# J'aime Akaroa

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2pm, Monday afternoon and in the centre of a city with near-on 400,000 people there's barely a soul in sight. Only there had to be because we could hear the rattle and whirr of construction, but beyond those in orange vests, the earthquake-scarred Christchurch CBD was the most empty downtown I'd ever seen.

Five years on from when those first, tragic quakes struck, Christchurch still looks very much a work in progress. Demolition, on-going rebuilding and a lack of central-city density make for a confronting experience, but optimism somehow peeks through.

And in unexpected places – the once temporary Container Mall looks a keeper, so too possibly the Cardboard Cathedral. Both are now part of the Christchurch story and represent positivity in adversity.

Fast-forward 24 hours and my melancholy is replaced by a euphoric and quite dorky enthusiasm. "Dorky" because it's for the cuteness of spring lambs. I'm a New Zealander and with 30 million of the fluffy things we're meant to be blasé about anything sheep-related, including sheep jokes from trans-Tasman neighbours. But do these sheep and little lambs have any idea how breathtaking they and their view are combined?

Having left Christchurch behind, myself and a couple of friends have headed 90 minutes over the hills of Banks Peninsula for the South Island equivalent of historic Russell in the North Island. This is Akaroa – a striking seaside town of galleries, cafes, museums and just 1,000 people. Of particular note is that Akaroa is also a former French outpost and had the British not won the colonisation race by (literally) less than a week back in 1840, New Zealand could've been two islands and two countries: one English speaking and the other French.

The French influence of those first 57 Francophile settlers lingers (French street names, bakeries with croissants etc.) and together with the town's geographic and architectural beauty, Akaroa is equally as petit and historically significant as the North Island's Russell.

Be that as it may, I've never heard anyone say, "come to Akaroa and see the sheep!" Opportunity missed because perched on a hill overlooking Stanley Park's nuzzling lambs with the first spring flowers and the distant mountains across the harbour, I realised Akaroa is not just run of the mill attractive.

My friends managed to pull me away and we made our way through the bush to the harbour's edge. Walking towards Akaroa's famous lighthouse, this red and white landmark is unique not just for being photogenic but also for being transplanted from its original location further up the harbour. These days its role is more in the realm of aiding tourists by being a pretty backdrop for holiday snaps rather than guiding ships into Akaroa's long, narrow harbour. It's doing a great job. Particularly when we spot a fur seal wandering the smooth rocks at the foot of the lighthouse and can scarcely believe our luck.

When it comes to wildlife, Akaroa (which has four marine protected areas) is also home to the rare Hector's dolphin as well as Little Blue penguins.

Animals and people alike are drawn here and it feels a million miles from the complexity of emotions Christchurch throws at you.

As for where to stay in a tiny town that greets enormous cruise ships to the tune of nearly 100 visits per summer season (and approximately 150,000 passengers*), I wanted something with a bit of a story to tell that befits the beauty and antiquity of the place. In Beaufort House we found that – a 5-star 1878-built B&B that promotes itself as being luxury accommodation for "discerning guests who enjoy heritage, character and the charm of a bygone era".

Knowing that sounded like my kind of residence, it was still the warmth of the hospitality that really got us. A blackboard next to the front door with chalk announcing "Welcome Tim & Friends!" was a perfect start. It's funny how much of an emotional impact a personalised greeting from a hotel gives you.

Follow that up with a genuine and wholehearted reception from the owner – in this case just Noel with co-owner Sharon still overseas – and we felt like we'd been welcomed in by an old friend. Noel, a suave chap possibly in his late 50s, showed us our rooms (think Victorian-era luxury with black iron bed-ends, marble bathrooms and golden fittings) that comprised two of the four upstairs suites available in the house. 1800s opulence has been honoured and nowhere is there a whiff of faded glamour.

With Noel inviting us down for drinks and canapés, we were surprised to be treated to a full smorgasbord of foods and wines. There's a small vineyard behind the two-storey house with 120 grapes and some of the (very good) bottles were from the property itself.

Hearing sailing yarns from passionate yachtie Noel, we also learned the stories behind some of the artworks at Beaufort: "So that's what the dog in the painting represents!" etc. Noel and Sharon are keen collectors and this is a B&B for fans of historic art as much as lovers of boutique luxury.

Noel explained how the property was originally called "The Wilderness" with its initial 5-acre hillside plot chosen as something of a health retreat for the first owner's sickly wife. Situated above the frost line and protected from the biting southerly winds of the South Island, the newly-built house received all day sun and was planted with a vibrant garden. That garden remains and together with the vineyard and surrounding trees gives the home a handsome, leafy setting.

Sadly the house wasn't spared by the quakes of 2010 and 2011. Before Noel and Sharon bought the property in 2012 the central fireplace had been toppled. Sipping on fine wines, admiring art I'd be scared to ask the monetary value of, it was a sobering reminder of how the violent whims of Mother Nature are indiscriminate. And how people and places can recover, sometimes spectacularly so. ⊞