

MCSQUID BURGERS AND A PINT OF GUINNESS

Why can't I hold my breath longer? Hell! I can't even go underwater without holding my nose!

I've often wished I had a tail but it wasn't till I gazed enviously at a pod of some 200 dusky dolphins, flipping and twisting and generally showing off their moves, that I rued the twist of fate that deprived me of similar underwater frolics. I don't want much...just a retractable fin, bigger lung capacity (or, even better, gills) and perhaps some sonar thrown in for good luck!



The town of Kaikoura, and launching point for this sell-out aquatic show, is so happily situated it must have been personally designed by Gaia herself. You can imagine the checklist: snow-capped mountains and pretty caves: *Check*; abundant sunshine: *Check*; dolphins, fur seals, sea birds, and oh-oh I know...a whale super-highway: *Check, check, check and check!*

The key to Kaikoura's wildlife allure is a combination of a deep ocean trench (the Kaikoura Canyon) and the convergence of warm and cold ocean currents. This magical combination provides a rich feeding ground of minerals and plankton for marine mammals and sea birds. Sperm whales are the town's most famous long-stay visitor and young males in particular cruise the waters all year round diving deep into the canyon to guzzle giant squid.

"Put in today's terms", Megan from Whale Watch Kaikoura said, when we saw regular sperm whale Tiaki surface for the second time, "the waters around Kaikoura are like McDonalds for teenage boy whales!"

"So, what'll it be boys?" "Double Giant McSquid burger please, octopus rings on the side."

On my return to shore, a new expert on whales, I rounded the Kaikoura Peninsula to Point Kean to pay the fur seal colony a visit. One of the fur seals (let's call her Angelina) obviously couldn't be outdone by the showy antics of the dolphins or the relaxed expulsions from Tiaki. I found her posing on a rock for a throng of about 20 photographers lap-



ping up her celebrity status: nose in the air, chest out, stretching this-a-way, flapping that-a-way and perfectly framed by the mountains. I almost wanted to start bigging her up with commentary, "oh yeah Ange, work it for the camera, give us your smoky nose, oh yeah that's it, point that gorgeous nose, wiggley that little tush, that's the way, go baby go!"

From the fur seal colony it was a short hop to the Peninsula Walkway which is an easy coastal track of between half a day and a day (depending on how many tangents you take). It's a great little walk and information panels along the way give a comprehensive history of the people, geology, animals and plants of the area.

Perhaps even more seductive than the coast (and a darn sight less touristy) is Mt Fyffe and her cronies – the Seaward Kaikoura Range. These beauties tickle the sky behind the town and stand still for photos unlike the flighty shags or the 'blink and you miss it' albatross. Popular walks include the Mt Fyffe Track (8hr) which offers views as far as Banks Peninsula and the North Island on a good day and is also open to mountain bikers looking for a 'fast and furious' ride. After a serious slog to a summit of 1600m you can have a joyous 'Weeeeeee!' on the way down!

Other tracks in the range include the Hinaiu Loop Track (45min); the Fyffe-Palmer Track



From far left: Leaping for joy on the Kaikoura Peninsula Walkway; Tiaki takes a breather in between Giant McSquid Burgers; Kaikoura township pays homage to its famous visitors

(1hr 45min) and the Kowhai-Hapuku circuit over the Kowhai Saddle (2-3 days).

Mountain bikers looking for a more sedate ride might enjoy the privately run Kaikoura Coastal Track which has been set up by local farmers for trampers and mountain bikers and offers accommodation along the way. The Kowhai River Area (3km from Kaikoura) offers a series of biking tracks with varied terrain within a flood protection area and vegetation buffer strip. A little further afield are a number of grade two tracks (20 to 40km return) including the Puhī Puhī Valley Road Track, Blue Duck Valley Road, Half Moon Bay to Okiwi Bay track and Clarence Reserve.

Places to stay in the town are many but I chose Donegal House for its super views of the mountains and because it promised (and delivered) a very good pint of Guinness. Host Murray Boyd has recreated his ancestral home in Donegal, Ireland and if you like a thigh-slapping, musically boozy time and some great pub food after a tramp this is definitely the place for you. 🍷

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