

FROM WELLY TO NELLY

Yes, you can use your passport for a mini-break and see a vibrant city and spectacular coast in one 72-hour trip

ANNIKA SMETHURST

A three-hour flight across the Tasman, New Zealand offers spectacular scenery, world-class food and wine and an exchange rate that won't send you broke.

The compact capital, Wellington, which blends the best of Canberra and San Francisco, is fast developing a reputation as our neighbour's hipster capital. Its once dingy laneways have been transformed into foodie hot spots, and the city is dotted with secluded bars. For culture lovers, there are first-class museums and galleries. But venturing beyond the city limits, I discovered Nelson on a sparkling stretch of coast on the top of the South Island.

DAY 1

8am: After arriving in Wellington about 6am, I drop off my luggage at the InterContinental Wellington, dive into this cool little capital and find some breakfast. The Larder (thelarder.co.nz) in the suburb of Miramar is one of Wellington's best eateries. The beautiful cafe and produce store offers great local dishes, including whitebait omelet and strong coffee.

10am: A two-block stroll away is the Weta Cave, a museum of the Academy Award-winning studio that created

props and special effects for films including *Lord of the Rings*, *King Kong* and *The Adventures of Tintin*. Movie buffs will love a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the Weta Workshop where you can see staff working away on top-secret designs.

1pm: Still full from breakfast, I head back to the CBD to Cuba St for a quick coffee and a snack. The trendy strip is a mix of boutique and bohemia and offers great shopping.

3pm: On the water, the national museum Te Papa gives tourists a history lesson on NZ. I could have easily spent a day exploring the exhibits, which take you on a journey from New Zealand's ancient past to present. An Anzac exhibition tells the story of the Gallipoli campaign through eight lifelike models of NZ soldiers, each immortalised in a moment of war. A team of craftsmen including those at the Weta Workshop helped to create the sculptures, which are 2.4 times human size.

6pm: I join locals for after-work drinks at St John's Bar on the waterfront just

outside the museum. There are bean bags to lounge on while admiring views of Lambton Harbour.

7pm: Keen to explore some of Wellington's hidden laneways, I head to the Egmont Street Eatery

(egmontstreet.co.nz). Located down an unassuming alleyway (trust me, even Melburnians will find this one tough to locate), this place is one of the city's coolest new restaurants. Serving up fresh, seasonal and simple cuisine, I opted for a bowl of mussels paired with a glass of NZ riesling.

DAY 2

9am: After an early breakfast at the hotel, I head for Wellington's famous red cable car, which runs from Lambton Quay in the commercial heart of the city and emerges at the top of the Botanic Gardens. The views from the top are spectacular. If you have the time, it's worth wandering down through the 26ha of exotic forests, flower beds and native bush right in the heart of the city.

Noon: I travel to the airport for a 30-minute flight to the top of the South Island to the picturesque town of Nelson. Try and secure a window seat for this trip because the views are phenomenal.

1.30pm: After landing, lunch waits at the Cod & Lobster Brasserie (codandlobster.com), a seafood restaurant located at the top of Trafalgar St. It's a great place to unwind, sample a local drop and plan my afternoon in Nelson – a favourite



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destination for movie stars and locals looking for a summer escape. And it offers more sunshine hours than any other place in the country, about 2472 compared to a national average of about 2100. The town can be explored on foot starting at Trafalgar St.

The region is home to more than 300 working artists, and I was keen to see

MAIN PICTURE: TRAVEL NEW ZEALAND, FACEBOOK

some of their work. The Red Gallery is a starting point and also sells an array of beautiful products.

5.30pm: I sneak out of town to Tahunanui Beach for sunset. The calm waters and postcard-perfect scenery make it the ideal spot to unwind, or, as I did, try stand up paddle boarding.

7.30pm: For a small town, Nelson has a huge number of restaurants, craft breweries and bars. Wander through the town and try something new, or head to The Monaco Kitchen for a tasty meal overlooking an inlet.

DAY 3

10am: Feeling energetic, I hire a bike and cycle to Mapua Wharf, an idyllic seaside town near Nelson. Bike paths crisscrossing the region take in wineries, secluded beaches and national parks as part of the Great Taste Trail. The ride takes you through fragrant pine forest and sandy beaches

where you can catch a ferry across to Mapua. This hidden gem can also be accessed by bus or car and offers a cluster of cafes, a wine bar, brewery and several art galleries.

Noon: Wine fans rejoice, Nelson is a two-hour drive from its more famous sister Marlborough, but it is fast building a reputation as a wine destination in its own right. Mahana (mahana.nz), formerly known as Woollaston Estates, is an organic vineyard and winery just a short drive from Mapua. The grounds are spectacular, with sweeping views of the ocean and nearby mountain range.

3pm: There's time for a quick stop at one of the roadside berry farms before the flight back to Wellington.

5pm: The Wellington Night Market starts about 5pm every Friday and Saturday. The market is spread throughout a series of laneways off Cuba St, offering live music, shopping

and street food.

7pm: Resisting some of the market food was difficult but I had heard that Matterhorn was one of Wellington's best restaurants. A popular hangout for *Lord of the Rings* stars during filming, Matterhorn (matterhorn.co.nz), in the Cuba St precinct, is sleek and stylish and the food is outstanding. A memorable way to finish my stay before the flight back to Australia the next morning.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF WELLINGTONNZ.COM

ESCAPE ROUTE

NEW ZEALAND

GETTING THERE

Flights to Wellington from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane are 3½ hours on average.

Last year, Jetstar launched a direct route from Melbourne to Wellington (fares from \$189) and Queenslanders can fly direct from the Gold Coast (from \$199). Jetstar flights from Wellington to Nelson are from \$40. See jetstar.com

STAYING THERE

A standard room at the InterContinental Wellington is priced from \$240 a night (standard room). See intercontinental.com

The Grand Mercure Nelson Monaco Apartments is priced from \$167 a night.

See monacoresort.co.nz

MORE

Wellingtonnz.com
nelsonnz.com

THE RIDE TAKES YOU THROUGH FRAGRANT PINE FOREST AND SANDY BEACHES

ANNIKA SMETHURST

GET ONLINE



SEE NEW ZEALAND'S NORTH ISLAND EXPLORED IN STUNNING TIMELAPSE AT
ESCAPE.COM.AU



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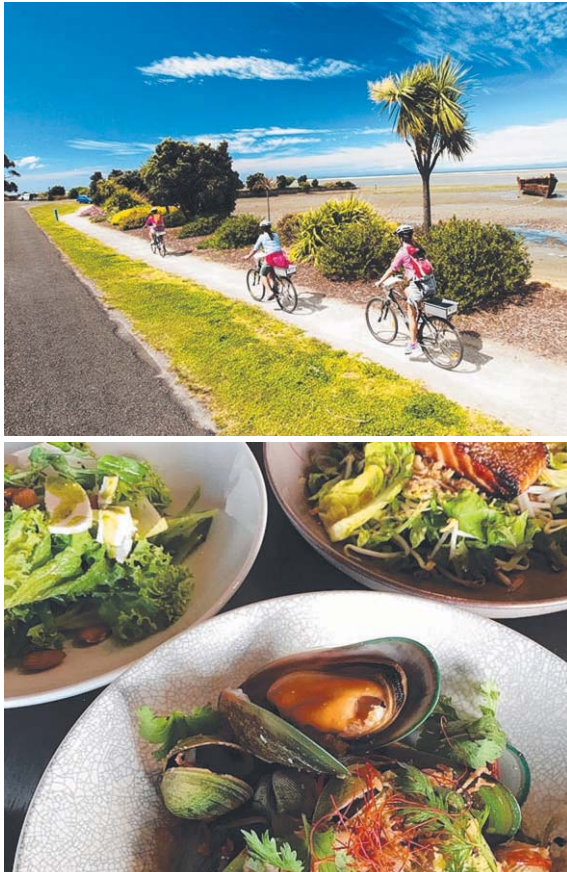
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Take the red cable car to the top of the Botanic Gardens for impressive views of the city (main); enjoy a relaxing wine with mussels at Egmont Street Eatery (above right); and lapping up the sunshine by bike, near Nelson, at the top of the South Island.