



# West Coast

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## Why Go?

Hemmed in by the Tasman Sea and the Southern Alps, the wild and sparsely populated West Coast lays claim to three national parks and large tracts of three more, encompassed within a conservation estate covering nearly 90% of its land area.

Unsurprisingly, the Department of Conservation (DOC) is very active here, reworking existing tracks and helping to build new ones, such as the Old Ghost Road. This and many others follow the byways of pioneer-era miners and loggers, who left in their wake rusting relics and landmarks that bring their stories to life.

There are splendid tramps from one end of the coast to the other, not just through Kahurangi, Paparoa and Westland Tai Poutini National Parks, but also within the many parks and reserves that fill in the gaps.

While its remoteness and reputation for wet weather puts many trampers off, the West Coast stands as one of New Zealand's most rewarding tramping destinations.

## When to Go

The West Coast is renowned for its rain, although the locals are liable to tell you that it falls mainly in big drops, and mostly at night. What is a fact is that the average rainfall in the lowlands is between 2000mm and 3000mm, 5000mm at the foot of the Alps, and in excess of 11,000mm a year in areas above 1200m. Much of it falls in late winter and spring. Flooded and impassable rivers, however, should be expected at any time of year.

Warm ocean currents sweep along the coast, resulting in a surprisingly mild climate. Midsummer to autumn can be exceptionally sunny, with long spells of settled weather. Westport and Punakaiki average almost 2000 hours of sunshine annually.

## GATEWAY TOWNS

- ➔ Westport (p254)
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## Fast Facts

- ➔ The West Coast is NZ's most sparsely populated area. Its 32,000 residents make up less than 1% of NZ's population, spread throughout a disproportionate 9% of the country's area.
- ➔ The culinary star of the West Coast is whitebait, the young fry of a fish species called galaxiids, which are caught along rivers as they try and migrate from the ocean back upstream.

## Top Tip

Encountering the infamous West Coast sandfly is a certainty. Keep them at bay by covering up when they are at their most active (dawn and dusk), and coating your exposed parts with a citronella-based repellent.

## Resources

- ➔ [www.buller.co.nz](http://www.buller.co.nz)
- ➔ [www.punakaiki.co.nz](http://www.punakaiki.co.nz)
- ➔ [www.greydistrict.co.nz](http://www.greydistrict.co.nz)
- ➔ [www.glaciercountry.co.nz](http://www.glaciercountry.co.nz)
- ➔ [www.foxglaciertourism.co.nz](http://www.foxglaciertourism.co.nz)

## Background Reading

Settlement of the West Coast was driven first by the gold rushes, which was followed quickly by the quest for its famously good coal. The birthplace of this industry – which continues (somewhat controversially) today – is Denniston, a once-isolated plateau perched above the narrow, coastal flats. Its apparent desolation belies its myriad fascinations, including its social history vividly re-imagined in Jenny Patrick's best-selling novels, *The Denniston Rose* and *Heart of Coal*. Get your hands on the combined and illustrated edition if you can.

Many of the region's tramps follow old mining byways, which lend themselves equally well to gentle mountain biking. To discover the joys of the region's cycling trails, look for *Classic New Zealand Cycle Trails* by the Kennett Brothers, or *Mountain Biking South* by Dave Mitchell.

## DON'T MISS

New Zealand's national bird, the kiwi, is a largely rare and elusive creature, more often heard than seen. On the West Coast, however, there are plenty of opportunities to encounter them if you know where to look.

Success is guaranteed at the **West Coast Wildlife Centre** ([www.wildkiwi.co.nz](http://www.wildkiwi.co.nz); cnr Cron & Cowan Sts; admission \$30, backstage pass \$50; 📞) in Franz Josef Glacier. This feel-good attraction ticks all the right boxes (exhibition, cafe and retail), then goes a whole lot further by actually breeding the rowi – the rarest kiwi in the world, along with another local species, the Haast tokoeka. It's worth visiting to view the conservation, glacier and heritage displays and mature kiwi in their ferny enclosure. However, the pièce de résistance is the 'backstage' incubating and chick-rearing area. You may well go ga-ga over the fluffy kiwi babies. Too cute!

You've got a very strong chance of seeing the rowi in the wild on a night-time expedition with **Okarito Kiwi Tours** (📞 03-753 4330; [www.okaritokiwitours.co.nz](http://www.okaritokiwitours.co.nz); 2-3hr tours \$75).

## DOC Offices

- ➔ **Buller Area Office** (📞 03-788 8008; [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz); 72 Russell St; ☺ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri)
- ➔ **Paparoa National Park Visitor Information Centre and i-SITE** (📞 03-731 1895; [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz); SH6; ☺ 9am-5pm Oct-Nov, to 6pm Dec-Mar, to 4.30pm Apr-Sep)
- ➔ **Westland Tai Poutini National Park Visitor Centre & i-SITE** (📞 03-752 0796; [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz); SH6, Franz Josef Glacier; ☺ 8.30am-6pm summer, to 5pm winter)
- ➔ **DOC South Westland Weheka Area Office** (📞 03-751 0807; SH6, Fox Glacier; ☺ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri)