

Atmospheric: Mist hangs on the Hokitika River at dawn.



# BY HOKI

Auckland travel writer LIZ LIGHT enjoys fine art, funky shops and a world of socks in Hokitika.

**M**ist hangs on the river and the sky is peachy. The hills, all different shades of dawn, lie in layers in front of the snowy Southern Alps. Even the Westland Co-operative Dairy Company, the biggest thing in Hokitika, looks beautiful in a steaming, industrial-grandeur kind of way. I'm the only one walking along Revell St in the early morning and it's quiet but not totally. The low-toned mechanical drone of the dairy factory in the east and the rhythmic hum of waves pounding the beach to the west is punctuated by the occasional seagull's squawk. Revell St is still known as The Crooked Mile, a name acquired in the 1860s when it was the throbbing heart of this wild

goldmining town. Then the population was more than 6000 (twice that of now) and Hokitika had 101 pubs, three breweries and an astonishing amount of ungodly behaviour. The Crooked Mile was home to 86 of these pubs until it was smote, by a fire in 1869, that took out an entire block of buildings. The Memorial Clock Tower, in Sewell St, a frippery of columns, arches, artistically beaten steel and a bell tells me it's 6.15am. Bang on. It was erected to commemorate the reign of Edward VII and unveiled in 1902 by Richard John Seddon. Edward VII has long been forgotten but Seddon remains a big man in Hokitika. Seddon was a miner, storekeeper, the mayor of nearby Kumara, a member of parliament

and, from 1893 until his death in 1906, he was the Prime Minister. This larger than life man has a larger than life statue (he bears an uncanny likeness to grumpy Mel Gibson) that stands in front of Seddon House. Seddon House, a grand Victorian pile of brick and stucco, the government buildings and courthouse from 1909, has 24 rooms and is for sale for \$400,000. This seems extraordinarily cheap for something that could be turned into a private palace or an exquisite heritage hotel. The south end of town is defined by the Hokitika River and when I reach the riverbank the sun has risen above the mountains and the mist gone. The peachy morning has turned blue and beached logs, the bridge on the main road and river-edge

bushes reflect in still water in perfect double. It's serenely beautiful. It never occurred to me that Hokitika would have so many superb, in an arty way, shops or that a town this small would have two cinemas. Hokitika Regent Theatre, a 75-year-old Art Deco building has been restored and though all the original deco features remain the cinematography is the latest; fully digital, top-end sound gear and it can show 3D films. *Avatar* opened here on the same night as in Auckland and Christchurch. Crooked Mile Talking Movies, around the corner in an ex-bank, shows art-house movies and is licensed. It's smaller and more loungey-comfy-intimate. The shops are grouped together along four roads that



**Town's heart:** The Memorial Clock Tower, Hokitika. Photos: LIZ LIGHT

spoke out from the clock tower and The Crooked Mile. There are a cluster of greenstone shops for tourists, a glass blower, wood carvers, a carve-your-own bone and jade gallery, a jeweller who uses Coast gold and another who specialises in local rubies.

**>>> To page 4**



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