

A Royal Makeover

– Skye Bothma, February 2018

Featherston's iconic Royal hotel reopened its doors last December after two years of intensive renovations. Conveniently situated for travellers in New Zealand's scenic Wairarapa region, the Royal's boutique accommodation is worthy of being a tourist destination in its own right.

Built in 1868 the Royal has been the principal hotel and social hub of Featherston; a much-loved local over the years. After being destroyed in a fire in 1893 it was rebuilt and remained largely unchanged until its new owners, Rob Allen and Janelle Harrington, gave it its latest makeover.

The hotel has been restored to its Victorian glory with rooms sumptuously decorated with furnishings of the time. A steampunk flavour has been added with whimsical features such as glass cabinets filled with antique scientific instruments, wash basins mounted on repurposed vintage treadle sewing machine bases, porcelain lavatories with real pull chains and exposed convoluted copper plumbing, and even a taxidermy animal or two. The luxurious beds are laid with piles of pillows, cushions and faux fur throws just begging you to sink into them.

Each room is unique, each themed with a personality or fictional character of the period. You can spend a night in the Jules Verne room or follow the footsteps of Māori women's suffrage campaigner, in the Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia room.

You might feel you've stepped back in time, but you won't be missing out on the modern conveniences. The rooms are equipped with large flat screen TVs, free Wi-Fi, electric blankets, hairdryers and the usual tea/coffee-making facilities, though you may have to look for them as they're tastefully hidden amongst the old books with worn spines, vintage typewriters and other curiosities.

You don't go to the Royal to check in, drop your bags and head out all hours of the day. This hotel is for 'staying in'. Come in winter when the cold rainy weather gives you an excuse not to go sightseeing. Bring your favourite novel, preferably one set in the 19th or early 20th century, and indulge in late morning lie-ins reading under the cosy covers while you lose yourself in your book and the fantastical world of your surroundings. Spend afternoons lazing sipping cappuccinos in front of the roaring fireplace in the lounge, and in the evening when you head down to dinner, you may even be lucky enough to spot a Victorian apparition at the end of the lamp-lit corridor.