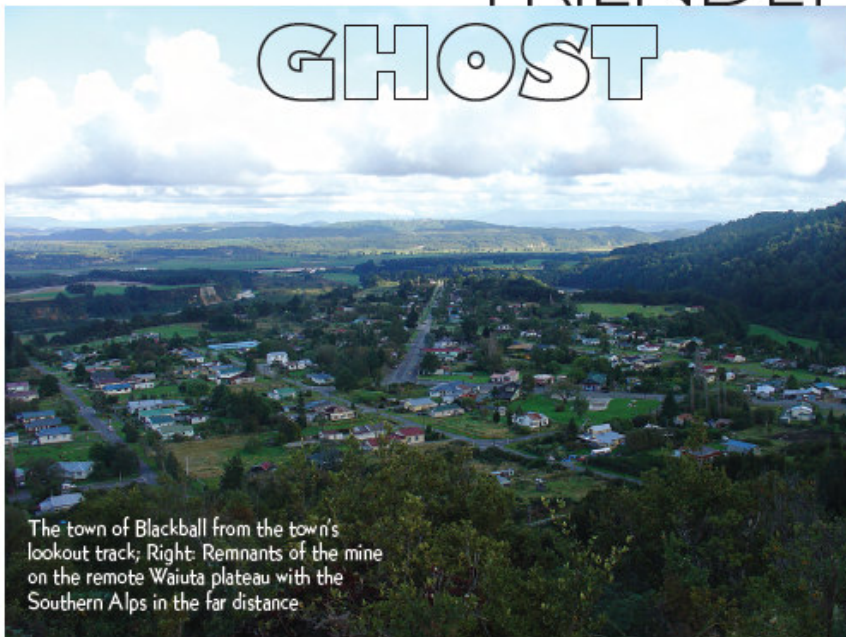


FRIENDLY GHOST



The town of Blackball from the town's lookout track; Right: Remnants of the mine on the remote Waiuta plateau with the Southern Alps in the far distance.



PENNY JONES

Blackball is a feisty West Coast town with plenty on offer for the outdoor adventurer, writes *Penny Jones*

“The 1908 strike was a crucial victory for the miners,” Jane Wells, proprietor of Formally the Blackball Hilton, tells me. “Not only did they increase their lunch break from 15 to 30 minutes, but they also highlighted to the rest of New Zealand, the collective power of the working classes.”

Historic Blackball, 20km inland from Greymouth on the West Coast, is, and always has been, a feisty little town. It was founded in 1866 after alluvial gold was discovered in the Blackball Creek, and its existence today pays homage to all the people who've held the community together through strikes, riots and the population plunge when the coal mine closed. The town wasn't expected to survive and on September 26, 1964, the *Greymouth Evening Star* reported: “Blackball will soon be rendered a ghost town.” The future looked bleak, but struggling against adversity seems embedded in the local psyche and against all the odds, the town lives on.

Today, Blackball (population 370) is an excellent base for many outdoor activities. A short walk from the main street is a catacomb of old gold mining tunnels that fan out beneath the foxy field and beyond. You're free to explore by yourself or you can go with Jane on one of her informal and fascinating history hikes of the area. Even if you don't do the tour, pop into the Hilton (the name was changed to Formally the Blackball Hilton after the Hilton hotel chain threatened legal action) and pick her brain because she's a goldmine of information and loves to yarn.

More strenuous and just a couple of kilometres from Blackball is the Croesus Track. It crosses the Paparoa Range and offers impressive views of the Southern Alps and Tasman Sea. It's a one-way 18km tramp across to Barrytown with the option to stay overnight at the Department of Conservation Ces Clark Hut.

Further afield, but worth the drive, is Waiuta ghost town, 45km north-east of Blackball. The last eight-kilometres make for hair-raising driving, but the reward is a remote plateau with wonderful views and plenty of mining relics and interpretive tracks to explore. At its peak, around 600 people lived in Waiuta, but the town died practically overnight after a major cave-in at the mine.

Blackball's accommodation options are the Hilton and the Club-hotel Blackball. Meals are served at the Hilton and both pubs are great for chatting to the locals who are well known for their hospitality and friendliness, but don't think you can join their gang easily.

“I've lived in Blackball for 14 years,” Roma told me. “Almost long enough to call myself a local! You can come to the West Coast, but that doesn't make you a Coaster. You have to earn the title; it's something to be really proud of.”

My week in Blackball hardly qualified me as a Coaster, but the more I explored, the more I could sense the pioneering spirit of the old days buzzing in the hills. I realised how lucky I am to live in an age where I can romp around the countryside for pure pleasure and not in a struggle for survival. 🏔️

WHAT TO DO, WHERE TO STAY

Activities

Fish for salmon (in season) and trout (all year round) in the River Grey

Pan for gold in the Blackball Creek

Walk the interpretive tracks around the Brunner Mine memorial site (10km from Blackball on the road to Greymouth)

Croesus Track

There are car parks at both ends of the track but beware: car break-ins are common. Pick up/drop off transport and Helibiking information is available at the Hilton.

Accommodation

Waiuta: There are several informal camping areas or the Waiuta Lodge has an un-staffed 30 bed bunkroom with full kitchen facilities. Contact the Reefton Visitor Centre for track and accommodation information, Ph: 03 732 8391, www.reefton.co.nz

Blackball: Formally the Blackball Hilton: Ph: 03 732 4705, email bbhilton@xtra.co.nz, or www.blackballhilton.co.nz; Clubhotel Blackball: Ph: 03 732 4823. Helibiking information is available at the Hilton.

Check out www.coolrunning.co.nz/races/croesus for information on the Croesus Crossing run.