



October, 2017  
Voyeur, National

Author: Dan F Stapleton • Section: General News • Article type : News Item  
Audience : 79,028 • Page: 74 • Printed Size: 5343.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Market: National  
Country: Australia • ASR: NZD 119,283 • Words: 1458 • Item ID: 855262119



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# W

**HEN FORMER NEW**  
Zealand prime minister John Key needed respite from the stresses that come with leadership, he would jump aboard a helicopter and fly north. According to staff, the politician was a

frequent visitor to the oceanfront golf course at Kauri Cliffs, in the Bay of Islands region, during his tenure in the top job. He would touch down after lunch, play a few holes and then be back in Wellington or Auckland by the evening.

There are no helicopters or security guards when I arrive at Kauri Cliffs one afternoon, but I feel like a VIP nonetheless. The property — which comprises the golf course, several beaches, tracts of bushland and a homestead with adjacent cottages for guests — is immaculately kept and utterly secluded. Staff greet me as I pull up in front of the homestead, then usher me through the grand building and out onto a balcony with dramatic ocean views, as well as a barbecue and a lunch spread.

In the height of summer, when half of Auckland seems to head north to the Bay of Islands, it can be difficult to reserve one of the 22 suites at Kauri Cliffs. But on this warm autumn weekend, there are only a handful of other guests. The region, located on the north-east coast of New Zealand's North Island, is very much a seasonal destination for Kiwis. Luckily for the rest of us, it enjoys a subtropical maritime climate, making it an equally attractive place to visit during the off-season.

**FROM FAR LEFT** The North Island has plenty of options for walking; dessert at Kauri Cliffs; admire the kauri trees in Waipoua Forest; the waterside grounds of The Boathouse at The Landing. **OPENER, FROM LEFT** The Bay of Islands near Kerikeri; Russell's historic town centre. **NEXT PAGE** Kayaking in the Bay of Islands.

"The Bay of Islands has always been a place city folk have escaped to, but lately we've seen an influx of overseas visitors, too," says my guide, Glen, as we circle the property's grandest accommodation: a two-bed cottage, enveloped by dense foliage. Recent guests in this handsome lodge, which boasts a cliff-top infinity pool and two open fireplaces, include a chart-topping American singer and one of Asia's wealthiest businessmen.

Nearby seaside towns such as Russell swarm with visitors from December to February. Russell was New Zealand's first European settlement, and it remained a major seaport through the 1800s. Rowdy sailors routinely terrorised the town and it became known as 'the hellhole of the South Pacific' on account of their debauched behaviour. Eventually, New Zealand's centre of gravity shifted south to Auckland, and Russell's infamy faded. Today, it is almost embarrassingly quaint, with cutesy souvenir shops, a strip of waterfront cafes and a number of fine old buildings, including a Roman Catholic printery from the 1840s that now operates as a functional printing museum.





## Testing the Waters

Coming from Australia, or further afield, the Bay of Islands is a supremely convenient destination, about three hours by car from Auckland, or a 45-minute flight from Auckland International to the local airport at Kerikeri. The roads are serviceable, the mobile-phone reception is decent and even tucked-away areas are within easy reach of amenities.

Unlike some other regions of New Zealand, which feature dramatic mountains, hair-raising roads and unforgiving weather, the Bay of Islands is a reassuring place characterised by undulating terrain, pastoral areas and patches of lush rainforest. If you're looking for an area that feels authentically Kiwi, but not exhaustingly so, it's a canny choice.

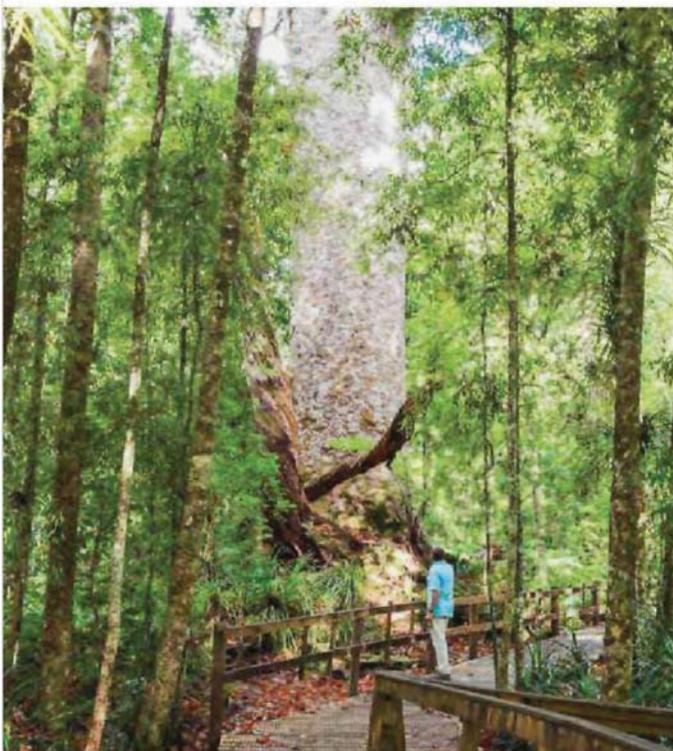
That afternoon, I venture into a rainforest grove on the edge of the property and commune with a 900-year-old kauri tree, then wander to the sun-dappled spa for treatments using rich, restorative manuka honey. After a homestead dinner of prawns, salad and slices of chocolate cake, I retreat to my hillside suite and sink into a deckchair to watch the light wane over the ocean. There's some gentle rain overnight — not uncommon in a region that records about 2000 millimetres of rainfall each year — and I sleep amazingly well.

By 9am the next day, I'm cruising across the gleaming bay in a speedboat helmed by Nick, an expat from Sydney. There are more than 140 islands of varying sizes in the area, playing host to all manner of water sports and boating activities, so it's wise to schedule as much waterborne time as you possibly can. Over the coming days, I'll explore the shorelines of several

island clusters aboard kayaks and stand-up paddleboards — but for an overview, nothing beats the speed and manoeuvrability of a small motorboat.

As we arc south from Kauri Cliffs towards Russell, Nick rattles off a list of local fauna: whales, marlin, penguins and gannets, for starters. Then, right on cue, we see our first dolphins frolicking in the distance. The Bay of Islands has a resident population of about 500 dolphins, including the bottlenose and common varieties, and Nick tells me there's a good chance of encountering them at any time of year. Migratory whales — including pods of orcas, or killer whales — can be seen during autumn, winter and spring.

Like many Bay of Islands residents, Nick had previously lived in Auckland. He moved to New Zealand in 2005 to escape an exhausting job as a cruise-boat operator in Sydney, but found work in Auckland similarly taxing. A few years ago, he spent a summer captaining boats in the area and decided to stay. "Up here, people run on island time," he tells me, employing a phrase that's most often used to describe the elastic schedules ➤





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common in the Caribbean. We pull up to the jetty at Russell and, as if to prove his point, Nick says to me simply, "I'll meet you back here a bit later."

Russell has become a popular spot for city folk seeking a sea change, and it's also a convenient visitor base from which to charter boats and catch ferries across the bay. I stop in at the Duke of Marlborough Hotel – an elegant, historic building on the promenade, and holder of New Zealand's oldest liquor license – for seafood chowder and fresh-baked bread with macadamia dukkah. There are 24 well-priced guestrooms at the hotel and an unpretentious vibe in the restaurant, which seems a popular hangout for locals and visitors alike.

My waiter tells me Mick Jagger was in here with a friend a couple of weeks ago. "The staff recognised him straight away," he confides. "But we decided to leave him in peace."

Back in the boat, we skirt some more secluded islands in the bay, including a couple of densely forested hideaways fringed by pure yellow beaches. I jump out at grassy Waewaetorea Island, known as one of the bay's prettiest spots, and

## DETAILS

**Duke of Marlborough Hotel** 35 The Strand; www.theduke.co.nz.  
**Kauri Cliffs** 139 Tepene Tablelands Rd; www.kauricliffs.com. **The Landing** 623 Rangihoua Rd; www.thelandingnz.com.

clamber up the hillside for panoramic views of the district. In summer, it's a picnic spot favoured by many locals.

In the late afternoon, Nick drops me at The Landing, a charming 400-hectare property at the tip of the Purerua Peninsula and the site at which Maori and Europeans first met and exchanged goods. Current owner Peter Cooper, one of New Zealand's most successful businessmen, plans to create a private community here for up to 20 households, set among vineyards, farmland and patches of carefully conserved native forest. So far, four houses have been constructed, all of which are available to rent for short stays.

Spending some time at The Landing, with its water frontage, bay views and gently rolling hillsides, is a deeply relaxing experience. There's all manner of equipment in the boathouse should you wish to embark on an impromptu kayaking trip, but there are also log fires, pure-wool throws and home-theatre equipment if you'd rather hibernate. The staff here will cook for you, or leave ingredients so you can whip up a meal yourself. There's fresh John Dory, produce grown on site, and baked goods delivered warm each morning.

With The Landing as my base and its equipment at my disposal, I'm able to explore parts of the Bay of Islands that most tourists never reach. But for my first 24 hours on the property, I decide to stay put. A succession of rain showers brushed the bay as I settled into armchairs to read, nap and talk. Island time, it seemed, had taken over. 

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