

Pedals, penguins and peat

Alice Hansen freewheels her way to a New Zealand whisky tasting



He's wearing full Victorian-era get up, standing in the doorway of Oamaru Cycle Works with a casual hand rested on his penny-farthing. He's looking at us in a bemused way. And we're looking back at him in his double-breasted suit, uncertain if folk here dress like that for fun or if it's some unfortunate costume he's instructed to wear.

As he wanders over smirking, we can't help but giggle. We're two young Australian

females, in the middle of New Zealand, and our rental van has a potentially very serious issue. It occurs to me that we do look fairly amusing ourselves.

We've just driven three hours from Christchurch where we picked up 'Juicy' for our big two-week voyage and Oamaru is our first stop. We have tools scattered on the ground from the emergency tool kit and what we're about to tackle isn't fun – we can't unlock, let's politely call it, the 'bathroom's courtesy cube.'

But David, rather than try to sell us a penny-farthing ride, is kindly wandering over like one of our fathers to show us how it's done. He tosses the manual back on the driver's seat, pulls a few magic levers, and in seconds our confused frowns are replaced by gracious smiles. We've met our first Oamaru pal. How could we not ask for a ride from this kind, well-dressed handyman with manners from yesteryear?

Now I've never ridden a penny-farthing and as I hurtle towards the scenic foreshore at a height that is certain to result in more than a scraped knee, I realise that I haven't engaged a foot brake in many years.



'That's it,' yells David encouragingly, 'Mind our precious yellow-eyed penguins, people come from across the world for those fellows. And watch the tourists to your left....'

His voice trails off. Something else has already caught my eye, tucked in among the most remarkable collection of Victorian buildings in Australasia.

Who would have thought we'd stumble across a whisky cellar door in New Zealand, while riding a penny-farthing? I've tasted many a New Zealand wine, but whisky? The New Zealand Whisky Company certainly hadn't made my travel to-do list.

We wander into the grand bond store by the seaside and are delighted with our find. With risk of drinking and riding at a lofty height near the ocean out of the question, we politely accept a Whisky Flight.

Out come two paddles with four little half-nips neatly lined up on each. There's DoubleWood, Single Malt, Cask Strength and whiskies ranging from 15 to 26 years of age. With each sip we are pulled deeper into the fascinating tale of this whisky's past.

'Whisky distilling in New Zealand began with the arrival of Scottish settlers in the 1830s,' our whisky guide Kay tells us. 'The industry thrived until the 1870s when onerous government rules essentially shut it down. Scottish banks agreed to fund the country's railway expansions, conditional



on the government legislating against local distilling.'

We're told how the whisky industry struggled through the decades, until in the 1990s the last New Zealand distillery was shut down. A whisky legacy had seemingly come to an end in New Zealand, as New World whisky was finding favour, with Japanese, Irish and Tasmanian whiskies growing their market share around the world.

Just when I thought the New Zealand whisky story was done and dusted, I glance across at a dusty barrel and know there's more to the tale. Kay senses my anticipation and offers another tasting.

As it turns out, some 433 barrels were set aside to mature and sweeten in this very seaside bond store. The barrels were later bought by some Tasmanian folk and the New Zealand Whisky Company was born.

Who would have thought that this whisky would have a Tasmanian connection? Not to mention that Oamaru, like Tassie, appears to be home to the nation's whisky revival as well as the National Penny-Farthing Championships.

'We believe New Zealand can support a trail of regional distilleries producing world-class whiskies just like Tasmania,' says company CEO Greg Ramsay. 'Bill Lark has reminded the world how wonderful hand-made whisky can be and we have a great team in New Zealand who are dedicated to crafting their own style of single malts, and the world market is now lapping up both New Zealand and Tasmanian whiskies.'

Since then, this long-forgotten Oamaru whisky has been winning awards across the world. In 2013 alone it has already picked up gongs at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the World Whiskies Awards in London.

'With the barrels maturing right here on the waterfront, the seaside atmosphere imparts a lovely tang to the whisky, which comes through on the back palate,' Kay smiles. 'Like many locals, I hope that the delights from these barrels will ignite the revival of New Zealand distilling once more.'

And as I pour my own bottle straight from the barrel, I'm certain there are many more treasures to uncover. Already Kay has insisted that we try the artisan Whitestone cheeses and stop in to view the skilled work of an antique bookbinder. Then we'll head 40 minutes' drive up the road to some rather big pebbles that go by the name of the Moeraki Boulders.

There's plenty of variety in a New Zealand campervan journey!

New Zealand Whisky Company Cellar Door
www.thenzwhisky.com

The Oamaru Cycle Works- Penny Farthing Hire
www.oocc.org.nz/



Tasmanian businessman Greg Ramsay leads an international syndicate behind the revival of New Zealand whisky. Known for his development of Bambougle Dunes Golf Links and the restoration of Ratho, Australia's oldest golf course, Greg believes that New Zealand can support a trail of regional distilleries producing world class whiskies. 'Tasmania's Bill Lark has reminded the world that hand-made whiskies can be outstanding,' Greg says. 'Our team in New Zealand is dedicated to crafting their own style of single malts, and the world is lapping up both New Zealand and Tasmanian whiskies now.'

Greg called on two Tassie mates ready to revitalise the branding, forge new export channels and re-launch New Zealand whisky to the world. Production manager and designer Tom Holder reinvigorated the bottles with fresh, modern packaging. 'I found a great 1870s oil painting of the original Dunedin Distillery and put that on the inside of the back label, so the golden whisky liquid brings colour to a three-dimensional view of the distillery,' Tom says.

Meanwhile Benalla-boy Troy Trewin, relocated to Hobart after a long stint in Oamaru and sought channels that today see the whisky collection available across Canada, Australia, the UK, EU and the US.