

INSIDE NZ

Tongue and groove

They speak a different language in the capital, finds **Sarah Lang.**

THINK WELLINGTON, think harbour, hills, hotels, the Beehive, business people, the cable car, and Te Papa, right? Wrong.

“Then it’s Wellington we’re coming to! It’s time, she says, it’s time surely for us to change lines, change tongues, they speak so differently down here.” So reads a Vincent O’Sullivan text sculpture on the Wellington waterfront, one of 19 such plaques which bears a quote from the poems or prose of New Zealand writers with strong Wellington ties.

Peppered along the waterfront between Frank Kitts Park and Te Papa, these text sculptures — which make up The Writers Walk — are a visually dramatic glimpse into how our wordsmiths viewed Wellington and its picturesque harbour.

The last time I wandered along the waterfront I had no idea this trail existed, but this time I keep eyes peeled for the sculptures, some splayed at surprising points like on the harbour rocks.

When I lived in Wellington as a student in the late 1990s, I was more interested in saving for kebabs and bottles of wine than uncovering the city's hidden treasures.

But a decade later with a little more money in my pocket, it's hard to know what to do first. The city's pulsing with things to do and see, many free and most within walking distance. After all, who needs a car in this village-sized city that's so easy to traverse on foot?

The prettiest walk, and the one that gives a real sense of the city, is along the harbour's edge. We follow the public walkway from Queen's Wharf — passing parks, tree groves, wetlands, old ships, cafes, a Chinese Garden, playgrounds, statues, sculptures, buskers and an open-air exhibition — all the way around to Oriental Bay.

If you're after a shopping fix, you don't need to go any further than the compact central city — in fact it takes just 20 minutes to walk from the corporate-oriented Lambton Quay end, down boutique-studded Willis St, to car-free Cuba



When you think of Wellington, its waterfront, with its boatsheds and cafes, comes to mind.



The text sculptures of the Writers Walk are must-reads.

Mall. It took me a little longer though — funky boutiques and design stores demand attention and dash implausible notions of spending little on my trip away.

For a full heads-up, insider's guide to the city, www.texture.co.nz profiles and points you to the top shops, cafes, restaurants, galleries, design stores and bars. As many are dotted a few blocks away from the shopping precinct, you might not know they're there otherwise. Texture also offers an invaluable events guide.

Just a short ramble from the far end of Cuba St is quirky Aro Valley.

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For decades the haunt of students and cash-strapped artists, the valley's corridor Aro St has recently burgeoned into a bustling shopping strip, with boutiques, eateries, and one of the best fish-and-chip shops in the land.

We wander up the steeply sloping, narrow side streets, peeking at the wee wooden houses adorned with stained-glass windows and merry murals, and gazing up the hill where more seemingly doll-sized houses cling ferociously to the hillside.

If you're keen to stretch your legs a bit further, turn left off Aro St along Holloway Rd and into the Waimapihi Reserve, which feels more like a storybook forest than New Zealand bush.

Not far from Aro, only minutes drive from the city and smack-bang next to Wellington's biggest suburb, is Karori Sanctuary. The unique 250ha "ark", where native bush is being restored and endangered species are breeding once again, feels like a secret valley.

It's ringed by a world-first 8.6km fence which clings to the steep hill and keeps predators from getting through, over or under.

The sanctuary runs regular tours through the bush, wetlands, along a floating bridge, over a steep dam, and past a 19th-century goldmine. Night walks where you can spy glow-worms, kiwi and the nocturnal tuatara are popular, but we plump for the one-hour daytime sanctuary introduction tour along an easy walking trail.

With the help of our guide, I can hear, and sometimes spy, weka, saddlebacks, bellbirds, tui, kaka and hihi (stitchbirds). In fact it's the only place on the mainland you'll find the hihi, the saddleback or the little spotted kiwi.

After a full day's shopping, sightseeing and bird spotting, it's time to pop into the Matterhorn — named *Bartender* magazine's fifth-best bar in the world. Dimly lit with a laid-back feel, it'd be perfect for clandestine meetings in cosy nooks indoors or outdoors. The easy-on-

TOP SHOPS AND CAFES

■ Pop Up Gallery on Ghuznee St (off Cuba St) is heaven for pop-art enthusiasts, with limited-edition prints from internationally renowned and up-and-coming artists. And heaps of cool T-shirts and toys.

■ More than 70 New Zealand artists, craftspeople and designers are represented at treasure trove Beckon Design Store on Willis St.

■ **Madame Fancy Pants on Cuba St** has handmade designer goodies by local and international designers. There's cute belts, clothes, shoes, cards, accessories, ornaments, bags, shoes, kids' stuff and trinkets galore.

■ Fashion lovers won't want to miss Miss Wong, a unisex urban boutique on College St not far from Cuba St.

■ Fin, on Cuba St, is the one-stop shop for a woman's bottom half. Its pants, skirts and shorts are sold exclusively in Wellington.

■ If you're into interiors, stop into Madder & Rouge on College St. As well as vintage finds, there's modern-style jugs, ceramics and homewares.

■ Floridatas is known for the best eggs in town and seriously good Mojo coffee. Open breakfast to dinner, and for late-night cocktails.

■ Perennial favourite Fidels on Cuba St has an extensive selection of counter food to tempt you away from the menu.

■ Funky new Superfino (on Ghuznee St, just off Cuba St), is a cross between a European coffee house and an old-school milk bar, morphing into a bar come night.

■ Sweet Mothers Kitchen on Courtenay Place proffers a largely Cajun and Creole menu, and is open from early morning to 10pm.

■ Wines connoisseurs might like to stop into 2007 Wine Bar of the Year, Vivo Enoteca Cucina on Edward St — or Hawthorn Lounge on Tory St, which was New Bar of the Year and Cocktail List of the Year in the 2007 NZ Bar Awards.

■ While Te Papa's always worth a visit, another gallery to call on is the City Gallery in Civic Square with major exhibitions by international and local artists. And down the road at Queen's Wharf is often-overlooked gem, the Museum of Wellington City & Sea.

■ The NZ Film Archive has more than 25,000 films, books, magazines and videos available to view free, film screenings Wednesday to Saturday, film and video-art exhibitions and a coffee bar.

the-eye, attentive waiters serve up fresh, unpretentious food which sets the benchmark for Wellington cuisine — and I've never found it so hard to choose between desserts.

Later in the evening, the places to be for drinks and gigs — Havana, Alice, Mighty Mighty, Good Luck, Bodega — are all on or within tottering distance of Cuba St. But most night owls seem to be installed at the end of Courtenay Place in Sandwiches, which doubles as a restaurant and bar hosting international and local music talent.

The Wellington music scene's

smouldering, and it'd be hard to find a weekend without a gig or festival that tickles your fancy. We head along to Sandwiches Summer-Set festival, which gathers top artists from around the country and the world into the Basin Reserve, and enjoy Shapeshifter, Black Seeds and international DJs.

Heading home on the plane, I decide Vincent O'Sullivan was right: Wellington does have a different language — and hidden treasures galore. And it was sunny all weekend: not a drop of rain until we touched down in Auckland.