



AD FEEDBACK

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Christchurch Makes a Comeback

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By Steve Murray

Christchurch, New Zealand, has gone through some hard times since the tectonic plates that shaped the Southern Alps around Canterbury and Christchurch delivered a series of earthquakes to the region between 2010 and 2012. With tragedy came opportunity, however, and the city is rebuilding with a new sense of itself. Old sites are reopening, and some fresh attractions are popping up that will add new layers to this most English of New Zealand cities.

Christchurch was founded by the Canterbury Association, a group of British clergy, the peerage and Parliament. The members of the association had a clear idea of the kind of city they wanted, and they were particular about choosing its settlers, requiring good reputations and good references for each applicant. The first "Canterbury pilgrims" set sail from England in 1850, and Christchurch was made a city by royal charter in 1856, making it the oldest established city in New Zealand.

If the pilgrims' objective was to re-create a bit of Britain in their new settlement, they triumphed with Christchurch. The city was laid out around a central square, with surrounding squares and parks. Gothic Revival architecture dominated its streets, and the placid Avon River enhances the English character of the city as it wanders through Hagley Park and the city center. Oarsmen push visitors along its waters in flat-bottomed punts like Venetian gondoliers, willow-tree branches hang low on the river banks and park grasses grow to the water line.

Residents and visitors enjoy city life indoors and out. The Christchurch Cultural Precinct, including the

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Canterbury Museum and Arts Center, offer a changing rotation of arts and cultural presentations, all nearby and east of Hagley Park. The flat terrain of the Canterbury district and an ambitious network of cycling lanes and bike paths make Christchurch an ideal cycling city. And while the surrounding mountains tend to trap a layer of haze in the wintertime, joggers and walkers are a consistent part of the city landscape. The winding drive south on the Summit Road offers spectacular views of the Canterbury Plains, Christchurch and Lyttelton Harbor with the investment of only an hour or two, while world-class skiing, river-rafting, hiking and wine-country explorations are all within two hours of the city.

The city's location on the South Island of New Zealand has also linked its history with Antarctic exploration. Scott, Shackelford and Byrd sailed from Lyttelton Harbor in the 20th century on treks to reach the South Pole, and today aircraft still depart from Christchurch Airport carrying research teams to Scott Base and McMurdo Station. The International Antarctic Center, adjacent to the airport, explains Antarctic research and offers a unique opportunity to experience what it's like to be part of these polar expeditions.

In 160 years, Christchurch and Canterbury had grown into a hub of agriculture, an academic and business center, and a popular destination for both urban and natural adventures. Then came the earthquakes

The city had experienced only four quakes since 1850, the last one in 1922. The recent earthquakes started in 2010 and came in quick succession, badly battering the Central Business District and Cathedral Square.

Most of the city center was declared a "Red Zone" and cordoned off, with sections reopening as reconstruction has been completed. Many stores, clubs, and bars of the district relocated to the suburbs and continued operations.

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In 2010, the City Council used the misfortune to focus Christchurch on its next chapter and released a long-term action plan to guide regional development through 2022. Christchurch will improve its public spaces and reduce motor traffic to remake itself as a "city in a garden." The business district will be smaller, opening more public spaces, and parts of the Avon River will be reworked as waterfront parkland. Buildings in the city center will be limited to seven floors.

Later tremors, stronger and closer to the city, brought worse destruction. In 2011. Christchurch Cathedral, the city's iconic Anglican structure, was ultimately damaged enough to require complete replacement, and this time people were killed.

More injury was met with more innovation, however. The city approached Shigeru Ban to replace the loss of Christchurch Cathedral, and the Japanese architect donated his time to design a transitional Cardboard Cathedral that used hundreds of cardboard tubes and other recyclable materials to create a structure to seat 700.

Even the dismal shipping containers needed to protect residents from quake rubble have been repurposed for Christchurch commercial life. Christchurch City Re:START is a new shopping village east of Hagley Park with retail stores, cafes and other businesses housed entirely in shipping containers. Although the shops were put up quickly and may be temporary, some citizens are weighing in to make

Re:START permanent.

City officials are anxious to show the state of recovery to everyone. Bus tours and Avon River punting journeys now run through the Red Zone for close-up views of both destruction and renewal, and parts of Cathedral Square were opened to the public during Christmas 2012.

Christchurch is still a work in progress, but people eat, shop and explore just the way they always did. And now they see the city of the Canterbury pilgrims coming back as a city of the future.

WHEN YOU GO

Christchurch and Canterbury offer an abundance of activities for the adventurer, the history buff or the casual vacationer. A good orientation site for many of these choices is www.newzealand.com/us/christchurch-canterbury.

The status of city and regional attractions is being continually updated. A good information source can be found at www.christchurchnz.com/planning/christchurch-travel-update.aspx.

The Canterbury and Christchurch Tourism blog also offers current information about the rapidly changing face of Christchurch dining, shopping, and entertainment at www.popupcity.co.nz.

The Cardboard Cathedral project is described at www.christchurchcathedral.co.nz/rebuild/cardboard-cathedral

Christchurch City Re:START is described at www.restart.org.nz/about-christchurch-central-restart.php.

Steve Murray is a freelance writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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