

Pickin' up good observations

I think I've got attention deficit disorder. I mean no disrespect to those with ADHD - my version is different, the main symptom being failure to notice things happening before my eyes.

I realise that's an odd admission from someone who's paid to pay attention, to note things, and write about life's observed phenomena. but I've just had an experience that brought me up sharply on the knowing-what's-going-on front. With apologies to The Beach Boys: I'm pickin' up new observations.

They came from an intensive three-day tour in the company of some young outsiders charged with producing a tourism marketing campaign to promote us to the world. I can't go into much detail because it's commercially sensitive, so suffice to say, my eyes – and theirs – were sauced by how amazing this place really is.

For a start, we have an extraordinary range of places to eat, something that became ever more apparent as the team lunched up to four times a day so the photographer could capture food images. I have a theory now that one place owes its success partly to the fact it offers small plates and large ones that can be shared, cleverly recognising that not everyone wants to eat like a rugby player.

Feasting with the eyes was never going to be a problem, of course, because of the region's natural and man-made features. While the risks of a three-day shoot in the middle of winter were all too obvious to pessimistic me, and we got only a single full day of fine weather before the southerly bomb hit, a day was long enough.

The mountain played nice and showed himself. Sunrises and sunsets appeared magically on cue so crazy people in wetsuits could demonstrate the appeal of surfing, and then how, after such exertion, it was possible on the same day to expend more energy up mountain range tracks cloaked in primeval bush within sight of snow. One outcome was an interminable quest among the team's wordsmiths on how best to re-state anew the proximity of surf to ski.

Pukekura Park was ever glorious, even before spring burgeons, and I was reminded how marvellous is the park's fernery, and how consistent it has remained over my lifetime.

Taranaki's artistic heart was there to be paraded with the Govett-Brewster and Len Lye, but there was another facet I hadn't noticed before, in our own forms of Banksy. There's now a significant collection of street art on the sides of buildings fronting New Plymouth's alleyways, a visual revolution that's grown like overnight graffiti. One of our many coffee outlets rewarded the outdoor artists with product and was itself repaid with wall adornment bringing new perspectives to its warehouse-like premises.

We visited innovative businesses, some well known for out-there funkiness, others almost too shy to show themselves and needing to be drawn out about how cleverly they make their way in global markets. In one case, I had to begin the interview with no pen or pad in play lest the self-effacing entrepreneur clammed up in the reserved manner so common among Taranaki groundbreakers.

Brooklands Zoo was on the list as an obvious exemplar of family appeal, and I was in for another surprise. We'd taken the grandchildren previously and been a bit underwhelmed because quite a few inhabitants seemed to be hibernating. This time, every creature with a nameplate was flaunting itself and there was an army of school holidays-freed kids to admire them.

The point to be made here is that you can live in a city and go about your daily routines and not notice the efforts of those among us who are determined to make changes for the better. There is no question in my mind they are succeeding.

Taranaki has among its population relative newcomers who are introducing things, and also old-comers who travel widely and bring back ideas they adapt and reinvent. Just to be clear on the term "newcomers": my father, who arrived here in 1948, waited 40 years before declaring he no longer felt newly come.

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The main aim of what I was caught up with is to make the most of Lonely Planet's astute judgement about Taranaki as a tourism destination. The only conclusion I could reach after three days of looking at us through outsider eyes was the Planet has it right - we've got it all happening, if you just care to pause and take a second look...and applaud.