

THE DOMINION POST

HD AUCKLAND: YOU'RE ALL VERY WELCOME TO IT

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I'VE just spent a week in a different world. You don't need a passport: just discounted air tickets to Auckland.

You could be in Sydney during one of its periodic booms. Many Aucklanders show levels of cocky self-confidence and assuredness not found elsewhere. This stems from the city's growing economic power and wealth. Developers can't keep up with the demand for new office buildings.

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For thousands this sense of well-being is buoyed by Auckland's booming property market - hundred thousand or so dollars price rises are a popular topic of conversation. I know someone who **sold** his Remuera home for \$2.5 **million** to a developer, buying a cheaper \$1.5m home to retire, in nearby Mt Eden.

The ethnic diversity, and burgeoning Asian and Pacific populations, sets Auckland apart. Driving around the city the traffic is noticeably slower and drivers more cautious. This may be because of the Auckland tradition of enforcing lengthy delays at each of its unsynchronised, countless traffic lights; more likely it is because many of its newer residents are wildly unpredictable drivers.

The booming Asian population is creating profound changes. Till recently Dominion Rd, a major city thoroughfare housed a strip of rundown shops; it is now lined with busy **Chinese** cafes. A Dutch businessman, who deals extensively with the community, told me that the apartments being built for **Chinese** settlers are different. "They have tiny kitchens. The **Chinese** rarely cook at home: they'd rather dine out with family and friends."

He reckons the **Chinese** are a major factor in the revitalised city and its property market. "They spend money and work hard. They are a great asset."

When I began making regular **business** trips to Auckland in 1971, it seemed a sleepier version of Wellington, Christchurch or even Dunedin. Prominent figures in the broking, investment and **business** world used to slope off home to Waiheke or wherever at around 4pm. **Business** leaders kept a wary eye on Wellington, where governments could make far reaching and inexplicable political and economic decisions, such as Muldoon's Think Big.

They had other reasons to keep an eye on the capital. All the major banks - dominated by the state owned Bank of New Zealand - were based there; as were investment companies, including the AMP, National Mutual, Colonial and Government Life and fire and general insurers, ie State Insurance and its British and Australian rivals. Wellington broking firms Daysh Renouf, Francis Allison Symes and Jarden were key financial players in the nation's share and bond markets.

Wellington was the centre of the car industry, with Ford, General Motors, Toyota and the New Zealand Motor Corporation major employers. It was the nation's transport hub, with National Airways, the Union Steam Ship and British rivals headquartered in the region, as was the biggest brewing **group**, New Zealand Breweries.

It was a major media centre. Murdoch backed Independent Newspapers' expansion, starting with The Dominion before snapping up papers like The Evening Post, Waikato Times and Press; The New

Zealand Press Association linked all papers. The New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation ran the country's television and radio, in 1970-71, as a sub-editor I wrote news bulletins for national radio and television, plus the ZB network (all from Bowen St). It would have been highly cost efficient.

Oil companies Europa (Todd), BP and Shell and government energy and electricity interests were headquartered in the capital. Evolving telecommunications saw the Post Office telegraph division become Telecom. Wellington was home to the big rural services companies Challenge, Dalgety and all major farmer co-ops, including the **Dairy Board** and the Wool, Apple and Pear and Meat Boards. All these head offices created work for accountants and lawyers.

Since then many of these companies have relocated their head offices to Auckland. Chief executives and directors often use the debatable excuse that they need to be "near the market" when the real reason is that they prefer the lifestyle and closeness to first class travel overseas.

Many chief executives are now Australian and only here as part of a career posting. There were many catalysts to these changes. Wellington-based Brierley Investments targeted many companies; its remaining monument, as former director Sir Selwyn Cushing said, is the Auckland Sky Tower.

The drift north accelerated with Rogernomics, state asset sales and the sudden liberalisation of the economy which led to the 1987 sharemarket crash, leading to control of many companies facing acute stresses or passing to overseas control.

Has Wellington fundamentally changed? I don't think so. It remains an easy place to live: I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. It is home to talented achievers and its economy remains underpinned by central government. It is quietly and without fuss reinventing itself as a major education hub and in innovative technological areas, including film. IT looks set to be a major industry for the rest of this century, reflected by the crowds at the Xero annual meeting last week.

My Auckland descendants love living in Auckland: They are welcome to it!

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