

The Hokitika bridge at dawn.

# A Weekend in Hokitika

Liz Light shops for socks and considers moving to the Coast.

LIZ LIGHT IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIZ LIGHT.

+ Travel

Mist hangs on the river. In the dawn's half-light, the hills behind Hokitika layer into shades of blue and grey before they're enveloped by the majesty of the Southern Alps. The sky is peachy; the sun still nudging up behind the alps. The Westland Co-operative Dairy Company – the biggest thing in town – looks beautiful too, 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, save for the low-toned mechanical drone of the dairy factory and the thrum of waves pounding the beach, punctuated by the occasional seagull squawk.

Revell St is still known as the Crooked Mile, a name it acquired in the 1860s when it was the throbbing heart of a wild colonial gold-mining town. Hokitika's population was over 6000 (it's half that now); it had 101 pubs, three breweries and an astonishing amount of ungodly behaviour. The Crooked Mile was home to 86 of those pubs until a fire in 1869 razed an entire block.

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 still looms large in Hokitika.

Seddon was a miner, storekeeper, the mayor of nearby Kumara, a member of Parliament, and Premier from 1893 until his death in 1906. Fittingly, his larger-than-life statue – bearing an uncanny likeness to Mel Gibson in grim repose – stands in front of Seddon House.

An Edwardian pile of bricks and mortar built in 1909 to house government offices and the courthouse, Seddon House now lies empty but for a live-in caretaker. Two years ago it was listed for \$1.2 million by its Auckland owner; it's now on the block for \$750,000. Cheap at the price, for an Imperial Baroque, 24-room doer-upper.

The south end of town is defined by the Hokitika River. When I reach the riverbank, the sun has risen above the mountains and the mist has gone. Beached logs, the bridge and river-edge bushes are perfectly reflected in the still water. A dinghy putters up the river leaving a wide V. It's serenely beautiful and as I walk along the bank I fantasise about selling everything I own, buying Seddon House and moving to Hokitika.



Clockwise from top left: Richard John Seddon in front of Seddon House; the Hokitika river mouth and beach; the Memorial Clock Tower at Hokitika's heart.



It never occurred to me that Hokitika would have so many interesting arty shops or even two cinemas. The 75-year-old Regent Theatre has been elegantly restored. Its original art-deco features have been retained, while the cinematography is the latest: fully digital, top-end sound gear and 3D capable. *Avatar* opened here on the same night as in Auckland and Christchurch. Crooked Mile Talking Movies around the corner in a former bank building shows art-house movies and is licensed. It's smaller and more loungey-intimate.

The shops are grouped together along four roads that form a spoke from the clock tower and the Crooked Mile. There are a cluster of greenstone shops that cater for tourists – scandalously, some selling Canadian

jade. There's a glass blower, wood carvers, a carve-your-own bone and jade gallery set up with 10 carving stations, a jeweller who uses Coast gold and another who specialises in local rubies.

I fall for Sweet Alice's, an old-fashioned fudge and candy shop. It has 12 flavours of heavenly fudge, made the traditional way and cooled and rolled on a granite block. Boiled lollies made in small batches are shaped through a hand-turned drop roller. The kitchen takes up half the shop so customers watch while Alice Phillips and her team create confection perfection.

After a marriage break-up in the UK, Phillips returned to New Zealand with a small stash of cash and the dream of opening a fudge shop. She spent six months looking

around the South Island, touring likely locations in a camper van with her dog. When she got to Hokitika, she noticed a line-up of tour buses across the road from a neglected, empty shop – and immediately knew this was the place.

"I love Hoki," she says. "The wild beach, gentle river, lakes and bush and mountains all around with snow in the winter. I like the way I can ride a horse through town, go on a three-hour hike and not meet another soul, and sit on the beach watching the waves without worrying about my dog annoying anyone."

"There's a tremendous community spirit here. Hoki folk are, quite simply, nice. The first person I spoke to was the wood-turner in the gallery next door, who was thrilled

to hear I was planning to open a fudge shop.

"One of my first customers was Pierre from Café de Paris, the French restaurant down the road, who bought \$60 worth of fudge for his staff, because he thought it was wonderful that Hoki had an interesting new shop."

And given that there are more men than women on the Coast, Phillips was soon dating Hokitika-born and bred Rob Stuart. "He worked a full day every week for me for months [for nothing] to learn how to make fudge. OK, so he probably had an ulterior motive but, even so, I've never been out with a bloke who would work for me for free just to get to know me better."

They're now engaged.

In another store, IaNZart, Ian Phillips is shaping sheet copper. The third finger on his left hand is heavily bandaged; not broken from working copper, he tells me, but from a moment of carelessness on his

gold claim in the Totara Valley near Ross.

Phillips crafts his sculptures by bending, beating and burning copper. He uses controlled heat patina, a method he perfected that brings out rainbow colours in the metal by heating and cooling it to different temperatures.

There are 2000 pieces of his art at large in the world, ranging in price from \$85 to \$5000: "Something for everyone," he says.

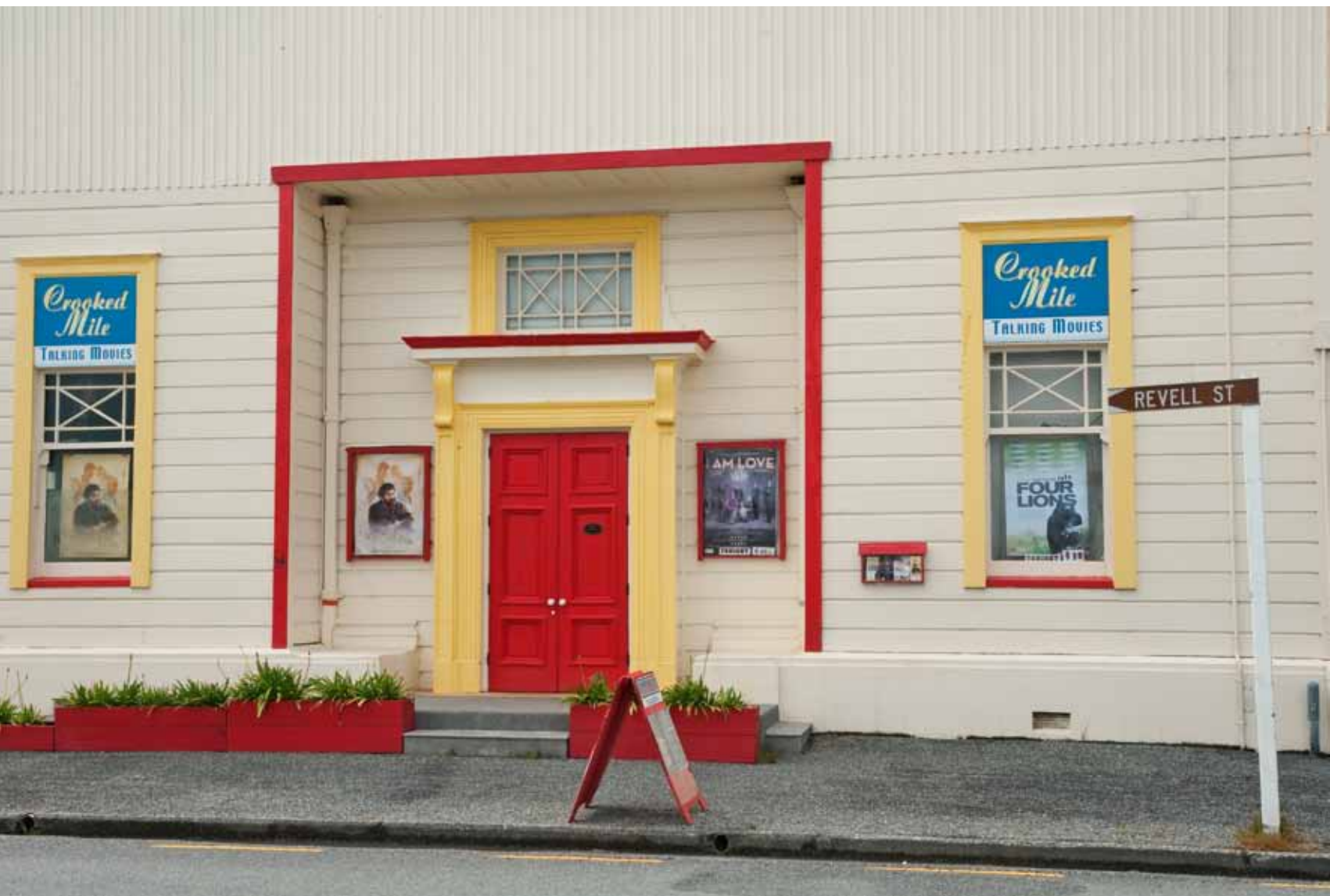
When he's not working copper, he's working his claim: "You can make a living from it, but it's hard on the hands and back."

Phillips spent his childhood holidays on the Coast and loved it. He left Nelson and moved to Hokitika 10 years ago. He bought the old BNZ Bank, opened the gallery-workshop on the ground floor and now lives upstairs in the bank manager's three-bedroom quarters. "Although the bank was built in 1905, it feels as if it was specifically built for us," he says.

**Ian Phillips cutting, beating and beautifying copper in his workshop.**

He too found love in Hokitika – meeting his wife, Janne (another native Coaster), not long after he moved to the town.

German-born Juergen and Monica Schacke own Wilderness Gallery. Juergen, an art photographer, says Hokitika is his idea of paradise. He first visited New Zealand as a backpacker and returned to the South Pacific many times as a photojournalist making multi-media promotional travel packages for German companies.



**Crooked Mile Talking Movies – an art-house, lounge-style theatre.**

“Hokitika is true-blue yet totally contemporary,” he says. “I can sit in the pub with an old gold miner in the evening and be on the internet in the morning. And I love the weather. It’s constantly changing: blue sky, stormy rain, broody skies, incredible sunsets and misty mornings.

“When I first came to the Coast I felt it was home; it took a while to get here but I’ve seen enough of the world to know that I don’t want to live anywhere else.”

The quirkiest of the retail ventures in Hokitika is Sock World, and the Sock Knitting Machine Museum. Jacquie Grant, a Coaster for 35 years, had a dairy farm and spun wool on long winter evenings. Not being a hand-knitter, she was delighted when she was given an old circular sock-knitting

machine found rusting in a shed. She restored it, started making socks from her spinning and tracking down other old machines. Some she kept, others she fixed and resold.

The 200-plus vintage machines she hung onto comprise her museum pieces. However, having identified an export market for the machines, she scouted local manufacturers and finally discovered a Christchurch foundry willing to make them, based on her prototype.

It’s been a surprisingly successful venture, with Grant still taking a hands-on quality control role before sending the machines to offshore craft enthusiasts. And she’s since sourced a “sock-specific” yarn from a South Island woollen mill.

An old Bentley, with hundreds of moving metal parts, clatters away in the background making a sock. It’s no surprise to learn most visitors to Grant’s unusual museum buy a couple of pairs of socks before exiting the gift shop – a possum and merino combo is the best-seller.

Socks have also proved a nice little earner – Grant’s business turns over a couple of million dollars a year.

In the early evening I walk along the beach to Sunset Point where wild waves merge with the mellow river. I hope for a spectacular sunset but the sea breeze turns into bluster, clouds roll in from the west and within half an hour the blue sky is moody grey. It’s the unpredictable weather Juergen delights in.

Tempting though it is, I’ve stopped wrestling with the idea of buying Seddon House. But I leave the Coast hoping someone with a down-payment and a dream does. They’ll get a warm welcome in Hoki.

## Best To-dos

Hokitika’s population increases five fold when 15,000 people attend the annual Wildfoods Festival in March. Tickets and information on [www.wildfoods.co.nz](http://www.wildfoods.co.nz).

Most of the town’s galleries, shops and cafes are on Revell and Tancred Sts and clustered around the memorial clock; all within five minutes’ walk.

## Cinemas

Take your pick from the latest movies at the Regent Theatre or art-house films at Crooked Mile Talking Movies.

[www.hokitikaregent.com](http://www.hokitikaregent.com);  
[www.crookedmile.co.nz](http://www.crookedmile.co.nz).

## Bonz n Stonz

Unleash your inner carver and make your own jade or bone jewellery.

Ph 0800 214-949, [www.bonz-n-stonz.co.nz](http://www.bonz-n-stonz.co.nz).

## IaNZart

Watch the artist at work, creating copper sculptures, and cruise the gallery.

Ph (03) 755-6336, [ianzart@actrix.co.nz](mailto:ianzart@actrix.co.nz).

## Wilderness Gallery

Superb West Coast nature photography and an array of other local art.

Ph (03) 755-7575;  
[www.wildernessgallery.co.nz](http://www.wildernessgallery.co.nz).

## Sock World & Hokitika Sock Machine Museum

Amazing but true, a collection of 200 vintage sock-knitting machines plus natural yarns for knitters and a vast selection of warm woolly socks.

Ph (03) 755-8304.

## Best Eats

### Hokitika Cheese & Deli

Serves fresh, seasonal, imaginative, homemade food and superb coffee. Licensed, it’s open from brunch through to dinner.

Ph (03) 755-5432, [sunset33@xtra.co.nz](mailto:sunset33@xtra.co.nz).

### Café de Paris

The service can be variable, but the food (mains \$25-\$35) and coffee are good – and the views are sublime.

Ph (03) 755-5035.

### Sweet Alice’s

Fabulous fudge, funky shop.

Ph (03) 755-5359; [www.sweetalices.co.nz](http://www.sweetalices.co.nz).

## Best Sleeps

### Beachfront Hotel

A hotel in two parts: one facing the beach and the other opening to the town. The rooms in the new seaside wing are excellent.

Ph (03) 755-8344, [www.beachfronthotel.co.nz](http://www.beachfronthotel.co.nz). +



**Right: St Mary’s, a Catholic church originally funded by Irish gold miners.**

**Below: Christine Freeth sells treats at Sweet Alice’s Fudge Kitchen.**

**Bottom: An old hotel still offering hospitality.**

