

Ross Goldfields: Breaking new ground



The Ross Goldfields Heritage Centre, located in the small town of Ross (population: 330), showcases the history of the gold rush era through artefacts, historic buildings and its major drawcard – a replica of NZ’s heaviest nugget. Though with dwindling international visitors because of Covid 19 it faced the real possibility of closing its doors.

“Normally we get 50-60 people through our doors each day, though with Covid our numbers halved and the type of people changed. Typically we get several buses of international tourists each week, though that’s been replaced by mountain-bikers and domestic tourists who are less interested in the gold-panning experience.”

Although the General Manager, Rick Fennell, has seen some more international tourists pass through their doors in recent months, he says, the return of overseas tourists has been slow.

ABOVE: Committee member Biddy Manera outside Ross Goldfields Heritage Centre.



“Our \$15 gold panning experience is one of our major income earners which is a hit for international visitors. Given our visitor base is largely made up of tourists, we’re still waiting for an uptick in their numbers after Covid. The extended lockdown in China really didn’t help either, though now that’s over we’re hoping things will change.” Rick says.

The reduced income from visitors passing through the doors made it impossible for the Centre to employ students over the last two years, and it has resulted in reduced opening hours. To fill any gaps, volunteers are called on to help out with everything from working bees to administration.

One of the Centre’s greatest assets is the historic precinct which contains an early mining cottage filled with historic domestic ware, the original town gaol, a replica waterwheel, a historic church and numerous other large artefacts from the early mining days.

Thanks to various service and maintenance contracts for the village, the Centre was able to bring in some income over Covid to cover its basic costs, though despite this there was still a significant shortfall in funds.

Navigating a shifting landscape

To keep the doors open, the Centre applied to employ Rick to manage the day to day operations alongside a part time assistant.

“The funding was incredible because it enabled us to stay the course, it gave us the bare minimum of what we needed to keep up our staffing, maintain our buildings and pay for insurance so that we could stay afloat. Without it, I can’t say whether we would be here today.”

Despite this additional resource from the Museum Hardship Fund, the staff still leans on volunteers to fill gaps in running the shop, coffee dispensary and the panning experience as this is too much for one person to handle, especially when large groups come through the door.

Committee member Biddy Manera regularly helps out with the shop and doubles as the Centre’s onsite historian by sharing stories about the families that

ABOVE: General Manager Rick Fennell by one of the centre’s models which demonstrates how gold is processed.

lived in Ross when it was a boomtown.

Meanwhile Rick entertains the crowds with his stories of his search for the ‘brother of the Honourable Roddy Nugget’. One of the highlights of the centre is a replica of NZ’s heaviest nugget – a 3.09 nugget found in Ross that was named after the then Minister of Mines, Roderick McKenzie.

Destination Ross

As a former dairy farmer and panel beater, Rick never envisioned himself in this role, though his jovial manner and impeccable knowledge of the local gold plots make him somewhat irreplaceable as he brings to life the story of gold-mining in the area.

“My interest in the town’s goldmining history was first sparked in 1987 when I completed an access care course through DOC and found all the old watercourses and tunnels in the region over six months. I walked the hills and created maps of all the historic mines in the area. All that comes in quite handy when you’re fielding questions.”

BELOW: Once home to around 4000 miners, Ross had a number of public facilities including a small gaol which is now a visitor attraction.

Although Rick is a living, breathing centrepiece of the experience itself, he realises that scenario is not sustainable, so he is keen to future proof the organisation, though currently he is swamped with work from day-to-day operations. And despite the respite provided by the emergency Museum Hardship Funds, the costs of running the Centre has continued to mount.

“Outside of staffing, there’s security, maintenance and that’s not to mention some of the future projects we’d like to work on like digitising our archives and revamping the exhibition area,” says Biddy. “Because we’re a small town we pool resources, recently we got CCTV installed throughout the area by sharing the cost, nothing goes to waste here.”

Even though the West-coast is growing as a destination amongst mountain-bikers, pack-rafters and adventure seekers, it is hard for the Centre to marry up the demands of its varied visitors base, so currently it is adopting a wait-and-see policy to determine whether there is a return of international tourists. In the meantime, the team are dreaming up ideas to ensure tourists take in all the sights that Ross has to offer.



“At the store we sell gold rings and necklaces made by local jewellers, though the dream is to get couples to come here to pan for gold, stay for a few nights and during that time they’ll get their rings made up. That way, they’ll get the full Ross experience. There are so many opportunities to explore, we just have to get a fuller picture of the post-Covid landscape before we make any big moves,” says Bidy.



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