



Nice to Meet Up...

**TO MEET
UP NICE**

Thousands of Wellingtonians use www.meetup.com to make new friends, explore hobbies, and even build new communities. So what's the deal with the site – and is it for you?

Article by Max Rashbrooke and photography by Alden Williams

When Scott Heiferman built a website to help his New York neighbours come together in the wake of 9/11, he expected a number of things to come from it. But not, one imagines, a zombie flash mob. Still, that's what he got, thanks to the enthusiastic embrace of his site www.meetup.com by the thousands of Wellingtonians who use it on a weekly basis.

Heiferman had been a tech entrepreneur with a string of successful businesses behind him – including the online ad agency *ittraffic* – when those planes crashed into the twin towers. In the aftermath of the disaster, he was struck by the way people connected with each other. “For a little bit there, New York became a pretty friendly place,” he told a conference several years ago. “I talked to more neighbours in the days after 9/11 than I had in recent years of living in New York, having moved to New York from Iowa a few years earlier.” The result is a global phenomenon that has drawn in over 11 million people in 45,000 cities.

Meetup's *raison d'être* is best summed up by the phrase, ‘Using the internet to get off the internet’. The site's simple, intuitive interface is designed to let people find other like-minded individuals – but then meet up in real life, not online. This socialising is orchestrated through the Meetup group system, in which anyone can, for a small monthly fee, set up a group devoted to whatever they like – except, as the website puts it, “hate or crime”. They then create events, and issue invites to anyone they have accepted into the group.

The Wellington region has hundreds of these Meetup groups devoted to a dizzying array of interests, from the Kyrgyz Alliance – dedicated to helping people from Kyrgyzstan assimilate into Wellington life – to the Wellington Girly Book Club. There are groups for people into mind control (18 “delicious creators” are members of Law of Attraction Devotees), photography, tech start-ups, and simply watching movies. (See the outbox, ‘If that's what you're into’, for more details.) Whatever your area of interest, Meetup wants you to do something about it. A search on paranormal groups in the Wellington region, for instance, returns the message, “There aren't any paranormal Meetups within 100 miles of Wellington, New Zealand – well, not yet!” and urges “a new paranormal Meetup – organized by you. Get it started!”

Someone who has got it started is Cara Hill, the organiser of the Circa Theatre Meetup Group. Founded in 2010, the group has 184 members, although in practice most opening nights get around 20 people. Hill, who works at Circa, set it up after

looking for ways to attract new audiences. “We were also looking for a way to create a sort of theatre club for people who love going to the theatre but don't go as often as they [would] like for one reason or another,” she says.

Each time a new show starts, Hill invites group members along – and offers bonuses for those who do. As well as meeting first for a drink and chat, and sometimes dinner, group members get to hang around for opening-night parties and ‘meet and greet’ sessions with the actors. “The Meetup group sort of gets VIP treatment at Circa,” Hill says. In return, the theatre gets more loyal, paying patrons. “As for the box office, we schedule a Meetup event for every production, so it certainly doesn't hurt!”

With 180 members, the Circa group is one of the larger Meetups in Wellington. But perhaps the biggest – and certainly the noisiest – of them all is Adventure Wellington, which has morphed from an outdoor activities group into a 2,000-strong (and growing) organisation dedicated to running increasingly weird and wonderful events. October last year became an unofficial zombie month, featuring

a zombie flash mob at the Wellington railway station and ‘Zombie Island’, a 5-kilometre fun run around Matiu/Somes Island in which participants were chased by, well, zombies.

Adventure Wellington member Keith Miller, an Aro Valley web designer, joined the group last year after “the death of a relationship” and with the desire to “meet new people and do what I wanted to do, which was essentially go out for walks at the weekend”. The walks were a success, socially and otherwise – “it's much easier to talk [to people] when you have got a bunch of people in the same situation, rather than you being the only new person” – but he also discovered Adventure Wellington were running other things under the rough heading of “well-organised silliness”.

The first was a pirate treasure day – “that was the start of the crazy events” – and then it was on to zombies. “[Initially] I didn't care for zombies at all,” Miller says. “In fact the first time I heard about Zombie Island, I thought, I don't like zombies and I don't like running. But then I heard everyone else was doing it... [and so] you end up doing lots of things that you wouldn't normally do.” Nor is there any shortage of things to do: since 2008, Adventure Wellington has run over 1000 events – an average of nearly five a week – organised by dozens of different group members. “I'm consistently amazed by how many events there are,” Miller says.

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Previous page: Meeting new people doesn't always have to be this dramatic, but the Zombie Island Fun Run arranged by Adventure Wellington was frighteningly successful. Photo: Brendon Doran. **Above (from left to right):** Linc Gasking, who helped found Meetup.com group Chalkle and is also involved in Adventure Wellington, at his day job; Cara Hill, from Circa Theatre, who founded a group to connect people attending opening nights. Opposite page (from top): More zombies attack during the Adventure Wellington event on Mātiu/Somes Island. Photo: Brendon Doran; Not all meetup.com events are frivolous, here Chalkle members gain practical advice on making their first will; Michael Upchurch had mixed experiences from his time in a Wellington Meetup.com book club.

He also belongs to the Chalkle group, in which members run free or low-cost events where they teach their specialist skills to other members. One week Miller attended four Chalkle events – “I made a long bow – as you do – from a piece of plastic tubing, I did an introductory class in sign language, and an introductory class in Maori, and went to a ukulele class” – although since then he has “eased off a bit”.

Miller says his friends sometimes think he has “gone a bit mad... whenever they see photographs of me dressed up as a zombie or a pirate. But I'm really enjoying it. I feel almost embarrassed about the amount of fun I've been having.” He adds: “People expect me to be doing something silly at the weekend, and they are disappointed if I'm not.”

Not everyone continues with their Meetups, however. Michael Upchurch, who works in publishing, moved here from Britain last year, and joined Meetup's Pensive Faust Wellington Book Club. “Having just moved to a country in which I knew only a handful of people, it did seem a good way to meet people, while also having a lot of relevance to my work interests,” he says.

At first Upchurch thoroughly enjoyed the Meetups, which were based largely around book discussions but also encompassed film outings and literature-inspired events. “But as I went to more and more, it became a bit predictable in terms of the feedback on the books and the same people always speaking. We had to find venues to cater for a large amount of people, when only a few of those people were making meaningful contributions. In a way, it was a victim of its own success.”

The Meetup framework “generally is excellent”, he says. But the events “need to be fairly contained and everybody has to be familiar with the books, if it's to work well... I was surprised by how fragmented and transitory the group was. It wasn't tight knit, as I'd expected. Also, by this time, I had been here nine to ten months. I felt settled – I didn't necessary need to go, although I would have gone had I continued to enjoy it.”

That transitory nature derives from the fact that many Meetup members are people without pre-existing social networks – including those new to the city – and they often eventually drop out of their

Meetup groups once they establish other, less formalised social circles. But that's not true for everyone. Hill says the Circa Theatre group has a mix of people new to Wellington, people returning after a long time away, and people “who have lived here all of their lives but who just want to get out and meet new people and see... theatre”.

Some Meetup groups, moreover, aim to build a permanent and deep-reaching community – and are doing so in radical, exciting ways. Linc Gasking, who helped found Chalkle, says the group's success “is a testament to the fact that Meetup represents the next generation of social networking online, where people aren't just going online for its own sake or going to something like Facebook where you have got hundreds or thousands of friends you've never actually met.

“In actual fact, you are going to use the internet's long tail to meet like-minded people with similar values who are interested in similar things – and using that to make potentially great, lifelong friends in real life.” Even Gasking, a long-time builder of online and offline communities, says he has been surprised by the “profoundness of the connections” that people have made at Chalkle events. Bringing individuals together, especially through the act of learning a new skill, goes way beyond the “surface” effect of many online interactions, he says.

Like Heiferman, Gasking had his thinking shifted by personal trials – in his case, severe damage to his house in the Christchurch earthquake. “It opened my eyes to the real need for connectedness in the community,” he says. Unlike Americans, who used Meetup to organise Superstorm Sandy clean-ups last year, New Zealanders haven't yet switched onto its disaster-relief potential. But that could easily change, Gasking says. The Zombie Island event was, despite its obvious entertainment value, also a serious exercise, organised alongside the city council's Wellington Emergency Management Office and containing important messages about preparing for disasters.

“If there's an emergency in Wellington,” Gasking says, “I can imagine that Meetup would be the perfect platform to motivate a lot of people to get things done, without the government being involved.” After all, as he puts it, “A connected community is a strong community – in so many ways.”



If that's what you're into

There's a Meetup group to suit (nearly) every taste:

- » **NZ Goat Meat Growers and Consumers Group** Nine "goat lovers" come together to discuss "co-ordinating production and processing of quality farmed meat goats", under which heading they debate such urgent topics as the need for a "buck progeny test", "contract grazing weanlings" and "use of AI".
- » **Sewers, Dressmakers and all other Fabric Hoarders** A forum for crafty people to "chat about current projects, share ideas and advice, learn about dressmaking from each other, and generally get to know other people who love making things out of beautiful fabrics".
- » **TAROT Wellington** A group dedicated to using tarot as "an excellent tool to uncover the path to personal development and success!" Members attend events such as "a Court Card a Day keeps boredom away!" and "Holiday get-together with your active cards!"
- » **Wellington Positivity** Some 22 "Positives" have joined a group whose description reads simply: "This is an experiment in Boot strapping a social life in Wellington. I'll post events I am hosting and these are open for anyone to attend. Please check your negativity at the door."
- » **Island Bay Toastmasters** Wellington is, according to this group's site, "the most Toastmastered city in the world – per capita". Untroubled by modesty, the group also happens to believe that "Island Bay Toastmasters has some of the best Toastmasters in Wellington! So, come along and learn from the experts."

Meetups a-plenty

The worldwide www.meetup.com phenomenon – in numbers:

Meetup.com HQ staff 80
Monthly visitors 10.8 million
Members 11.1 million
Monthly RSVPs 2 million
Monthly Meetups 340,000
Local groups 105,000
Meetup topics 117,000
Cities 45,000