



Travel

Editor-in-Chief Sido Kitchin

5 reasons to love THE BAY OF ISLANDS

Sido shares her top picks for exploring the historic region

One of the wonderful things about your kids growing up is you can finally book a babysitter and plan a weekend away with your husband without feeling guilty. And the Bay of Islands has got to be one of the most romantic places to zip away to for a mini-vacay.

1 Where to stay?

For a luxurious once-in-a-lifetime stay, check out Donkey Bay Inn in Russell. The sumptuous interiors of this boutique hotel will have design lovers swooning. Indeed, the beauty of the architectural eco-friendly marvel, with a garden on the roof, is only outshone by the views across the Bay of Islands. With manager Matt's impeccable personal service, including a lavish breakfast spread, we felt like royalty. The other wonderful place to stay in Russell is the grand Duke of Marlborough Hotel. Established in 1827, this old dame is steeped in history as New Zealand's oldest licensed hotel. If only those walls could talk! Right on the waterfront, the Duke has been lovingly restored with light and lovely bedrooms, and an eclectic mix of artworks throughout.

2 Grab a bite

Head to the Duke for a sunset cocktail on the balcony before dinner. The menu's full

of classics and showcases fab seafood from the region – if you like oysters, try those from the Waitakere Inlet. The Duke's fish and chips are world-famous in NZ too. A quick ferry ride across to Paihia is Charlotte's Kitchen, right on the wharf. We enjoyed live music and chats with friendly locals alongside our delicious meal. If you don't mind the whole restaurant staring, brave the slow-roasted pork knuckle. Huge but amazing! A fresh and funky little newbie on the food scene is Patois – said "patwa" – where we stopped for a stonking cocktail and tapas. Low-key and relaxed with nice tunes, this cruisy spot serves local food made with love (try the octopus!) – and it wasn't expensive. Our host Chris was the friendliest dude. In fact, service in every Bay of Islands restaurant was the best we've come across in NZ.

3 Beat the feet

We far exceeded our 10,000 daily step goal in the Bay of Islands because it's such a glorious place to explore. To get the heart pumping, walk the Flagstaff Hill Loop Track. It's a bit of a climb, but at the top of the hill, you'll get gorgeous 360° views and learn a little about the turbulent history of the former pa site – famed for flying the first Union Jack

in 1840, then being promptly chopped down five times by local Maori. Tapeka Point is a lovely beach walk too.

4 Get on the water

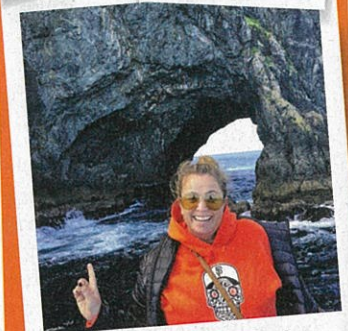
To experience the full glory of the Bay of Islands, head out on the water and get some air in your hair. The quick ferry rides between Paihia and Russell are always fun, but to see more, jump on the Hole in the Rock Dolphin Cruise for a three-hour jaunt. You'll almost always spot dolphins – and can swim with them if you're game – but it's also a great way to see all the hidden sanctuaries along Cape Brett, and of course the famous Hole in the Rock.

5 A bit of culture

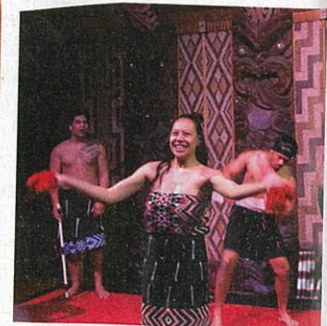
A highlight was a trip to the Waitangi Treaty Grounds. We'd both previously visited this historic site where the treaty was signed in 1840, but having a tour made all the difference. I could have listened to our guide Sharee for days – her knowledge was off the charts! I was transfixed in the meeting house as she shared the stories of tribal ancestors which the carvings symbolised. Earlier, we'd had an incredible kawakawa massage treatment at the Paihia Beach Resort – using kawakawa leaves, balm and hot stones – which prompted Sharee to run off and grab us a kawakawa health tonic she'd made. What an amazing personal touch!



The lush Donkey Bay Inn, which features a portrait of Princess Margaret waterskiing!



Our Fullers GreatSights cruise gave us an up-close look at the Hole in the Rock.



Ka pai! A wonderful display of Maori culture in the meeting house at Waitangi.