

Finding renewal in New Zealand's birthplace

Jill K. Robinson | July 21, 2017



Photo: Jill K. Robinson, Special To The Chronicle

During the height of the whaling industry, Russell was known as "the hellhole of the Pacific."

The sun sets, and it takes three steps from the roadside to be absorbed into a wall of green. Birdsong falls into the air like liquid silver, haunting and exquisitely garbled. The twitters, trills and creaks weave in with the feathery ferns and towering kauri trees of the Waipoua Forest, the largest remaining tract of native forest in the Northland.

Anywhere else, I'd have my eyes firmly fixed on the trail ahead, wary for snakes or dangerous critters. But I'm in New Zealand, and there are none. So, my head is angled up into the green canopy, where shafts of the day's last minutes of sunlight create a kaleidoscope effect – a swirl of emerald, azure and gold.

The Northland is known as the birthplace of New Zealand. It was here in Hokianga where Kupe, the first Polynesian explorer to reach New Zealand, landed his *waka* (ocean-going canoe). It was here in Russell that the country's first seaport and first British settlement were established, and in nearby Okiato was New Zealand's first capital. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed here in Waitangi, resulted in the declaration of British sovereignty over New Zealand and is the country's founding document.

The cultural history in this distinctive and beautiful region at the far northern edge of the North Island – from the kauri forests to the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, from the colonial buildings and whaling history in Russell to the spot that separates the Pacific Ocean from the Tasman Sea where Maori spirits are believed to leap to the water to return to their ancestral homeland of Hawaiki – offers a deeper understanding of its complex past.

History and legend are bountiful in the rural Northland, and the region sometimes goes by the nickname Te Hiku o Te Ika, "the tail of the fish," referring to the legend that New Zealand was fished from the sea by the demigod Maui.

It's a place where you're not at all surprised that the gates to the magical forest never close.

The ancient green world of majestic trees in the Waipoua Forest begins to get dark quickly once the sun goes down. After the bird symphony, all I hear are my footsteps on the path amid the living entities that were mature trees before any human came to the shores of New Zealand.

Kauri are among the world's mightiest trees, growing to more than 164 feet tall, with trunk girths up to 54 feet, and living for more than 2,000 years. Kauri forests once blanketed the top of the country from the Far North of Northland to Te Kauri, south of Auckland, and were common when the first people arrived around 1,000 years ago.

"I am a seed; despite being small, I am of great value," says Teresa, my Maori guide. "That's something we were told as kids, and when you look at the kauri seed and the eventual size of the kauri tree, you understand."

She hands me a winged, brown kauri seed, which is tiny in my palm.



Photo: Jill K. Robinson, Special To The Chronicle

Giant kauri trees start with small cones and seeds.

Looking up at Te Matua Ngahere, the "Father of the Forest," estimated to be nearly 3,000 years old, it's difficult to imagine that the immense tree was once only a small seed. It seems comfortably appropriate that Teresa refers to the kauri as "he." The colossal beings that surround us in the forest reach their branches like outstretched arms into the space above my head, as if they're welcoming us to their domain.

Approaching both Te Matua Ngahere and Tane Mahuta, the two largest kauri in New Zealand, Teresa greets the trees with haunting *waiata* (sacred chants) that illustrate the deep spiritual respect the Maori hold for the giants still growing in the forest. In the waning twilight, I gaze at the Tane Mahuta, the "Lord of the Forest," which stands about 169 feet tall and is about 2,500 years old.

In the blazing light of day, the majestic kauri would be equally awe-inspiring, but now, as night nears, I can't help but feel humbled at the foot of this great elder of the Northland.

Early Maori migrations settled throughout the Northland, including the subtropical Bay of Islands, with its turquoise water and nearly 150 islands that today lure those on holiday. The Russell pier juts out from the Strand into Pomare Bay, a deepwater harbor that Captain Cook once declared a "most noble anchorage." But the village quickly became a magnet for rough elements during the height of the whaling industry, and **grog shops** and brothels did a roaring trade when sailors were on shore leave, earning the town the nickname "the hellhole of the Pacific."

I walk past a tattoo shop conveniently located less than a block from the pier, and in the short time it takes me to self-tour the tiny downtown where the streets retain their original layout and names from 1843, I count maybe two bars, a liquor store and no brothels.

On the outdoor patio of the **Duke of Marlborough Hotel** (which began life in 1827 as **Johnny Johnston's Grog Shop**), families lunch on fish and chips while kids pedal along the Strand on bicycles, weaving in and out of meandering vacationers. A hellhole no more.



Photo: Jill K. Robinson, Special To The Chronicle

Vacationers and local relax along the waterfront Strand in Russell.

Not far from Russell is Waitangi, the site of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 between the British Crown and more than 500 Maori chiefs, establishing New Zealand as a British colony. At the newly opened **Museum of Waitangi**, I wander among the artifacts in the permanent exhibition, but am drawn back to the interactive display of New Zealand's founding document, which was written and translated in less than a week.

Next to me, a teenager proudly points to where his ancestor signed the treaty, his family crowded around the display, poking fingers at the digital copy of the historic document. Outside, across the Treaty Grounds with panoramic views of the Bay of Islands, visitors hang out between the **Treaty House** and carved meeting house, awaiting a cultural performance.

I hurry down the path to have some time alone with Ngatokimatawhaorua, the world's largest ceremonial war canoe, made from three kauri trees. My fingers trace the carving that lines the *waka's* sides, in hopes of feeling the kauri wood beneath the red lacquer.

For Maori, Te Rerenga Wairua is the most spiritually significant place in New Zealand. After death, all Maori spirits travel up the coast and over this windswept vista of the most northwestern corner of the country, down the roots of the lone pohutukawa tree at Te Rerenga Wairua, into the sea and to Manawatawhi ("last breath") in the Three Kings Islands. From there, they say a final farewell to family and tribe before returning to Hawaiki, the land of their ancestors.



Photo: Jill K. Robinson, Special To The Chronicle

As legend goes, Te Rerenga Wairua at Cape Reinga is where Maori spirits leap to return to Hawaiki, the land of their ancestors.

The point, also known as Cape Reinga, marks the separation of the Tasman Sea from the Pacific Ocean. I lean into the wind to watch the swirl of currents where the two great waters collide in whirlpools that look like those that dance in the wake of a boat.

Walking around the lighthouse and the crowd of visitors posing at the signpost that proclaims the distances to Tokyo, Sydney, Vancouver, Los Angeles, London and the South Pole, I scan the bluffs to find the lone pohutukawa tree. It takes maybe two seconds. There is only one perfectly placed ancient tree, said to be more than 800 years old, clinging to the rock.

If I were a Maori spirit, I'd want to travel here, too – among the shades of aqua ocean currents and whistling wind at the grassy, green end of the world. And while I love the ocean, I wouldn't jump. I'd be the sole spirit clinging to the Northland, refusing to leave this heart-achingly beautiful region.

Surely, fodder for another legend.

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Side trip

A straight line cutting along the west coast of Northland and flanking the Aupouri Forest, 90-Mile Beach (which is only 55 miles) is known for spectacular sunsets, a great left-hand surf break and towering sand dunes.

Don't bring your rental car along on a tour of 90-Mile Beach, because rental companies won't allow their cars on the sand, mostly for safety reasons. The beach is safe to drive only at specific times of the tides, and if you time it wrong, you may become very uncomfortably acquainted with the Tasman Sea and lose that rental car.

The best bet for visiting 90-Mile Beach is on a bus tour that leaves from neighboring Kaitaia. The daylong tour includes plenty of stops along the way, including the Te Pahi Sand Dunes, Cape Reinga and Tapotupotu Bay, and even provides lunch on a beach.

Thrill seekers get to try their hand at sand surfing on the Te Pahi Sand Dunes. The sand formations, vegetation and continually moving sand seems like a desert destination instead of an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Tours provide boards, and all you have to do is hike to the top of a dune, get on and fly down the mountains of golden sand.

If you go

Getting there

Nonstop flights from San Francisco to Auckland on Air New Zealand and United cost about \$1,600 and can take up to 13 hours. Other flights require at least one connection. From Auckland, flights to Kerikeri take less than an hour; driving takes about 3.5 hours.

Where to stay

Kauri Cliffs: 139 Tepene Tablelands Road, Matauri Bay. 64 (9) 407 0100, www.kauricliffs.com. Luxurious Northland home base on the dramatic coastline of Matauri Bay, with rolling farmland and quiet, pristine private beaches. Room rates start at about \$1,124 per night, and include daily breakfast, evening cocktails and canapes, and a nightly gourmet dinner.

The Waterfront Suites, Bay of Islands: 100 Marsden Road, Paihia. 64 (9) 402 5665, www.heritagehotels.co.nz/hotels/the-waterfront-suites-bay-of-islands. These all-suite apartments allow ample room for families in a convenient location just steps from Paihia activities and the Russell ferry. Room rates start at about \$124 per night.

Where to eat

Food at Wharepuke: 190 Kerikeri Road, Kerikeri. 64 (9) 407 8936, www.foodatwharepuke.co.nz. Dine among the sub-tropical gardens of Wharepuke from a menu featuring European- and Thai-inspired cuisine. Prices range from about \$10-\$29.

Hone's Garden: 10 York St., Russell. 64 (9) 466 3710, www.facebook.com/HonesGarden. Another garden spot to enjoy in good weather, this restaurant serves wraps, salads, fish and chips, and wood-fired pizzas – along with local wines and Northland craft beers. Prices range from about \$10-\$19.

Provenir: 130 Marsden Road, Paihia. 64 (9) 402 0111, www.paihiabeach.co.nz/provenir_restaurant.htm. At this fine-dining restaurant, pair incredible views of the Bay of Islands with dishes focused on seasonal New Zealand ingredients. Main courses range about \$25-\$29.

What to do

Footprints Waipoua: 334 State Highway 12, Omapere. 64 (9) 405 8207, www.footprintswaipoua.co.nz. On the Twilight Encounter tour, visit the majestic kauri trees of the Waipoua Forest with a Maori guide and learn about the culture's deep spiritual respect for these ancient giants. Tour: about \$69 per adult, \$25 per child.

Waitangi Treaty Grounds: 1 Tau Henare Drive, Waitangi. 64 (9) 402 7437, www.waitangi.org.nz. New Zealand's most important historic site is where the country's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, was signed in 1840 – by Maori chiefs and representatives of the British Crown. Day pass: \$29 per adult, free for children. The Maori Hangi & Concert experience is about \$80 per adult and \$36 per child.

Sand Safaris: 36 Wireless Road, Kaitaia. 64 (9) 408 1778, www.sandsafaris.co.nz. This day-long guided bus tour of the Aupouri Peninsula, 90-Mile Beach and Cape Reinga includes frequent stops and lunch. Tour: about \$36 per adult, \$22 per child.

More information

Tourism New Zealand: www.newzealand.com

Northland New Zealand: www.northlandnz.com