Addington roastery ran on a generator for a fortnight, their adjacent cafe was closed for only three weeks, and although Nick's house copped an estimated \$150,000 damage, it was liveable.

“Christchurch was a bit stale before the quakes, but you can feel the energy now. Everything’s gaining momentum.”

“We were the lucky ones.”

The Cowpers weren’t looking to set up a second cafe, and Re:START was “a high-risk venture”, but they decided to take a tenancy anyway. “After the earthquake,” Nick explains, “cafes became a meeting point to get out of the house and share stories, but so many cafes were out of action. Our business has been based in Christchurch its entire life, and we thought it was important to get back in the CBD and get something going again.”

They didn’t stop there. “We wanted to do something to give back – something tangible,” Nick says. “I grew up going to the Court Theatre and I think it’s important for Christchurch to maintain its theatre and arts.” So Hummingbird created coffee blend Re:START, and still donates 30c from every 200g pack to help re-equip the Court Theatre, temporarily based in a grain-storage silo. “They were pleased, and said, ‘If you can do \$2000-3000, that would be great.’”

The tally is \$57,110 and counting, though he’s quick to shrug off praise. “So many others are doing so many things. Christchurch was a bit stale before the quakes but you can feel the energy now. People are doing exciting things, places are opening, everything’s gaining momentum.”

Arguably the best way of getting round this flat city is by bike, zipping between the footpath and the road.

Stu Waddel, a super-friendly entrepreneur who runs ski-pass, mountain-bike and publishing businesses, also hires out retro bikes through The Vintage Peddler. As we pedal along on steel-framed beauties “Green Goblin” and “Ron Burgundy”, Waddel talks about that last day in his High St Mall premises. “We rode it out under the tables. The high buildings next to my small building were all coming down. I quickly shoved my computer hard drive in my backpack and walked home.”

Although the houses across the road were gones, his house had only surface damage. Wife Tori and their 10-month-old daughter got out of town for three weeks, while Waddel stayed on to “pick up the pieces”. His premises were in the Red Zone.

“Losing your business is like losing your home. For the first six months, everything felt too much. The most moving day for me was when we reopened in a new location, and our regulars came in and showed they appreciated us and cared. I feel part of Christchurch more now than the whole 15 years I’ve lived here. You feel the energy and see new things springing up everywhere.”

We brake at what looks like an outdoor dance floor, and sure enough, it is. Waddel explains how you slide a \$2 coin into a washing machine, plug in your phone or iPod, select a song, and strut your stuff to some high-volume music.

The “Dance-O-Mat” is part of Gap Filler, a volunteer-powered initiative which “activates” vacant sites with temporary creative projects the public can enjoy. Think poetry walls, art installations, a mini golf course, a chess set with toddler-sized pawns, a book exchange in a fridge, and many more.

Gap Filler’s *pièce de résistance* is central-city public space and events hub The Pallet Pavilion. A temporary structure built from loaned, reused and donated materials, including 3000 blue pallets, it’s filling the gaps left by the destruction of community halls, clubrooms and other public spaces. On another street corner, the transitional Cardboard Cathedral – constructed from 120kg cardboard tubes – is taking shape to fill another gap. Passersby stop, smile, exclaim.

Nearby in Kitchen Things’ Sydenham showroom, chef Jonny Schwass is packing up his portable, temporary one-table private restaurant “Schwass in a Box”. Since the quake killed a friend and destroyed the



Rex Hayward on Hassle-free Tour's bus.



Hummingbird Cafe in Re:START.



C1 Cafe, deconstruction chic.



Nick Cowper's Re:START coffee blend has raised more than \$60,570 to help re-equip the Court Theatre.



The Brewery founder and craft beer baron Alasdair Cassells (centre), with son-in-law Joseph Shanks (left) and son Zak.

award-winning Restaurant Schwass, he's kept busy: co-founding local-produce restaurant Gorilla, catering for events with his portable "Mobile Relief Unit BBQ", and starting up a line of pickles and Schwassages (gourmet sausages).

"I got involved in all sorts of crazy things I'd never normally think of doing," says Schwass, who was determined to keep his five core staff in work. He has. Now he's put Schwass in a Box aside to work on plans for a new restaurant on Victoria St, which is becoming quite the restaurant strip.

While many restaurants, bars and cafes are now opening and reopening in the central city, no one's forgetting the suburban establishments that stepped up after the quakes. One is busy bar-cafe-pizzeria The Brewery in Woolston, 10 minutes' drive from the CBD. The giant beer vats behind the counter are a reminder that this is also the Cassels & Sons craft brewery, run by Alasdair Cassels, his son Zak, and son-in-law Joseph Shanks.

The Cassels lost beer and equipment worth tens of thousands of dollars in the February quake, and 90 per cent of the establishments that served their beer were out of action. The

Alasdair's bushy moustache twitches with pride as he walks me through the old tannery turned Victorian-style shopping arcade with its open-air dome framed by arches.

grand old family home of 30 years and Shanks' house were also written off. "We got slammed," says Zak, who was selling beer in the CBD on February 22, and walked and hitchhiked home to his wife and kids in Lyttelton.

Rather than taking time out, the family fast-tracked its rough plans for a brew-pub, knowing people needed gathering places. Opened in June 2011, The Brewery is much more than a bar. It puts on free outdoor films and music gigs, donates beer to Gap Filler gatherings, and helps promote Gap Filler's and other community events.

The Cassels also run CBD Bar on Madras St; it opened in September 2011 even though they knew foot traffic would be slow. "Madras

St was closed, and the central city was pretty, well, dead," Zak says, "but we wanted to be part of rebuilding Christchurch."

In April, the Cassels open the first stage of the Tannery Boutique Retail and Arts Emporium, behind The Brewery. It's Alasdair's baby, and his bushy moustache and eyebrows twitch with pride as he walks me through the old tannery-turned-Victorian-style shopping arcade with its open-air dome framed by arches. The second stage opens in June.

At a time when so many old buildings have been destroyed, the biggest historic restoration project in town is lifting spirits and providing premises for 70-odd quake-displaced (and a few new) tenants, from gift shops to fashion boutiques, a piano bar to an art gallery. Some tenants were so keen that, in November, they set up in shipping containers and tents in the carpark.

For Alasdair, 62, these three new ventures aren't just about business, but supporting and investing in the city he loves. "After a while, that's your motive. People urge you on. It sounds funny, but a geologist will tell you a quake releases energy, and it does."



Best To Dos

Re:START

Fashioned from rainbow-coloured shipping containers, Christchurch's outdoor shopping precinct is a must-do, with food caravans, street performers, art, live music and 50 shops. Cashel Mall, 128 Cashel St, www.restart.org.nz

Bus Tours

Take Hassle-free's one-hour quickie of central-city landmarks, or its full three-hour, city-wide tour. To go inside the cordon, hop aboard The Red Bus. Departs outside Canterbury Museum, Rolleston Ave, ph 0800 HASSEFREE, www.hasslefreetours.co.nz; ph 0800 REDBUS, www.redbus.co.nz

Punting on the Avon

Take the new Red Zone tour or the traditional punt through the Botanic Gardens. Departs from Antigua Boatsheds or Worcester St Bridge, ph (03) 366-0337, www.punting.co.nz

Vintage Peddler

Hire a retro bike, or take Stu Waddel's two-hour central-city tour (for three or more people). 16 Bealey Ave, ph (03) 365-6530, www.vintagepeddler.co.nz

Happy Tours

Take a joyride in one of Paul Fleming's Austin 7 vintage cars. City Mall, off Cashel St, ph (027) 460-3765, www.happytours.co.nz

Gap Filler

Check out the latest creative, people-centred projects filling empty sites. www.gapfiller.org.nz

The Cardboard Cathedral

Constructed from giant cardboard tubes, this is a must-see even as a building site. Cnr Hereford & Madras Sts, www.cardboardcathedral.org.nz

Canterbury Museum

A museum and community project, multi-media attraction Quake City opened in Re:START Mall in February and will run for three years. It uses large-scale imagery, sound and film, among other features, to tell the stories of the Canterbury earthquakes. And with most of the museum reopened, cracker exhibition *Scott's Last Expedition* (until June 30) transports you to the Antarctic and into the minds of Scott and his men. Ph (03) 366-5000, www.canterburymuseum.com

The Tannery Boutique Retail and Arts Emporium

Opening in April, this Victorian-style arcade is an architectural feat and an upmarket shopping destination.

3 Garlands Rd, Woolston, www.thetannery.co.nz

Best Eats

Dux Dine

This recently opened restaurant in a refurbished Riccarton villa is a visual and culinary knockout, with indoor and alfresco dining, seafood and vegetarian dishes galore, and incredibly reasonable prices. 28 Riccarton Rd, ph (03) 348-1436, www.duxdine.co.nz

Saggio di Vino

Destroyed by the quake, the fine-dining mecca with its traditional European cuisine has been warmly welcomed back to Victoria St. 179-181 Victoria St, ph (03) 379-4006, www.saggiodivino.co.nz

Cook 'N' with Gas

With the feel of a French bistro, the atmosphere here's as good as the food. Room-mate The Astro Lounge offers drinks, tapas and live music in the garden.

23 Worcester Boulevard, ph (03) 377-9166, www.cooknwithgas.co.nz

The Brewery

The wood-fired pizzas are perfection, the craft beers delicious and the entertainment nightly. 3 Garlands Rd, Woolston, ph (03) 389-5359, www.casselsbrewery.co.nz

C1 Cafe

With its new home in an iconic central city building, and salvaged materials like giant globe lights, C1 is the epitome of demolition (or deconstruction) chic.

150 High St, ph (03) 379-1917, www.c1espresso.co.nz

Smash Palace

Converted buses serve as bar and lounge, making this popular bar-eatery oh, so Christchurch. Try the burgers. Cnr Victoria St & Bealey Ave, ph (021) 353-759, www.thesmashpalace.com

Best Sleeps

The Classic Villa

This boutique B&B in a beautifully restored, central-city villa has charm and every creature comfort. It feels like you're staying with friends. 17 Worcester Boulevard, ph (03) 377-7905, www.theclassicvilla.co.nz

The George

A gorgeous luxury hotel with two restaurants and river views that keeps winning World Travel Awards. 50 Park Ave, ph (03) 379-4560, www.thegeorge.com

Ibis Hotel Christchurch

The first central-city hotel to reopen post-quakes has 155 rooms at reasonable prices, right next to Re:START. 107 Hereford St, ph (03) 367-8666, www.ibis.com



The Re:START shopping precinct.

Handy websites

- www.popupcity.co.nz
- www.neatplaces.co.nz
- www.welcomeaboard.co.nz
- www.christchurchnz.com
- www.christchurch.org.nz
- www.christchurchcity.org.nz
- www.findchch.com