

By the bay



Edge of the world: The Boat Shed Cafe hangs over the quay. Photo: Mitali Parekh

Mitali Parekh

There's never a dull day at Nelson, a lovely, laidback town by the Tasman Bay

I don't really want to talk about Nelson and give it away. When I tell people I am going to New Zealand, let them imagine adrenaline-charged adventures, while I sit on the commode at Woodi and Johnny Moore's B&B and watch the regatta in the Tasman Bay. Located on the northern tip of the South Island, Nelson sees fewer Indian tourists than, say, Queenstown. It's a bayside town with heritage bed and breakfasts where honeymooners come to feast on mussels and sip on the local Neudorf Rosé. With a museum of wearable art and old architecture, it's a town for aesthetes to refuel their imagination.

I'm parked here for a day, at the B&B Wakefield Quay House, before heading to the Abel Tasman National Park for a hiking and kayaking excursion. It's a good place to start an affair, resuscitate a flailing one or lick to life a broken heart. The 105-year-old home, perched on a quay, has two bedrooms for guests. I'd take the one with the porch converted into a bathroom so one can look on to the hope-renewing view while washing one's backside.

I have 24 hours to fill here and I ask Woodi what I should do. Woodi, originally from London, has designed and lovingly renovated the cottage ("I call myself an inferior designer."), and knows everyone in Nelson. She gets her Kiwi husband Johnny, to drive me up to Lookout point — up on the hill at Prince's Drive behind the Quay — to understand the lay of the land first. In front of us are the houses of the first settlers, behind us is the suburb where Johnny grew up and the newer settlements are.

Later, Johnny drops me off at the World of Wearable Art Museum. It's a movement dedicated to sartorial creativity started by Nelsonian (now Dame) Suzie Moncrieff in 1987. Keeping in mind Nelson's romantic nature, it also has a section on vintage cars. I spend several minutes wrapping my head around the displays by winners from each year since its inception. 'Inkling' by Gillian Saunders which imagines what happens to a heavily tattooed person if the ink to blood ratio shifts, brings to mind a certain tattooed hair artist from Bandra. Mac's Bizzare Bra section has nothing to do with mammary support, and everything to do with bad dreams. Even the bathroom is 'cool' — the walls above the washbasins don glasses on a larger-than-life face.

The museum closes at 4pm, leaving me just enough time to head to downtown Nelson. Woodi has drawn me a map, so I know exactly what I am looking for — the historic South Street. Originally known as Town Acre 456, the street lined with ornate cottages with porches, was home to the first settlers who arrived between 1860 and 1900. It then degenerated into a slum area in the 1920s only to be revived in the '70s. Many of the cottages here function as B&Bs, and some are for sale, which gets me thinking... I can't afford real estate in Mumbai. But in Nelson, there is hope yet.

Around the corner from South Street is the Christ Church Cathedral built in 1851. The original building was the first church in the area. There's a wedding in progress. The bell tolls deeply, as bells are wont to do.

Across the road from it is arguably Nelson's biggest celebrity — the man who made The Precious. Jens Henson created the rings (there was more than one) in the Lord of the Rings (LOTR) series. A stream of tourists waits outside the shop to custom-order wedding bands and take a picture with him... You can't escape The Hobbit and LOTR in New Zealand — I'm amazed I've gone nearly three days without it.

From here, I head to the main, New Age-y shopping avenue. For if it's esoteric, it's on Bridge street. Woodi's map directs me to Palm's boutique. Jane Palm curates from a range of indigenous designers, but what makes her store unique is its display window. Palm's husband, Anders, is a sculptor and they both work on installations that grace the

windows. I'm greeted by naked, hairless plastic dolls bowing to a circuit board!

I take a walk around town and to Wakefield Quay again. The road rounds up from the old settlements back to the waterfront. Woodi and Johnny have some neighbours over for cheese and wine in the shade. It's an afternoon tradition that allows their guests to meet each other and the neighbours. One of the ladies is interested in tea and frequently visits plantations in Darjeeling. Conversation veers towards the familiar topic of whether India is safe for women.

Woodi and Johnny make an interesting observation. "Johnny looks like he could be from anywhere. When we visited India, he looked Nepali or like he was from the northeast. So people would look at me, then look at him and wink at him, as if to say 'Good catch'. I never got groped and asked Johnny if my bum wasn't good enough!" Johnny does look like a weathered hill-man but it takes more than that to be safe in India, I argue. Johnny is the only deep sea fisherman in a family of lawyers and doctors. Like many Kiwis, he loves the land — or in his case, the sea. He learnt to sail as a child and runs a sailing school now; he looks like a fish out of water at home.

His step-sister is artist Sally Burton, who incorporates symbols of New Zealand into her paintings. They change colour with the light. I have been checking on the one in Woodi's dining room every few hours. It has the 'long white cloud' from New Zealand's Maori name Aotearoa — the land of the long white cloud.

Later, I head off to dine at the Boat Shed Cafe and call it an early night before I leave for Abel Tasman. But really, I'd skip it all just to chat on the porch or read in the loo at Woodi's.

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(This article was published on May 9, 2014)