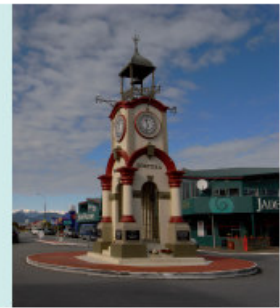




# A TOWN THAT REINVENTED ITSELF



It's hard to take in the splendour of the wild places on the West Coast and not get distracted (or perhaps a better word would be terrorised) by the dreaded sandflies. But, at last, I'm thrilled to be able to pass on some ancient local wisdom.

What you are about to read is perhaps the definitive local remedy and has been passed on by word of mouth for decades: When a sandfly attack begins, don't panic – they can smell fear. Instead, pour a bottle of whisky over your head and vigorously rub it all over your body. Then roll in the sand. The sandflies will no longer bite. Instead they'll get drunk and throw rocks at each other. What genius!

Hokitika is the perfect getaway to test this theory as it provides both a haven for sandflies and a grand destination for nature seekers. Located on SH6 between Greymouth and the glaciers, Hokitika is sandwiched between the dramatic snow-capped peaks of the Alps and the pounding surf of the coast and like many South Island towns has a golden history. After the hills had been sacked of their treasure, the town fell into decline but now, thanks to a surge in eco-tourism, the arts and the famous Wild Foods Festival, Hokitika is experiencing a cultural renaissance – there is a lot going on.

The first place to start your explorations is on the cusp of the ocean at Sunset Point and the start of the Hokitika Heritage Trail. The round trip takes about two-and-a-half hours and follows the lovingly restored quayside of the Hokitika River before heading inland, circling around the town and returning to the coast via many areas of interest including bushland, monuments and a lighthouse. Sunset point is also (as the name suggests) the best place in town to watch the sunset and once the sun has gone to bed you can visit Hokitika's 'universe in a cave' at the Glow-worm Dell – accessible from the roadside at the northern entrance to town.

After you've got to grips with the town and its history there are more treats in store along the coast. My first stop was Lake Mahinapua (10km south of Hokitika) to walk the Mahinapua Walkway (5hr return). I found nothing less than perfect tranquillity as I followed the boardwalks over the shimmering swamp to Picnic Point on the edge of the lake. The lake and swamps are surrounded by a mix of podocarp and hard-

wood species and bird watching opportunities are plentiful as the area is home to parakeets, tui, bellbird, pigeon, Black Swans, and grey and mallard ducks. If you're lucky, you might even see a bittern, white heron or fernbird. The track follows an old logging tramline and meanders



Above: Boardwalks traverse the swamp on the tranquil Mahinapua Walkway; Below: Hokitika i-SITE operates from the historic Carnegie Building on Hamilton Street



past rusting relics of the old sawmill which seem to be melting into nature as creeping bush tentacles cuddle and wear them away. The lake is also great for canoeing and anglers can try their luck for brown trout, perch and catfish.

Other shorter walks (10-20mins) around Lake Mahinapua include the Jum Michel Track, Bellbird Walk, Swimmers Beach Walk and the sumptuous coastal forest remnant – Mananui Bush. Embarking on this track was like plunging into the dark magic of a fairytale where the trees – juicy and dripping and pregnant with moss – graciously waved me through their kingdom before I emerged, blinking, into tall swaying flax, an enormous sky and an endless beach.

Another gorgeous lake, Lake Kaniere, is just 19km from Hokitika and makes for a great day trip. Shorter tracks in the area lead to Canoe Cove (a superb spot for swimming and picnics), Dorothy Falls (if you fancy a spine-tingling glacial dip), and the Kahikatea Forest walk. This loop track follows Sunny Bight Creek and passes through virgin kahikatea forest to a flax swamp. Day tramps include the Lake Kaniere Walkway (4hr), the Kaniere Water Race Walkway (4hr) and the more adventurous Mt Tuhua Track (7hr) which climbs steeply to the open tussock peak of Mt Tuhua at 1125m. The lake is also great for water sports including sailing, water-skiing and flat water kayaking. Anglers can fish for brown trout and perch.

Back in town there are plenty of accommodation options and I was lucky enough to stay in one of the ocean view rooms at the Beachfront Hotel Hokitika. A glass of red on the balcony to watch the moon rise then falling asleep to the sounds of the sea was the icing on the cake, or perhaps more aptly: the snow on the peak of my Hokitika experience.

The last place I visited before leaving town was the Hokitika Gorge where a swingbridge spans a granite ravine and deep pools and cascading waterfalls of milky blue-green runoff twirl on their journey to the sea. The view was amazing but, alas, suddenly I was surrounded! Where was the whisky? Kicking myself for forgetting this vital piece of west coast kit I briefly danced the 'crazy sandfly dance' (which consists of uncoordinated arm and leg flailing) and left pretty sharpish. 🗡️

## WILD FILE

Hokitika i-SITE: P: (03) 755 6166; enquiries@hokitikainfo.co.nz  
 Department of Conservation Hokitika Area Office: P: (03) 756 9100; westcoast@doc.govt.nz  
 Beachfront Hotel Hokitika: P: 0800 400 344; www.beachfronthotel.co.nz  
 To fish at Lake Kaniere and Lake Mahinapua you must obtain a sports-fish license. They can be purchased from local sports shops, service stations and any Fish and Game office.