

TRAVEL

SANDWICHED BY THE Tasman Sea and the serrated peaks of the Southern Alps, bountiful Hokitika is a pitch-perfect base camp for summer road-tripping in Westland.

You'd be hard pressed to find a comparably sized town in New Zealand with more galleries and studios, spanning painters, glass-blowers, craftspeople and pounamu carvers.

I've always loved the Glass Blowing Studio, which the Wilson family have run for over 30 years.

Their product range of delicate art and ornaments is astounding.

My favourite arty space in Hokitika is the Wilderness Gallery, spanning the full range of local arts. You'll struggle to walk out without buying something.

But the gallery's prized feature is the award-winning landscape photography of Juergen Schacke. He's kind of like an Ansel Adams in these parts.

Just north of town on the Kumara Junction Highway, make tracks to Stone Mats Hokitika. These guys pioneered those iconic West Coast stone mats, fashioned as door mats or table mats, making for a trusty, totally usable memento.

Living on site, they collect the beach stone, weaving their wizardly magic in the creation of these stone mats.

Scattered across windswept, wave-lashed Hokitika Beach, the sculptural driftwood art is ever-evolving. Unleash your own creative juices and assemble something, while you're there.

I have to admit, I was hopelessly uncreative with my twiggy construction efforts, but you might have better luck.

Grab a coffee from the Lifeboat Cafe and take a stroll along the beach, which is swooned over for its dramatic tangerine sunsets and staggering procession of driftwood sculptures.

The beach practically laps the main street. Most sculptures are informal, whimsical, organic creations that constantly recast the beachscape throughout the year. But you'll also marvel over extravagantly sized works, like grand gazebos.

Some are hardy survivors from the annual driftwood and sand sculpture festival, which has evolved into a heady hotbed of creative flair. It's next outing is from January 26 to 30.

Follow the locals to score some primo fish and chips at Dulcie's Takeaway, tucked away in the heritage-heavy nook of Gibson Quay. Her fish burgers are particularly good.



Driftwood in Hokitika.

Bountiful Hokitika

The West Coast town's varied charms will win you over, as Mike Yardley explains



Giant kiwi at Hokitika Glass Studio.



Dulcies Takeaways, Hokitika.

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While waiting for your dinner order, take a stroll along the historic quay, where a series of interpretation panels pay homage to the glory days of Hokitika's trading bustle.

As the capital of the Westland goldfields, by 1867 it was New Zealand's busiest port in terms of shipping movements. (And home to 102 hotels!)

There's a stunning photo of over 40 ships tied up alongside the wharf from the late 19th century. The notorious river bar entrance claimed the loss of 30 ships.

Wrapped in forest and perched on a hillside, you've got a ringside seat on an indelible sunset at Hokitika Sunset Lodge.

Loaded with comforts, the sun terrace, hot tub and garden barbecue all add to the golden holiday vibe.

I locked in my stay with Booking.com

who have the West Coast covered, with exceptional accommodation options spanning all tastes. No matter where you are travelling, nor your budget or accommodation taste, bag a great rate, with total flexibility and convenience.

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Heading south on SH6, I went as far as Ross, a cute-as-a-button settlement, with a storied past in gold mining.

The historic village of glories lost sports a cluster of colonial buildings, including the old Ross jail and miners' cottages.

The 150-year old Empire Hotel (the current building dates from 1908) is one of the most treasured on the Coast, bursting with history, personality and great pub cuisine. Whitebait, anyone?

From Ross, I ventured back up SH6, to take in a recent addition to Westland's

stable of top-billing attractions.

Turning off the highway on to the Woodstock-Rimu Rd, the \$7 million Treetop Walk is a series of elevated steel walkways allowing you to traverse the canopy of the podocarp forest by Lake Mahinapua.

Twenty-five metres above the forest floor, the mesh-steel gantry leads you through a dense vista of native forest, with giant specimens of rimu, kamahi and matai, interspersed with tree ferns, orchids, liverworts and fellow forest floor residents.

Gently sway in harmony with the forest on the Mahinapua Springboard.

Lush and intimate, the highpoint is the 47m-high spiral staircase of the Hokitika Tower, leading you up to sigh-inducing views of the forest, Lake Mahinapua and the mountains of Westland.

www.treetopsnz.com

Sunset Lodge, Hokitika.



Lifeboat cafe in Hokitika.



Treetop walk.

