

Chapter Nine

The last time I went to the North Island I flew. It was meant to be a simple flight, direct from Dunedin to Wellington lasting about an hour and a half. Instead, thanks to an unscheduled stopover in Christchurch due to a mechanical fault, it ended up lasting almost eight hours and took an entire day. Now, I found myself returning to the North Island (the Wairarapa region) however this time I wanted to go via a different means of transport.

I wanted to drive through small towns, to be stuck behind campervans and to travel on narrow, and winding roads that were steeper than expected. I wanted to stop at small and curious coffee shops, quirky eateries and to see unique landmarks and local features that you missed if you flew. In short, I wanted a road trip.

So it was, that I left Dunedin at 9am on a Monday morning and barring one petrol stop, I arrived in Picton around nine hours later, having travelled some seven hundred kilometres. Upon arrival, with everything closing on a Monday night, I found something to eat, sorted myself for the early morning ferry and retired to bed.

The next morning I awoke in a state that was surprisingly bright and fresh for 5:30am. I completed my morning ablutions without incident, a feat that I was rather proud of considering I hadn't yet awoken my internal systems with coffee. Then, ensuring to leave my accommodation key in the designated spot for housekeeping to find later, I quietly slipped out into Picton's fresh morning air, heading for the ferry terminal, the Marlborough Sounds and later Wellington.

The crossing was smooth and pleasant and upon the sight of Wellington city I took a moment to reflect that I'm always pleased when I can depart a ferry in the manner in which I boarded, rather than having to swim ashore. So it was, my mind was most happy that I was able to sedately drive off the Bluebridge ferry in Wellington and begin my search for brunch. I have to admit to not having the most sturdy of sea legs and to avoid breakfast making a sudden surprise appearance, my food intake through-out the morning had been minimal. Finding myself back on dry land and with my stomach letting me know it was now ready for food, I went in search of sustenance.

I navigated the city streets for a while and got hopelessly confused with a Wilson's parking building before settling upon a delightfully busy place called the Pickle and Pie for lunch. Patiently waiting to be seated as the sign directed, I spent the next hour discovering how ravenous I was while at the same time happily people watching the Wellington lunchtime crowd. Contently full, I made my way back to the car, successfully navigated my way out of the city and spent the rest of the day enjoy the drive to my final destination of Martinborough.

The next day, heavy, dark clouds hung overhead like a thick blanket. In the distance a wall of weather loomed ominously on the horizon. Between, patches of blue sky gave

a sense of hope that there might yet be some fine weather left in the day. I hoped so, I was heading for Cape Palliser Lighthouse, the southernmost point of the North Island.

Approaching the coast which would eventually lead to the Lighthouse, the wind picked up and the countryside changed to a beach of black sand with dramatic pinnacle cliffs. Occasionally I'd pass cribs and huts that were scattered along the road that held little or no protection from the elements. I maneuvered past partially washed out roads and small villages that were filled with crayfish pots and fishing boats that were pushed into the sea by bulldozers. The road narrowed to a single lane, a ford had to be negotiated, fallen rocks scattered the way ahead and I lost wifi coverage. This was a place that you'd truly have to love to spend any length of time. It was New Zealand's rugged coastline at its very best and what's more, it even had a Lighthouse!

I arrived at what can only be described as a 'makeshift' parking lot. Standing in an enthusiastic wind, I steady myself for the ascent to the red and white striped Cape Palliser Lighthouse that sat on a rocky point some 60 meters above me.

To get to the Lighthouse (having first survived the drive), first you must commit yourself to climbing the two hundred and fifty two steps which were built in 1912. Keeping in mind that the Lighthouse was first lit in 1897, that gives fifteen years that Keepers had to scramble up a dangerously slippery dirt track just to reach the Lighthouse. Once there, they still had to haul the supplies (oil and kerosene) up the cliff face to the light station by way of a hand winch. Getting supplies to live off was just as complicated. Stores were delivered every three months, weather permitting. On the occasions when the seas were too rough, the stores were landed six kilometres away at Kawakawa Bay. This then left the Lighthouse Keeper with the dilemma of getting the stores back to his lodgings.

Standing at the Lighthouse I took a moment to take in my surroundings. It was beginning to rain. The wind was picking up and I couldn't help but reflect that the life of a Lighthouse Keeper must have been a lonely existence. With that I departed, heading for the charm of the Martinborough Hotel.

The next day I awoke feeling cold. Throughout the night the surrounding hills of the Wairarapa had been covered with a dusting of snow. I'd spent the previous evening enjoying the hospitality of the local hotel, discussing the benefits of wearing a Peak Blinder hat and the virtues of the late, great All Black Sir Brian Lochore. This then led to a much deeper discussion on if it's still possible to make the All Blacks by playing for Wairarapa Bush without playing Super Rugby. We all agreed it wasn't.

Yesterday, leaving Cape Palliser the weather had turned nasty pretty quickly and so I'd decided to leave having a stroll around the town of Martinborough till the next day. Now, in the brightness of a new morning with the odd hail storm passing overhead, I went for a look around.

The town very much had a 'summer vibe' to it. The houses all had either contemporary designs or were upgraded Villa's with wrap-around decks to provide shade from the summer sun. There were swimming pools, vineyards and olive groves aplenty. All of which suggested that in summer if you like complicated and lavish food platters with expensive wine then this was the place to be. I came to suspect that

Martinborough was a place that shutdown over winter and was just now coming out of its hibernation.

Walking in the hail I passed the now familiar hotel and passed the Old Post Office which had been converted to a Boutique shop that among other things, claimed to have Inspiring Sophistication. Not being confident about what inspiring sophistication was, I went in. It took all of about 15 seconds to decide that if what was in front of me was inspiring sophistication then clearly it was something I was lacking. What's more, since it seemed to involve floral designs, gourmet gift presentations and stuff made with lace, it wasn't something I'd be purchasing in this lifetime, and dare I say it, the next!

Over the next hour I wandered around the village square and the surrounding shops while rain, hail and snow showers passed by. As I was preparing to leave, I spotted two things that caught my interest. The first of which was a sign at the Wine Merchants. I stood for a moment, studying the sign to make sure I understood it properly. It appeared that you could buy wine and also hire bikes. Now, I don't want to cause alarm, but doesn't that seem a tad dangerous to anyone else? Secondly, I discovered that the town of Carterton was nearby. Thus it was that I made up my mind to make Carterton my next stop, after Masterton.

The drive from Martinborough to Masterton took about 40 minutes and was uneventful. Which is just what you want to be able to say when the national road toll regularly reaches around 300 deaths per year. It rained the whole way, apart from when it was snowing and hailing. I can't say the journey was boring, more unremarkable! Which is a good way to describe Masterton. Maybe it was the rain, hail and snow however I drove from one side of the town to the other, went around a round-about and drove out again without finding a single reason to stop. I just couldn't find one. I really tried, I really did, however I just couldn't for the life of me convince myself that it would add to my day or life in any conceivable way. So, leaving Masterton behind, I headed for Carterton and a coffee.

Carterton is a pleasant small town and unlike Masterton holds a bit of allure. It's surrounded by farmland and hills that provide a lovely backdrop for the town itself. I stopped at a place called Wild Oats for coffee and drank it while rummaging through a second-hand store called Bizarre Attractions next door. A shop filled with curiosity, it had everything from records to old tin cans, toys and gardening equipment. I hunted through the vast collection of items in a world of happiness and while I didn't find inspiring sophistication, I did find something better, joy and delight. Exiting the shop, finishing my coffee and bidding the owner Graham farewell, I took a moment to read about Carterton's namesake Charles Rooking Carter at a nearby statue before walking back to my car.

The rain settled in once more and I became hungry. In need of lunch I made up my mind to eat in the nearby town of Featherston and that is where I headed next.

I stopped and ate before I found a place called Loco. A delightful place that was not only a second hand bookshop but it was also a coffee shop. I instantly adored it. The shelves were piled with books from every genre spread out over two rooms that filled all the spaces in-between. There were couches, sofas and chairs set out around a coffee table in the shop window while at the back of the store a more extensive reading area

had been created with plenty of nooks and crannies to tuck yourself into. It wasn't long before I had found a copy of Truman Capote's 1966 non-fiction novel, *In Cold Blood* and armed with a delicious cup of joe, I settled myself for a chapter or two.

Later, remembering I still had nearly 70 kilometres left until I got to Wellington, I pointed my car in the direction of the Rimutaka Hills, the Hutt Valley and Wellington.

By the time I arrived at my pre-booked accommodation in Wellington, I was ready to sit down and wet my whistle. This thought turned out to be a bit premature as it transpired that what I had booked, and what I was presented with, were vastly different. Upon entering the establishment I checked my confirmation email that read "double with ensuite - superior comfort with a double bed and ensuite bathroom." What in fact I was given was a single, top bunk in a dorm with eight other individuals and a small locker to store my belongings. The thought of staying a second longer, didn't even enter my consciousness. Being beyond a station in life where I want to share a bedroom with seven complete strangers in bunk beds, I simply collected my belongings, politely bid everyone good day and walked out the door.

Fortunately for me, after a quick Google search and a few phone calls later I found myself walking into the lobby of a nice block of hotel apartments that were only a few minutes away from Lambton Quay and nearby Courtenay Place. The staff were friendly and the room was spacious and clean with everything that is required of a decent room. It was free of bunks, it had an ensuite and I didn't have to share it with anyone. Dropping my bags on the bed, I went in search of food and beer.

Having been to Wellington a few times, I felt I knew the city fairly well. However, this time it felt different. The city seemed almost frightened. Over the streets and business there hung a shroud of angst and apprehension. Fear of a new kind seemed to be terrorizing the city. Large gangs of middle aged women had invaded for the 2022 World of WearableArt Show.

Taking over the city streets in numbers of up to eight or nine at a time, they walked giggling and laughing, forcing passers-by onto the pavement. The bars, nightclubs and cocktail lounges had been compelled to stock extra supplies of Merlot, Lindauer, Sauvignon Blanc and Shiraz while the once calm and peaceful streets of Wellington weren't going to be safe after 7:00pm. These ladies had their husbands at home and were ready to flirt with the 18 year old bartender and dance inappropriately to Rock DJ by Robbie Williams.

This was a situation I wanted no part of. Taking shelter in a quiet restaurant that featured cuisine from South East Asia, I washed it all down with a few Heineken, then beat a hasty retreat to my hotel for the rest of the evening.

I slept wonderfully. Apart from between 12:00am and 2:00am when three large gangs of middle aged women who had attended the World of WearableArt Show arrived back at the hotel. The first group treated the rest of the building to renditions of songs from Grease and Abba at obnoxiously high volumes. A second group got a trifle confused with what floor their room was on. This they solved by phoning a friend who was clearly deaf! While a third group in fits of giggling and laughter bounced their way off doors and walls down the corridor to the end of the hall. To show my appreciation,

the next morning I replied in kind with several long blasts of my car horn as I departed for the Ferry at 6:00am! 'I hope the show was terrible' I muttered as I went in search of coffee!

That morning the Wellington waterfront and harbour was a true sight to behold. The day was breaking still and calm. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, nor a ripple on the water. It was so nice I didn't even mind the ferry to Picton being 45 minutes late. This was Wellington on a good day, and what a good day it was.

On the ferry from Wellington to Picton they were showing the movie Frozen. I have some questions.

- In the movie, is the way the snowflakes fall in the wind scientifically accurate?
- What about hypothermia?
- What about climate change?
- Wouldn't Elsa's ice castle be amazingly boring?
- Just how close can a snowman get to a fire without melting?

I wanted to address these questions with the other passengers. These were questions that needed answers and so I looked around to see who I could converse with. The dads were mostly asleep, the children were engrossed in the TV while the mum's had that disturb me at your peril look. Deciding that I was the only one questioning what was being shown, I left these ponderings and I went for a walk outside before returning to my seat and settling back into my book until arriving in Picton.

The ferry docked in Picton on a stunning day. All the little bays and inlets that made up the Marlborough Sounds looked ideal for swimming and soaking up the sun. Driving off the ferry, it was the type of day that made me realise why so many people decide to spend an extra day or two in the area.

Once off the ferry I stopped to refuel both the car and myself before starting the 692km journey home. Leaving Picton, I passed by Mount Pleasant, Koromiko and Spring Creek before taking the wrong exit at a roundabout in Blenheim, eventually finding the correct road that took me through the Weld Pass and on to Kaikoura.

It was somewhere along the Kaikoura coast, near the famous food truck Nin's Bin that I started randomly pondering about the sights that I was passing. This led me to the conclusion that it's amazing what you remember that you forget when you're looking out a window. It also led me to several observations about driving in New Zealand:

1. Keeping left unless overtaking in a passing lane is apparently quite hard.
2. Fields of Rapeseed are very pretty but have such an unfortunate name.
3. The Three Waters bill doesn't appear to be very popular.
4. You can always tell buildings that were once a petrol station.
5. Gangs of orange road cones seem to be multiplying at an alarming rate and taking over the streets!
6. Fonterra trucks turn often.
7. There are plenty of places to buy bales of hay and horse poo.
8. State Highway 1 is no place for a restored steam tractor to be towing a caravan and a car, no matter how lovely and old it is.

9. Snow-capped peaks and high mountain ranges that sit on the edge of the horizon always look lonely yet strangely enticing.
10. I love the sight of Dunedin from the Northern Motorway when you're traveling south, It's the sight of home.