

Chapter Seven

I'm Off to See the Wizard...

"Exercise is for homosexuals, weirdos and Americans."
--The Wizard of Christchurch.



But shirts and shoes are still required to eat here...

Christchurch may have been the biggest surprise of my entire visit.

Given such a ponderous name, I was sure it would be a dour, unhappy place, filled with cathedrals and fundamentalists. It didn't help that the only impression I had of the city was based on the movie "Heavenly Creatures," in which two boarding school girls become fast friends, have a lesbian affair, and then kill the mother who tries to end the friendship. The movie ends with the two girls getting caught, being punished, banished, and prohibited from ever seeing each other again.

Not exactly my idea of a party town.

My early expectation couldn't have been farther from the truth. Although it has an English feel to it, Christchurch is a city that enjoys laughing at itself as the outer wall of a restaurant near downtown proved.

The restaurant's slogan proclaimed "PERRY'S CAFE WHERE REAL MEN EAT QUICHE" in three-foot block letters. Next to the slogan was an eight foot tall painting of two factory workers, with one sporting an industrial apron and the other wearing a welder's mask raised over his head. Both had comic-book style word-bubbles next to their heads revealing their conversation.

"Fancy a latte and a piece of quiche?" said the one wearing the industrial apron.

"That would be lovely," Welding Boy responded.

Christchurch was at the height of its silly season when I arrived, with its third annual World Buskers Festival in full swing. The event was a 12-day celebration dedicated to street performers all over the globe, running from mid-to-late January. The performers included Americans Robert Nelson "the

Butterfly Man" and Large Tool Juggler Bobarino Gravittini; Australian Karen Murphy, who painted her body to look like a statue then stood in the same position for 30 minutes; and the hometown favorite: the Shenanigan Brothers, Shameless and Flattery.

Nelson was my favorite perhaps because of the joy he took in abusing his audience. The 5'5" performer challenged a taller, huskier man to a Styrofoam club duel. The challenger quickly out-witted and out-dueled him, getting in five good solid hits for each of Nelson's single hits. Ever the good loser, Nelson thanked the man for his assistance, waited until his tormentor's back was turned, then beat him about the head and shoulders. Nelson also snuck up on a teenager who laughed at him and smacked the boy twice from behind before the kid realized what hit him.

The juggling Shenanigan Brothers focused their act on impromptu schtick, rather than juggling. They pulled a 7 year-old bystander out of the crowd and made him a prop, using him as a belt to holding up Shameless' pants and later a door they opened and closed to leave an imaginary house.



Apparently, children make good props. Left, boy as superman. Right, boy as belt.

Next, they stole a woman's video camera, stuffed it down Flattery's pants and commented about a local church tower. Then, they played a game in which they created a story a word at a time with the brothers alternating words.

"Don't...." said Shameless.

"Try...." Flattery added.

"This..."

"At..."

"Home..."

"You..."

"Might...."

"End...."

"Up...."

"With..."

"A..."

"Complete..."

"Sentence..." they explained.

I enjoyed the festival so much I decided to write a travel story about it and another annual event, the Festival of Romance. It took a bit of doing, but I was able to meet Jodi Wright, the woman who created

both, and who was coordinator, traffic cop, occasional wake-up service, and mom to a motley crew of misfits each year.

Much to my surprise, she didn't have an accent.

"I'm from Tacoma, Washington," she said.

It figures. I travel half way around the world just to meet someone from home. It wasn't the first time this had happened, though. The day I boarded the Magic Bus, I met a woman whose family lives close to the house I moved out of to go on the trip, and when I was in Waitomo waiting for the next Magic bus to come along I met a man who lived just down the block.

Wright never expected to live in New Zealand, she just joked about moving there when she thought about raising kids in a country with such a high violent crime rate. A few weeks after her initial wise cracks she was in a Tacoma bar and waved a man over to tell him his fly was open. As it turns out, the man was a polo player from New Zealand.

They were married and moved to Christchurch two months later.

Wright couldn't find a job -- until she met the mayor and proposed holding a February arts event called The Festival of Romance. The Busker's Festival came a year later. Now, she spends much of her year finding acts for the Busker's Festival, then making sure they get where they're supposed to when they're supposed to.

"I try to coordinate them, I do. Sometimes I even go wake them up in the morning and bring them toothpaste." It doesn't help that buskers have their own sense of time that bears no resemblance to reality. The perfect example is a conversation she heard at 11:40 one morning involving a busker who was supposed to have been performing at 11:30.

"I know I have to be there at 11:30 a.m. and I will be. I just have to make a few calls."

They may not follow the clock, but they know one rule by heart: Keep the crowd happy. "If you piss off their children, you're not going to get a good hat," Wright said.

The festival ended with a gala performance where the performers strutted their stuff in a "busker-off." The marathon competition I attended bombed when the sound system failed within the first 20 minutes of the show, making it difficult to hear many of the acts over the Friday night crowd's beer-shortened span of attention. In some cases it may have been a good thing because some of the acts lost something in translation from street to stage.

Between acts I talked to a couple from Tasmania. When they learned I was a journalist, they said their daughter wanted to go to journalism school and asked my advice. They weren't amused when I told them to discourage her at all costs to keep her from a life of penury, but I had to be honest. Then, I asked about Tasmania. I didn't plan to visit, I was just curious. The more we talked, the nicer it sounded; It still wasn't enough to change my mind. Their invitation to visit, see the school where they taught, and meet their students wasn't enough to sway me either but, I dutifully took their address and telephone number. I'm sure the husband realized there wasn't little chance I'd accept.

I wasn't reluctant because I was on a fixed itinerary, though. It's just that I was nervous about visiting Southeast Asia. I realized my first stop in an exotic country like Indonesia could be a disaster, and just wanted to get my culture shock out of the way as soon as possible.

Still, they had just given me what every traveler hopes for: an invitation for a home stay. I hadn't been on the road long enough to miss home-cooked food and a nice bed, but I've always been curious about how other people live. So I kept my options open. How was I to know I'd find myself on Tasmania only two weeks later? At the time I was just surprised to have gotten to Christchurch in time for a festival I'd never even heard of.

I had stopped at Christchurch for another reason, altogether. I was off to see the Wizard.

If Andrew was any indication, most New Zealanders would rather forget about the middle-aged man who appeared in Cathedral Square every weekday and spent an hour or so ranting and raving about nothing in particular. When the wizard came up in conversation, most Kiwis preferred to talk about something else. Anything else. Andrew not only rolled his eyes as far up into his head as the laws governing physics would allow, he also referred to the wizard with the same affection he showed toward the idea of spending more than a day in Franz Josef.

Andrew's disdain seemed odd, considering that the Wizard turned Christchurch into a must-see-town, even for backpackers who are more interested in hiking than visiting its cities. Sure, plenty of people would still come to Christchurch to visit family or see festivals, but backpackers told me they had come to see the wizard.

It's easy to see why the wizard makes Kiwis cringe. In a nation filled with beautiful trekking areas, amazing scenery, a rich cultural heritage, and lovely cities, it must be embarrassing to be internationally known for something as kitschy as a babbling madman who looks like a Rasputin wanna-be that took a wrong right turn somewhere around Moscow. I'm sure his status as a tourist attraction must make many islanders about as happy as some Canadians are when they discover the only Canadian musical group most Americans know is Bare Naked Ladies. Or when Americans discover that the French worship Jerry Lewis as the clown prince of comedy.

It just goes to show, there's no accounting for taste.

The true measure of the wizard's popularity came in late 1995 when an Australian airline advertising service to New Zealand took out full page ads in Australian daily newspapers with the wizard's picture and the phrase "IT'S MAGICAL." The airline neglected to get the wizard's permission or pay him before it ran the ads. A woman at the traveler's information kiosk in Cathedral Square told me the situation depressed the wizard so much he stopped making daily appearances.

Ever the optimist, I went to Cathedral Square around 12:45 anyway, hoping he would show up. At precisely 1 p.m. a man wearing ordinary, every day clothing and carrying a poster proclaiming, "Jesus Is The One True Way" started speaking, and a woman standing on a chair beside him mimicked him by crowing as he spoke. Somehow, this wasn't quite what I had imagined. Just as I was about to give up and go back to the Busker Festival, the real McCoy arrived.

It's hard to mistake the wizard. After all, it isn't every day you see a 6 foot-tall man in his mid-50s wearing an ankle-length black gown, beat-up black ankle boots, a horn on a string around his neck and a pointed sorcerer's hat pulling a wheeled step-ladder in the middle of summer. His scraggly, salt-and-pepper, shoulder-length hair, somewhat well-trimmed beard and the gleam in his eyes make him look like the result of a pairing between Rasputin and Santa Claus. The glimmer filling his eyes as he took his bully pulpit reminded me of jolly old St. Nick, the nonsensical rantings and ravings made me imagine how the old Russian cleric must have looked and sounded at the height of his powers.

After positioning his ladder just so, he jumped to the third step, blew his horn, and launched into an hour-long speech which could easily have been titled, "Women Start Wars, And Men Are Stupid."



The Wizard his ownself

During the speech, he claimed that men don't cause wars, women do. Left to their own devices, men would be happy to be scruffy, unwashed, lazy, sports-playing, beer-making, testosterone-laden slobs. The only reason men wage war is because women with children want more space and better things for their families.

He also said feminists are stupid because they want to be just as stupid as men.

He was quick to point out he's not a male chauvinist. Tongue firmly in cheek, he said he supports equal opportunity. He quit his job so he wouldn't keep a woman from having it. He also said he supports women in their search for equality and is happy to let them carry his bags, pay his expenses, and tell him they love him.

Over the course of three days I noticed if I listened long enough, the wizard's pretzel logic almost made sense -- until he would say something so far out I could see not even he took what he said seriously. For instance, the first day he announced, "Exercise is for homosexuals, weirdos and Americans." The following day he gave this honest assessment of himself: "I haven't had a job in 27 years. I'm a lazy, incompetent bastard."

His description may be true now, but it wasn't always. He was once a professor and head of a sociology department at a university in England before he chucking it all and moving here. That's why it's so ironic that he admitted it had taken him years of persistent ranting and raving to become the embodiment of the fictional character he is now as he closed up shop and drove off in his Volkswagen Beetle with a Volkswagen front on the front and the back of the car.

In many ways, the car is just like its owner: it's hard to tell if either is coming or going.

