

Christchurch earthquake : assistance for displaced tourists after the quake

Autor(en): **Schütz, Tanja**

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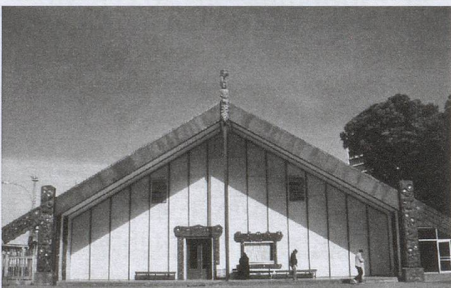
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Assistance for displaced tourists after the quake

Wellington is the main coordination hub for New Zealand's emergency response via the Ministry of Civil Defence bunker located under the Beehive. After the earthquake, an 'air bridge' was established by the NZ Air Force between Christchurch and Wellington.

The majority of initial evacuees, mainly international tourists, were transported from the Civil Defence welfare shelters in Christchurch to Wigram Airbase and flown into Wellington. Evacuees with identification were flown onto Auckland, to catch flights home.

The NZ government viewed this as part of their 'duty of care', albeit its responsibility, to ensure the safety of its visitors during an 'Act of God' - unexpected natural disasters. International evacuees without identification came to Wellington, to organise temporary passports from their respective embassies. Many had



Pipitea Marae

lost their passports, money and possessions, including some young Swiss nationals (from Zürich, Graubünden, etc), who had stepped out for lunch at the time of the quake, unable to retrieve their belongings from damaged hotel/backpacker accommodation in the central CBD.

Pipitea, one of the largest marae located in Wellington City Central, became one of the main evacuation centres and collection points. Other marae in the local area were put on standby, should more temporary accommodation be required, and on call to provide logistical support to Pipitea marae.

Pipitea marae, the local iwi and a large contingent of volunteers (including some members of the Wellington Swiss Club and the Swiss Embassy) provided the evacuees with hot meals, accommodation, clothing, translation services and welfare assistance/advice, health and food products, trauma counselling and cultural entertainment, free of charge.



Communal living

For many evacuees, including the Swiss nationals, it was the first time that they had been on or slept at a marae. This type of communal living was daunting for some, who no doubt preferred the comforts of hotel accommodation. However, there was little alternative accommodation available in Wellington at the time, and as many evacuees had little to no cash funds available, the marae became a welcome temporary respite, also providing an opportunity to reflect whether to continue travelling through New Zealand or head straight home. Some Swiss chose the latter option, others chose to continue to wander around the country.

Assisting the evacuees were the Wellington City Council, Salvation Army and the Wellington Emergency Management Team (WEMO), the National Kohanga Reo Trust and numerous Maori organisations. The level of coordination and logistical preparation at the marae was excellent, derived from years of experience hosting and accommodating large numbers of people within a short period of time (similar to the army). The Swiss nationals commented that they were im-

pressed with the level of coordination, and appreciative of the assistance provided during their short stay.

At the same time, volunteers city wide also assisted with the Pipitea collection point packing bottled water, non-perishable food, tools (shovels etc), toilet paper, buckets, rubbish bags, cleaning products, camping/safety equipment, health products, nappies, baby food and wipes to send to those affected in Christchurch.

On the weekend of the 26 February, three large containers headed to Wigram Air Force base, unloaded by a large contingent of the Canterbury university/school students 'army' and Maori wardens, distributing its contents to the wider community, particularly those living in lower socio economic suburbs.

The combined effort highlighted that preparation, volunteering and a strong sense of community can make a big difference, despite adversity. Make sure you are prepared in the event of an emergency. Check 'Be prepared to get thru' - www.civildefence.govt.nz for helpful tips.

Tania Schütz



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