

WINDY WELLINGTON

THE NEW ZEALAND CAPITAL OFFERS GORGEOUS VIEWS WITH GUSTS THAT ARE SURE TO SWEEP YOU OFF YOUR FEET (QUITE LITERALLY)

TEXT AND PHOTOS: RATHINA SANKARI

I sat on a bench waiting for my guide from Seal Coast Safari. The day had started on a rough note. I had taken the guided food tour of Wellington that morning when, during the walk, a sudden gust of wind had blown me away a few meters. I held on to a roadside bolster to avoid getting swept further. But an American lady wasn't that lucky as she banged on to me and flew ahead on the pavement, but was rescued in the nick of the time by her husband. This was an unusual experience. I had never been swept away by water, let alone howling winds.

After a hot cuppa of the country's famed flat white at the coffee capital of the country and having soothed our frayed nerves as we walked ahead, my guide pointed to a graffiti on a wall. Until then I didn't know the city was called Windy Wellington. A red coffee cup, blustery winds, windmills, windswept hair, craft beer, flights hovering in the windy sky, merino sheep, chocolates, guitar denoting the music scene of the city were few of the many details found in the artwork. It was so very Wellington, depicting all that the city is famous for. Landing in Wellington Airport is one Herculean task for the pilots due to the winds. No wonder their professional rugby union team is called Hurricanes.

After an eventful morning, I sat on a bench having my sandwich for lunch, unaware my windy experience was to continue through the rest of the day. Soon the rain started to fall in sheets when a burly and bearded Chalmers arrived. We soon got into his SUV and hit the road to the coast. The plan was to visit the coast and watch the endemic New Zealand fur seal colony in action. Chalmers got talking and gave me a run-down of his city. I noticed the Parliament house and old buildings in the city were made of timber due to its high bending and flexibility traits. The Wellington to





HEAVEN ON EARTH: Sheep grazing about is a common scene while driving towards Tongue Point

TRAVEL

Christchurch region is earthquake-prone and these timber houses prevent maximum damage. “The city experiences wind an excess of 60 km per hour, two thirds of the year, gale force wind,” said Chalmers. As someone who worked earlier for the emergency services, Chalmers recounted an incident when he had to rescue a family that was trapped in a house crushed under the weight of a large rock. “The wind was coming at 230 kilometres per hour and we had to crawl to the house,” he said, describing the gravity of the situation.

Soon with the car’s heater turned on and warmed us up enough as we left the city behind for some serious off-roading. A kākāriki couple – the colourful New Zealand parakeet – flew past us chattering. Chalmers was happy to sight these threatened birds and said that the Maoris (Polynesians settled in New Zealand) consider sighting them lucky. The rain drizzled intermittently. Not long after we sighted the swamp hen or pukeko native to the country. We had reached a large farm with an area of about 200 hectares that had about 2,000 cattle and sheep each and 500-odd wild goats. Chalmers unlocked its gate, drove inside the farm and then locked it again. “Maoris believe one should leave the gate how you found them,” clarified Chalmers for his act. It was a private farm that he had access to. He was eager to drive me to the windmills spinning in the distance. We took a narrow dirt path that circled round the hills sputtering gravel on the way.

Of the total 93 turbines, 60 were based in the farm. “The farmer gets 10 per cent of the energy generated every year. I don’t think he needs to be a farmer,” chuckled Chalmers. I could see the ocean below as we gained height. It was a little scary as we continued to climb. I could hear the wind pounding outside. The vehicle trudged through the steep climb. Chalmers brought the vehicle to a stop at the base of one of the turbines. Standing at 111 metres tall, the blades mounted on the gigantic columns spun as the wind had gathered speed at that height. As we stepped out of the car, the wind howled. I struggled to stand on the ground, lest I be toppled. The car was parked but rattled and shook continuously as the wind thrashed around us.

I was eager to get into the car and make way. Soon we got going downhill and I noticed the wind-beaten trees peppered around the expanse. “We sighted the pukeko and the kākāriki today. But the jewel in the crown is the New Zealand fur seal,” said Chalmers, anxious to take me to the seals. We passed by the lighthouses at Tongue Point when he mentioned, “We are almost there. We need to keep an eye for the juvenile seals as they do steer away from the colony and can be found on the road. We wouldn’t want to hit them unknowingly.” Sure, a few were found lying on the dirt road while others were galloping through the rocky ter-



FACT FILE

Book your adventure with Seal Coast Safari (www.sealcoast.com).

The tour runs for three hours and costs NZ\$125 per adult. There is the morning 9:30 am tour and the afternoon safari at 1:30 pm.

rain. The big boys weighing 120-160 kilos were lazing all around the beach. “The beach master weighs 180 kilos,” added Chalmers.

The ocean seemed to be in a rage as the wind wailed around us. The waves were crashing one over the other. I walked on the beach watching the fur seals in action. Few jumped into the water and then popped back on the ground. Here was someone who didn’t mind the wind and enjoyed it. The rain, wet and cold weather conditions didn’t bother them an ounce.

I returned to the vehicle where Chalmers had set up some tea for me. Sipping the hot tea and relishing homemade muffins, I realised all it takes is ignoring the irritants and enjoying the goodness around us. While the wind had been a deterrent, the drive was worth it. Something that I wouldn’t have got to experience back home. After all, doesn’t expecting the unexpected in unknown regions, give the much-desired thrill and interest to travel to new destinations? Wellington was for keeps. [W](#)

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WALK ON AIR: 1. A rough day at the beach; 2. Windmills in the distance; 3. Seals relaxing on the beach; 4. Graffiti depicting Windy Wellington; 5. Safari guide Chalmers enjoying the wind pounding