



ALL IN THE FAMILY

Dunedin is the middle child in the 'family' of New Zealand cities. Neither the bossy big brother nor the coddled baby sister, Dunedin is the quiet achiever and a firm favourite with visitors.

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Dunedin is a show-off. It is the oldest city in New Zealand, the country's wildlife capital, a top surfing spot, has more Edwardian and Victorian heritage buildings than any other city in the Southern Hemisphere, boasts the world's steepest street, houses the nation's first university and NZ's only castle, Larnach Castle. But the harbour on a blue-sky day rubber stamps the city's favourite phrase, "Dunner Stunner". The fine weather lasted just one glorious hour before polar-grade winds fresh from the Antarctic whipped in, dark clouds stole precious lux of light and the temperature nosedived faster than the local blue penguins. This is Dunedin's daily weather, and a conversation you will have every day of your visit.

WILDLIFE WONDERLAND

"I had one man cry," says Rachel Kerr. I'm on a four-hour adventure with Clearwater Wildlife Tours, and Rachel, a 5th generation member of the Clearwater family, has brought our group to the property they've farmed since 1838. Perendake sheep graze the green stuff on Dunedin's Cape Saunders. But with wool prices painfully low, the farm gates have opened for tourists to see the extraordinary wildlife that live on this privately owned stretch of coast: New Zealand fur seals, albatrosses and the endangered yellow-eyed penguin, hoiho. It's a very cool backyard.

"One man who visited just burst into tears," says Rachel. "He said: 'I've never been alone on a beach like this before, the wildlife is amazing!'"

I feel teary when Rachel tells us what her family are doing to save hoiho at risk of contracting avian diphtheria, a bacterial infection that is killing colonies across the country. In a military-style operation, the penguin parents are shoed away from their nest so day-old chicks can be 'kidnapped' and taken to Dunedin Wildlife Hospital for the first weeks of their life, a time when diphtheria would most likely kill them.

Volunteers at the hospital feed the chicks a fish slurry, just like the meal Mum and Dad would regurgitate. The birds are then returned to their nest, hopefully strong enough to fight off the disease (we can only imagine the parents' confusion at the reunion seeing the sudden growth of their baby!). The results, so far, are heartwarming, the tiny penguin population is 22 and growing.

I walk the beach, past dozens of seals – New Zealand furs and the odd Australian sea lion. Wet from the ocean, they have rolled in the sand and look like fat black sausages dusted in icing sugar. They're not interested in me, nor in the hoiho that waddle past – a snack at sea is strangely off the menu on shore. Young males throw their weight around in blubbery battles for dominance, seal pups in



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: 5-star accommodation at Fable Dunedin; High tea at The Press Club; Built in 1862, Fable Hotel was originally known as the Wains Hotel; Make friends with penguins with Clearwater Wildlife Tours; Chicken Leg Confit with Lamb Bacon, Rosti & Sauerkraut; Stately Larnach Castle. **This page:** Ginger Sticky Date Pudding with Vanilla Bean Ice Cream & Butterscotch Sauce.

rock pools practise for their first ocean swim, and albatrosses soar overhead, showing off their ability to fly without flapping a wing.

Dunedin City is equally wild. Especially the architecture. Centuries collide, with majestic Edwardian, Victorian, Jacobean, Italianate, Gothic, Georgian and Palladian-style buildings alongside 21st-century concrete office blocks. The side walls of modern-day constructions are irresistible to artists from Poland, Britain, Belgium, China, Italy, Australia, South Africa and Argentina, who have painted, brushed and sprayed the walls with extraordinary images.

I take shelter from the drizzle (fondly known here as "liquid sunshine") in Olveston House, a time capsule of Dunedin society life in the early 1900s. Thirty-five rooms are piled ceiling to floorboards with treasures gathered by businessman, collector and philanthropist David Theomin on his numerous trips around the world. You can enjoy Edwardian high tea in the Great Hall or shoot a few balls in David's fabulous billiard room.

GHOST STORY

"Tell me about the ghost," I ask. "Which one?" is the reply.

I'm staying at Larnach Castle, built in 1871 by another wealthy local – businessman and politician, William Larnach, who didn't spare a pound building his dream home. Gothic Revival is the theme here, and it took 200

workers three years to make the shell of Larnach's castle. Craftsmen worked on the interior for the next 12 years using Italian marble, floor tiles from England and glass from Venice and France.

But a fancy castle didn't buy happiness. William's first wife, Eliza, died of a stroke; his second wife, Mary, from blood poisoning; his daughter, Kate, of typhoid, and then his son Douglas had an affair with his third wife, Constance. Facing bankruptcy, William ended his own life. If ghosts exist, Larnach Castle is the perfect haunting ground.

Dinner is a four-course feast in the castle's music room under the glow of Larnach's original chandelier (few things are original as his children stripped the castle bare to get money). There are mini tours to rooms between dishes. I stay at The Lodge which has 12 themed rooms with beautiful harbour, ocean and peninsula views. I want to see a ghost. Given a choice, I would choose William's beloved first wife, Eliza and with that thought in mind, a light flickers. Fluctuating power supply. Apparently.

Ticking more experiences off Dunedin's mighty résumé, I stroll through the Chinese Garden (the first in the Southern Hemisphere), then along to Dunedin Railway Station, which is said to be the most photographed building in New Zealand. White limestone and black basalt rock are a dramatic combination, and inside the building is a stunning mosaic floor of 750,000 tiles of Royal Doulton porcelain. Yes, I take a photo or two – I wouldn't want the city to lose that photographic honour.

KIWI CLASSICS

Gourmet meat, gin, oysters and whitebait patties are next on my holiday menu – The Big Foody Walking Tour of Dunedin visits Princes St Butcher (yummiy pies!) and Dunedin Craft Distillers, the only distillery in New Zealand making gin from scratch using surplus bread to make the base alcohol. To finish I lunch at Best Café for a classic kiwi feast of fried seafood – oysters, cod, whitebait, green-lipped mussels and chips. Sorry, chips.

Another family story ends this tale. During the Otago gold rush in the 1860s Job Wain opened his first hotel, Wains Hotel, known today as Fable Dunedin. It's one of the Italianate buildings in town, with columns, arches, pilasters, and carved figures on the façade. Inside is The Press Club restaurant, once the stomping ground of Dunedin's newspaper editors and reporters, including Thomas Bracken, who wrote *God Defend New Zealand*, one of the two national anthems. My seafood cheesecake and venison shoulder with truffle pudding and horseradish sauce are exquisite, and I devour them like a middle child, quickly, before the bossy big brother swoops or the baby sister cries. 🍴