

About time

Jeff Kavanagh finally takes the right turn

IN SWINGING OUR CAR off SH1, about 70km north of Dunedin, and onto a narrow tar-seal road leading over a railway line, up a hill and round a large stand of pine trees towards the coast, I was accomplishing something I'd been meaning to do for a considerable time.

More than 30 years earlier, my family and I spent a summer holiday in the little seaside village of Moeraki, and I had fond, if a little patchy, memories of gentle, blue-green bays and unassuming, weatherboard cribs. During the intervening years I'd driven past the turn off to the township countless times, its signpost constantly beseeching a visit, yet without ever generating sufficient reason to alter my route either north or south.

Overshadowed by the area's world famous boulders, most of which are strewn along Koekohe beach to the north of the township, Moeraki's one of those places just far enough removed from the main road to remain unappreciated until you eventually visit or, in my case, revisit. Once there, you inevitably wonder why you didn't get round to it earlier.

My girlfriend and I travelled the short distance up from Dunedin, not merely to satisfy our curiosity, but also with the intention of taking it easy for a few days. Being endowed with a name that can mean 'a place to rest for the day', as well as 'sleepy sky', it seemed an ideal location for doing just that.

In previous manifestations, Moeraki was both the site of a Maori pa and, during the early 19th century, a whaling station – supposedly the only alcohol-free one of its

kind in Otago. Since then, it has slowly transformed into a quintessentially coastal Otago holiday village; there's a motel and a small camping ground, and native and exotic trees grow harmoniously together on hills dotted with modest holiday homes sporting generous balconies and windows facing the sea. Our digs for the weekend was such an abode. Stretching along a hillside overlooking the bay, its spacious wooden deck was perfect for winding up for the day, or down into the night.

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No longer dry, Moeraki nowadays boasts a small tavern and an award-winning seafood restaurant – Fleur's Place. An old fish-packing shed reincarnated as an eatery, with the aid of recycled materials and wood, it's a fantastic little place situated at the base of the township's jetty.

Within a stone's throw of Fleur's, a small fleet of fishing boats bob contentedly in Moeraki's harbour, the rich marine life that first attracted the whalers still evident in the blue cod, perch and trumpetfish caught daily by commercial fishermen and on charter boats, which virtually guarantee amateur anglers as much fish as they can reel in.

Naturally, it's not only humans that are drawn to these bountiful South Pacific waters;

Clockwise from top: the calm, sheltered harbour; looking south along the coast; Fleur's Place; a sleepy seal; sunrise at Moeraki; some of the famous boulders; sunset at Moeraki.

VISITOR INFORMATION

» Accommodation
See www.aatravel.co.nz for accommodation, or opt for a holiday home with Bookabach – www.bookabach.co.nz at Moeraki.



PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD PHILLIPS

seals and sea lions frequent the rocky outcrops in and around the village. Further down the coast at Shag Point – another old whaling station – hundreds of the large sea mammals yawn, stretch and slumber on the warm rocks during the day, while yellow-eyed and blue penguins are also regular visitors to the area.

The sky and sea often seem to swap shades of blues and greys along this stretch of North Otago coast and, looking out towards the horizon – often no more than a thin line delineating where one finishes and the other begins – it wasn't difficult to summon a feeling of contented isolation.

If truth be told, there's not a great deal to do in Moeraki itself beyond going for walks or quick swims, if the day and sea are warm enough. But that's where the beauty of the place lies. There's a well-stocked shop 10 minutes' drive away in Hampden to provide everything you need for a few days of self-sufficiency, and Fleur's Place and the tavern should you require a night or two out.

For the rest of the time there's your crib, its balcony and the view.

Late on our last evening, while sitting on our deck enjoying the lingering warmth of a beautiful summer's day and a bottle or two of Dunedin brewery Emerson's delicious Pilsner beer, we heard the distant whistle of a train travelling along the coast. As we sat in silence and listened to it *ka-dink-a-dink, ka-dink-a-dink* on its determined journey south, I felt a small wave of contentment at having finally made the decision to veer just off the beaten path. ■