

# This Way of Life

Peter Feeney and family explore the  
off-season pleasures of the Hokianga.

Kupe, the Polynesian navigator who discovered New Zealand, parcelled out the rest of the country but was careful to keep the jewel in the crown, the Hokianga, to himself. Kupe journeyed from the legendary Hawaiki, and hats off to him, because come Friday night the three-and-a-half-hour drive there can feel a trifle daunting to your average work-worn Auckland. It's a trip best saved, as my wife and three children did, for a long weekend.

The route to get there is via Dargaville, which takes you off the beaten track. From the Brynderwyn turn-off, traffic evaporates and a scenic drive commences through a small towns-and-countryside landscape that reminds me of the New Zealand I grew up in. We set off gamely one Friday morning with Edith Piaf's "Je ne regrette rien" blaring on the car stereo, our four-year-old's choice (lest Frankie be accused of a cultural sophistication beyond her years, it must be said that the tune is from the movie *Madagascar III*). But somewhere around that darn wrong turn near Dargaville, the patience of our one-year-old, Tilly, finally snapped, along with our nerves. By then Piaf's signature tune, looped for the hundredth time, began to lose some of its shine.

Midway through the gut-churning bends of the Waipoua Forest, Tane Mahuta, our tallest tree, appeared just in time for a pit-stop that saved us from internal familial combustion, and provoked six-year-old Arlo's comment that he'd certainly seen bigger trees, only he couldn't quite remember where...

Our home for the next four days was my sister Margaret's stately house, where she enjoys multimillion-dollar views over the harbour in return for a laughable (by Auckland standards) rent. There was plenty to amuse the kids: the trampoline, feeding the cows, riding the local pony, strolling down the road to see the Koutu

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A leg-stretch at Waipoua Forest for Arlo Feeney, six (standing), Frankie, four (also pictured at right), and Tilly, one, equally intent on getting a fence-high view of Tane Mahuta.



Wood sculptor Glen Hayward, who lives with his wife, Ceri, in the isolated Wekaweke Valley, carved and painted these drawing pins, as part of a “fully carved” office space, based on Mr Anderson’s cubicle in the film *The Matrix*.



boulders, or making clay creations with Auntie Mags. We were 10 minutes’ drive to both Opononi and the big smoke – bustling Rawene, population about 500.

The Hokianga is one of the earliest places of settlement in New Zealand, for Maori and Pakeha both: Horeke (1826) and Rawene (1827) are our second- and third-oldest European communities. With them came logging; by 1900 whole hillsides, suddenly bared of vegetation, began to slip into the harbour, choking its tributaries with mud. During the 1970s, the area became a haven for alternative lifestylers. Nowadays tourism and the arts are thriving, alongside other challenges facing local people: custodianship of the land is under stress because of migration, as well as government policies that undermine traditional ways of life – for example the culling of Department of Conservation jobs and contracts.

On Saturday, driving to lunch at the home of wood sculptor Glen Hayward, we dropped by the inaugural Hoki Fest

at Omapere. Here I met the first in a succession of mesmerising locals. John Klaracich (Ngapuhi) is 81 and still active on his farm. He grew up with old people, some born in the 1840s; he’s served the local council on countless boards and trusts, been a dairy company director, and had a lifetime involvement in the local Maori community, three marae, schools – among many other activities.

Klaracich has never left the Hokianga, unlike notable exports such as Dame Whina Cooper, Hone Tuwhare, Robert Sullivan, Rawiri Paratene and Ralph Hotere. His father was Dalmatian, put on a ship alone at Trieste by his mother at the tender age of 11 to sail across the world in search of a better life. I came across two other locals, John and Marta Cullen, who’d travelled the other way in 2002 as part of Father Henare Tate’s four-month hikoi that took in Italy, then went on to France to exhume Bishop Pompallier’s bones and see them returned to the Hokianga.

The good bishop had arrived originally in 1838 to establish a Catholic mission. He found the southern shores of the Hokianga Harbour firmly in the hands of the Methodists and Anglicans, but the northern side vacant. Now his remains lie buried where his mission started and the harbour, like the Reformation, divides Protestant and Catholic.

The legacy of that time is exquisite churches and the destruction of much early Maori art: many of these false carved idols (to add insult to injured male pride) were graced by over-large male appendages and highly offensive to missionary sensibilities.

Back on track, we found Glen and wife Ceri at the end of a long metalled road off SH12 abutting a DoC reserve. Soft-spoken, lean and 38, Glen has a PhD from Elam School of Fine Arts, where he also earned a scholarship (for his PhD, Elam largely left him to produce

and sell whatever he wanted). He tutors at the Rawene Arts School and is typical of the quality of teacher there. He’s won an indecent number of commissions and residencies which must make his contemporaries emerald with envy. From one of these (the Wellington Rita Angus residency) came his recent winning idea for the Te Papa four plinths project. This gives him \$30,000 for an installation he gets back after two years – nice work if you can get it. Glen plans to sculpt enlarged fragments of crockery he found in Rita Angus’ garden during his stay.

In this leafy corner of paradise, Glen and Ceri grow their own food and bravely milk their own goat. Their house is the hippie creation of a 70s city refugee, pieced together from the prized innards of other dwellings then added to, as family growth and whimsy dictated, to become part Dr Seuss – and more than a little *Mr Magorium’s Wonder Emporium*. It’s a house where you look at and handle objects with both curiosity and caution. Glen specialises

in carving exquisite reproductions of everyday objects, most from a single piece of kauri, and many are scattered around the retro bric-a-brac that adorns the house.

I’d found one such example of his work the night before at the house of artist Maree Wilson. Reaching for what I thought was a large matchbox, I realised it had “Elastrator” written on it – it was a Glen Hayward carving of a container for the rubber rings that are used to castrate lambs and calves. It felt like a trick, albeit an agreeable one; as Glen explains it, a kind of “gotcha” feeling.

Later when Arlo casually picked up a goat’s skull, knowing his innate talent for breaking things, I grabbed it off him quickly, then recognised it as another wood carving; in all its intricacies indistinguishable from the real thing. I think Glen enjoyed this whole episode. His are beguiling objects that leave you feeling captivated but also somehow complicit: he’s a clever bastard who knows how to get inside your head.

After lunch – which included some very passable and excessively alcoholic home-brewed cider – we went for a stroll. By the door of Glen’s studio I wondered at an amazing replica of a worn old sawhorse, until Glen told me it was a worn old sawhorse.

A further walk to the neighbours rewarded us with six jars of beautiful factor 15 manuka honey. Terry and wife Anita had left Papatoetoe and their six-day working grind seven-and-a-half years ago. Terry had since self-trained in beekeeping. On the same remote metal road lives another neighbour who grows chillis, bottling and picking them in tricky ways and selling them to Farro Fresh, Moore Wilson’s and Air New Zealand. There must be something in the water...

Fish, for one thing. The artsy theme continued on Sunday. Having previously never met a wood carver in my life, I was off to meet my second in two days. Like Glen, Will Ngakuru (Te Roroa, Te Rarawa and Ngapuhi) is no slouch, artistically



or otherwise. A carver and sculptor, he lives and works near Waimamaku, off the grid and up a remote valley. He built his solar-powered house himself – framing, earth plaster, wiring, plumbing – the lot. Dinner was mullet he'd caught in the local river and smoked himself.

Will is working towards a level of self-sufficiency that was known by his grandfather's generation. Needless to say, this was all rather humbling. My own father and grandfather thought nothing of building our family bach together, but I can't find the starter motor in my car.

I was pleased to see on arrival that Will had two children, Amorangi and Ramai, who could keep our lot occupied. But it took a while for me to realise there was something wrong with them. They were content to quietly sit, watching proceedings calmly, with no iPads or Xboxes or a TV in sight. It was shocking proof that children require neither endless stimulation nor electronic babysitting to survive.

Over dinner the kids had a ball pulling eyeballs out of the mullet and watching Amorangi swallowing them – Will was well impressed when my two oldest followed suit. Then out came Amorangi's bow and arrow and

Carver Will Ngakuru (above left) and children Amorangi (above right) and Ramai (below).



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a good chance, I thought, of more than just the fish losing an eye.

While we checked out a nearly completed traditional waka that Will was carving on commission, I asked his daughter, Ramai, about her pretty dress. It wasn't from Pumpkin Patch, as I expected, but Fiji: Will's sailed to Fiji several times and taken part in various exchanges around the Pacific Rim. He attended PIKO, an international artists' gathering in Hawaii in 2007, and the International Indigenous Arts Festival in Khabarovsk, far eastern Russia, in 2010. His work is held in both local and international collections and he's now branching out, doing a postgraduate Diploma in Fine Arts at Elam in Auckland.

The National government has cut allowances for postgraduate students but Will is undeterred, sleeping in his van during the week and commuting to and from the Hokianga each weekend. Last semester he got an A grade.

After dinner I popped by "Auntie" Urikore Matiu's home. She turned out to be yet another bewitching local. Also living off the grid, she's a sprightly 76 and, incredibly, has just started

studying at the Rawene Arts School. One wall of her home was graced by pictures and photos of dead relatives and ancestors – one a Goldie print.

Each image had a story (a heart-rending one, in the case of the accidental death of a young niece) but Auntie told them all with an unsentimental and friendly familiarity.

Although I'm a lapsed, in fact near-prolapsed, Catholic, on our last day Pompallier's bones summoned my own weary ones to the car ferry and the north shore of the harbour, nosing out into a ghost-like early morning fog shrouding the water. I was off to Kohukohu to meet Dawn, Heiwari and Lewis, Rawene Art School alumni and the artist-curators of the exciting new pop-up gallery I'd heard about, Blackspace. (The name is a quip on Auckland's Whitespace gallery.)

Among other meanings, Kohu means "misty", and in fact this mist portended a sunny day. We met at the Koke cafe and pub – rated five-star by TripAdvisor – just as the owner turned up with his morning catch, fresh flounder. The cafe is next to the Village Arts Gallery where Hotere had exhibited with local artists in 2009, one of whom was Heiwari, whose work had sold out.

Dawn, Heiwari and Lewis had just returned from a temporary gallery in Paihia where they'd been tapping into the cruise-liner trade. Their mobile gallery represents up to 26 Maori artists' work at any one time. When we met the enterprising trio, they were organising an exhibition to accompany the unveiling of a memorial to the Ventnor shipwreck.

This in itself is a fascinating story. In 1902, the Ventnor was carrying the bones of 499 Chinese back to their homeland for reburial: gold miners from Otago, Southland and West Coast, placed in kauri coffins lined with lead or zinc.

In 2009, local filmmaker Wong Liu Shueng, making a film about the wreck, discovered that some of the bones had been found and buried by local Maori. The impetus then came from the New Zealand Chinese community to build a memorial so they could honour their ancestors. All this segued into the old Maori custom of caring for and mourning the dead, where cleaned bones were polished with oil and red burnt clay, after which they were taken into the mountains and deposited in secret caves for protection.



Arlo up a tree (top) and soon to be lured into a sea-going adventure (above).

Will told me later that the Chinese visitors and local community recognised much in each other over the moving Ventnor memorial weekend.

An attempt to find the nearby sign-posted but undetectable oldest bridge in New Zealand consigned it to remain Kohukohu's best-kept tourist secret. Then it was back across the harbour to Rawene. We spotted the local sailing club out in force on the foreshore offering rides on P-class boats to kids for free. Nosy-parker that I am, I got chatting to the American resident doctor at the Hokianga Hospital, which is just up the road, while Arlo – who had yet to venture out in water much deeper than a bath tub – confidently talked up his skills and was given a boat to pilot out solo mid-harbour. Frankie and I hurriedly set sail to tow him back.

We departed the Hokianga much as we arrived, relaxing to the dulcet sounds of Piaf, back by popular demand. We'd been rather blown away by it all: a slower pace, a simpler life, bloody good home-cooked kai and, the biggest surprise of all, art, art, art. Notably absent were two pilgrimages we'd hoped to do – the first to visit Hotere's gravesite at Mitimiti, the second to Motuti, where Bishop Pompallier had been reinterred in St Mary's Church.

You need a lot longer than a long weekend for this place. We'll be back.

## Best Bets

### Four Square

The Four Square sign gazes down at you from every town in the area, looking like a cheeky rip-off of Dick Frizzell's iconic work. Not all of these mini-monopolies are created equal. Our personal favourite was in Waimamaku, the only one we could find that stocked mesclun salad. They also extend credit to locals.

### The Art

There's a swag of good galleries and around 20 arts events each year. The Gordon Tovey Northland project of the 50s and 60s started a ripple effect in art education that's felt in the Hokianga today. For instance, Selwyn Wilson was handpicked by Tovey and became the first Maori graduate of the Elam School of Fine Arts. Wilson, mentor to Ralph Hotere, also taught Buck Nin at Northland College, and Nin taught Will Ngakuru. The Rawene Arts School, founded in 2006 by Sue Daly and Maree Wilson (offering diploma and soon degree courses) has given the arts further strong impetus. For more information visit [www.hokianga.co.nz/d\\_Art-Craft.cfm](http://www.hokianga.co.nz/d_Art-Craft.cfm)

### Tourist Attractions

Check out the great kauri trees of the Waipoua Forest and the waterfront villages of Kohukohu and Rawene, with their fine cafes, beaches and historic buildings – Clendon House is a must-see. There are also nature walks, horse trekking, boat trips and fishing. From the Copthorne Omapere (owned and operated by the same family for more than 20 years) to backpackers, B&Bs and, of course, Bookabach, there's a place to lay your head to suit every taste and budget. For details check out [www.hokiangatourism.org.nz](http://www.hokiangatourism.org.nz) +