



Buster Greens



Bell Hill
Apartments



Dunedin at night



An endangered
takahē

NZ'S SECRET ARK

Rachelle
Mackintosh
discovers
Dunedin's
wildest side



Yellow-eyed
penguin
or hoiho

Wedged between southeast Aotearoa's lush hills and rugged coastlines sculpted by the Southern Ocean, Ōtepoti/Dunedin is a surprising contrast of wild and refined.

The Ngāi Tahu Māori people settled on the Otago Peninsula in 1100AD. The city we know today, often called the 'Edinburgh of the South', was established in 1848 by the Free Church of Scotland, becoming an early hub for whaling, gold prospecting, and a departure port for Antarctic exploration.

This colonial history is well-preserved in modern Dunedin's Victorian and Edwardian architecture, with must-see highlights including Larnach Castle, First Church and the Olveston Historic Home.

While the city feels chilled and friendly, an effervescence runs through Dunedin's historic streets, with its vibrant student population, a buzzing live music scene, impressive street art trails, and landmark museums all adding to its dynamic vibe.

SETTLE IN

With wilderness right on Dunedin's doorstep, it's a great idea to base yourself in the city and take advantage of its excellent selection of restaurants and accommodation, then spend each day enjoying self-drive sightseeing trips.

I chose a laidback-luxe stay at the charming Bell Hill Apartments as they're within easy reach of the legendary Octagon plaza, standout

eateries like Buster Greens, The Press Club, Moiety, Vault 21 and The Swan, and there's also a Woolworths nearby for easy self-catering.

Other excellent accommodation options include the Scenic Hotel Southern Cross, Fable Dunedin, Quest Dunedin and Larnach Lodge.

PENGUIN HEAVEN

The energetic seas, vast beaches, imposing cliffs and virgin forests of the Otago Peninsula and surrounding wilderness are ideal habitats for penguins, sea lions, royal albatrosses and Hector's dolphins – one of the world's rarest marine dolphins.

As I explore the region on a five-day self-drive holiday, it quickly becomes clear why Dunedin is known as the Wildlife Capital of New Zealand. Rare and endangered critters seem to find me wherever I go.

My first highlight is the yellow-eyed penguin, also known by its Māori name,

hoiho, which translates to 'noisy shouter'. Only around 1500 of these beauties remain, but the Otago Peninsula Eco Restoration Alliance (OPERA) is helping them bounce back by supporting their habitats and rehabilitating ailing birds.

Visiting OPERA, I meet four hoihos temporarily in care and learn that, unlike other penguins, they are solitary shy birds who prefer their own company and build their nests high in the hills so they can enjoy peace and quiet.

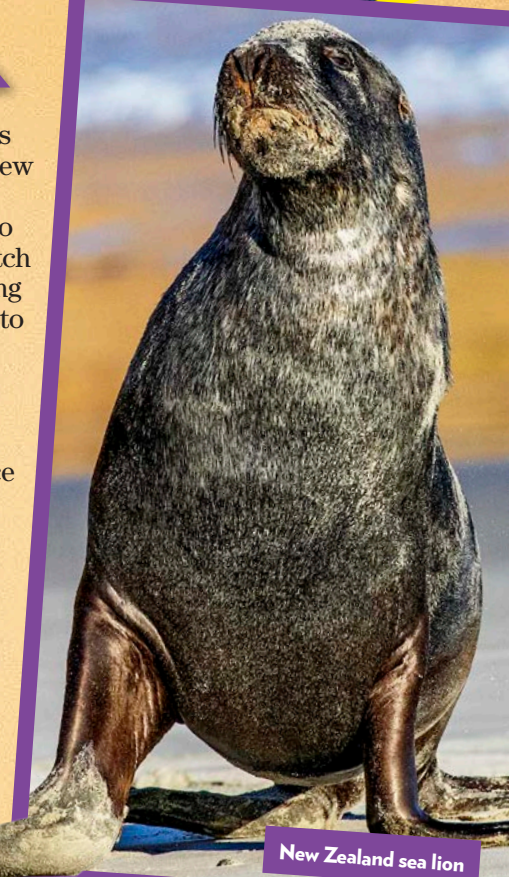
Afterwards, I join a Clearwater Wildlife Tours excursion to find wild hoihos on a private beach that's a protected habitat

for these elusive seabirds as well as endangered New Zealand sea lions.

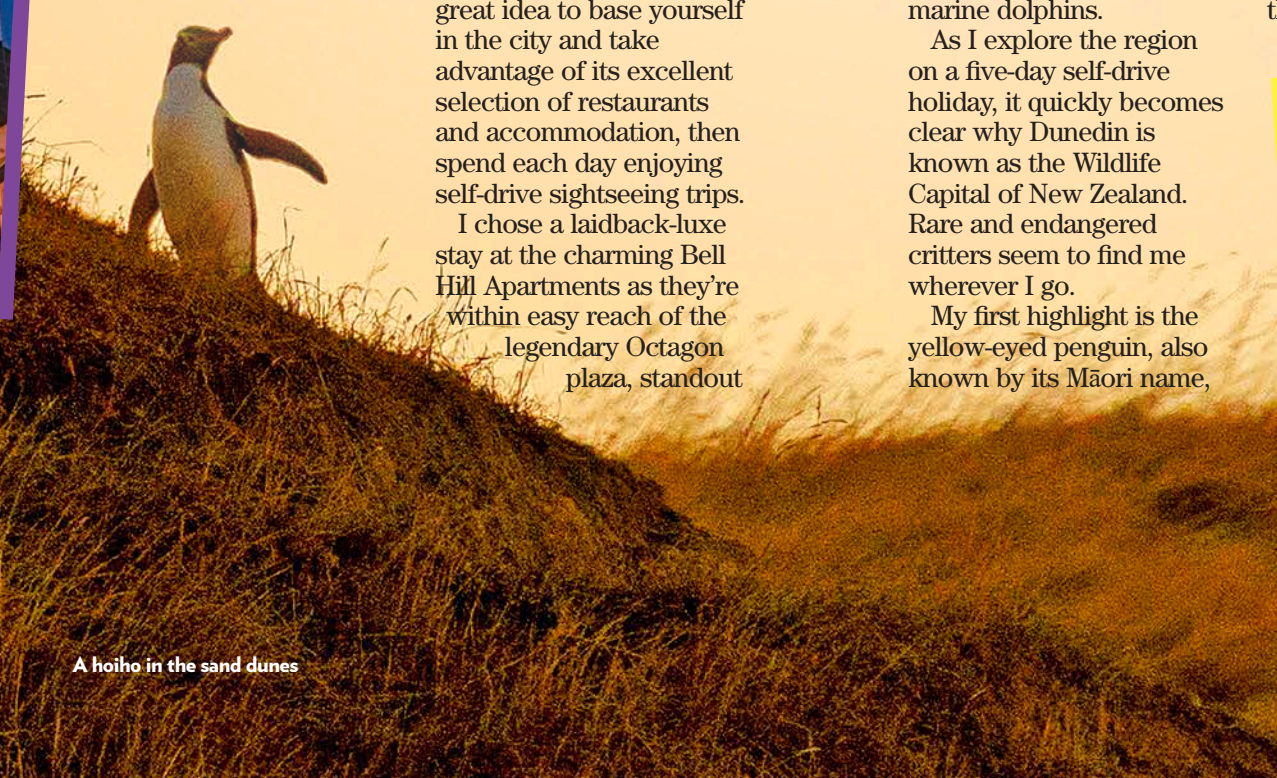
Just as the sun starts to set, I'm privileged to watch a solo hoiho waddle along the shore then climb up to a hilltop nest – this incredibly rare sighting could only happen here.

Nearby at Takiharuru Beach, a dusk experience with Blue Penguins Pukekura is a chance to see the hoiho's more sociable neighbours – the planet's smallest penguins, also known as littles, blues, fairies or kororā – return from fishing.

My bucket-list sightings continue on an hour-long



New Zealand sea lion



A hoiho in the sand dunes



Larnach Castle

Fur seal



An albatross flying by



cruise with Monarch Wildlife Cruises & Tours through the Otago Harbour towards the open sea. The crew point out snoozing fur seals and Otago shags fishing in the shallows, as well as the historic battlements and lighthouse of Taiaroa Head.

We're treated to an unexpected visit from Hector's dolphins – just 7000 of these endangered beauties remain in the wild. Seeing them erupt from the ocean like happy torpedoes is heart-filling.

Back on land, I visit the Royal Albatross Centre for a closer look at more of Dunedin's airborne rarities – the endangered northern royal albatross, one of the world's largest seabirds with a massive three-metre wingspan. Their nesting area clings to the cliffs at Taiaroa, and the centre's

fantastic viewing areas offer a fascinating glimpse of these streamlined giants from a respectful distance.

The winged wonders also thrive at the Orokunui Ecosanctuary, where a network of trails weaves through the coastal forest, home to 20 types of native birds, including the endangered takahē – a flightless bird once thought to be extinct – and the kākā, kererū and tui.

WANDER TO WONDERS

There are more than 30 pristine beaches within 30 minutes' drive of the city, and hiking and cycling paths crisscross the region.

Standout strolls include the easy trail around the Huriawa Peninsula at Pā Te Wera, the Sandymount Track, the short but jaw-dropping Tunnel Beach Walk, and Mount Cargill, which offers incredible views of the city, sea and countryside.

If a gentle wander is more your speed, visit Dunedin's Botanic Garden, and private estates such as Larnach Castle and Glenfalloch Gardens.



Royal albatross chick at the Royal Albatross Centre

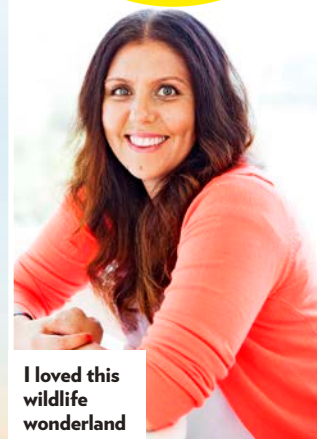
LEARN MORE

To learn more about Dunedin and where to go, stay and play, see dunedinnz.com

Or you can take a scenic five-hour train journey on the Taieri Gorge Railway, taking in the sweeping Otago countryside, the Taieri River and crossing the Wingatui Viaduct, the tallest wrought iron structure in Australasia.

And if you've ever wanted to see the Aurora Australis (Southern Lights), Dunedin's dark, clear skies make it an ideal location to experience the otherworldly natural wonder.

I loved the opportunity to be immersed in the raw natural beauty of this area, and can't wait to return. 🇳🇿



I loved this wildlife wonderland

PHOTOS: BELL HILL APARTMENTS; DUNEDINN; RACHELLE MACKINTOSH; HAYDEN PARSONS



Tui at Orokunui Ecosanctuary

