

TRAVEL

Sky's *the* limit



The South Island robin is one of the many wildlife highlights on Motuara Island.

Mike Yardley reckons Picton is well worth a flying visit

Above, the Classic Fighters Airshow provides some spectacular aerial spectacle.

Photo / MarlboroughNZ

FAR FROM BEING just a port town, Picton has blossomed into a fully-fledged holiday gem.

Wrapped in forest-clad hills, the Picton foreshore is studded with a swag of hospo spots and heritage treasures like the Edwin Fox, in addition to being an alluring launch-pad for savouring Queen Charlotte Sound.

At day-break, the glossy deep blue water surrounding Picton Marina gleamed like a photoshoot-ready aquatic jewel. Picton had dawned bright, brilliant and perky as early-risers exercised on the velvety grass waterfront, while the horse-shoe curve of swanky cafes edging the harbour were humming with trade.

For a head-clearing walk, a perennial favourite is Snout Track. The full walk is 12km return, moderately challenging, as it climbs its way through bush. But it's the marquee views of Queen Charlotte Sound, all the way to the head of the peninsula, that make this walk the gift that keeps on giving.

If you're short on time, drive through Victoria Domain to the Queen Charlotte



A cruise ship is dwarfed by the magical scenery of Queen Charlotte Sound.

viewpoint carpark, overlooking Titokai Bay (where the ferry grounded last year) and Karaka Bay. Viewissimo!

Back in Picton, prior to boarding my scenic cruise on Queen Charlotte Sound, I headed to the hip waterfront venue, Toastie Lords, which turns heads and seduces passers-by, with its gourmet sourdough toasted sandwiches, all made with their in-house four cheese blend. I ordered up an Ivan, consisting of pastrami, sauerkraut and pickle. Delish!

Plump for a day trip with one of the region's oldest tourist operators, Beachcomber Cruises. If you're keen to combine cruising with a spot of walking and bird-watching, make a date with Motuara Island.

Just offshore from Ship Cove,

Beachcomber Cruises operates a stunning half-day excursion to this bird sanctuary between October and the end of April. On arrival, you'll be serenaded by a chorus of birdsong from the local inhabitants. The one-way track threading around the hill serves up several lookout points, including a cracking perch across to the North Island at the Cook Strait lookout.

Motuara Island attracts bird-lovers from around the world. A clutch of eagle-eyed British birders joined me on my excursion. All introduced pests were removed from the island more than 30 years ago and it's a thriving haven. Highlights included spotting the grey warbler, South Island saddleback, the yellow-crowned parakeet (kakariki), the South Island robin and the Marlborough green gecko.

For a complete change of scenery, swap the feathers for wings, down the road in Blenheim, the vintage aircraft displays at Omaka Aviation Heritage Centre are spectacular. The exhibition halls dramatically showcase classic aircraft from the two world wars.

The original Great War exhibition, *Knights of the Sky*, features Sir Peter Jackson's personal collection of WWI aircraft and artifacts, vividly brought to life in sensational sets crafted by the creative wizards at WingNut Films and

Weta Workshop.

Then there's *Dangerous Skies*, the WWII exhibition, exploring the stories of both male and female aviators and their tales of valour from the forests of Germany to the steaming jungles of the South Pacific. Iconic warbirds on display include a flyable Spitfire Mk 14. The collection of magnificent flying machines is indeed magnificent, but the personalised human dimension packs a poignant punch. Scenic flights in vintage aircraft are available.

But for next-level aviation exuberance, nothing beats an air show. Av-fans rejoice! The next Classic Fighters Airshow is just weeks away at Omaka Aerodrome. The three-day celebration of aviation takes place over Easter weekend, starting April 18. The line-up of aircraft is staggering, from the pioneer (pre-WWI) era 'flivvers' to fighter and bomber aircraft from both world wars, glamorous art-deco machines from the 'Golden Age' of aviation between the wars, military trainers, and post-war machines leading through to the jet age.

At Classic Fighters, locally based aircraft will be joined by multiple machines from around New Zealand and beyond. Putting on the Ritz is the theme for this year's airshow, and I got a sneak peek at some of the deft touches being created by the army of volunteers, which will raise the glamour stakes and set the Marlborough skies a dazzle.

For a vintage fun-filled weekend of fantastic flying, classic cars, fireworks, food and entertainment, secure your tickets online now for the Marlborough Lines Classic Fighters Airshow.

www.classicfighters.co.nz



Top row, from left: a display at Omaka Aviation Heritage Centre; all aboard for a Beachcomber cruise (centre and right). Photos / Mike Yardley / MarlboroughNZ



Bottom row, from left: Classic Fighters Airshow; Motuara Island has some great lookouts; cyclists check out the Snout Track. Photos / MarlboroughNZ