



TIME

&

Head for our wild West Coast, a region steeped in history
and blessed with astonishing natural beauty.

STORY SARAH LANG

TIDE

Turquoise water rushes
through Hokitika gorge.



SHAPED LIKE A chilli pepper and home to just 32,000 people, the West Coast feels different to the rest of New Zealand. That’s partly a result of its dramatic topography: jagged limestone bluffs, alpine ranges, glaciers, native rainforest and driftwood-strewn black-sand beaches with pounding surf. But it’s also down to how the West Coast’s history has shaped its people and informs its present.

In the 1860s, the gold rush resulted in mining settlements springing up from Karamea to Bruce Bay. Much of the region’s identity still rests on its gold- and coal-mining history, and its tales of miners’ lives – their fortitude, degeneracy, hardships and heartbreak. Former mining towns and settlements, with their old buildings and small museums, are well worth exploring.

Or you can simply soak in the region’s colourful history by osmosis and opt for its myriad outdoor activities, such as kayaking, walking and mountain biking. Stop at old-school pubs, with local Monteith’s beer, of course, and stay at top-notch seaside accommodation.

GOLDEN YEARS

“Hoki”, home to around 3000 people, is considered more arty than its northern counterparts Westport and Greymouth. One landmark is the Hokitika Clock



Tower, built in 1903, with an archway and bell tower. A few blocks away, the main entrance to the black-sand beach has Hokitika spelled out in driftwood, and two surprisingly comfortable Take-a-Seat chair sculptures. Fish and chips on the beach at sunset is a must. In 2020, Hokitika became a Tohu Whenua, a place rich in historical or cultural significance that has shaped Aotearoa and provides visitors with memorable experiences.



1. The lauded Great Coast Road, that runs between Westport and Greymouth. 2. On the Reefton Cycle Trail. 3. This driftwood sign leaves you in no doubt you’re in Hokitika. 4. Shantytown Heritage Park. 5. Steam train at the Shantytown station.

In the 19th century, the “goldfields capital” was the region’s commercial centre and the country’s largest immigrant-entry port, although it was a case of enter at your own risk: there were 108 strandings and 32 ships lost between 1865 and 1867. At the height of the gold rush, the settlement boasted an astonishing 102 hotels, 84 of them on Revell Street, then known as the Crooked Mile. Choose a self-guided walk – the town centre Points of Interest Loop or Hokitika Heritage Walk. The West Coast was, and is, where almost all New Zealand’s pounamu, also called greenstone and jade, is found. Check out the art, carvings, jewellery and more at the town’s shops, including Traditional Jade, a small store with many pieces.

Over at Hokitika Glass Studio, handcrafted pieces range from platters to penguins, and there’s even a glass chess set. From the shop, you can watch the artisans creating pieces in their workshop behind the counter. Perhaps finish the day by seeing a film in the art deco Regent Theatre. Fifteen minutes’ drive from Hokitika is the West Coast Treetop Walk and Cafe. Stroll along the loop track on a steel platform 20m from the forest floor, then climb a narrow, winding staircase to the Hokitika Tower more than 40m above the ground. It feels like you’re suspended in the sky.

BACK IN TIME

Greymouth, north of Hokitika, is the region’s biggest town, with around 8000 people. Check out its historical buildings, including the Regent Theatre



About 10km from Greymouth you’ll find Shantytown Heritage Park, a recreation of a gold-mining town that oozes authenticity inside and out.



and the little Left Bank Art Gallery, with its regular exhibits of contemporary New Zealand art, in a former bank.

Beer lovers can take a guided 45-minute Monteith’s Brewery tour and tasting. And be sure to stop at the beachside caravan-sized eatery The Lifeboat NZ, run by Dutchman Richard Mons. From a 1908-built lifeboat he restored, he sells delicious Dutch specialty stroopwafels, plus great coffee and hot chocolates.

About 10km from Greymouth is Shantytown Heritage Park. You might imagine a recreation of a gold-mining town would be somewhat kitsch. But it oozes authenticity, inside and out.

It has two rehoused original buildings – a town hall and a church – and 30 specially created replica buildings including a foundry, post office, theatre, bank, general store, fire station, stables, butcher, barber, saloon, printer, Masonic lodge, library and jewellers. The audio tour is recommended, and you can dress up in period costume for a photo in the saloon. Kids will love Shantytown’s train trip and gold-panning experience.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

Home to around 5000 residents, the Coast’s northernmost centre of Westport is another historical hub. Paying tribute to its coal-mining history is the Coaltown Museum, where you can see and hear a grunting steam engine and the inclinator that took miners down 600m. There are tools, artefacts, photos and story panels about the miners and their lives. It’s a noisy experience well worth the entry fee.



From Westport you can take one of three Outwest 4WD tours. One goes into the valley where farmer, logger, gold-miner and deerstalker Johnny Currie – who has many a tale to share – lives.

Between Westport and Greymouth, the Great Coast Road, named one of the world’s Top 10 Coastal Drives by Lonely Planet, passes small towns Charleston, Fox River, Barrytown, Rapahoe, Runanga Bay and Punakaiki.

Punakaiki’s famed Pancake Rocks are cliffs of tiered, jagged limestone formations that emerged some 30 million years ago when the seabed was raised by earthquakes. A 20-minute loop walk from the main highway offers the best view of the sea bursting through blowholes in the rock.

Alternatively, hire single or double kayaks from Punakaiki Canoes and paddle the peaceful, meandering Pororari River. The slight current means your work your arms a little more going upstream. Along the way, park your kayak on the riverbank, and soak in the scenery and serenity.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The main centres have a lot to offer, but don’t bypass the region’s smaller, historical inland towns such as Blackball, Denniston and Reefton. The latter is a compact town an hour’s drive inland from Westport and Greymouth. It has a population of about 900 and has undergone a major transformation. That’s largely down to John Bougen. After co-founding and later selling shares in clothing outlet Dress Smart, and developing shopping centres, he and his partner moved from Christchurch to Reefton in 2015. Since then he’s led its revival and makeover.

Dubbed “Hurricane John” by some (in a fond way), this infectious upbeat character drives around town with a cherry-picker on the back of his truck, waving or stopping to chat to pretty much everyone he passes.

Bougen has bought and restored 15 buildings over five years, most on the main street Broadway, helped by his Reefton Contracting Company team. All but one of these buildings are rented out to new or



6. Paddling on the Pororari River. 7. Children explore along the Reefton Cycle Trail. 8. Towering cliffs, rock rifts and the Tasman Sea at Punakaiki.





existing businesses. For instance, the former general store now houses a gin distillery, and the old Reefton Coffin Co Shop is now occupied by an antiques store that has relocated from Christchurch. Bougen has also restored and beautified town amenities and public areas, including the 150-year-old Band Hall and the band rotunda.

Bougen and his team are currently working on a further 12 historically significant but dilapidated buildings, sometimes doing so for no money. They do everything from total restoration to painting or repiling, simply because of the buildings’ visual significance to the town. And he’s funded a major Reefton attraction: a 60m by 30m field of 4000 blue, red and white lavender plants that form what should win a Guinness World Record for the largest New Zealand flag.

Where to stay? Now a city councillor, Bougen has that covered too. He’s restored the original jail and turned it into visitor accommodation, and he’s converting the old State Mines office into guest digs too. He shrugs off praise for his efforts. “Others lit the match and I chucked some petrol on it.”

Other well-known locals are the Bearded

Miners: Gavin, Peter and Geoff, who go by their first names only. Step into their replica 1870s miner’s hut and sip a cup of billy tea brewed over the fire. The trio share stories of mining life, how Reefton was founded and how in 1888, it became the southern hemisphere’s first town to have a public supply of electricity and electric street lights. That’s why heritage-style lamps hang on the main street.

DIGGING INTO THE PAST

The West Coast has about 70 so-called ghost towns, deserted after the closure of gold mines. One is Waiuta, an hour’s drive inland from Greymouth, and 21km south of Reefton. Expect to tackle some gravel road as you head for the hills.

In 1905 a prospecting party found the Birthday Reef of gold – on King Edward VII’s birthday – and sold their claim for £2000, the equivalent of around \$500,000 today. It became home to one of the world’s most productive gold mines with a depth of 879m.

Six hundred people lived in Waiuta at its height in the 1930s: there was a boarding house, huts for single men and some basic family homes. But residents left in 1951 after

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PHOTOGRAPHY ALAMY, ADOBESTOCK



the collapse of the main shaft, used for ventilation, pumping and electricity supply. Without power the pumps stopped, the mine flooded (no one was injured), and the mine and the township was abandoned. You can drive or walk up to the former mine site with its views of Aoraki/Mt Cook.

Some of Waiuta’s original buildings still stand, including the former police station, three cottages and the old barber shop. In an open-air building, black-and-white-photo panels transport you back in time. Many photographs are the legacy of Prague immigrant and mine-worker Joseph Divis (1885-1967), who lived out his life in Waiuta.

Waiuta is now Department of Conservation (DOC) land, and DOC runs a lodge with bunk rooms for hikers and mountain bikers. Meanwhile, 35-year-old organisation Friends of Waiuta continues to preserve buildings and landmarks and sharing its history. Contact the group at least two weeks in advance to arrange a guided tour from an historian.

The group commissioned documentary *Whispers of Gold*, produced by filmmaker Dave Kwant and directed by Luis Castanon. It has screened at small cinemas countrywide and has been released on DVD. Waiuta also recently became a Tohu Whenua. No doubt more of the West Coast will earn that title. westcoast.co.nz



9. Downtown Reefton. 10. The Reefton Coffin Co building now houses an antique shop. 11. On the West Coast Treetop Walk. 12. Reefton Distilling Co produces gin. 13. The Bearded Miners share stories at their miners’ hut.

Eat

GATHERER WHOLEFOODS & BAR

This beautifully on-trend cafe in Hokitika started life as a food caravan and now serves a predominantly plant-based menu. Come evening, it’s a boutique bar. gathererwholefoods.com

REEFTON DISTILLING CO.

Gin is the new craft beer, right? Enjoy a tasting, take a tour or buy some gin. Employees forage locally for unusual ingredients. reeftondistillingco.com

HOKITIKA SANDWICH COMPANY

In this small space where coffee sacks are tablecloths, you’ll get



some of the best sandwiches around. The New Yorker and the smoked-fish sandwiches are recommended.

FUTURE DOUGH CO.

This Reefton cafe and bakery, formerly The Broadway Tearooms & Bakery, opened in 1874 and has had its ovens on since. The sweet treats are good. thefuturedoughco.co.nz

Sleep

ROSS BEACH TOP 10 HOLIDAY PARK

If there’s such a thing as a boutique holiday park, this is it. Beside Ross Beach, 20 minutes’ drive south of Hokitika, it has tent and campervan sites, and 11 shipping-container “pods”. These super-cool rectangles have amenities carefully tucked away and are a minute’s walk from the sea. It’s bliss on the deck on a sunny day. top10.co.nz

HYDRANGEA COTTAGES

About 500m from the Punakaiki Pancake Rocks are six cosy cottages set among hydrangeas and backing onto native bush. Over the highway beside the sea is a large house for gatherings. This family business also offers horse treks. pancake-rocks.co.nz

HOTEL LAKE BRUNNER

Tiny town Moana, 25 minutes’ drive inland from Greymouth, sits next to the region’s largest lake, Lake Brunner. The studios and larger apartments are roomy and comfortable. Dine at the Kingfisher Bar & Restaurant. hotellakebrunner.co.nz

BEACHFRONT HOTEL HOKITIKA

Four types of room, from a one-bedroom studio to the penthouse suite, overlooking the ocean. Enjoy a glass of wine on the balcony. beachfronthotel.co.nz

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