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# 'What a place': New Zealand's crayfish capital hailed

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The first albatross is an incredible sight, its wingspan like an A380 as it swoops out of the cloudless sky and settles on the ocean next to our boat. It bobs there in the glassy water, obsidian eyes fixed on us, hoping for a free dinner.

It's a rare thrill to spot one of these magnificent seabirds in the wild. Though, I soon discover it actually isn't that rare, as another albatross joins us, and then another, and later a few more, bobbing, staring, just a little unnerving.

The albatrosses have been drawn here for the same reason I have: this place is teeming with fish. The continental shelf off Kaikōura, on New Zealand's east coast, is incredibly close to shore, which means you only have to putter out in a boat for about 20 minutes, drop a line in the water, let it run down deep, and then pull in literally as many fish as you desire.

Or, as the birds are clearly hoping, a few more than you desire.



## New Zealand: Seabird capital of the world

Kaikōura is home to over 150 species of seabird. How are they doing, and who's protecting them?

The clue is in the name in Kaikōura. It's a portmanteau of the Maori words for eat, "kai", and crayfish, "kōura". [Eat crayfish](#). What a place. Those original inhabitants neglected to mention, however, that you can also eat fish, as much as you like, and that the land around here is also perfectly fertile for the growing of very good vegetables.

Kaikōura is just a few hours' drive north of Christchurch. Marlborough is another couple of hours north. But with the New Zealand Alps rising in all their snow-capped glory behind you, rolling foothills pouring into the sea, the Pacific sparkling on this fine day, you feel like you have discovered something very few people know about. You get the feeling most locals would like to keep it that way, too.

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Though, [tourists do come to Kaikōura](#), sometimes to hike along the coast, or go whale-watching, or birdwatching, or mountain-biking in the surrounding countryside. They come to stay in luxury lodges, or budget holiday parks, or pull up their campervans somewhere quiet.

Me though, I'm here for the town's namesake. I'm spending the morning with Malcolm Halstead, a construction manager who realised that his plan for retirement – to go fishing – could be much more quickly achieved by taking a few tourists out with him. And so, Top Catch Charters was born.

Malcolm might actually have the easiest job in the world. By far the most challenging aspects of his day appear to be, A) trying to catch something other than sea perch, which seem determined to join us in the boat, and, B) persuading the albatrosses to stay back while he scales and cleans the catch.

We grab a bag of five of these blushing red rockfish in about half an hour (nothing else stands a chance of being caught) and then head back into shore, stopping along the way to pull up a crab pot, which happily is home to three bucking, snapping crayfish, [the local specialty](#).

My next stop is [just outside Kaikōura, at Hapuku Kitchen](#), a cooking school run by former Masterchef New Zealand finalist Fiona Read and her husband Chris Sturgeon. The pair used to work just up the road, running the restaurant at luxurious Hapuku Lodge, but decided to strike out on their own with a purpose-built garden and kitchen in the shadow of those towering alps.

My job today is to make use of the oceanic bounty so recently landed in Malcolm's boat. With Fiona's help I fillet the sea perch, despatch the crayfish, and then head out into the garden to collect a basket of fresh vegetables and herbs.



Cooked crayfish, a specialty of Kaikōura.  
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This melange of ingredients eventually becomes a smoked fish pate with salsa verde, and char-grilled crayfish with horseradish butter and grilled baby zucchini. My plan was only to eat a small amount before I head over for a full dinner at Hapuku Lodge, but something strange happens and pretty soon I've eaten an entire lobster, multiple zucchini, and a good amount of the pate.

Maybe it's the company, convivial and kind. Maybe it's the surroundings, the large picture windows framing the majesty of the mountains. Maybe I'm just keen to obey the orders of the original inhabitants.

## The details

### Fish

Top Catch Charters and Hapuku Kitchen run a combined "Catch & Cook" experience, which includes a private two-hour fishing charter with Malcolm, and a half-day cooking class with Fiona and Chris, starting from \$515 per person. See [topcatchcharters.co.nz](http://topcatchcharters.co.nz)

### Stay

Hapuku Lodge is a luxury hotel and restaurant just outside Kaikōura. Rooms start from \$1195 a night for two people, including three-course dinner and full breakfast. See [hapukulodge.com](http://hapukulodge.com)

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