



# 10 GREAT REASONS TO VISIT

# The Bay of Islands

*Our nation's birthplace offers history, culture, scenic beauty and some mighty fine seafood*

WORDS LIZ LIGHT

## HISTORY WALK

**1** The perfect way to arrive in the history-rich town of Russell is by sea from Paihia, as even the ferry is vintage. From the wharf the sickle-shaped beach fans out in both directions. Giant pohutukawa hem the sand and historic buildings hide behind them.

I stroll along the bay, past cute shops and quiet cafés, keeping an eye out for a cannon that helped defend the town from Hone Heke's last attack. It has a new job now. Children climb onto it and pretend it's a horse, and in summer they hang their swimming towels over it – a sweet job for a 200-year-old instrument of war.

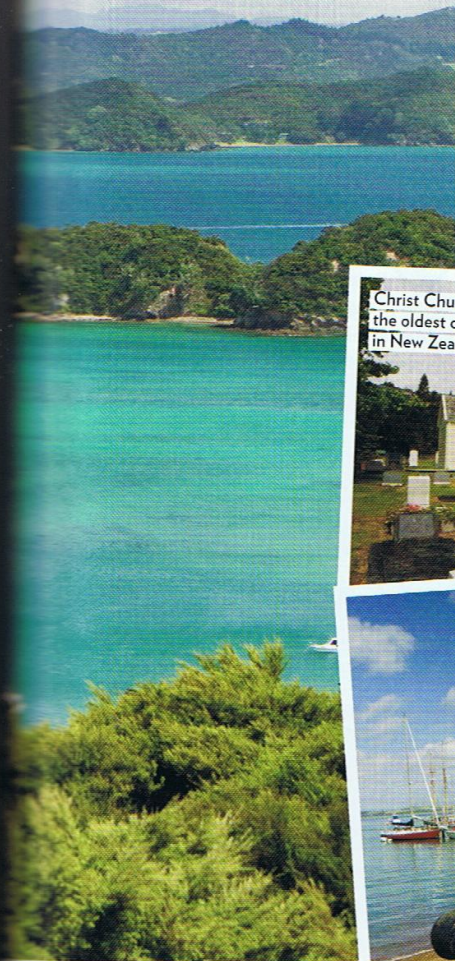
Dwarfing the pohutukawa is a Moreton Bay fig, planted in 1870. Its stunning trunk is a

massive bundle of knotted and woven roots. The tree shelters New Zealand's most charming police station, a fine example of Victorian Gothic architecture with a steep slate roof. [www.russellnz.co.nz](http://www.russellnz.co.nz)

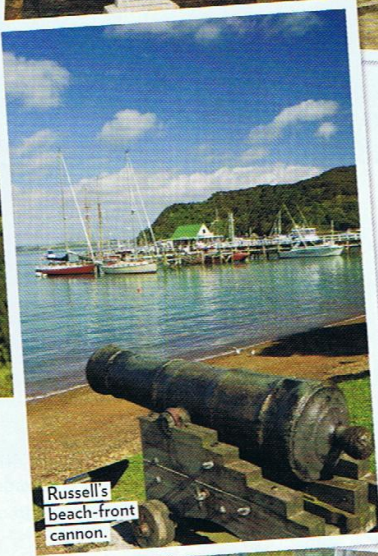
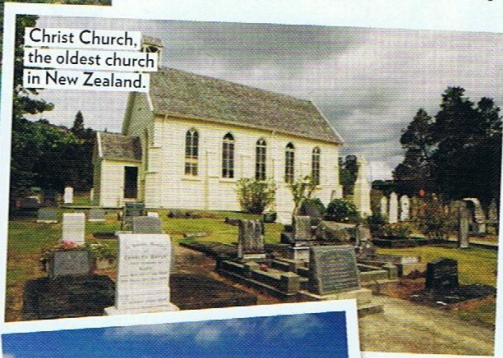
## 184 YEARS IN THE DRINK

**2** The Duke of Marlborough Hotel bar has been serving alcoholic refreshments to 'rascals and reprobates' since 1827; it has the first liquor licence ever issued. New, young, passionate-about-Russell owners have tastefully restored the dining room, now home to the Bay of Islands' best restaurant. Have a glass of wine on the front veranda, watch the sun set then adjourn to the

The crystal-clear water of the Bay of Islands beckons even in winter.



Christ Church, the oldest church in New Zealand.



Russell's beach-front cannon.

dining room for a top-notch meal.  
[www.theduke.co.nz](http://www.theduke.co.nz)

## OH HOLY PLACE

**3** Rascals and reprobates occasionally repent, so in 1835 Anglican missionaries built Christ Church Te Whare Karakia o Kororareka, now the oldest church in New Zealand. It survived Hone Heke's 1845 ransacking of Russell almost unscathed, although the walls still bear musket-ball holes. Its cemetery tells intimate tales of love and death on gravestones. Inside, the ambience is simple and serene. The pews have rows of cushions covered in



The Just Imagine art gallery.

hand-stitched tapestry depicting the pretty town, many nearly as old as the church.  
[www.oldchurch.org.nz](http://www.oldchurch.org.nz)

## FRENCH CONNECTION

**4** The Anglicans had a base with Christ Church and the Catholics felt they needed one too. Pompallier House, a unique French-style building built in 1841, was the base of the Roman Catholic mission and a printery. Its construction is 'rammed-earth', meaning the walls are made of earth, sand and lime. The first bibles in Māori were printed here along with 40,000 other religious books in Māori. When Bishop Pompallier, after whom the house is named, visited from Auckland he stayed in a cottage in the glorious garden. The house is now a working

museum where you can see tanning, bookbinding and printing.  
[www.bayofislandsinfo.co.nz](http://www.bayofislandsinfo.co.nz)

## NATIONAL PRIDE

**5** Had we not already been booked for the 10am tour of the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, we may have been tempted to laze away the morning, but this is our nation's birthplace. The Treaty House basks in a sun-filled garden. It was here that James Busby, the official British resident, his wife Agnes and their children lived until 1882. The Whare Rūnanga, the meeting house, stands nearby. It's unique in that it was planned and built by all the major Māori tribes, and the carving and panelling inside represent many different styles. It's a powerful building – tall, spacious and proud, with carved wood glowing golden. Here I can feel the spirit of the people it represents.  
[www.waitangi.net.nz](http://www.waitangi.net.nz)

## HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

**6** The Bay of Islands Swordfish Club in Russell (there are also clubrooms in Paihia) is not for the squeamish; bright-eyed marlin heads greet me at the top of the stairs and ▶

IPS  
UP  
VE



The tall ship  
R. Tucker  
Thompson.

there are huge stuffed marlin and sailfish hanging from the ceiling. Lots of them. The walls are covered in photographs of famous folk - including the Duke of Windsor and Mrs Wallis Simpson - and their big-fish catch. The biggest fish recorded in this club is a 460kg blue marlin caught in 1968. An old seadog called Stew, propping up the bar, tells me he stopped game fishing because he felt sorry for the fish and that, these days, sports fishermen increasingly go for tag and release. The good news is that fish numbers are increasing. [www.swordfish.co.nz](http://www.swordfish.co.nz)

### ALL AT SEA

**7** There is nothing quite as romantic as sailing on a tall ship. R. Tucker Thompson, a traditional 19th century gaff-rigged schooner, offers day sails and evening cruises in the Bay of Islands. She's 26 metres long, her spars are Oregon pine, she has rope rigging and carries eight sails. Guests get involved, hauling sails, taking turns at the wheel and checking out charts, sextant, and compass - the things that navigation needed

before GPS. Skimming across the sea on a tall ship with wind-filled sails is an experience of majesty, beauty and wonderment. [www.tucker.co.nz](http://www.tucker.co.nz)

### SUITE TREAT

**8** The rising sun floods my bedroom and casts a shiny silver ladder across the bay. I'm with a girlfriend and The Waterfront Suites in Paihia are a special-occasion treat. We laze about in bathrobes and natter over a cuppa. Paihia starts waking up, runners leg it along the sea-edge footpath, ferries putter back and forth and a bright orange parachute hangs in the sky. What a way to greet the winter day! [www.thewaterfrontpaihia.co.nz](http://www.thewaterfrontpaihia.co.nz)

### LOVELY CURIOS

**9** I never expected a small place like Russell to have fabulous shops but I stumble on a couple of beauties. Just Imagine specialises in art glass, sculpture, painting and unusual jewellery from a range of international artists and emerging local

artists. Just along York Street is the tiny Fait Accompli, once the generator room for the old Telecom building next door. Owner Lulu specialises in personalised embroidery on napkins, pillowcases, aprons and T-shirts. She designs the motifs herself (mostly icons such as pohutukawa

and koru) and sits in the middle of her shop, at her embroidery machine, pumping out products. [www.justimagine.co.nz](http://www.justimagine.co.nz)



The Bay of Islands  
Swordfish Club.

“**SKIMMING  
ACROSS  
THE SEA  
ON A TALL  
SHIP IS AN  
EXPERIENCE  
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MAJESTY**”

### SUPER-FRESH SEAFOOD

**10** All good things come to an end and real life in Auckland beckons. The last treat is lunch at 35 Degrees South. It's round, has an aquarium in the middle, and is built out over the water at Paihia. My calamari steaks are tender and delicious. We toast ourselves in the sun, watch boats and people come and go on the wharf and know, for sure, that nothing much beats a beautiful winter day in the Bay. [www.35south.co.nz](http://www.35south.co.nz)

PHOTOGRAPHS LIZ LIGHT AND GETTY IMAGES