

Treasure islands

If you want pristine beaches, divine food, high adventure and a place steeped in history, look no further than our very own northern jewel, the Bay of Islands.

STORY VIRGINIA LARSON

Aerial view of Okahu Island, one of about 144 islands dotting the picturesque east coast horizon.



BAY OF ISLANDS. You can blame Captain James Cook for this most prosaic of names, given to Northland's magnificent natural harbour in 1769 when the *Endeavour* anchored off the Russell peninsula. Still, you can't fault Cook for accuracy. At last count there were 144 islands spilling out to the horizon – some little more than rocky outcrops, others supporting holiday retreats, farms or regenerating native bush now thrumming with birdsong.

The islands and settlements scattered around the bay all have their stories, a good many of which you'll hear when you hitch a ride on one of the harbour cruises that sail out of Paihia. The skipper of our catamaran

regales us with history, ecology and a few well-spun sailor's yarns while pointing out landmarks big and small as we skim over ever-changing intensities of blue. "Nine Pin," he says, waving a nut-brown arm in the direction of a shark fin-shaped rock. "So called because it's exactly nine nautical miles from the old Russell post office." We skirt Moturua Island, with its 27 archaeological sites and evidence of New Zealand's very earliest Polynesian settlers at lovely Mangahāwea Bay; then Motuarohia, one of a chain of islands to benefit from the work of local conservation group Project Island Song. Besides a profusion of native birds it's now home to a 128-strong translocation of giant wētā, our captain adds, rather too enthusiastically. Nervous glances are exchanged among the bean-bag loafers on the foredeck. But we're too chilled to ponder the frisson of a mega-wētāpunga encounter, and there are other wildlife



distractions – bobbing little blue penguins, silver flashes of fish, and gannets gliding the updrafts or circling in thermals.

Dolphins love a harbour cruise, where they can surf the boat's wake and perform acrobatics for the crowds. The motivation for this playful behaviour, even marine mammal experts agree, is dolphins' sense of curiosity and plain old-fashioned fun. So make like the dolphins and switch to fun and curiosity mode – what better guide to a Bay of Islands getaway.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Nearly 80 years after Cook sharpened a feather quill and marked Bay of Islands on his New Zealand map, naturalist Charles Darwin sailed into the harbour, landing first at Russell – then called Kororāreka and infamous for being the largest and roughest whaling port in the Southern Hemisphere. Darwin summed up the settlement's seafaring and grog-shop rabble as "the very refuse of society" and promptly decamped to the buttoned-up missionary settlement across the water at Paihia.

What a difference a century or so makes. Today, Russell is a village of around 750 permanent residents, many occupying gabled heritage houses with neatly clipped lawns and roses rambling over white picket fences. Even with the influx of summer visitors, it has a gentrified and villagey vibe – helped by its historic places restrictions and lack of reticulated water, which limit big developments.

Everyone gravitates to the Duke of Marlborough Hotel – "refreshing rascals and reprobates since 1827" – because it's smack-bang on the waterfront and you can dine on its wide verandah, choosing from locally sourced, seasonal produce, rascally good red meats and a range of seafood options befitting its location.

1. On a Barefoot Sailing Adventure in the Bay of Islands. 2. A tūi feasts from a flax/harakeke flower. 3. Wētāpunga are released as part of work by local conservation group, Project Island Song.



Alternatively, buy a craft beer at the bar then park yourself at a beachfront table and watch the people, boats and clouds pass by.

At the Russell Museum, pick up a Heritage Trail pamphlet and take a leisurely wander back through history: up Flagstaff Hill, where Hōne Heke felled the flagpole four times in protest against the British; and to Pompallier Mission, an 1842 rammed-earth building, where Catholic missionaries busily printed te reo Māori translations of religious texts through the mid-1800s. The French-style pioneer printer has been restored to full working order, as has the tannery, once used to make leather for book and Bible covers.

Follow your own "cemetery trail"; reading the gravestone inscriptions is like eavesdropping on a slice of our ruffian, rollicking, hard-scrabble and God-fearing pioneer past. You'll inevitably find your way to Russell's Christ Church – built in 1835, which makes it the oldest church still in existence in the country. It's no lie to say history is etched in its walls; you can trace your fingers across musket-ball holes from the New Zealand Land Wars.

WAITANGI WELCOME

Across the harbour, Paihia's pretty beach parade meanders north to the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, where two cultures hongied, haggled, skirmished and signed – in 1840 – the treaty that marks the beginning of New Zealand as a nation. It was a hasty union, based on unbridled imperialism as well as good intentions – and misunderstandings on both sides – but these now peaceful, manicured grounds and the stories told in their buildings will impress even reluctant students of New Zealand history.



4. The Duke of Marlborough on the Russell seafont. 5. Inside Te Kōngahu, the Museum of Waitangi. 6. Christ Church at Russell. 7. Te Rau Aroha museum. 8. Waitangi Treaty House.

Te Kōngahu Museum brings the treaty to life; it's laid out like a walk through history and combines a stunning collection of taonga with deeply moving audio-visual experiences. Don't miss the new Te Rau Aroha museum, which marks the commitment and sacrifice of Māori in the New Zealand Armed Forces through the framework of the treaty's article three – the price of citizenship. One of the galleries is dedicated to the 28 (Māori) Battalion's A Company, most of whom came from Northland. It is dominated by a vast wall of names and faces of those who served; some remain silhouettes, but photos and information still turn up.

Our guide tells us that last year a Kaikohe electrician handed over a photo of an ancestor that filled a gap on the memorial wall. Earlier, a treasure trove of war diaries and photos by Corporal Walter Wordley were found tucked away in his granddaughter's house; they help weave together the stories of "the Gum Diggers" – the 720 men of A Company.

Make use of Waitangi's "experience pass" and join a guided tour, explore the Treaty House, the carved Te Whare Rūnanga meeting house and mighty waka taua. Then linger among the stands of pōhutukawa – time-capsules of formality, planted by royal visitors and a muster of governors-general from Lord Bledisloe in the 1930s to our current Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy. On the hill under the flagstaff is a perfect spot to soak in the sweep of bay and reflect on just how far we've come as a young nation.

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT

If you're a history nut and a fruit bat, Kerikeri is your kind of town. Especially on the

9. Stone Store at the Kerikeri Mission Station. 10. Slow-roasted tomato and ricotta bruschetta from Arcadia Lodge. 11. Snorkelling in the Bay of Islands' clear waters on a Barefoot Sailing Adventures' trip. 12. Golden Sand beachfront accommodation at Cable Bay. 13. Exploring one of the many beaches on offer.



weekend, when the Old Packhouse Market bursts into life around 8.30am for four or five hours of rain-or-shine trade and live entertainment. Local producers pile in with fresh pickings from the surrounding rich soils and subtropical temperatures: citrus, of course, persimmon, feijoas, grapes, fat blackberries, tangy raspberries, piles of greens and lots of pot plants.

Follow the hand-written chalkboards to sample local wines, craft beer, gourmet street food and damn fine baking. The humble, yet so-easy-to-get-wrong date scone, is made exactly right at two locations – the Old Packhouse Bakery with its "famous" date and cheese scones, and the Kerikeri Inlet's Honey House Cafe, where we tuck into feather-light versions and good coffee.

Tear yourself away for a mosey around the Stone Store – open for business since 1836 – and the elegantly proportioned, 1822-built



Kemp House, with its ghost stories and tales of derring-do. As you cross the bridge, re-imagine this tranquil scene as the Kororipo – "swirling waters" – it once was, when war canoes would be propelled around and around in the pool, churning up the water in a spectacular display before moving down the inlet ready for battle.

Heading north to Doubtless Bay, leave SH10 for the loop through charming little Mangōnuī, with its colonial courthouse, hotel, hall, store and houses strung along the tree-lined waterfront drive. You'll be tempted to hang out over the water at the fish and chippery, but you have an important appointment at Cable Bay: to pile into Golden Sand's beachfront cabana and do absolutely nothing but swim lazily in clear water; ponder how the sand here truly is a demerara-sugar shade of gold and the bay is actually named for being the terminus of a telegraph cable from Vancouver in 1902.

Floating over a gentle swell, you'll wonder why this stretch of coast was found in a 2006 scientific study to have the second bluest sky in the world, after Rio de Janeiro. It would win the contest now, we're betting on it. northlandnz.com

PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY, TAMAIRA HOOK, DARREN MARKIN

Sleep

ARCADIA LODGE

This graceful 1902 Russell villa is set in lush gardens and offers five luxury suites – all with harbour views – plus an adjacent two-bedroom cottage. Greg Hoover and Peter Gillan are impeccable hosts: their antique-meets-modern furnishings wrap you in luxurious comfort; 20 years a chef, Gillan whips up arguably the best breakfast in the bay, served on the deck in summer. His slow-roasted tomato and ricotta bruschetta is masterful, and when Hoover sets a basket of his freshly baked almond croissants on your table, kiss your willpower goodbye. arcadialodge.co.nz

GOLDEN SAND

"Beachfront accommodation" is an understatement at this Cable Bay establishment. Its five apartments and suites are all a few jandalled steps away from sand and sea, but the beachside cabana takes the prize. It is cleverly self-contained, funkily furnished and you'll find yourselves cancelling that restaurant dinner for homestyle burgers and kumara chips from the Cable Bay store, eaten at your outdoor table. There are loaner e-bikes for a spin to Mangōnuī but, honestly, you won't want to leave. goldensand.co.nz



Eat

SAGE @ PAROA BAY

It's a 15-minute drive from Russell but the views over the Bay of Islands at this hillside winery restaurant make the trip worthwhile. And the menu – short but near-perfectly formed – is all about local, sustainably caught fish and seafood and the best of the country's meat and

produce. If you can't decide, there's a New Zealand seafood platter and a charcuterie selection that will tickle all your taste-bud fancies. thelindisgroup.com

CHARLOTTE'S KITCHEN

A British convict who led a mutiny on the ship transporting her to Tasmania in 1806, Charlotte Badger was possibly the first white woman to settle in New Zealand. This sunny eatery at the end of the Paihia wharf celebrates her buccaneering spirit in style, with themed artworks, live music nights, a menu that swings daringly from steamed pork buns to pork knuckle, and a suitably swashbuckling cocktail list. charlotteskitchen.co.nz

Play

BAREFOOT SAILING ADVENTURES

You really do drop your shoes in a plastic bin on Paihia Beach before stepping barefoot onto Captain Luke's 33ft catamaran *Kopiko*. You won't need them again – unless you choose the walking option at the lunchtime island anchorage (there's also paddle boarding, snorkelling or beach-pottering on the Island Hopper cruise). Sailing the Bay of Islands, nestled in a bean-bag on the trampoline-net foredeck, is pure sun-kissed, wind-swept pleasure. And you'll be in the best of hands if you want to try sailing the boat or helping haul the sheets – them's the ropes, landlubbers. barefootsailing.co.nz



Getting there

KERIKERI

Air New Zealand operates daily non-stop flights to Kerikeri from Auckland with connections across the domestic network.

- Contact Centre
0800 737 000
- Holidays Travel Brokers
0800 737 767
- airnewzealand.co.nz

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER