

Christchurch, New Zealand

~ A trip from Tokyo to Christchurch

Written by Christopher Green, May 2004

In 1848 the Canterbury Association in London decided to establish an English settlement on the Canterbury Plains of New Zealand. They planned for a cathedral, university and public school, allowed for 3,500 settlers to sail there, and named the settlement Christ Church, after the cathedral college of Christ Church at the University of Oxford. Today the thriving city has close to 350,000 inhabitants. Christchurch's architecture and town planning do give it an English look and feel, and it's a unique city packed with fun and as cosmopolitan and relaxed as New Zealanders themselves.

There's much to see and do in Christchurch. A great way to visit key parts of the city in a short time and learn about its history is to hop on a sightseeing bus. Some will pick up at major hotels, most will pick up at the city's focal point, Cathedral Square. I booked a tour the night before by telephone, and made my way to the square for the 9am start. Our driver, who also doubled as the tour guide, was laid-back, friendly, and professional. As he drove us around the city center, he remarked on each notable stone Victorian building, and fed us the history of the city in digestible chunks. He pointed out that many years ago the city's Avon River was made shallow to a couple of feet to reduce the number of drunken deaths by drowning. He quickly reassured us that the city didn't have a drinking problem. Our tour allowed us to spend time outside the coach. We were dropped off at the Canterbury Museum for 45 minutes and handed a coupon for tea and biscuits in the museum's café. The exhibition on Antarctic exploration enthralled me so much that I later bought a book about it. We could have spent hours in the museum, and I decided to return to it after the tour for a closer look. Back onboard, we headed out to the leafy streets and well-tended gardens of the suburb Cashmere, and to Sign of the Takahe, a historic building with a panoramic view over the city and the Canterbury Plains. Not a skyscraper or high rise building in sight, just the cathedral spire protruding above the city's rooftops. Ten minutes later and we were back at Cathedral Square. I thanked the guide, then walked across the square for a latte at Starbucks.

Several large parks adorn the city, and sandwiched between the spacious North Hagley Park and South Hagley Park is the splendid Christchurch Botanic Garden. I took a leisurely stroll around it, watching people enjoy a punt on the river and children forging mini-mountains from the fallen leaves. If you visit Christchurch in autumn you are in for a treat. The city glows in browns, reds, oranges and yellows as leaves change color. Every tree offers a photo opportunity. Tramping my way along the river through beds of crisp fallen chestnut leaves I was reminded of a similar scene from the movie *When Harry Met Sally*.

On a Sunday afternoon I strolled from Christchurch Cathedral down Worcester Boulevard, and

found a colorful weekend market outside the Arts Center. Artists were more than happy to answer questions about the original works they were selling. Greenstone objects, wood carvings, local cheeses and even soap made with goat's milk were just some of the offerings on display at the stalls. Inside the Arts Centre building I explored two floors of specialty shops selling books, paintings, pottery, home-made fudge (delicious, and why didn't I buy more?), hand-made candles, and all sorts of other wonderful stuff.

Complimenting the city's relaxed cosmopolitan atmosphere, a tram service makes a short loop around the core center streets, and can offer respite to those weary of walking. It's even possible to dine on a tram, having the city pass before your eyes as you eat. On the subject of food, if you want to try New Zealand lamb, beef, salmon or seafood, you won't be disappointed; quality of food and service was high in all places visited, and I found it delicious. I especially enjoyed the Beatles music and a pepper steak at Sergeant Peppers Steakhouse, and what better to wash it down than a glass of wine from one of New Zealand's world-famous wine regions? But you don't have to limit yourself to tasting the wine in a restaurant. There are over 35 wineries in the Canterbury region alone, making it one of the country's major winemaking areas, and wine tours including tasting sessions are available; information can be found at the Christchurch-Canterbury Visitor Centre on the west side of Cathedral Square

Eager to see a kiwi before leaving New Zealand, I took a trip slightly out of the city to Willowbank Wildlife Reserve. I had great fun feeding the fat eels that lurked in the ponds, fighting off the greedy attentions of lime-colored Keas, and getting close to farm animals such as pigs, sheep and goats. But the highlight was of course the kiwis, which are kept in a nocturnal house. After my eyes had adjusted to the gloom I was rewarded with a sighting of this timid creature. Being a flightless bird with only tiny wings it would have been easy for me to have mistaken it for a plump, if large, rodent, should I have seen it in the wild.

Christchurch is also an ideal launch pad for trips to the South Island's magnificent mountains such as Mt. Cook, national parks, springs and beaches. Wherever you go, you won't want to leave.

Getting there

Direct flights from Narita to Christchurch are offered by Air New Zealand. Travel time is roughly 11 hours. New Zealand time is 3 hours ahead of Japan Standard Time. Christchurch International Airport is 10km from Cathedral Square, and the Airport Bus makes the trip between them at regular intervals. Other shuttle services are in operation, or you can catch a train or taxi into town. Details of transportation and accommodation are available at the airport's Visitor Information Centre.

Where to stay

Accommodation can be booked in advance over the Internet (see below for More Information). But the airport Visitor Information Centre and the Christchurch-Canterbury Visitor Centre on the west side of Cathedral Square will help you find and book accommodation.

More information

These Web sites offer information about the city, where to visit and where to stay.

<http://www.christchurchnz.com/>

<http://wikitravel.org/en/Christchurch>