

SCENIC ESCAPE

Take a picturesque journey along the South Island's storied Pacific coast and discover the wild wonders of Kaikōura.

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The Coastal Pacific.



Whale watching in Kaikōura.

WITH THE ROLLING swells of the Pacific Ocean flanking one side and the white-capped Kaikōura Ranges rising from the other, it's hard to beat the Coastal Pacific panoramic 348km rail excursion between Ōtautahi Christchurch and Picton. And – thanks to Great Journey New Zealand's recently refurbished Scenic Plus premium carriage – ringside seats are better than ever, serving a fully hosted experience with storytelling, top-notch service, and a paddock-to-plate degustation style menu that showcases the regions you're travelling through.

ROOM WITH A VIEW

It's an early start from the Garden City but even at 6.30am you know you're in for something special. The sunrise washes the sky crimson and as the train slowly glides out of the Christchurch Railway Station, KiwiRail staff line up along the platform to wave us off. Our Premium Service Leader Toni McDaid is a gem, kick-starting

our adventure with a Māori blessing and sharing stories that bring to life the landscapes we pass. For more insight into points of interest, an app provides GPS-triggered storytelling.

Feast on herbed spinach and feta loaf as you cross one of the South Island's great ice-fed rivers, the Waimakariri, and hear about how the Canterbury Plain's patchwork of braided rivers is a form of waterway found only in New Zealand, Alaska, Canada and the Himalayas. Devour agria hash with Pacific Ocean smoked salmon and poached eggs while passing through Rangiora, where New Zealand's highest-ever temperature of 42.4°C was recorded back in 1973. This is the gateway to the North Canterbury wine region, so wash it down with a glass of citrusy Waipara chardonnay. Waipara has 26 wineries and 80 vineyards and is lauded for its chardonnay as well as riesling, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir and syrah.

Inland rural views fall away as we cross



the Conway River and meet the Pacific coastline, just in time for the next course, a white chocolate, almond and raspberry croissant served with a side of sunbathing seals and dancing dolphins. This is one of the country's most famous stretches of coast and it's teeming with marine life, so have your camera ready.

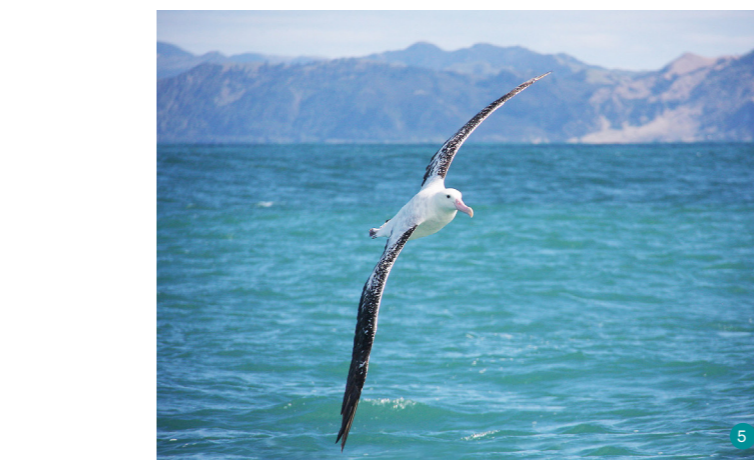
Although the Coastal Pacific runs through to Picton, we're Kaikōura-bound this trip and, a little under three hours after departing Christchurch, we roll gently into picturesque Kaikōura Railway Station with its backdrop of snow-capped peaks. A Ben Foster sculpture catches the eye. Made from twisted railway tracks, it serves as a monument to the reconstruction workers who toiled to repair damage after the devastating 2016 Kaikōura earthquake, and also symbolises the importance of the railway line to the region.

WHERE MOUNTAINS MEET SEA

Marine encounters are Kaikōura's special talent, thanks to the unique deep-water trench that plunges to a depth of 1200m extraordinarily close to shore, creating a rare system of sea currents and a nutrient-rich marine food chain. Whale Watch Kaikōura aims to get you up close and personal with giant sperm whales (and, depending on the season, humpback whales, pilot whales, blue whales, southern right whales and orca), while Encounter Kaikōura's Dolphin Encounter gets you



1. Kaikōura township.
2. Greystone vineyard.
3. Ben Foster's twisted rails sculpture. 4. Agria herbed hash with poached eggs is on the Coastal Pacific Scenic Plus breakfast menu.



5. Toroa (wandering albatross). 6. Cycle the Kaikōura Trail. 7. Seafood platter, Coopers Catch. 8. Albatross and petrel feeding. 9. Fur seals.

wet-suited and into the water for a chance to swim with playful dusky dolphins (or take in the action from the comfort of the boat). We set our sights a little higher though, signing up for the Albatross Encounter, with Encounter Kaikōura skipper Gary Melville. A Kaikōura local through and through, Melville has been taking tours since 1997 (apart from the six years he spent conducting offshore research for the likes of NASA and the Smithsonian). He knows his stuff. And even though he admits his first love is fish, marine birds come in a close second.

A couple of miles off South Bay, Melville cuts the engine and hoists a basket of frozen fish off the back of the boat. We wait, but not for long. The first to swoop in are the giant Westland petrels (aka marine vultures). They're huge and make loud growling noises as they vie for a spot around the fish basket. It sounds like a scene from *Jurassic Park* – not surprising given the fact birds descended from dinosaurs.

Wandering albatross have the largest wingspan of any bird, measuring up to 3.5m wingtip to wingtip.

I've never seen birds this big, but even a giant petrel can't prepare me for a great wandering albatross, which appears as a speck on the horizon, but gracefully speeds towards us, low and fast. Wandering albatross have the largest wingspan of any bird, measuring up to 3.5m wingtip to wingtip, and they're top of the pyramid. As more of these magnificent marine birds arrive, even the competitive petrels take a back seat at the fish basket.

We see seven albatross on our encounter (wandering, royal and Salvin's), 21 petrels

(nelly, Westland and Cape), as well as shags, terns, black-billed and red-billed gulls – and on the way home a 5000-strong flock of tīti (shearwaters), an endangered species that breeds only in Kaikōura and locals have gone to great lengths to protect. It's a bevy of birds, but my personal favourites are the Salvin's, which look like a cross between a cartoon character and *The Muppets'* Sam the Eagle.

Melville explains that all albatross need help. There are 22 species globally, and New Zealand has more than half of them. Fourteen species have been seen in Kaikōura and most of them are endangered. But there's hope. Encounter Kaikōura's charitable trust (Encounter Foundation), for example, is (among other things) helping fund development of albatross-saving hookpods, which encapsulate baited hooks until they sink deep enough to no longer pose a risk to birds. Money from every Encounter Kaikōura tour goes towards supporting the foundation.

STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

All that salt air brings on an appetite. Head to Coopers Catch on the main drag for the best fish and chips, or head to Kaikōura Seafood BBQ, a bustling kiosk near the seal colony that serves up Kaikōura's world-famous crayfish. Given the Māori translation of Kaikōura is “eat crayfish”, it seems a crime not to.

When dusk falls, look up. Kaikōura has been officially designated an International Dark Sky Sanctuary, joining Great Barrier Island and Stewart Island to become the third location in New Zealand (and 22nd globally) to earn the prestigious status.

Settle in for the night at the recently opened Sudima Kaikōura, the town's first 4.5-star hotel. Located on the shoreline, it is across the road from Encounter Kaikōura and just a skip from the town centre, along the new waterfront promenade. Rooms are spacious, with sea and mountain views; there's a heated outdoor pool, and all-day restaurant Hiku does a crayfish omelette, which I called breakfast.

ZIP IT

Spend the first day in Kaikōura out on the water, and the second sampling the town's new land-based activity, EcoZip Adventures Kaikōura. It's a chance to get a bird's eye view of this coastal paradise – and let's face it, hurtling through the valley at 60km/h dangling from a wire is exhilarating. With five giant ziplines spanning 2.2km, there's plenty to keep the adrenaline pumping.

EcoZip Kaikōura is the sibling of highly rated EcoZip Waiheke, and is based at Rakanui Station, a hill farm about 15 minutes south of Kaikōura township. A trip to the “gear up” station starts the adventure – helmets and harnesses are donned and fears put to rest. We are wearing \$1000 worth of safety equipment and will be suspended from not one but two wires, each of which can hold the



weight of a bus. From there it's all aboard a Unimog 4x4, across streams and paddocks to the Rakanui Station lookout, followed by a short walk through forest to the first zipline.

Along the way, guides share stories of the local area and touch on EcoZip's conservation efforts which include native forest restoration and the development of a native plant nursery on the station. They do work across Aotearoa and the Pacific too, offsetting 120 percent of their carbon emissions, making them climate positive. Guides break us in gently with the first zipline, Callaghan's Mahi, named after project manager Tim and featuring panoramic views of Mt Manakau, the highest peak in the Seaward Kaikōura Range. We fly our way through the Rakanui Rocket and Ki Uta Ki Tai before buckling up for Flinty's Long Drop. EcoZip's longest zipline (and the second-longest zip in the country) is 613m of jaw-dropping views. Kārearea rounds out the experience, capping off three hours of the best fun I've had in ages.

With the bucket now full, it's time to make tracks back to Kaikōura Railway Station for more great food, wine and epic vistas on the Ōtautahi-bound Coastal Pacific. The perfect bookend to two adventure-packed days. greatjourneysnz.com kaikoura.co.nz



19. Kaikōura Seafood BBQ. 20. EcoZip Kaikōura's Unimog, aka “Moggy”. 21. Coastal view of Kaikōura from a zipline. 22. Sudima Kaikōura. 23. Kaikōura was designated an International Dark Sky Sanctuary last September.

Getting there



Air New Zealand operates daily non-stop flights to Christchurch from Auckland, Wellington, Queenstown and Dunedin, with connections across the domestic network.

Air New Zealand operates non-stop flights to Blenheim from Auckland and Wellington, with connections across the domestic network.

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER

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