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Christchurch offers relaxing attractions for visitors to New Zealand

By Cliff Terry
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Obviously, it was a very touristy thing to do. But we were ready for a relaxed punting sojourn on the lovely Avon River, with a young man doing all the work as he moved us along with the aid of a long pole.

The punt, of course, is a traditional English flat-bottom boat most famously associated with Oxford and Cambridge, and the 30-minute trip through the beautiful Botanic Gardens in Christchurch, New Zealand, was a nifty throwback to a more elegant era. It didn't hurt that the weather was nearly perfect, a chamber-of-commerce-like fall day (early April, temperatures in the upper 70s). As Kenneth Grahame wrote in "The Wind in the Willows": "There is nothing -- absolutely nothing -- half so worth doing as messing about in boats."

"I've actually been punt-hijacked," cracked our pole person. "Some macho tourists are eager to take the boat themselves, and so they jump up, grab the pole, and do it."

No such inclinations on our part. After two weeks of tramping (i.e., hiking) the mountains of New Zealand's spectacular South Island and sea kayaking its lagoons with a group paced by hyper-competitive 30- and 40-year-olds ("It's not a race," they kept insisting as they charged up mountains and frenetically pedaled down highways), my wife, Pat, and I were ready to unwind.

Our base for the next four days would be Christchurch, the largest town (population about 360,000) on the South Island and the only one with an international airport.

When most people think of New Zealand, they envision the rugged scenery. But its cities are also worth exploring, especially Christchurch, known as the Garden City. At first inspection, it seems to be a town of limited charms, its many historical buildings and homes surrounded by hideous examples of sterilely modern or outright awful architecture. But after a few days, the place grows on one, mainly due to its centerpiece: the appealing Avon, which meanders through the neighborhoods, popping up at times in unexpected places.

Like Australia's Melbourne, Christchurch -- often dubbed the most English of New Zealand cities -- is a great place for walking. A good start is the always bustling Christchurch & Canterbury Visitor Centre in Cathedral Square, the heart of the city. A key piece of literature is "Christchurch City Centre Walks," offering three compact routes that take you to most of the essential sights.

A good spot to start exploring is the Arts Centre of Christchurch, a 10-minute walk from Cathedral Square, the bustling heart of the city. The center is a handsome compound of buildings once occupied by Canterbury College (later the University of Canterbury), which was founded in 1873 and modeled after England's Oxford University, with one major difference: It admitted women from the start. In 1975, the growing university moved, leaving the Gothic Revival structures to be occupied by various shops and craftspeople. In the old chemistry building, visitors may watch artisans at work, turning out high-caliber products such as tapestries, quilts, pottery and wood

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sculptures.

Other Arts Centre spaces include Rutherford's Den, a multimedia presentation honoring Canterbury scientist Ernest Rutherford, a Nobel Prize winner who did pioneering work on the atom (and who once remarked, "Ions are such jolly little beggars; you can almost see them"). There's also the Te Toi Mana art gallery, selling Maori crafts, and the impressive Cave Rock Gallery, with its propensity for signs such as: "All unattended children will be captured and sold as slaves."

Also in the Centre are eateries (try the Dux de Lux), theater and dance companies, art-house cinemas, a bookstore and offices housing such organizations as the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society. On weekends there's an open-air market filled with vendors staffing stalls selling everything from goat's-milk soap to silver spoons bent into imaginative candle holders, along with eclectic buskers -- including, one Sunday afternoon, a passable Sinatra impersonator. Free guided tours of the Centre operate daily.

The centerpiece of Cathedral Square, not surprisingly, is the Anglican ChristChurch Cathedral, an impressive Gothic structure where services are conducted in English and Maori. Missing our mountain hiking, we paid a fee to climb 133 narrow, winding steps in the cathedral's tower; upon reaching the top, we were greeted by a congratulatory sign proclaiming that only 16,167 more steps would have taken us to the summit of Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest peak.

For those who want a break from walking, board the free yellow shuttle buses, which take you to all the major sights, or, for a modest fee, the vintage green-and-cream-colored trams. But footing it is best, leading to all kinds of serendipitous discoveries, including such delights as the wonderfully cluttered Smith's Bookshop, crammed with more than 80,000 secondhand books on three floors, including a section on New Zealand authors.

Christchurch is home to myriad and diverse restaurants. We even stumbled across our first-ever Burmese restaurant, the Bodhi Tree, on the main thoroughfare, Colombo Street, a five-minute walk from Cathedral Square. The waitress suggested some exotic dishes, all of which were superb, especially the unappetizing-sounding tea salad (pickled tea leaves mixed with garlic, beans, sesame seeds and chili) and tofu thoke (yellow split-pea tofu tossed with salad greens and dressed with tamarind), which drew raves even from confirmed tofu-haters.

Other places we liked included the charmingly funky Cook 'N' With Gas, across from the Arts Centre on Worcester Boulevard; trendy Sticky Fingers (on restaurant-heavy Oxford Terrace across from the Avon River), offering humongous portions and cutely named drinks; and the bustling Cafe Valentino, across from Bodhi Tree, a favorite of the theatrical set. As for the dress code, no worries. We had dropped in earlier at Sticky Fingers to ask about changing our rather travel-worn clothes, and one waiter cheerfully informed us, "No one dresses up anymore, guys."

One morning we wandered through the beautiful Hagley Park, following, whenever we could, the ubiquitous Avon. Locals use Hagley for golf, rugby, tennis and guiding radio-controlled sailboats on a lagoon. Later, a taxi driver told us that Hagley, with its 500 acres, was the third-largest city park in the world behind New York's Central and London's Hyde. He added that, astoundingly, there are about 650 parks in Christchurch, and who were we to doubt him?

As for the Botanic Gardens, adjacent to the Canterbury Museum on Rolleston Avenue: simply superb. Along with our favorite river, there are gigantic trees from the 19th century and, in all, more than 10,000 exotic and indigenous plants (check out the rose and herb gardens particularly) displayed in a gorgeously landscaped setting. There also may be unexpected sights. While drinking coffee in an outdoor cafe, we noticed a young mother feeding her baby as she lit up an unmistakably "aromatic" cigarette.

The Canterbury Museum itself (founded in 1867) is not to be missed, with its Maori gallery, Antarctic discovery section and information about New Zealand's early colonists.

For the adventurous, all kinds of activities operate out of Christchurch, including hot-air ballooning, jet boating, horse treks, fly-fishing, Clydesdale wagon adventures and bungee jumping.

We took in a few films in audience-friendly cinemas selling wine and beer that you can take to your seat -- which, incidentally, helps kill time, because the films invariably start late. In fact, the Kiwis (as New Zealanders proudly call themselves) seem a bit conflicted. These extremely active people take advantage of the outdoors by hiking and kayaking and jumping off things, but inside they patiently wait for movies to begin and restaurants to serve. (At one cafe, we tried to order soup and were told that it would be ready in 20 minutes. What about coffee, then? Oh, 15 minutes.)

For a look outside the city, we opted for a 25-minute bus ride (No. 28 just off Cathedral Square) to Lyttelton Harbour, home to Christchurch's port, a real working harbor with huge container ships and storage tanks. A small, funky little town that reminded us of places in rural Colorado, it has a bustling main street and some nice restaurants. Activities include visiting the historic Timeball Station (where a ball was dropped at precisely 1 p.m. daily for 58 years to provide ships' masters with the correct time), taking walks around the hills and booking a dolphin- or whale-watching cruise.

Earlier, one Sunday evening back in Christchurch, we had attended a service at the cathedral to hear the famed boys' choir. The sermon, delivered by a university professor on the subject of love, noted that many New Zealand men still have difficulty showing emotions, such as hugging. On a more secular level, we learned from others that beer-loving Kiwi men were still reluctant to drink wine, considering it, apparently, a somewhat effete libation.

But during our relaxing outing on the Avon River, our friendly punter wanted to dispel that stereotype, at least on a personal level.

"I drink wine as well as beer," he confided. "Maybe it's because I run with a different circle. I mean, we can hug *anybody!*"

Terry is a Chicago-based freelance writer and a former critic for the Chicago Tribune.

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