

Greg arrives to pick me up at Pen-y-bryn Lodge in Oamaru, a town in New Zealand, when the sun is about a palm's breadth below the horizon. The sky is a lively mess of clouds, tinged with orange, gold and black.

I had met Greg at the Blue Penguin Colony, one of Oamaru's most heartwarming attractions, the previous evening. The area where the colony is today was actually a quarry from which stones for Oamaru's harbor were taken. In the seventies, quarrying was stopped, and penguins started coming ashore and nesting on this land.

# Ready, steady, Otago!

Fantastic drives, breathtaking views and the chance to get up-close and personal with wildlife are what await you in this region in New Zealand's South Island.

 TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS **RISHAD SAAM MEHTA**

Breathtaking views, smooth tarmac and sparse traffic—all this and more make New Zealand's South Island an ideal self-drive destination.

Today, you can find a place to sit and observe these tiny blue penguins from close quarters as they waddle ashore after spending a day out in the cold waters of the Pacific. The Blue Penguin Colony is an example of what makes New Zealand truly unique—it is one of the few places in the world where flora and fauna are reclaiming what man has marred.

Greg, who works at this major tourist attraction, had asked me if I was interested in seeing some yellow-eyed penguins, and that's why he's here today, to pick me up and take me to the seaside cliffs where the penguins nest.

We are greeted by a gorgeous sunrise and scamper down the cliffs to where the sea is lashing the reddish black rocks. While doing so, we disturb a solitary seal, who loudly voices his disapproval.

Now that the sun has cleared the horizon, the hoiho, or yellow-eyed penguins, who have been nesting in the cliffs, waddle out onto the beach like portly gentlemen going for a dip in the sea. They walk in pairs, dive into the water, and then set off on their day's quest. Greg tells me they will now return only after sunset. These are one of the world's rarest penguins, but here, they're commonplace.

### Victorian memories

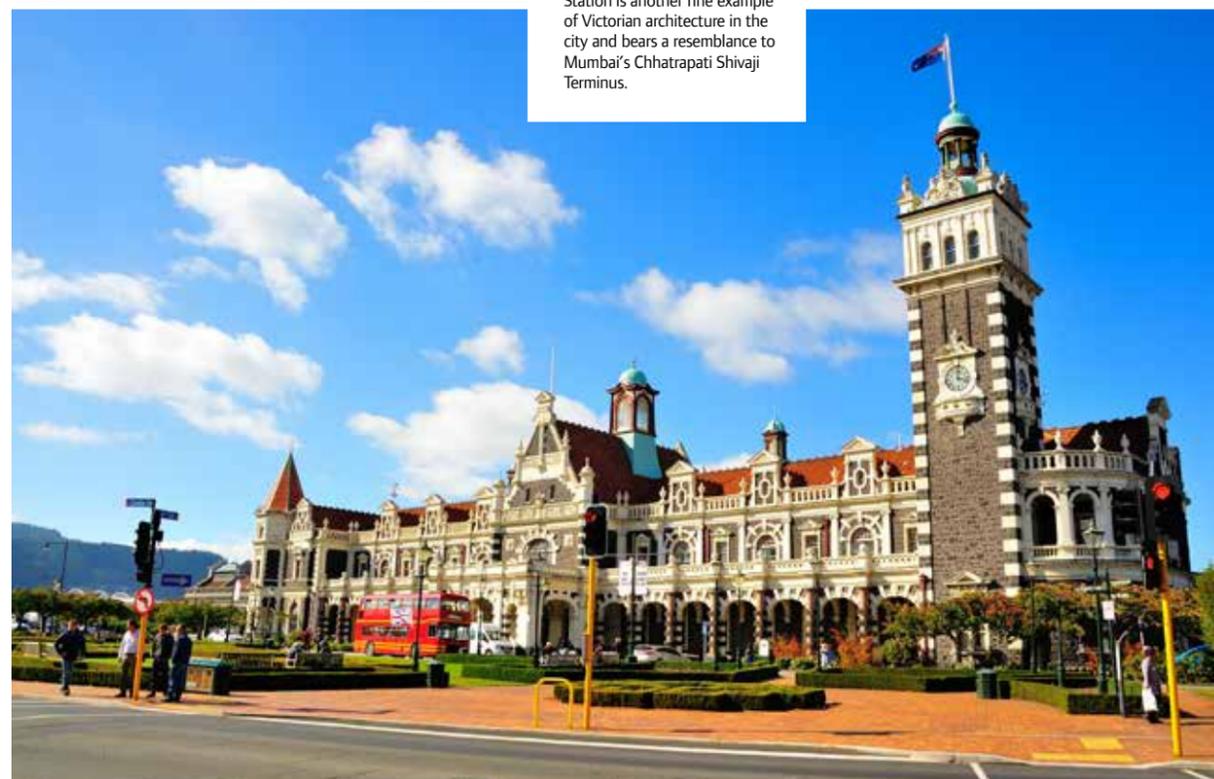
I had arrived in New Zealand's South Island a few days ago, and my first stop was Dunedin on the Otago Peninsula, which is home to the country's oldest university—University of Otago. As a result, it hosts a thriving restaurant, theatre and music scene, which springs to life after dark.

This is one of New Zealand's old cities, where the homesick first settlers tried to create a memory of Old Blighty. So, it's not surprising to see the statue of Queen Victoria here.

In the town centre, in the area called 'The Octagon,' you'll find another statue. This one is of Robert Burns, situated in front of St Paul's Cathedral, near the Town Hall. Now, the occurrence of this at first seems a little strange,



**Left:** The First Church of Otago complements Dunedin's Victorian skyline and is located in the heart of the city.  
**Below:** The Dunedin Railway Station is another fine example of Victorian architecture in the city and bears a resemblance to Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus.



because the Scottish poet never came to Dunedin—or even New Zealand—for that matter, nor did he pen any verse about this city. But, as I soon find out, his nephew, Thomas Burns, was one of the city's founding fathers and was instrumental in having this statue installed in 1887.

The English heritage is also apparent in the bluestone Victorian buildings that dot the town centre and the very Victorian Dunedin Railway Station that is oddly reminiscent of our very own Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (earlier Victoria Terminus) in Mumbai.

### On the road

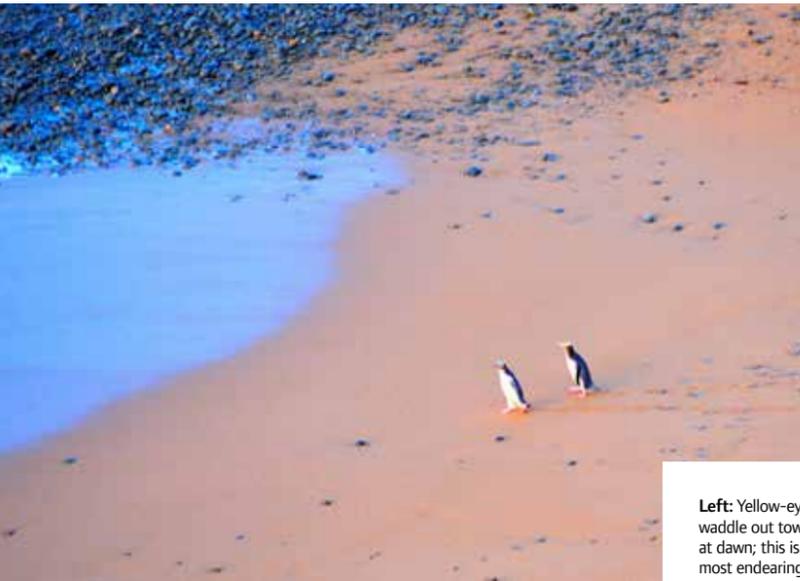
For all of Dunedin's prettiness, it is the 113-km drive from Dunedin to Oamaru that will leave the wanderer wide eyed with wonder.

In fact, to go to New Zealand and not hire a car and drive around on your own is like going to the best steakhouse in the world and then nibbling on lettuce. It is the drive from place to place, with the stunning countryside, and the paucity of traffic and people, that makes you feel as if this is your own little island and that you truly are at one of the last remaining corners of the world, where problems like pollution and the burgeoning of concrete structures are yet to arrive. There are so many places where you can pull up, park your vehicle and go for a little stroll that invariably leads you

to a gorgeous view or a secluded waterfall. And then there are the many mysterious natural formations you'll chance upon—like the Moeraki Boulders, or Te Kai Hinaki, in Maori speak.

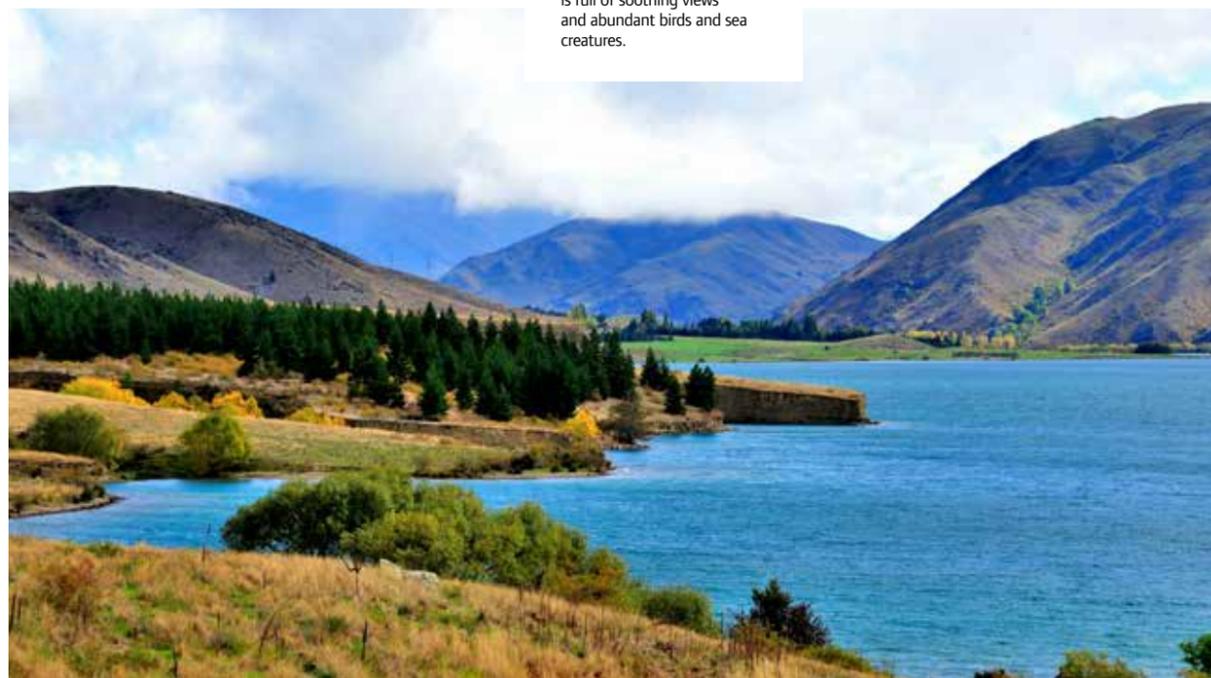
These are a collection of spherical boulders, shaped thus by tidal and wind erosion, and are located off SH1, 30-km south of Oamaru, on Koekohe Beach, Moeraki. The sight of this beach with the boulders during low tide is fascinating. Some of the boulders have been uniquely hollowed out by the sea and are possible to climb into!

Nearby, at the Old Jetty at Moeraki, is Fleur's Place, which dishes out some delicious seafood made from the freshest catch. In fact, the engines of the boats that bought in the fish are probably still ticking when the catch is on your plate! And there was another surprise in store for me at the restaurant—Rod Stewart was lunching there too, taking a pit stop on his way to Dunedin for a concert.



**Left:** Yellow-eyed penguins waddle out towards the water at dawn; this is one of Oamaru's most endearing sights.

**Below:** The Otago Peninsula is full of soothing views and abundant birds and sea creatures.



**Around Oamaru**

Besides penguins, seals, and stunning sunrises, Oamaru is also known for its fine-dining and its cheese. You may crinkle your nose at the very mention of blue cheese, but a local cheese-maker—Whitestone—manufactures something known as Windsor Blue, which is absolutely sublime.

We'd just exited Scotts Brewery, a happening hangout by the beach where we'd stopped for a drink and a bite, and suddenly I see in front of me three women who look like they've jumped out of a *Mad Max* movie. They are followers of Steampunk—a sub-genre that combines science

**Left:** Windsor Blue is Whitestone Cheese's award-winning product, and a must-try when in Oamaru.

**Right:** The seafood soup at Fleur's Place—a popular seaside cafe at Moeraki, between Dunedin and Oamaru.

**Below:** The Steampunk subculture is very strong in Oamaru and some local residents have adopted a fashion style that reflects this genre.



fiction, and often, fantasy. The clothing and accessories, for instance, are inspired by 19th-century industrial steam powered machinery.

Oamaru is perhaps the best place to be a Steampunk follower. The Steampunk HQ is Oamaru's quirkiest attraction. There are fantastical steam-inspired machines within and the steam engine outside spits flames and steam on the insertion of a coin. This

place *has* to be seen after dark. Then hope on over to Harbour Street, the road connecting Scotts Brewery and the Steampunk HQ, which features a collection of quirky shops selling everything from antiques to Steampunk fashion accessories.

With Dunedin and Oamaru done, I have more scenic drives ahead. From Oamaru, I head towards Wanaka—a journey that, once again, leaves me stunned. Since it's nearly autumn, the leaves are starting to turn, which adds a fine contrast to the blue lakes and dazzling snow-capped peaks. I am looking forward to spending a few days in Wanaka and Queenstown, where more adventures await.

But that's another story for another day...

**FACT FILE****GETTING THERE**

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Singapore from Mumbai, from where our codeshare partner e-ticketing interline partner Singapore Airlines connects you to Christ Church.

From Christ Church, you can fly our e-ticketing interline partner Air New Zealand to Dunedin.

You can know more about the Blue Penguin Colony at <http://www.penguins.co.nz/>

Athol Parks offers interesting city walks around Dunedin if you're interested in the history of the city and the story behind some of the buildings. [www.citywalks.co.nz](http://www.citywalks.co.nz)

To stop at Fleur's Place on the drive from Oamaru to Dunedin or vice versa is mandatory since the seafood is simply delectable. Open from Wednesday to Sunday. [www.fleursplace.com](http://www.fleursplace.com)

A good place to stay in Dunedin is Fletcher House which is a luxurious Bed and Breakfast run by a very hospitable and helpful couple. [www.fletcherlodge.co.nz](http://www.fletcherlodge.co.nz)

A very elegant and luxurious Bed and Breakfast to stay in Oamaru (especially for the lovely breakfast and interesting conversations with the hosts) is Pen-y-bryn Lodge run by James Glucksman and James Boussy. [www.penybryn.co.nz](http://www.penybryn.co.nz)

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

For more on New Zealand go to [www.newzealand.com/in/](http://www.newzealand.com/in/)