

NEW ZEALAND

Cities by the Sea

By Monica Frim

Photography by Monica and John Frim

Maurice Shadbolt, the enigmatic writer whose works of fiction and non-fiction greatly illuminated New Zealand culture and social history, wryly didn't seem to care for the cities of his homeland. In the 1950s, he wrote that New Zealand's cities "were among the most joyless in human history." Now, some 60 years later, I'd venture he'd eat those words.

We were meandering about the city of Auckland reminiscing about the change that had taken place since our first visit more than 30 years ago. At that time, Auckland was partway through a major facelift that had many residents and onlookers scratching their heads in dismay. The new developments took place with little architectural and design control. While some historical buildings were lovingly restored and refurbished, others fell to the wrecking ball to be replaced by a shuffle of mismatched high rises that elicited complaints about newly created shadows and wind tunnels. Maurice Shadbolt's sentiments persisted.

Auckland is again engaged in an ongoing building project—as the ubiquitous construction cranes will attest—with ten more years to go. The plan involves turning the city into a vibrant international metropolis with sky-piercing architecture on par with the rest of the world. Unlike the previous building boom, this one has been carefully planned. Under the auspices of Auckland Council's Auckland Design Office, the city will receive a totally new skyline, revamped wharves, and increased recognition of the city's Maori heritage.

The lava dome of Mauao, known locally as The Mount, rises above the resort town of Mount Manganui, a suburb of Tauranga on New Zealand's North Island.

Splayed across some 50 volcanic cones that taper into a skinny neck of land flanked by two large harbours, Auckland is defined by its volcanic bumps and watery indentations. The dormant volcanoes have been turned into city parks like Eden Hill, One Tree Hill, and the Auckland Domain. Protected from development, these lush green parklands provide panoramic views over the city and harbor.

If a city can be both lax and urbane, Auckland is it. Artsy shops, swanky restaurants and world-class museums and galleries co-exist among parklands and walking trails that spider along the waterfront and up the slopes of Auckland's extinct volcanoes. One of Auckland's most iconic streets is Parnell Road. It cuts through Parnell Village, Auckland's oldest suburb but, paradoxically, it's trendiest. This is the heart and soul of the city, but with a quiet vibe. Quaint Victorian houses, fragrant rose gardens, outdoor cafés, and high-end boutiques serve as social levelers for browsers and buyers from all walks of life. Former President Bill Clinton is said to have gotten his chocolate fix at Parnell's Chocolate Boutique during a visit in 1999.

At the top of the road, the modern Holy Trinity Cathedral is a consolidation of two very different styles. Its roofline mimics the roof of neighboring St. Mary's Church but with a sleek contemporary feel. Stained glass windows feature a Polynesian Christ with colorful Pacific motifs, and 18 side windows incorporate both traditional and Polynesian designs. The overall effect has been deemed "Pacific Gothic," a newly minted design term that may only apply to this cathedral.

Auckland's Maori heritage is its pride. The language has been revived and incorporated into everyday greetings, place names, even city protocols and customs. Maori art is everywhere—decorating buildings, in parks, in the collections of galleries and museums, and in Parnell's pricey shops. But for cultural and historical authenticity, the somewhat misleadingly named Auckland War Memorial Museum houses a phenomenal collection of Maori art and artifacts including an intricately carved marae (meeting house) and giant waka taua (war canoe). The museum occupies a prominent place on the crater rim of the Domain, Auckland's oldest park. Its Winter Gardens boasts a changing collection of tropical and temperate plants in two barrel-vaulted Victorian glass houses that open onto



Auckland's Sky Tower features an adrenalin boosting "SkyJump" from its observation deck. A cable guide protects jumpers from colliding with the tower in the event of wind gusts.

a courtyard with a sunken pool. Open green areas give way to leafy walkways shaded by a mix of exotic and native trees,

and large abstract sculptures lend a sense of urbanity to nature's green spaces.

Of course, like modern cities everywhere, Auckland has its token Sky Tower. After a full day of sightseeing, we stopped at the foot of the tower to contemplate how the city has changed—and continues to change. For one thing, 30 years ago no one was jumping off high buildings tethered to a wire.

Despite the new construction Auckland remains a great walking city—even when construction cranes hover overhead and heavy hydraulics encroach on the sightlines. If Shadbolt were still alive, I think he'd be pleased, although I wonder how he'd feel about the Tolkien tourism that's defining other parts of the country.

If some people think of New Zealand as a Middle Earth shire peopled with fantastical characters with names like Gandalf, Baggins and Frodo, they're not completely wrong. Hobbiton near Matamata drives a thriving tourist trade, with guides leading fantasy fans along walkways through The Shire with its colorful hobbit holes and two-arched bridge. The tours end with a drink at the iconic Green Dragon.



Holy Trinity Cathedral dominates the hill in Parnell, a tony suburb of Auckland.

But the real film magic takes place more than 300 miles south in the Weta Workshop, a design and manufacturing facility named for a cricket, that's made Wellington the center of New Zealand's film and special effects industries. The Weta conglomerate, which includes Weta Workshop and Weta Digital, is co-owned by Sir Peter Jackson, the writer, director and producer of the Lord of the Rings and Hobbit trilogies. Visitors can take studio and workshop tours to see how the magic that's earned Wellington its nickname of 'Wellywood' is made.

There's nothing like a touch of whimsy to juice up the traveling spirit, but it's Wellington's historical and cultural tie-ins that define its personality. For a capital city, Wellington maintains both small-town charm and big-city sophistication, which explains why Lonely Planet designated it the "coolest capital in the world." Squished in on all sides by either mountains or sea, and dangled over by a cable car, the city is evocative of San Francisco or Porto, complete with colorful homes and gardens that spill down the hills to a central area. A lovely path winds through the Botanic Garden among trees,

flowers and gargantuan statues down to the city center. But for the best views over the harbor and the city, the hike up to Mount Victoria at the southeastern end of the city is nonpareil.

Wellington's heart and heritage unfold along its waterfront where the old brick sheds that once housed shipping goods have been turned into museums, galleries, shops and restaurants. We walked the entire shoreline from the Railway Station all the way to Oriental Bay Beach at the foot of Mount Victoria, stopping to admire the street art and the impressive

Wellington's historic Waterfront Shed 11 now houses the New Zealand Portrait Gallery.



historical exhibits at Wellington's top museums. The Museum of Wellington City & Sea houses a trove of artifacts and displays related to Wellington's Maori, maritime and colonial history. But for a comprehensive collection of Maori artifacts, art and innovative displays, the Te Papa Museum of New Zealand carried the day.

Wellington's location at the convergence of several fault lines means this city sure can shake. Some 15,000 seismic tremors a year take place in New Zealand, with about 150 of them strong enough to be felt. So the cities have learned to roll with the punches. But in the days prior to strict new building

The Bucket Fountain on Cuba Street is one of Wellington's quirkiest landmarks.



The Executive Wing of the New Zealand Parliament Buildings is affectionately known as the Beehive.

codes and the 1970's invention of base isolators (a special bearing system made of rubber and steel), rebuilding was the only recourse.

The city of Napier, midway between Auckland and Wellington, was almost entirely rebuilt after the Hawke's Bay earthquake of 1931 destroyed almost the entire city. The earthquake uplifted the land and dramatically altered the shoreline, adding fill to Bluff Hill, which was once an island, and turning it into a fully integrated part of the city. New buildings were simultaneously erected in the Art Deco style of the day. Today Napier rivals Miami for having some of the best-preserved Art Deco architecture in the world, along with a seemingly endless stretch of sandy shoreline. Norfolk pines, sculptures, water fountains and flower-filled parks and gardens line its Marine Parade, the road that separates the downtown from the sea.

Napier is unmatched by any other city in New Zealand—consummately Kiwi but with international counterparts. Its Six Sisters cottages on the city side of Marine Parade are evocative of San Francisco's

Wellington's pedestrian friendly waterfront provides a great walking and sight seeing route along the harbor.

Painted Ladies, and the delightful sculpture of Pania on the Reef is Napier's answer to Copenhagen's Little Mermaid, but with a Maori storyline. You can wander fluidly among contiguous attractions—from one end of Marine Parade, then loop around the downtown with its splendid streetscape of restored art deco buildings. The best examples are on Emerson and Tennyson Streets.

About 179 miles north of Napier, the city of Tauranga on the Bay of Plenty is one of New Zealand's fastest growing cities. It recently bypassed Napier and Dunedin to become the fifth largest city in New Zealand and largest exporting port. As container ships leave the port loaded with cargos of logs, dairy products and kiwi (the fruit, not animal), incoming cruise liners disgorge passengers who use the port predominantly as a springboard to places like Hobbiton and Rotorua.

Paihia Wharf is the departure point for boat tours of the Bay of Islands.



Auckland teems with cranes and construction sites as new residential buildings and commercial towers continue to reshape the skyline.



Vintage car tours with local guides dressed in jazz era costumes are a fitting complement to Napier's Art Deco heritage.



Some find their way to the city center six miles away—a pretty place, compact and walkable, but not nearly as popular as the surrounding suburbs with their shops and beach resorts. Mount Maunganui is one of the most favored suburbs with expansive white beaches, rocky islands and reefs that attract divers and devotees of wildlife. While sand, surf and hilly trails are the main highlights, Mount Maunganui's tiny downtown core is full of atmospheric cafes, bars, restaurants and high-end fashion boutiques.

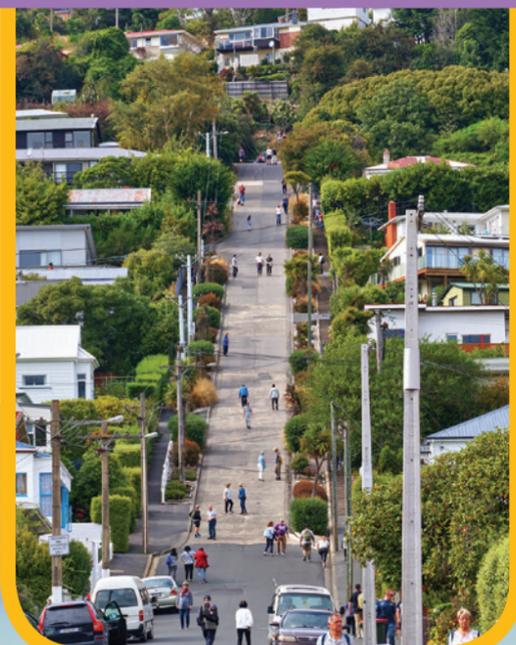
At the end of the town, a large lava dome known as Mauao is Mount Maunganui's most prominent feature. Although it looks intimidating, it takes only about 45 minutes to walk the base track around it or climb to the top for an incredible view of the peninsula with Pilot Bay on one side, and the wild Pacific surf rolling into the Bay of Plenty on the other.

The city of Dunedin as seen from Signal Hill.



St. Paul's Anglican Church in Paihia was erected in 1925 on the site of the original mission church, a hut made of bulrushes in 1823.

Dunedin's Baldwin Street is the steepest residential street in the world, according to the Guinness World Record.



DUNEDIN



For an even easier climb, Mount Drury, in the heart of the city, offers ancient burial caves and lush terraces that attest to early Maori occupation. Mount Drury was once a separate island but now forms a scenic buffer between the downtown and Moturiki, a "tied island" attached to the land by a sandbar.

Moturiki pokes a rocky finger into the Bay of Plenty and offers an easy walk with scenic lookouts to Mauao on one side and the wide sandy beaches that stretch like golden tapestry all the way to Maketu, 25 miles away, on the other. It takes only 15 minutes to walk the entire length of the island to the blowhole at the end and more amazing views. But to catch the spume, you need to time your visit with the incoming tide. Regrettably, we didn't.

No matter their size, New Zealand's cities find common ground in walkability and kinship to other places, whether by heritage or design. Nowhere is this more evident than in Dunedin, New Zealand's oldest city, whose Scottish connections go well beyond its name (Gaelic for Edinburgh). Lording over the Octagon (Dunedin's central plaza) and the literary tributes of Writer's Walk, the statue of Scotland's patron poet, Robert Burns, also has a coincidental tie-in to one of the city's founding fathers: The Reverend Thomas Burns who was a nephew of the poet.

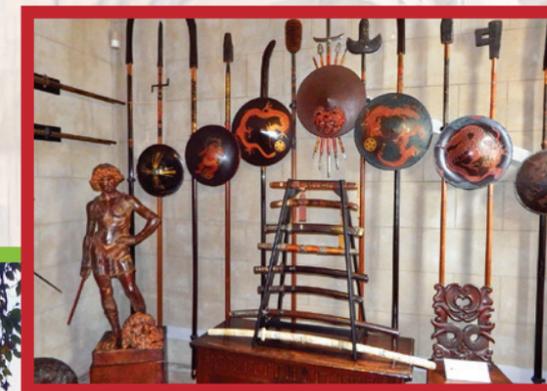
But it's Dunedin's Victorian and Edwardian architecture that really defines the city. Built in the 19th century after the economic boom of the Central Otago Gold Rush, Dunedin's grandest buildings bear distinctive dark basalt exteriors with light Oamaru stone trimmings. The Dunedin Railway Station and University of Otago (New Zealand's oldest) are considered to be the finest examples of Dunedin's characteristic architecture,

although a walk through the city will reveal many other praiseworthy heritage buildings.

The Olveston Historic Home is one of the finest Edwardian houses to grace the city. Built in the Jacobean style for English-born merchant David Theomin, the house was deeded to the city after both Theomin children died without heirs. Tours of the home reveal the family's sophisticated tastes with collectibles from all over the world, and give insight to how the wealthy of New Zealand lived in the early 1900s. The home was one of the first to incorporate advanced technological conveniences such as central heating, an intercom and a service elevator into the design. For history buffs and anyone who appreciates fine art and innovative period architecture, this opulent home is an exemplary timepiece of the early 20th century.

Turn to page 70 for contact information for the Olveston Historic Home and Salt Air, the helicopter service used to view the Bay of Islands.

A collection of Japanese weaponry adorns the Vestibule of the Olveston Historic Home.



Olveston Historic home



It's easy to be awed in Dunedin. With world-class galleries and museums like the Otago and the Toitu Otago Settlers Museums, local culture and history unfolds in standout displays. We did our best to cram as many exhibits into our too short stay as possible, still leaving time to take in the outdoor attractions and vistas: Signal Hill for the views and Baldwin Street for its muscle-aching steep grade. Listed in the Guinness Book of records as the steepest street in the world, there's tourist pride in conquering the ascent.

When it comes to suburban flair, the tiny laidback tourist town of Paihia on the Bay of Islands doesn't exactly fit the mold. Yet as New Zealand's spiritual home—gateway to the birthplace of New Zealand and

the meeting of two cultures—it's the country's most honored place. Today the Waitangi Treaty Grounds where the signing of the first accord between the British Crown and the Maori people took place is a protected site on the outskirts of Paihia, revered by both Maori and non-Maori alike. The Grounds house the historic Treaty House, a carved marea, a 70-year-old waka and the new Museum of Waitangi, the latter erected in 2016 to showcase the story of Waitangi and surrounding areas through artifacts and a powerful audio visual show.

Paihia is also the gateway to some of the north's most spectacular scenery, much of it unreachable by road. One hundred and forty-four islands dot the bay, some so wild and rugged that one wonders if any

human ever set foot on them. We followed the wake of Captain Cook and the early explorers in a helicopter courtesy of Salt Air, a local operation. As we flew over the historic towns of Russell and Paihia with their breathtaking beaches and secluded coves, and out to the Hole in the Rock off the tip of Cape Brett, the glorious islands that led Captain Cook to land appeared like colossal jewels sprinkled across a shimmering sea. For the first settlers, this was where their story began. For us it was a beautiful ending. ■

If you would like to learn more about the Olveston Historic Home and Salt Air Helicopter and Airplane tours, turn to page 70 for contact information.



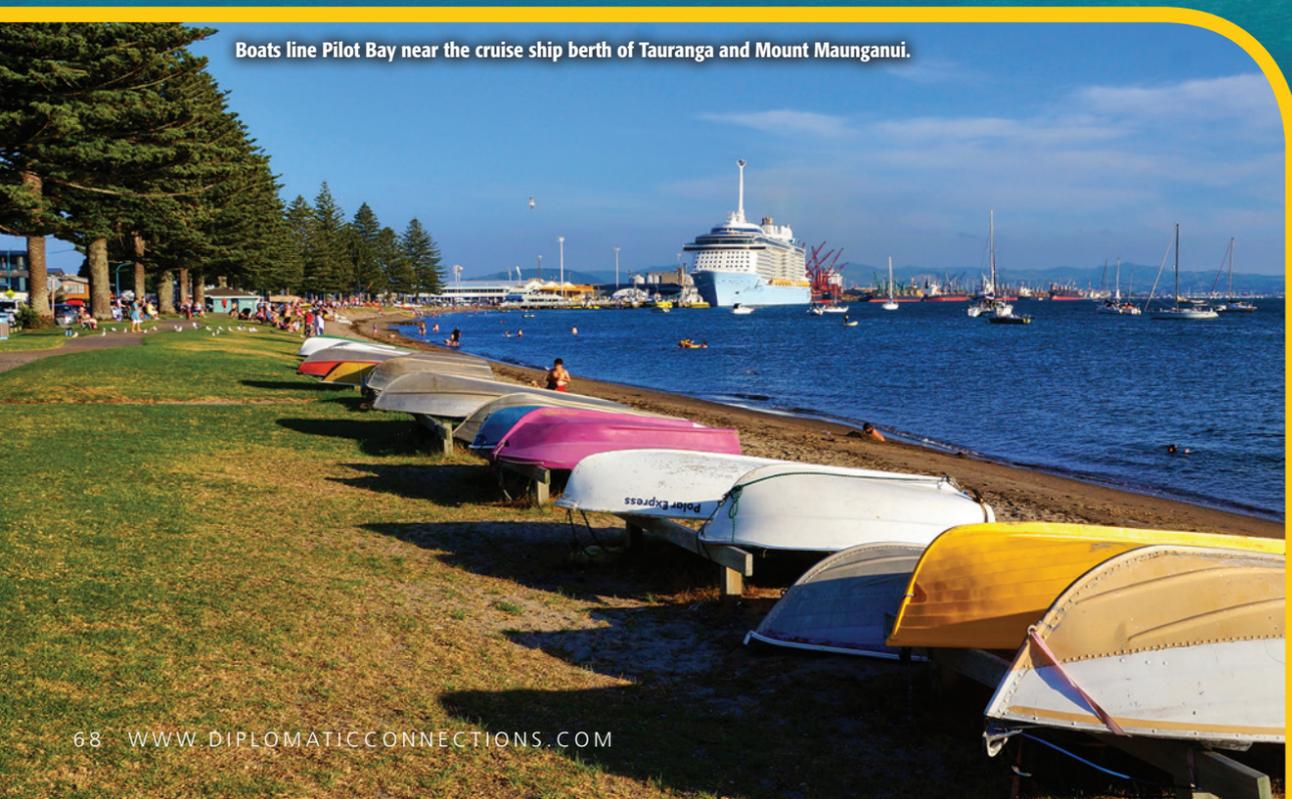
Bronze statue of a marlin at Paihia Wharf.



A custom built V8 Chev provides a memorable way to explore Paihia and the Bay of Islands.

A helicopter flight over the Bay of Islands offers a marvelous perspective of island topography.

Boats line Pilot Bay near the cruise ship berth of Tauranga and Mount Maunganui.



Diplomatic Connections thanks Olveston Historic Home and Salt Air for their support. Olveston Historic Home and its furnishings were gifted to the city of Dunedin in 1966 by Dorothy Theomin. Guided tours operate at set times daily, but on Christmas Day only by prior arrangement.

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Salt Air is a family business that offers a variety of scenic tours by helicopter or airplane around the Bay of Islands. Its company slogan is: Northland – Best seen from above. Headquarters are at the Paihia waterfront on the Bay of Islands.

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