

Aramoana

The tiny seaside village, Aramoana, is written into New Zealand's history in blood. It's the site of one of the country's worse mass murders.

On the 13th of November, 1990, David Gray, a reclusive local resident with paranoia and “fanatical ideas”, used a high-powered rifle to shoot anyone who moved in the village. In a 34-hour rampage, Gray murdered 13 people, including two children and a policeman. Eventually cornered by the Police Armed Offenders Squad, he was shot to death with five bullets.

There is, however, cause to remember Aramoana for reasons other than that grisly incident.

The name, Aramoana, means “pathway to the sea”. Half an hour’s drive away from Dunedin, the area is home to a vast array of wildlife and plants, which thrive in the extensive salt marshes and sand flats. The land provides an important feeding ground for oyster-catchers, gulls, black swans, spur-winged plovers, banded dotterels, white-faced herons, kingfishers, and yellow-eyed penguins. In the summer it is treated to visits from the migratory godwits.

Aramoana is also home to a large number of inveterbrate shellfish. Its cockles are among the largest in the country.

Lying opposite the albatross colony at Taiaroa Heads, Aramoana boasts interesting rock formations, beautiful white sands, massive sand dunes, and good surf. A rocked-lined mole stretches out to sea alongside a deep-water port to protect the beach from erosion. Walk to the end of the mole and you can see a seal colony, a population of white-fronted terns, and blue penguins swimming in the ocean. Divers can explore old shipwrecks and a varied marine life.

Plans to build an aluminium smelter at Aramoana in the early 1980s met fierce public opposition. Fearing the destruction of precious wildlife and the sensitive natural environment, protesters came out in force. Among them was Ralph Hotere, a prominent New Zealand artist, who focused a series of artworks against the smelter. Hotere would nail up large sheets of corrugated iron, splashed with anti-smelter messages. Ultimately, plans for the smelter were scuttled after an independent economic study showed it to be financially unviable.

Since that close encounter with industrial interests, Aramoana has been made a conservation area. Recently, the Department of Conservation built a boardwalk over its wetlands to provide a good vantage point for viewing plants and wildlife, and a native tree arboretum.