

# Peace of Paradise

Mike White mingles with the hunter-gatherers of Fox Glacier.

I first met Lewie when he offered to piggyback me across a stream at Bruce Bay. This was South Westland – you don't let yourself get piggybacked here if you're a guy. No way. Not cool. So I rolled up my trousers and waded across to join him.

There were five of them on the beach, down from Fox Glacier for the evening. They had quad bikes, surfcasters, a chilly-bin full of bait and beer and a driftwood bonfire crackling on the sand. They wore Red Bands and Swanndris, drank Speight's and smoked rollies.

One of Lewie's mates insisted I inspect their catch, a seven-gill shark that had been stabbed through the head and draped over the back of a quad bike, and a snapper he was particularly proud of. "Look at that – you won't get a better fish than that. That's a perfect fish."

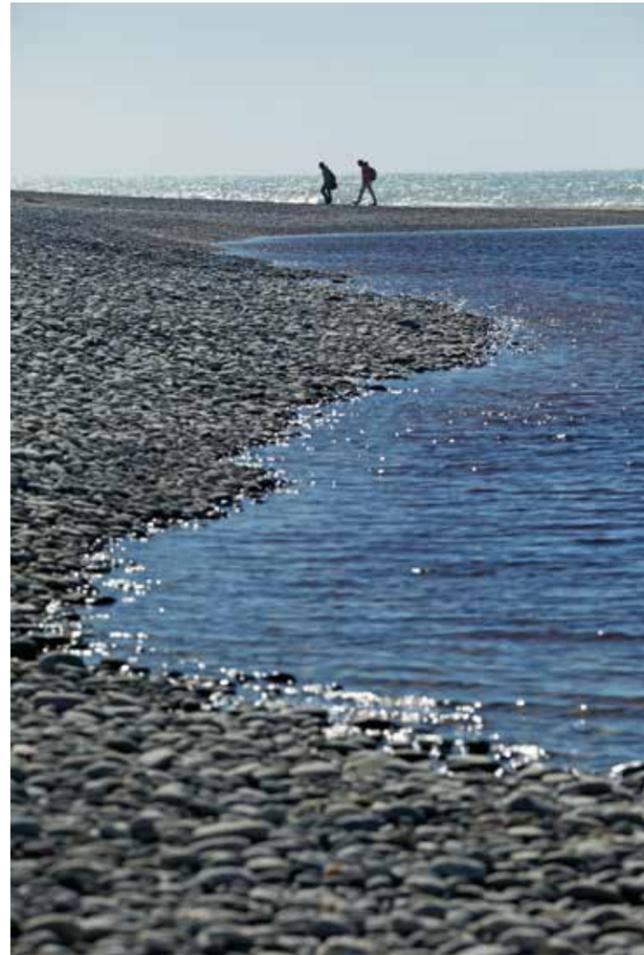
Lewie was a chopper pilot from Fox. He did the tourist season here then went to Canada and flew for a mining exploration company in remote backcountry over there. That's where he met Amanda, a geologist, who'd come back with him for summer to get a taste of New Zealand life. She'd shot her first deer, docked lambs and been gold mining. She'd reeled in the shark tonight.

It was a magic night, calm, no sandflies, the sea as lazy as you get down here. Easy to linger, dig your toes into the sand, stare at the fire and listen to the locals.

Lewie said his mum ran the B&B I was heading to, said he'd see me up in Fox. Said if he had a spare seat he'd take me up for a flight round the glacier.

So I said thanks and headed back across the stream, leaving Lewie and his mates to enjoy the place they lived in, their bonfire spitting sparks into the twilight.

MIKE WHITE IS A NORTH & SOUTH SENIOR WRITER.  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE WHITE.



Top: "Dinky Di" with her catch of dogfish for dinner at Gillespies Beach. Right: Walkers skirt the lagoon at Gillespies Beach. Above: Wide, wild and empty, Hunts Beach is rarely visited by tourists.



Lewie Tuck in his summer playground above the Southern Alps' glaciers.

**SOMETHING YOU REALISE** about glacier country if you spend a bit of time here is that it's not all about the mountains – the coast is simply fantastic.

Only six people live at Bruce Bay, half an hour south of Fox Glacier township. But each year thousands stop here, leaving small memories of their visit. Using the smooth white stones that speckle the beach, they write messages and love letters, placing them between high tide and the highway tarseal. They're intimate and winsome, stone tweets, small thoughts known only to the writer and wondered at by other passing travellers. Above all though, they reflect joy in the surroundings.

"Ted and Margaret: Typical Kiwis proud of their country."

"Time of my life, Anja."

"Lisa, thanks for everything, Vera."

There are families wishing loved ones were with them, someone wishing his grandfather in England a happy 80th birthday.

Part of the beauty is that the sun will bleach them and the rain will leach them and in a few months the messages will have disappeared, the faded faces of the stones ready again for the next passerby with something that needs saying.

Not far north, hardly anyone goes to Hunts Beach. You need to turn off the highway, probably need to have a reason. If you do, though, you'll discover a glorious wide beach and a few friendly locals who live behind the sandhills.

Nathan Wilson grew up here and makes a living from what surrounds him.

He runs some beef inland, whitebaiting when the season is good and collects sphagnum moss. He's got a sawmill too, "but it's a noisy office, isn't it".

When the price of gold started rising he turned to that, sluicing sand along the beach. "Well, you might as well – it's just lying there."

It's a similar story with the rocks that Brian from Bay of Plenty is after. Each year he makes a trip down from Waihi

and scours West Coast beaches for gems and stones that collectors will buy. To those with no geological background he describes them prosaically as "green stuff, pink stuff, white stuff".

This trip will be seven weeks and by then he reckons he'll have quarter of a tonne of rocks weighing down the back of the Hyundai. Already it's full of banana boxes and shoeboxes of pink schist and snow quartz. On rainy days when he can't "treasure hunt" along the beaches, he sits and polishes his finds with increasingly fine emery paper. It's not for amateurs – his brother is a top rock hound and taught Brian what to look for.

And so he's off, down the beach and around the bluff, he says, brown legs and ragged red backpack, in search of something special he reckons might lie there.

**IT'S ONE OF** those incredible things about New Zealand, how you can be in the snow in the morning and on the

beach in the afternoon. At Fox this means walking on the glacier after breakfast and watching seals after lunch.

Twenty kilometres from Fox township, Gillespies Beach was originally one of the many shortlived towns that sprang up along the coast, after gold was discovered here in 1866. Prospectors called Tony the Greek and Harry the Whale and hundreds of others arrived with hope and found little but hardship. Explorer A.P. Harper called it, "the most godforsaken place imaginable". The corroded carcasses of dredges that later tried to exploit the black sands can still be found in the bush behind the beach.

Today, Gillespies Beach has become a popular day destination and overnight stop for campers. Travellers arrange flat stones and twisted driftwood into fragile beach sculptures, eventually destroyed by the wind and king tides. On fine evenings they gather along the shoreline and watch the moon rise over the Southern Alps while the sun simultaneously dips

into the Tasman in one of the country's most spectacular natural displays.

Di had arrived at three that afternoon in her motorhome and an hour later was gutting two dogfish she'd caught off the beach. "Oh, I'm a good hunter-gatherer."

In her old blue raincoat and zinc lip balm, she flicked a knife around with easy skill, readying fillets to fry for dinner. She'd been on and off the road for 11 years, clocked up nearly 300,000km in this vehicle, with its DIANA number plate and "Recycled Teenager" sticker on the back. Dinky Di, she liked to call herself. She was on her own but joined up with other "freewheelers" – single people in motorhomes.

Doug was another one. With black baseball cap, bleached jeans, boots made of tawny leather and aviatorish sunglasses, he was staring out to sea. The beach was a good place to sit and think, he reckoned. He'd spent a lot of time at sea, years working on the rail ferries, but now did his travelling on land.

When his wife died, he kept their house in Orewa and headed off in a motorhome. One time he decided to return to Orewa and settle down for at least six months. "I lasted a week. Bought another van and hit the road again."

At 78, he took things quietly now, often stayed a week in a place and figured he'd head up north somewhere for winter.

How long would he keep going? "For a while. Well, I've got to. The longer I'm on the road, the harder it'll be to pull over and stop for good."

**"FOX IS CHUGGING** along," says Chris Alexander, who runs a cafe and gift shop at Lake Matheson, just out of town. It's a special spot, the lake's surface often so flat it perfectly reflects the mountains, the view so lovely it's adorned placemats and postcards for decades.

They reckon 200,000 tourists visit Fox each year but Alexander thinks it might have slipped a bit from that. Of constant concern is that less than five per cent



Connor Bateman of Queensland climbs inside an ice cave while walking on Fox Glacier.

of his customers are Kiwis. "They all go to Wanaka, they all go to Queenstown. And they're usually complaining about the price of petrol and milk. I tell them, 'Yeah, we've got to pay that every day – you've only got to do it once.'"

Ultimately though, Alexander thinks the lasting perception that the Coast's weather is awful is what stops New Zealanders holidaying there.

Yeah, it rains a bit, but that can be part of the experience, he says. "Put a coat on. You go and get wet. You go and do it anyway. Then come back to your motel, have a hot shower, go and sit in front of the fire at the pub and have a beer."

It's a burden the area has had to bear forever, with lichen and rust betraying the climate. When clouds arrive here they seep down silently, suffocating the peaks and filling the gullies.

More than 60 years ago, *The Press* described the Coast as: "...gloomy skies, incessant rain, country wrapped in perpetual solitude, incapable of occupation, niggardly of promise..."

That's grossly gloomy exaggeration but it's fair to say this isn't soft country. At Gillespies Beach you can see the graves of pioneers and miners who died early and harshly. On your way back, stop at the lookout where the views of the glacier and Alps are perfect on a good day – and read the sad memorial to the nine people who died in a light plane crash at Fox in 2010. Heart-shaped stones, honeysuckle and unopened Heineken bottles sit beneath the names.

Living here can be tough. But those

who choose it also choose to not grumble.

At Bruce Bay, John Birchfield had a heart scare two days ago and had just got back from hospital in Greymouth. "I'm feeling not too bad," he said, trying to mask discomfort. Stoicism and understatement, like Swannndris and gumboots, are obligatory here.

**LEWIE CALLED AROUND** and said he had a spare seat on a scenic flight up the glacier that morning. We skirted cloud, flew low over crevasses and landed near the top of the icefall. Taking off again we flew parallel to the peak of Mt Cook, two climbers silhouetted on the last ridge to the summit.

Explorer Julius von Haast described Fox Glacier as, "pure unsullied ice... a thousand turreted needles and other fantastic forms... a most remarkable and striking contrast to the surrounding landscape." Nothing's changed today, apart from the glacier withdrawing further towards the mountains. It's still beautiful and stupendous.

Back in Fox, Lewie dropped me round at his mum's place. Raelene Tuck has hosted visitors for more than 20 years, knows everyone and knows all the local secrets. The talk over coffee was about the young fella who'd shot himself through the foot. Had been at the dump shooting bottles, thought his rifle was empty and managed to put a .22 through his gumboot. He'd been medevaced up to Greymouth to try and put all the pieces together. Almost as bad as the injuries would be the ribbing he'd suffer for



One of many ways to experience the glacier. As well as hiking on it, you can take helicopter flights over it or drive to viewpoints (bottom right). The more adventurous can easily reach Chancellor Hut (below left) overlooking the glacier.



years to come, as the story was told and retold and he limped into local lore.

Raelene still loved showing off the region to visitors and didn't know what she'd do otherwise. "Maybe I'd be living the life my husband promised me," she said, laughing like hell.

That morning, guests from England had been showing her photos of the mountains they went walking over, back home in the Lake District. They looked small, bald and tamed. Raelene looked out towards the Southern Alps then back at the photos, and tried to look impressed. "Everyone's got their own piece of paradise," she said diplomatically.

## Best Sleeps

### Reflection Lodge

Wonderful views of the Alps with Mt Cook and Mt Tasman reflected in the lake beside the house. Homely, extra-friendly B&B; you immediately feel part of the Coast community here. \$190-\$210 including breakfast. 137 Cook Flat Rd, Fox Glacier, ph (03) 751-0707, [www.reflectionlodge.co.nz](http://www.reflectionlodge.co.nz)

### Mahitahi Lodge

Luxury lodge at Bruce Bay for those wanting to stay a bit further south but within striking distance of the glaciers. Five minutes' walk to beach and river that has excellent fishing. Dinner available. \$345 per couple including breakfast. SH6, Bruce Bay, ph (03) 751-0095, [www.mahitahilodge.co.nz](http://www.mahitahilodge.co.nz)

## Best Eats

### Matheson Cafe

It would be hard to find somewhere to eat in New Zealand with a more spectacular view. Highly recommended. At the entrance to the Lake Matheson walk. Open for breakfast and lunch – and dinner from November to March. Lake Matheson Rd, ph (03) 751-0878, [www.lakematheson.com](http://www.lakematheson.com)

### The Last Kitchen

Cafe and bar, open from midday till late offering local fare from venison sandwiches for lunch to salmon fillets at night. Small but good menu, fire to snuggle up to when the rain is falling. Corner Sullivans Rd and SH6, Fox Glacier, ph (03) 751-0058



## Best To Do

### Glacier Hiking

A wide range of options here from guided valley walks to the glacier, to ice climbing. Highly recommended is the half-day heli-hike. Fly high onto the glacier by helicopter, spend over two hours exploring its shapes and formations and then chopper off. Fox Glacier Guiding, SH6 Fox Glacier, ph (03) 751-0825, [www.foxguides.co.nz](http://www.foxguides.co.nz)

### Gillespies Beach

A wild and spectacular beach, 20km from Fox Glacier town, where you can walk to see seals or explore old gold mining sites. Great views of the Southern Alps. A basic DoC campsite for those who want to stay the night.

### Lake Matheson

A must-stop for every tourist. Beautiful, gentle walk around the lake with several viewpoints where the mountains are reflected in the water if the weather is clear. Best early in the morning or at dusk.

### Copland Valley

For the fitter, an overnight trip to Welcome Flat and its hot pools is a unique experience. Large DoC hut and lovely camping area by the river. Track begins south of Fox township. [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)



Above left: Our Lady of the River Catholic church at Jacobs River, south of Fox Glacier.

Above: Walkers are helicoptered in to explore the glacier. Right: Sunset near Lake Matheson. Far right: Reflection Lodge, Fox Glacier.

