

GO NZ: Road trip in the Catlins to see fossilised forests, caves and waterfalls

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The Catlins' Cathedral Caves rise like the landform of an epic movie and are a testimony to the power of the sea. Photo / Getty Images

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There is something seductive about the frayed possibilities of land's end. Gondwana's remnants of buckled land are clothed with verdant pastures of sheep, interspersed with ancient forests, fairy-tale waterfalls and ragged cliffs where rocky creches offer refuge to fur seals, sea lions and the world's rarest penguins.

The Catlins, on the Southern Scenic Route that straddles Otago and the Southlands, is this end-of-land enigma.

The winding road that hugs the shores of the feisty Southern Ocean, between Kaka Point and Curio Bay is short in distance - 108km from point to point. Don't rush. Allow time to be sidetracked and sight-tracked as you deviate to discover the Catlins' natural beauties.

Driving into Kaka Point, the sweeping, windswept beach takes your eye. Majestic tides have heaved a hefty tree trunk on to the sand where it lies embedded like a bleached, beached leviathan. Beachcombers have constructed igloos and tents from the flotsam of driftwood while a scrounged, wooden cable spool is set up as a table ringed with odd, found chairs.

Taking in the sea-glass-green panorama is The Point Cafe & Bar. While sipping on a dewy glass of the Catlins Brewery's Nuggety Black Stout, I read of the day in 2006 when, not orcas, seals or whales skimmed the shores, but a procession of 500m-long icebergs. Complete with inner lakes and cascading waterfalls, the icebergs had escaped the subantarctic currents to promenade the Otago Coast.



Tokata Lighthouse at Nugget Point in the Catlins. Photo / Graeme Murray

The coastal road continues its dramatic drive to Nugget Point, a steep-sided, narrow neck of land where pinnacles of rock poke from the water like a pod of spy-hopping whales. It's debated whether Captain Cook named The Nuggets after pieces of gold, or whether the name evolved during the sealing and whaling era.

Perched like an eagle's eyrie on the peninsula's tip is the white and grey-domed Tokata Lighthouse. During the uphill walk, I'm alarmed by cries of children rising from the clefts below. Peering down, it's not little ones in danger, but a creche of fur seal pups playing in the pools, the rocky walls acting like an acoustic chamber.

Next to the lighthouse I'm almost airborne and anchor down to the viewing platform's handrail. Bull kelp floats like shimmering gold tutus around The Nuggets, performing wave-surfing ballet for onlookers. It's a striking seascape with the promise of migrating whales and shags, shearwaters, spoonbills and gannets on the wing. It's the only place on the mainland where fur seals, sea lions and elephant seals co-exist.

Further south is the turn-off to Purakaunui Falls, one of New Zealand's most photographed landscapes.



Purakaunui Falls is one of the beautiful waterfalls in the Clutha region. Photo / Supplied

From the carpark, it's an easy 15-minute wander along a gravel track that wends through a fairy-tale forest of native beech and podocarp, where giant ferns bow overhead, lichen-trunked brush your shoulders and birdsong stipples the moist and heady air.

Across a wooden bridge, over small rapids and up a bush staircase you're at the top of the falls, but for the best view continue down to the base where the triple tier of rock

ledges showcases the 20m cascade. Fringed with micro-ferns, visitors scramble the slithery rocks for the iconic waterfall photo.

While on the waterfall trail, the McLean Falls are a 30-minute drive southwest; the last 3km being a stint along a gravel road.

Again, I feel like Alice in Wonderland as the creek ripples and flourishes, pinballs and skewers the mossy boulders. Coming to The Chute, it could be a wild ride at a fun park. There's a fairly steep walk to the lookout up muddy wooden-framed steps and several rocky inclines, but the spectacle of the 22m tumbling falls, the tallest in the Catlins, is worth the effort.

Although the next waterfall is not in order of stops through the Catlins, Niagara Falls entices you to visit on the reputation of its famous namesake. But the joke's on me. It's a waterfall of irony. The sign is bigger than the falls that must be the world's smallest, but it makes for a fun photo.

After a food stop at the Niagara Falls Cafe set in an old schoolhouse, it's off to the Cathedral Caves. These 30m-high sea caves are only accessible at low tide, so check the tide charts before setting off. The area is closed from June to the end of October. Access is across trust-managed Māori freehold land and a small fee is incurred once reaching the carpark.

The kilometre walk downhill to the beach is through lush old forest and as the sun reappears, the caves come into view. They're still a distance away requiring a small hike along the low-tide sand.



Huge bull kelp on the rocks of Cathedral Caves beach, in the Catlins. Photo / Getty Images

The caves rise like the landform of an epic movie and are a testimony to the power of the sea. They're horseshoe-shaped; you go in one entrance and out the other. I use my phone torch to examine the carved walls, rock intrusions and human-height barnacles. I can't help testing the acoustics with a coo-ee.

I'm at the end of this stretch of the Catlins and for this citizen geologist, the chance to experience Curio Bay, the site of one of the world's finest fossil forests, makes me feel I'm at the end of the world and the beginning of time.

On the anvil-shaped headland, the sweep of Porpoise Bay with its resident and rare Hector's dolphins lies to the north, while the southern side fans out to the rock platform of the Jurassic-era fossilised forest that stretches about 20km to Slope Point.

It's low tide, and after a whirl around the information centre, I head down the flax-lined track to the viewing platform. Laid before me in 3D are hundreds of petrified stumps and horizontal trunks cast in stone like time capsules. These mighty trees were felled by the blast and ash of erupting volcanoes when Gondwana was a supercontinent.



Slope Point is the southernmost point of the South Island. Photo / Getty Images

The rock platform is a combination of sandstone and shale. Silica has replaced the woody structure of the trees making them harder than the underlying rock so they have endured the last 180 million years since the area was a forested floodplain.

I join the people squatted in curious groups on the rock platform. I finger the tree rings and run my hand along the trammel lines of fossilised trunks that lie like train tracks pointing to the sea. This is one of three accessible fossil forests on the planet. Being here, connecting with the Earth's formation, fills me with wonder and gratitude.

Another of the world's wonders is metres away; Curio Bay is the nesting home of portly, yellow-eyed hoiho penguins, voted in 2019 as New Zealand's Bird of the Year. They are also one of the world's rarest penguins. A plaque celebrates in poetry: "Straight from the Roaring Forties - South winds lash this bay - Where through its surf the Hoiho go - To and fro each day."

The Catlins gives off its own wild personality, of secret spots and spectacular places. It's where Mother Nature rules supreme.

DETAILS

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