

MT VICTORIA

Wellingtonian Sharon Stephenson on being won over by Mt Victoria.



Every spring, sea turtles swim hundreds of miles, past perfectly good beaches, just so they can lay their eggs on the spot where they themselves squirmed out onto the sand. Ditto salmon in the Atlantic Ocean, which fight their way upstream to the tributaries where they were born. Actually, say scientists, a surprising number of animals return to the place where they were born to live out their days.

While my journey hasn't been nearly as dramatic, or arduous, I too have found my way back to my home town. In my case, to a tiny

speck on the map dressed up as a capital city, where the wind drums a daily tattoo against the windows and only fools and tourists are silly enough to unfurl an umbrella.

Like so many, as soon as I cleared university and my first job, I threw money at a one-way ticket to London.

Five years later, I was back in Wellington; another decade on and the UK beckoned once again.

Like so many more, I could easily have shed my travelling skin in Sydney or Melbourne or even Auckland, cities large enough to make me feel as though I hadn't totally abandoned the world. Instead, my

stubborn, almost irrational allegiance to the capital brought me back.

You don't fall in love with Wellington; you stumble slowly towards her, bent over double by the prevailing southerly. But when you return with a passport full of stamps and an empty wallet, she'll be kind to you. She'll pick you up from the airport, bring you a coffee that doesn't taste of muddy water and help you surrender to the real life of career, mortgage and domesticity.

In our case, she was also kind on the employment front, letting my husband slot back into the animation industry and allowing me to stitch together enough freelance and contract work to buy a house. What wasn't so easy was figuring

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Opposite page:
Sharon Stephenson
and Bristol at the
Mt Victoria Lookout,
one of Wellington's
best vantage points.

Above: The
distinctive
St Gerard's
Monastery
dominates the Mt
Victoria skyline.

Left: A walk in
Wellington's Town
Belt is a daily ritual.

out where we wanted to live.

Anywhere north of the stadium was out: we'd both grown up in the Hutt and realised some years ago that we were better suited to city life. Previous postcodes had included Ngaio, Thorndon and, for 10 glorious years, a 100-year-old Kelburn villa we'd painstakingly breathed life back into.

The idea of apartment living was tossed around but we reasoned dogs and small spaces don't usually mix. Plus, after spending 18 months shoe-horned into possibly the tiniest flat in the entire British Isles, I ached for room. Lots of it.

Hubbie had long ago signed up to the Mt Victoria fan club; from our previous Kelburn house we

would gaze longingly over "those lucky bastards" on the other side of the city whose properties remained bathed in sunshine hours after it had deserted us.

Yet I still wasn't convinced: I've always been in the camp that believes the suburb where rickety wooden houses cling perilously to cliff faces and narrow roads are, inexplicably, two-way and over-priced, overrated and several centimetres too far up its own bottom.

And, let's be honest, it can be a bit of a douche, boasting about its proximity to work/cafes/nightlife, its legacy as one of Wellington's oldest suburbs and its "hipness".

"It's full of rich tossers," commented a friend, while another said she'd

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fled to the northern suburbs to get away from "too many renters with over-enthusiastic sub-woofers and no respect for their neighbours".

Fortunately, my husband wore me down. Well, that and the 1890 villa we managed to wrest away from rival bidders. And then spent the next six months liberating from layer upon layer of bad wallpaper.

Now, Mt Vic, I totally heart you. I've never lived anywhere where the washing dries so quickly, where you can eat dinner outside in the blazing sun at 8pm, and where the killer southerlies have little impact. And how do I even begin to express the joy of being able to walk to work in 15 minutes, to the movies, dinner or the library?

And, here's the kicker, to run home, take my dog Bristol for a walk, run back to work and shower – all in a lunch-hour.

It's also one of the friendliest places I've ever lived. Tonight, for example, I took Bristol for his usual trot into the town belt, a jaunt that should take 20 minutes. But by the time I'd run into a friend and her child, a neighbour and her new puppy, a couple of lost German tourists ("The Lord of the Rings filming location is that way") and several others who wanted to make Bristol's acquaintance, the better part of an hour had been swallowed.

Thank you, Mt Victoria, for being part of our story. I can't promise you my itchy feet won't carry me to other parts near or far at some stage but, for now, I'm overjoyed to be able to nestle into your inner-city bosom. +

• Readers' well-written contributions to "My Suburb" – or "My Town" for those outside the cities – are welcome; no more than 800 words, send your stories to north&south@bauermedia.co.nz