

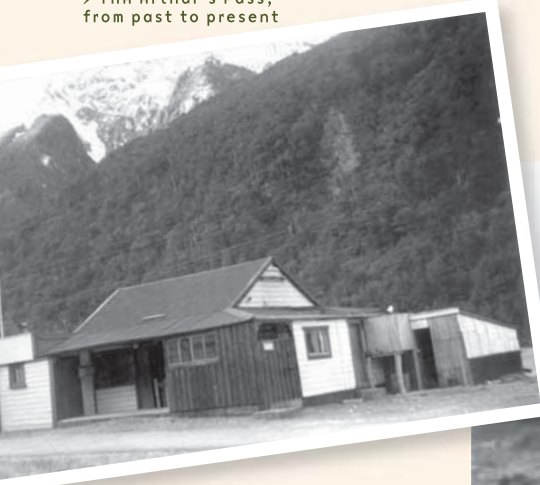


Passing through Arthur's Pass: past and present

I left Christchurch with the wind at my back and the sun in my eyes, following the signs pointing to the West Coast via Arthur's Pass. I'd never been before and I was spurred along by my interest in YHA's long-standing heritage in the area and (to a lesser extent, of course) the fact that I was going bush on a work day. The drive along SH73 is nothing short of stunning. Golden, parched fields are rudely interrupted by strange rocky outcrops, and great big mountains that look like they're made out of sand. As I twisted and turned and climbed towards the hills, I wondered how Sir Arthur Dudley Dobson had ever managed to discover a pass through this countryside to the Coast.

It started raining at Broken River – the big, wet West Coast kind of rain where you have to have the window wipers on turbo and even then you can still barely see where you're going. The "Welcome to Arthur's Pass" sign had taken shelter under a tree so when I arrived, I wasn't exactly sure I had...the cheerless tones of Leonard Cohen singing Please Don't Pass Me By played in my head as I stepped out into the main street. I wondered again about Sir Arthur – not so much this time as to how he discovered the Pass, but why?

> YHA Arthur's Pass, from past to present



I hurried across the road to the Mountain House and Bob Vaile – the sole reason I had forsaken my warm East Coast office for a West Coast road trip. I'd met Bob for about ten seconds a couple weeks back in Christchurch and he came across as one of those big, booming American guys that could take on the world and win. That's probably because he's Canadian. Bob has taken over running of the YHA hostel in Arthur's Pass. Meanwhile he has also added YHA branding on his Mountain House business – and he's now working on a "very cunning plan" for its future.

"This building is very cool," he gestures around a room adorned with Cora's "Ode to Sir Arthur" mural, its muted tones in stark contrast to the adjoining orange hallways and lemon-and-lime kitchen. "It was designed as a mountaineering hut and it has served that purpose well for a long time. There's no doubting the personality and the passion of the people who built this hostel. You can still feel it even today. But it's time to look beyond the mythology. We made a decision to run this hostel as part of a unified complex.

It makes good business sense, even better common sense."

My first visit to the old YHA hostel came at the end of Bob's tour of the Mountain House complex. First up, I shared Bob's obvious pleasure in the just-completed multi-share Mountain House hostel, but he told me to curb my enthusiasm because I had yet to see the "very best accommodation in Arthur's Pass. Full Stop." So I shut up and followed

him uphill to School Terrace, where stood before me a row of former railway houses, now gorgeous little blue and green and red-rimmed cottages. "It's back-packing Bob, but not as we know it," I quipped to myself, as I wandered around the trendy new kitchens, lovely warm lounges and french-doored double rooms.

Prior to walking in the door – finally – of the historic YHA Arthur's Pass, I had done my homework. I'd read a book, flicked through scrap-booked newspaper articles and even talked to some of the people who had a personal account of its establishment.



> Arthur's Pass and its surrounds have long been a mecca for trampers



> YHA Mountain House



> Below: Mountain House cottages



> Hiking near Arthur's Pass

It was, I knew, a place that had achieved an almost iconic status – as the first ever YHA New Zealand-owned hostel, the oldest in what is now a nation-wide network and, at the time (August 1955), the largest and best-equipped hostel in the Southern hemisphere. It was hard to imagine, as I stood under the shadow of Cora's mural, that 50 years ago this building was deemed a "better class of hostel". Today, it was showing its age. You could easily imagine the mice scurrying across the floor, the rising damp and holes in the walls that came with Bob's inheritance of the hostel.

"Today, it's the warts and wrinkles side of the business," Bob pointed out the obvious. "But come April 2007, the doors of this building will close for the winter and when they re-open in spring, YHA will show a whole new face to Arthur's Pass."

"We're going to stick to the basics with this building, but we're also going to be a little bit clever," he went on. "We'll keep the old mountaineer's hut theme and create a shared environment that's properly priced for the market. And then we're going to put a great big slice of macrocarpa in the garden with a plaque on it that says 'Welcome to the historic Sir Arthur Dudley Dobson Memorial Lodge – where hostelling began.' It's going to be a stay cheap, groovy budget hostel."

I was thoroughly convinced. I'd dried out, ingested coffee and slurped down the best kumara and mushroom soup I had ever

tasted (thank you Wobbly Kea Café!) and I was ready to call the office and ask if I could extend my day trip to a sleepover. "Come back in a year and you'll be amazed at the transformation," said Bob over our brew. (I'm going to.)

"Our business approach means a win-win situation for everyone. Members benefit because they now have access to a full service hostel and a wider range of accommodation options in Arthur's Pass. Plus, it allows for a more dynamic use of the current hostel, in combination with the Mountain House, and means we can mix and match our products to best meet traveller's needs."

I left Arthur's Pass just as the rain stopped and the sun made a concerted effort to burst out of the clouds. Leonard Cohen reappeared on my in-built i-pod: this time he was Passing Through... "sometimes happy, sometimes blue, glad that I ran into you" and that pretty much summed it up for me – I was glad I ran into Arthur's Pass. It's a fabulous wee place – even on a rainy day. Maybe because it was a rainy day. Next time I'm going to take some sturdy boots and a whole weekend.

Nikki Waghorn,
YHA Communications
Coordinator



> Bob Vaile

1959 – YHA awarded the 'Travel Enterprise Award' by the New Zealand Travel and Holidays Association, in recognition of it making "the greatest contribution to the promotion of tourism in New Zealand."

The 1960's heralded a significant change in the usage of YHA hostels. Once almost the exclusive domain on New Zealanders, YHA was now catering for overseas guests. "During the 1960's, most of the usage was by overseas visitors, mostly female Australians who came across to work in THC hotels (free air tickets paid by NZ government) to save money to go to Britain." Elizabeth Beer, Southland Branch Secretary.

1961 – Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin becomes first man to orbit Earth in a spacecraft; East Germany begins building the Berlin Wall.

1962 – The Cuban Missile Crisis leads to the threat of US-Soviet nuclear war; Andy Warhol exhibits his Campbell's Soup Can; Marilyn Monroe found dead.

1963 – Martin Luther King delivers his 'I Have a Dream' speech; US President John F Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

1964 – African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela sentenced to life imprisonment in South Africa.