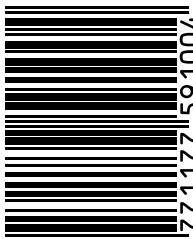


WildTomato

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Be a tourist - explore your backyard



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Features

Issue 169 / October 2020

30 Tourism

Ivy Lynden looks at what is happening with tourism in the Top of the South

37 Building Boom

Business is booming for the construction industry locally, writes **Alistair Hughes**

45 Awesome Apprentices

Demand and Government subsidies mean that now is an opportunistic time to sign up for an apprenticeship, as **Alistair Hughes** discovers

INTERVIEWS

14 My Big Idea

Getting to sleep can be a mission for some people, but Allan Baker has some answers, writes **Cathie Bell**

22 The Interview

Nelson College's new headmaster Richard Dykes is embracing the Nelson lifestyle after shifting here from Auckland in June. **Brenda Webb** caught up with him

26 Local Connection

Sarah Nottage talks to an eco warrior who sells coffee to save falcons

28 Event Showcase

Tim Hawthorne expands on next month's Top of the South Film Festival; the sixth such event



Supporting Tourism

A backyard bonanza for those willing to explore

Tourism brings important dollars into Nelson Tasman and Marlborough's economy and previously much of that has been generated by international visitors. The Covid-19 pandemic has put an end to that, so what now?

Ivy Lynden explores the road ahead.



Photo: Nelson Tasman NZ



Photo: Owen River Lodge

International tourism has long been a major income earner for both the country and the Top of the South. Plane and bus loads of overseas visitors are well gone, and it may be some time before that scenario reoccurs, yet tourism is still very much a viable industry, albeit in a revised format.

Just as foreign visitors cannot come to New Zealand, so too Kiwis cannot travel overseas on holiday, which means they're exploring their own country more and more. The dollars that previously flowed into Australian, American and European coffers are now slowly finding their way to New Zealand-based companies.

Transport, accommodation and nourishment are all areas through which domestic tourism dollars are making their way back into the national and local economy.

Camper vans, motorhomes and sleeper shuttles are back on our roads in full force as Gen Z, Gen Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers and even the Silent Generation give back to tourism. Long weekends, road trips and even staycations are on agendas, and not just during the school holidays.

Pre-Covid, tourism directly employed one in 10 people and contributed \$660 million to the local economy, however this is expected to drop significantly in the next year.

For many tourist-oriented businesses it is a time of re-invention and being creative and that is definitely happening across the Top of the South. Lodges – luxury and otherwise – are among the businesses re-shaping how they operate, now that they can no longer rely on an affluent American and European client base.

Among them is the Owen River Lodge, a luxury fly-fishing lodge near Murchison, whose owner is offering guests the use of his Porsche for a day.

Previously Owen River Lodge marketed to a high-end global market, primarily based in the United States, Australia and the UK. The lodge was a category winner at the New Zealand Tourism Awards in both 2018 and 2019, and was described by the 2018 judges as “a role model for tourism businesses everywhere”.

Until early March, owner Felix Borenstein was quietly confident that 2020-21 would be another bumper season. Then the coronavirus struck. Like many other operators catering to an affluent overseas market, Felix watched as his bookings, and his business, tanked.

Above: Fly fishing excursions from the Owen River Lodge

Opposite page: Enjoying the scenic delights at Kaiteriteri via cycles

“So I tried to come up with something different and that’s when I hit on the idea of offering a Porsche for a day.”

FELIX BORENSTEIN

When the borders remained closed month after month, Felix realised he'd have to look closer to home if he wanted his lodge to survive. This would be a challenge; although Owen River Lodge enjoyed an international reputation for providing a world-class visitor experience, it was virtually unknown in New Zealand.

“I had to think outside the box,” he says. “There are a lot of other operators in the same situation all competing for the same guests, and the big drawcards for an overseas market, like our natural landscapes, don’t necessarily have the same pulling power at home – most Kiwis have seen their own country.

“So I tried to come up with something different and that’s when I hit on the idea of offering a Porsche for a day.”

His Porsche Boxster S is available for a day’s touring as part of a three-night, all-inclusive package.

“The Boxster is one of those iconic luxury sports cars,” he says. “It was featured in the Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* and in the TV show, *Billions*.

“It’s just a beautiful ride and I’d really love to share it with our Kiwi guests in the coming season.”

Felix says he’s definitely up to the challenge of attracting a new market to his lodge and will continue to find innovative ways to introduce his award-winning, luxury visitor experience to discerning Kiwis.

Creative solutions

New Zealanders are inherently travellers and if they cannot head away for an overseas fix, then chances are they will instead decide to revisit their favourite spots and discover new places and experiences domestically. Going back to Level 2 locally created complications, but nothing that hasn’t arisen before, and now it has resulted in even more creative solutions as tourism operators and would-be holiday makers think outside the square.



Photo: Abel Tasman Sea Shuttle

Helping keep the focus is the Nelson Tasman Economic Response & Regeneration Action Plan, launched in June, which outlines a seven-point action plan to accelerate the region's economic recovery from Covid-19. One of its focus points is on business and investment attraction, stimulating local spending and domestic visitation as well as targeted business and innovation support.

Tracking well

The action plan was developed by the Project Kōkiri collaboration, which was formed to respond to and mitigate the economic impacts of Covid-19 on the Nelson Tasman region. The aim is to enable an economic response and regeneration that will stimulate the economy, protect and create new jobs and accelerate investment into the region.

The response has been initiated and led by the Nelson City Council, Tasman District Council, the Nelson Regional Development Agency (NRDA), the Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce, mana whenua and the regionally-based government agencies including MSD, MBIE and MPI.

The initial extent of economic damage caused by Covid-19 to Nelson Tasman was quantified in August when the latest Quarterly Economic Monitor was released by Infometrics. The data shows that in the June 2020 quarter, the Nelson Tasman region's GDP was 12.5 percent lower than the same quarter in 2019, which is in line with the national contraction of 12.6 percent. The number of Jobseeker Support recipients in the region rose by 19.5 percent.

NRDA CEO Mark Rawson says the region's economic recovery has been tracking well to date with a bump in domestic visitors and local spending, aided by campaign activity and the government's financial support through the wage subsidy and cashflow lending schemes.

... now more than ever, a collaborative response is needed to tackle the economic challenges – of which tourism is one – head on.

MARK RAWSON

Above: An Abel Tasman Sea Shuttle at Medlands Beach Abel Tasman

He says that now more than ever, a collaborative response is needed to tackle the economic challenges – of which tourism is one – head on. “That’s what the ‘We’ve Got This’ campaign is all about, and it’s been hugely heartening to see the level of participation and enthusiasm for this initiative right across the region.”

Working hard and re-invention are nothing new to many of the surviving tourism businesses. One of those is Abel Tasman Sea Shuttles which this month celebrates 20 years in business; a considerable achievement, particularly in tourism.

Despite the challenging financial times, Abel Tasman Sea Shuttles is still giving back to the community and continuing to provide its popular school holiday offer* these school holidays. For several years the company has offered free return trips into the Abel Tasman Park for two children accompanied by a paying adult during school holidays, excluding the long summer break.

Giving back

Now it has a few extras added on to ‘give back’, but with terms and conditions which can be seen on the websites abeltasmanseashuttles.co.nz and experiencekaiteriteri.co.nz.

“We’re really pleased to be able to join forces again with the Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve to add free accommodation for kids* and a complimentary game of mini golf during the school holidays,” says Abel Tasman Sea Shuttles general manager, Mark Burnaby.

“Families can have a half day trip into the park, enjoy a delicious lunch at the newly re-opened Awaroa Lodge and return to Kaiteriteri to play mini golf in the afternoon via a visit to see the New Zealand fur seal colony and iconic Split Apple Rock. Or they can spend a full day in the park and then come back on another day to play mini golf.

“We want to support parents making memories with their kids and help to provide something fun that will entice kids away from their screens. What better way to do that than enjoying Kaiteriteri and our stunning Abel Tasman National Park?”

The company is also planning other special offers during the summer months, and some special events to celebrate its 20th anniversary.



Photo: RNZAF

Scenic flights

Other Nelson Tasman and Marlborough tourism sector operators are doing their bit to continue to offer enjoyable, memorable and reasonably-priced visitor experiences, especially during the holidays.

In sunny Marlborough, PMH Aviation Ltd is offering 'Vintage over the Vintage' scenic flights from Omaka Aerodrome, Blenheim. Owner Pip Hally says the scenic flights are smooth and graceful in a De Havilland DH83C Fox Moth, affectionately known as 'Foxy'. The aircraft was originally purchased new by the Marlborough Aero Club in 1947 so is historically significant to the Marlborough region.

A relatively new tourism business that only opened in July last year, having Covid-19 thrown into the mix created quite a challenge for PMH Aviation, says Pip. "Every time there is a level announcement or change, we notice a huge impact on our bookings. This constant up and down provides many challenges to running a business and staying afloat."

Regardless of Covid-19, their business is 'here to stay'. "We operate an aircraft that is historically significant to both Marlborough and New Zealand, so we are committed to working through Covid-19. We never targeted international tourism as our key market but instead have provided an experience that can be enjoyed by locals and visitors alike."

She adds that they are seeing more domestic tourism and it is great to see Kiwis out enjoying their own backyard. "Too often we tend to travel overseas when the scenery and experiences we have in New Zealand are world-class"

The opportunity to take to the air in a vintage aircraft is proving a unique drawcard. "There is nowhere else in the world that does what we do, and I think this could probably be said for a lot of our tourism activities, so if we focus on what amazing tourism we have in New Zealand and travel internally, this will be enough for many of us until we are able to welcome back our international visitors. Kia kaha NZ!"

Across in Golden Bay another small Kiwi company is also changing it up by creating new products and packages tailored for New Zealand businesses. Kiwi Spirit Distillery specialises in unique spirits handcrafted from the purest local ingredients.

Pre-Covid-19 it created a range of different spirits such as the popular Waitui Single Malt Whiskey, award-winning Totara

"We operate an aircraft that is historically significant to both Marlborough and New Zealand, so we are committed to working through Covid-19."

PIP HALLY, PMH AVIATION

Gin, a range of liqueurs and more. Now it is also producing downsized versions and offering local Tasman businesses special corporate gift packages.

"We have something to suit all tastes and budgets," says sales director Isabella Knight. "We have individual, gift-wrapped bottles along with gift boxes with 12 mini bottles so everyone in the team can take home a little something special."

Nelson Tasman locals are right behind regional tourism. A recent survey conducted by the NRDA suggests that locals strongly support the visitor sector and have a keen desire to explore the region themselves; something that will play a key role in the tourism sector's recovery.

The early May survey, carried out while New Zealand was still at Alert Level 3, drew 832 responses. The majority (73 percent) of respondents are not employed in the tourism sector, representing a wide range of views.

Challenges

NRDA CEO Mark Rawson says the number of responses received, and the depth of the comments, shows a real interest in the industry. "Nearly all respondents (97 percent) feel that tourism brings benefits to the region. The sector underpins many aspects of our community which locals do not wish to lose. As well as boosting the economy and creating employment opportunities, locals recognise that tourism enables more hospitality businesses, retailers and events to take place."

But, he adds, the survey also shows that with the benefits come challenges which need to be managed in the future when visitors return. "The challenges felt by locals include pressure on the environment, overcrowding at their favourite locations and the presence of freedom camping. The survey results clearly indicate that there are many locals who wish to camp responsibly in self-contained vehicles, but there is a strong desire to limit freedom camping on the whole."

Popular destinations

Interestingly, more than half the respondents were unaware of the environmental projects which local tourism businesses support through direct funding and resources as well as their own initiatives. Eighty-five percent agreed the region should offer low-carbon holiday options to align the visitor sector with the protection of the environment.

Locals reported a strong desire to explore the Top of the South themselves, once alert levels allowed. Golden Bay was the most popular destination cited, with nearly 70 percent wishing to go there in the near future.

"We were surprised and heartened by the number of visitors who came over the Takaka Hill in the first weekend post-lockdown," commented Jane Dixon of the Mussel Inn. "It was great to see Golden Bay up and buzzing again."

The top activities which locals were looking forward to doing and willing to pay for within the region were dining out, spending a night away from home and taking a scenic tour.

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Above: PMH Aviation's De Havilland DH83C Fox Moth