

A LONG WAY HOME

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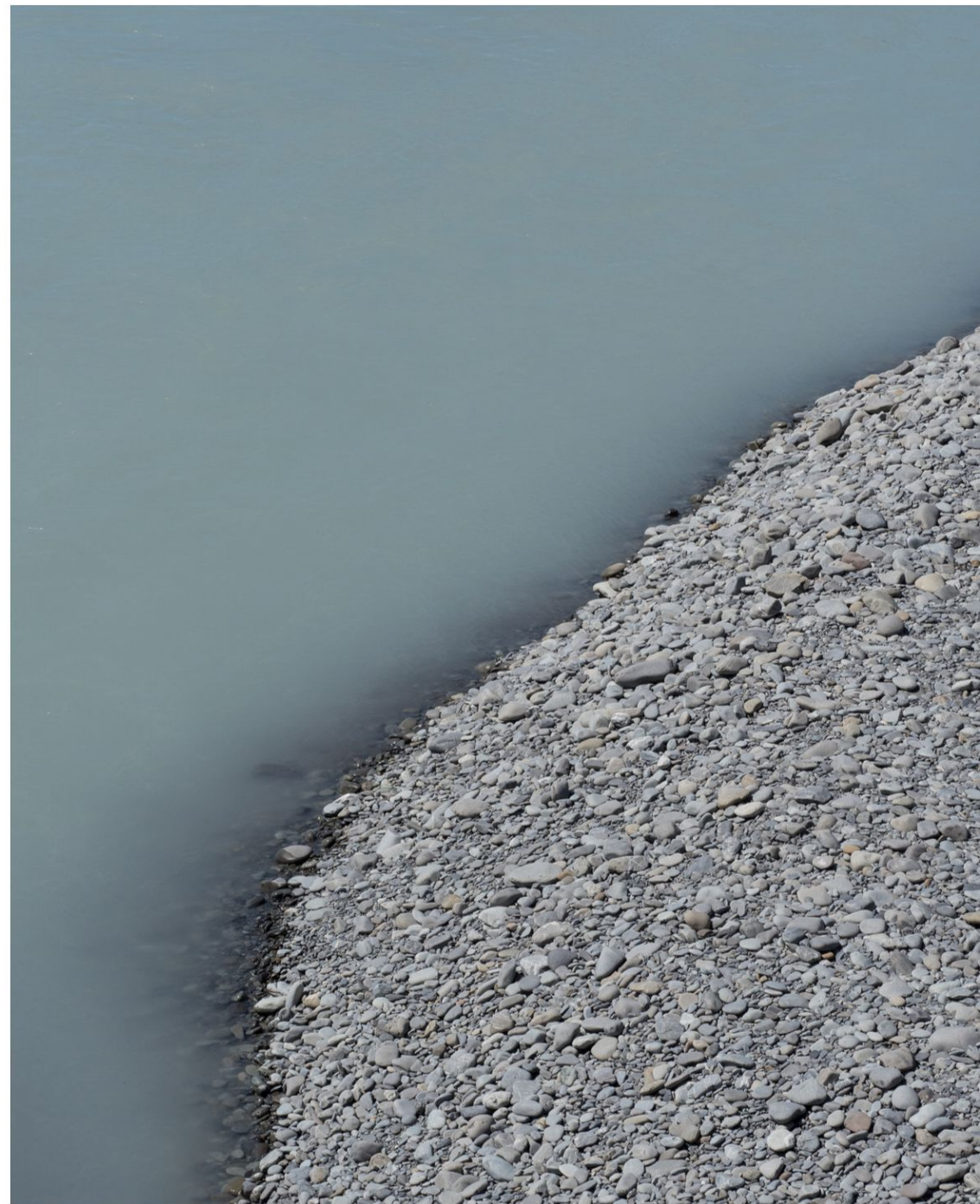
Crossing Aotearoa's South Island in search of whitebait, weather and a sense of connection.

The door blew shut on the ferry lounge, leaving behind the fragrant whiff of sheep from the livestock truck in the vehicle bay where, earlier, 100 woolly faces had greeted us onboard. Every pair of brown eyes had asked the question: where were we going? 'South', I'd winked back, which was about as much as I knew myself.

For a New Zealander I was shamefully out of touch with New Zealand. Being Auckland-born and Wellington-raised I'd traversed the North Island a thousand times over, while the South remained stuck on my to-do list - somewhere at the bottom at that. New Zealand's grass was never green enough for me and I was bored, preoccupied with romantic notions of *overseas*. As soon as I could I emigrated to the UK, spending more than a decade revelling in ancient history and effortless travel until, in 2016, I became a British citizen. I reckon it was at this point my mother decided enough was enough - how could I be a certified Brit when I was still so uninitiated in my own backyard? It was time to come home and tackle that to-do list. So here we were, my mum and I, on the Cook Strait Ferry as it coasted through the lush valleys of the Marlborough Sounds, heading for the unchartered territory of my motherland.

The West Coast

My sum total knowledge of the West Coast was that it had whitebait and weather, and plenty of both. Sure enough, we arrived to rain and thick cloud, my mother navigating the winding road through a complete white-out. This untamed coast is beautiful regardless; the wild churning sea, hills shrouded in mist, the road flanked by tall *nikau* palms. Forget *Lord of the Rings*, this is *Jurassic Park* territory. We stopped in Punakaiki and followed a cliff-cut trail through beds of flax to see the famous Pancake Rocks; ancient stacks of limestone born out of the seabed over millions of years and eroded by the elements. Continuing south we made a detour to Blackball, a former coal mining settlement turned backwater town renowned for two notable highlights: the local salami company (where we stocked up on snacks) and a grand turn-of-the-century hotel once called The Blackball Hilton. Although it was named after the bloke who ran the old mine, the global Hilton chain came knocking and demanded they change the name. And so they did. In a nod to good ol' stubborn Kiwi humour it's now Formerly The Blackball Hilton.







Avenues of tall kahikatea trees saluted us as we made our way to glacier country, the drizzle following us all the way. We arrived in Fox, a small town at the foot of the Southern Alps dedicated almost entirely to mountain pursuits, such as the glacier heliflight we'd booked for the following day. But the peaks above us were obscured by ominous cloud. "The helicopters," chimed the woman checking us into our motel, "haven't been up all week." When people in the UK tell me that I must miss the weather back home, they're confusing us with sunny Australia. For in New Zealand the only thing you can predict about the weather is its changeability. We were lucky then to wake up to blue skies, giving us the chance to witness the mountain ranges reflected in Lake Matheson's much-photographed mirrored surface and keep our date with Fox Glacier. Our pocket-sized helicopter hovered up the great sweeping frozen river, pure white ice rippled with translucent blue, made all the more humbling for the fact nature almost didn't let us in.

Having encountered all weather varieties we went in search of that ultimate Kiwi delicacy: whitebait fritters, fresh from the pan and served on no-frills, generously buttered white bread with a wedge of lemon. In Haast we came upon Otoko Espresso, a rust-brown, corrugated-iron cart serving hot coffee and whitebait sarnies on the side of the road. We ate where we stood, juices running down our chins, as proprietor Robyn rested her elbows on the counter and told us how she parks here for the summer holidays. "My kids are playing over there somewhere," she says, waving an arm

towards the park. "They'll come back when they're hungry." Oh my word, if only we could do the same.

Otago

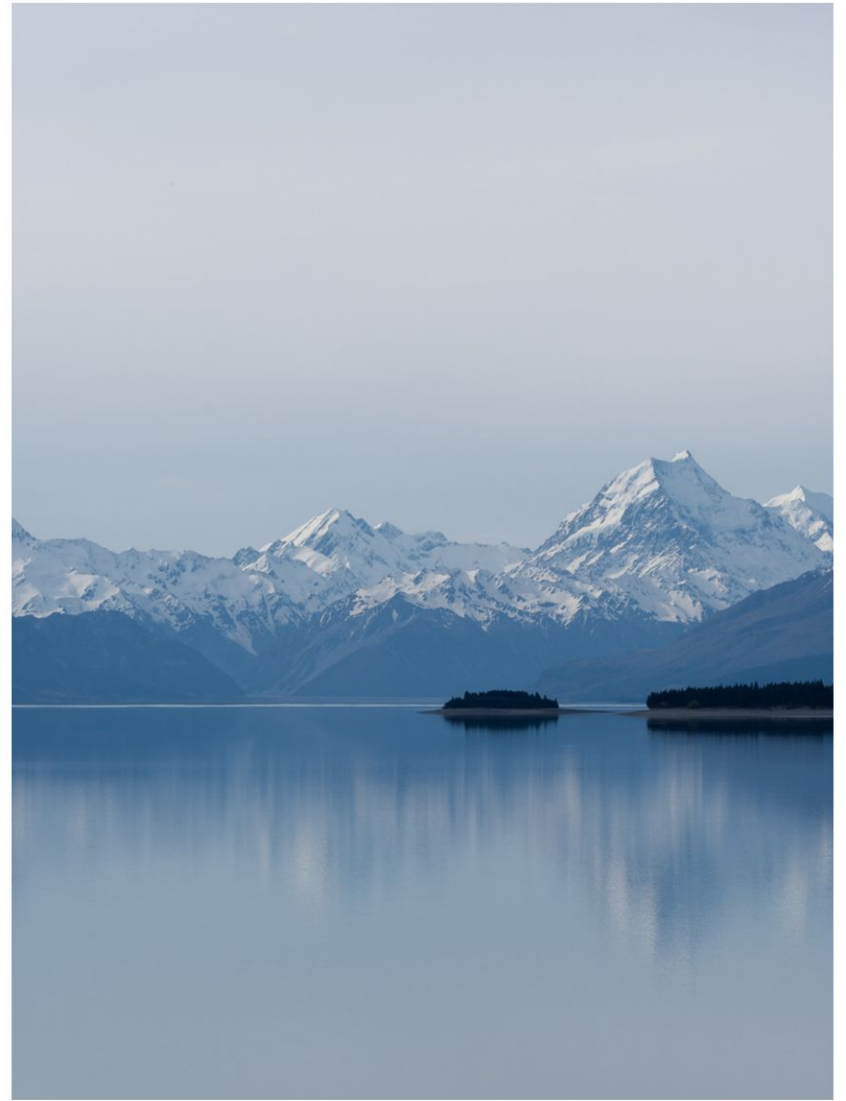
We ventured inland across the Alps, through the beech forest and rugged schist ravines of the Haast Pass - once an ancient Māori greenstone trail - emerging into what appeared to be an entirely different country. The moody greys and greens of the west coast had been replaced by sandy browns and bright blues of Lake Wanaka, backed by mountains beyond mountains and Lake Hawea, which is a startling shade of turquoise. Mum's little red Mazda carried us over the Crown Range, the highest main road in the country and one hell of a scenic drive, golden valleys appearing at every hairpin turn. Having made it to the other side we stopped for a drink at the Cardrona Hotel, an iconic coaching inn dating back to 1863, which is seriously old when you consider that the country was only founded in 1840. Its wooden facade is original as is the vintage Chrysler parked out front, while round the back the rose-bordered beer garden is the perfect spot for a cold one.

We spent two nights in Arrowtown, set at a welcome distance from the summer crowds of nearby Queenstown and a place that benefits from a proper nose. Retaining its gold rush charm, the main street is a cluster of heritage-style shops and restaurants, merging with a tree-lined avenue of original miners' cottages. A horse was tethered outside the pub where a jazz band had people on their feet and dancing

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in the beer garden. Surrounded by all this it was easy to imagine the lives of families who'd emigrated here to make their fortune panning the Arrow River for gold. New Zealand may not have seen the rise and fall of empires, or had the likes of Shakespeare walk its streets, but our country has an intrepid history all its own, something I was only now beginning to appreciate.

Back on course, we followed the long straight country roads, passing Cromwell as we went, the town once drowned and rebuilt to make way for the great Clyde Dam. We were heading for Oamaru - a place I'd known nothing about and was pleasantly surprised to find contained beautiful neo-classical architecture of white stone, a preserved Victorian precinct and, most surprisingly, a quirky museum claiming Oamaru as the birthplace of steampunk. We strolled the avenues of the old town, browsing curiosities in ye olde bookshops and eclectic vintage stores before heading along the coast to neighbouring Moeraki, which is famous for its own curiosities. Here you'll find oft-photographed circular boulders scattered across a small patch of beach, strangely otherworldly, as if some mythical giant had dropped his marbles long ago.

My favourite curiosity of all was Fleur's Place, a seafood shack lovingly installed on the Moeraki harbourside by chef Fleur Sullivan. We arrived for dinner, the evening sun glinting off the ocean as gulls twirled above the ramshackle restaurant built from marvellous bits and bobs - old doors, pieces of boat, a spiral staircase

rescued from a demolished hotel. We tucked into freshly grilled hoki and monkfish, while all around us the walls were covered in Sharpie scrawls from previous diners, love notes to a good meal. And then there was Fleur, with a cloud of white hair and a greenstone hung about her neck who, despite being in her seventies, was hustling through the restaurant with a steel tray of fish. Stopping for a chat, she told us how the ample supply of local food motivated her to open the restaurant in 2002. "I'd go out on the boats and see how much went to waste - they'd chuck the fish heads overboard. And I thought, that would make a bloody good stock!" Next thing I knew Fleur was tugging on my arm and mum and I were encouraged to come ogle another diner's fish supper. "This bream was caught about two hours ago," she announced, clearly as delighted as we were. Here was a woman who appreciated what was right on her doorstep. New life mantra: be more like Fleur.

Canterbury

We had arrived in lake country, passing Lake Aviemore, where 'freedom campers' congregated in their laundry-draped campervans, then the eye-wateringly blue Lake Pukaki, and Lake Benmore, with its colossal hydropower dam. Punctuating all this water are the Clay Cliffs, found just outside of Omarama. Five dollars in an honesty box beside the gate grants entry to what looks like the Australian Outback - a dry, arid landscape spiked with huge pinnacles of rock and riddled with walking trails. Then, it was back to blue for the rest of the day, our

digs a tiny cabin on the edge of Lake Tekapo alongside the compact tents of committed cycle-tourers. Mum and I sat on the porch, sharing fish and chips with a family of ducks and waiting for nightfall; this place is a UNESCO dark sky reserve, the undiluted darkness a perfect opportunity for stargazing.

The morning brought a palette of colour as we hit the road through trails of lupins, an immigrant wildflower that mottled the roadside with watercolour shades of pink and purple. We were heading for Akaroa, a pretty port that the English and French had competed to claim in 1840. After a long and epic voyage the French arrived to see the British flag up on the hill. They were 48 hours too late. Nevertheless, the town still adopted a little French flavour, as evident in the street names and the boulangeries serving crêpes and croque monsieur. From the pier, pint-sized catamarans come and go, taking wildlife-watchers to meet the little native Hector's dolphins that play in the harbour. Then there's the uniquely Akaroan The Giant's House, the home of blue-haired artist Josie Martin, reinvented as a bonkers fantasyland of mosaics - a world of characters she created out of tiles, glass and chipped crockery and which has a je ne sais quoi all its own.

Our road trip was meant to end in Kaikoura with a visit to Nin's Bin, an iconic, retro caravan selling crayfish on the beachfront. But a few weeks before the region was rattled hard by

a 7.8-magnitude earthquake, cutting off access roads and heaving up the seabed (decimating the crayfish with it). Here, quakes are a part of life. Kaikoura would rebuild and I would come back. In the meantime, we reset our route to Hanmer Springs, a splendid place to conclude a road trip, as it turns out. Hanmer has been an oasis of geothermal hot springs for more than 150 years and its steamy mineral pools are ideal for soaking weary bones and car-contorted limbs. It seems that with one hand nature may taketh away but it giveth back with the other.

On our last morning we hit the road early, the peaks of the Southern Alps striking against the pale sky. We stopped for fuel and flat whites in Springs Junction, possibly the only place to actually benefit from the earthquake. This little one-horse town was fielding all the rerouted traffic from Kaikoura and local business was booming. As I juggled our takeaway coffees a tattooed truckie smiled and held the cafe door open for me. I felt a long-overdue surge of affection for my little country and its people, grateful it had so warmly welcomed back its prodigal daughter. In Nelson Lakes National Park we made our final scenic stop, at beautiful Lake Rototiti, where I wandered barefoot to the end of its creaky wooden jetty and felt the sun on my skin. And I finally got it. There really is no place like home. I'd just had to go to the other side of the world and back to get here.

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