

Cable cars and coffee: Wellington, New Zealand is the capital of cool

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Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor

An iconic view of New Zealand's capital can be had from the top station of the Wellington Cable Car.

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By KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Special Contributor

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WELLINGTON, New Zealand — Walk along its harbor and you might mistake New Zealand's capital city for San Francisco, with its waterfront ringed by hills

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studded with homes and high-rise buildings. Spend a day poking around Cuba Street, or a night bar-hopping at Courtney Place and you will pick up a similar vibe: young, hip and a little bit quirky.

Wellington long ago shed its staid, bureaucratic image, though you'll still find plenty of "the suits," as they are affectionately called, around the Parliament Building, corporate headquarters and the New Zealand Stock Exchange. The dress code now leans more toward sandals and hiking shorts, and backpacks, not briefcases. Lonely Planet travel guides dubbed Wellington "The Coolest Little Capital in the World" last year when it named the city to its top five Best in Travel. Nearly 60 percent of Wellington's 200,000 residents are ages 18 to 49, and it shows in the city's festivals, film industry and active lifestyle.

A turning point came in 1998 with the opening of the national museum of New Zealand. An instant hit, it sparked a resurgence of arts and culture and made the city a popular weekend destination for Kiwis and a must-see for international visitors.

WHEN IN WELLINGTON, DON'T MISS:

Lady Norwood Rose Garden

Take a walk in the woods on paths winding through this 62-acre garden. In addition to native forest, you'll find seasonal floral plantings. November to May is the blooming season. In spite of its name, the Begonia House displays a variety of plants, including orchids. At the Carter Observatory, you can explore the constellations of the southern sky in a domed planetarium.

Te Papa Tongarewa

The National Museum of New Zealand, an architectural showcase on the waterfront, takes an innovative, high-tech approach to the display of art and artifacts that tell the story of New Zealand's history, people and environment. Take your time: With five levels, Te Papa is one of the world's largest national museums. Admission is free, though you'll pay for special exhibits and tours. Check out Maori artifacts, a colossal squid and an exhibit on the migration of peoples to New Zealand. Walk onto a satellite map of the country and images light up on the wall. Don't pass the museum store without a look at the high-quality merchandise.

Cable cars

Board one of the bright red cars at Lambton Quay and enjoy the ride past the stop at Victoria University to the top where the view, on a clear day, is stunning. Peek inside the Cable Car Museum before deciding whether to ride back down or take a 45- to 60-minute walk.

Coffee

Kiwis are serious about their joe. Wellington has more than a dozen coffee roasters and, though there is Starbucks, it is frequented mostly by teens who haven't honed their palate for quality java. You'll need to learn the lingo. A "short black" is an espresso; a "long black" is an espresso doubled in size with hot water; and a "flat white" is one-third espresso and two-thirds steamed milk, with froth and a swirl on top. Smell the fresh roast at Mojo Coffee Cartel on Customhouse Quay or Havana Coffee Works on Tory Street.

Cuba Street

Once a gritty, grungy section of town, Cuba Street has gentrified into a hip, bohemian enclave with edgy boutiques and trendy cafes. Wellington has more restaurants and bars per capita than New York City, and

you'll find some of the most popular here, including the Matterhorn Bar and Restaurant and busy Le Metropolitan. Stop for a few minutes to watch the Bucket Fountain. Bright red, blue and yellow buckets slowly fill with water then splash down, surprising unsuspecting passers-by.

Zealandia

Some of New Zealand's rarest native animals thrive in this refuge located in a forested valley just 10 minutes from downtown. The long-range mission here is to return this corner of New Zealand to the way it was before humans arrived. Walk the 20 miles of paths and you might be lucky enough to spot a giant weta.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Air New Zealand flies from Los Angeles or San Francisco to Auckland, with a transfer to Wellington.

Lodging: Amora Hotel, near Te Papa and the Michael Fowler Convention Center, was the Duxton House before an upgrade in 2010. wellington.amorahotels.com **Museum Hotel** was originally where Te Papa now stands. The building was moved across the street and renovated as a boutique property with both hotel rooms and apartments. museumhotel.co.nz

Dining: Martin Bosley's, once reserved for members of the Royal Port Nicholson Yacht Club, is known for seafood. Chef Martin Bosley, a regular on New Zealand TV and columnist for Air New Zealand's in-flight magazine, adheres to his philosophy of cooking what is local, fresh and in season. Martin-bosley.com

Crazy Horse The Steak House specializes in Australian and New Zealand wines and meats. crazyhorsethesteakhouse.co.nz

Katherine Rodeghier is an Illinois freelance writer.