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MANGO

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Dramatic scenery a feature of Northland

By Mike Yardley

BEING A Christchurch lad, jaunting to Northland always feels like a glorified overseas holiday, bordering on a South Pacific mini-break.

The weather and foliage is fabulously sub-tropical and the sun-kissed beaches are achingly gorgeous. On my latest visit, I set my sights on some short and sweet scenic drives from Whangarei.

Striking out from Onerahi, the Whangarei Heads Rd offers such a dramatic scenic medley of saw-toothed mountains, beaches, walkways and craft galleries, strung along the peninsula's pencil-thin road, wrapped around the indented northern shoreline of the harbour.

Every princess-pretty bay, like Munro, McLeod, McGregors and McKenzie reveals new watery vistas framed by gnarled pohutukawa trees on the foreshore, backed by handsomely maintained holiday cottages and quirky homes, rising up the volcanic slopes from the road.

McLeod Bay is a family favourite for its sheltered swimming, nestled beneath the mighty presence of Mt Manaia. The quaint white wooden St James Church, gracing the foreshore since 1858, completes the picture. McGregors Bay is another family crowd-pleaser, with clear waters for snorkelling and fabulous rock pools to keep the kids enthralled.

At the base of Mount Manaia, a plaque pays tribute to the district's early European settlers, Scottish Highlanders, who as you might have guessed, gave their names to many of the area's beaches.

Towering above the harbour

entrance, majestic Mt Manaia's jagged peak, crowned with toothy pinnacles, dominates the skyline – reminiscent of those fang-like mountains that backdrop Rarotonga and Tahiti. Eager to scale Manaia, it's a thousand steps up, on a vigorous but manageable

one hour climb to reach the sizzling 360 deg views.

Back in the car, the road climaxes at Ocean Beach, a powerful Pacific sweep of big surf, bounded by hulking sand dunes. After the sweet tranquillity of those inner harbour coves, Ocean Beach seemed all the more raw and wild.

Tracking back to Whangarei, I then headed north to the Tutukaka Coast.

Arguably the most famed of Whangarei's short drives, the two hour-long glorious loop road roams past succulent orchards, historic drystone walls, undulating emerald farmland and formidable rock walls, before kissing the Pacific Ocean.

The Tutukaka Coast's necklace of seaside villages revel in their seclusion, proud little communities heaving with creative types, small convivial pubs and out-of-the-way restaurants.

Tutukaka Marina Village was heaving with excited hordes of tourists gearing up to set off to the Poor Knights Marine Reserve. But I had a hot date with a big tree.

Heading north towards Matapouri, I made my way to the Tutukaka Forest Conservation Park, home to Tane Moana. Moana may not enjoy the rock-star billing of big brother, Tane Mahuta, but Moana is a treasure too – the largest surviving Kauri on Northland's

East Coast.

Reaching nearly 30m in height with a stunning crown, and boasting a circumference of 11m, Moana will make you work for the pleasure of an audience. It's a four-hour return walk through tracts of native bush, thick with bird life. But a chance to commune with this East Coast giant made it a doddle.

I topped off my Tutukaka sortie by soaking up the astonishing views of some of her northern beaches. Just north of Matapouri Bay is the crescent-shaped show-stopper of Whale Bay.

Thickly fringed in native forest, ablaze in the crimson flowers of pohutukawa, off-set by custard-coloured sand and translucent blue water, this celestial pocket of coastal splendour is accessed by a short walk through a grove of ancient Puriri trees.

After taking in the coastal charms north and east of

Whangarei, I sauntered south for a quick rendezvous with Marsden Point and Bream Bay's sprawling arc of white sandy beach, before laying over at pint-sized Waipu Cove.

Steeped in Scottish heritage, the Waipu Museum lustily showcases the great migration of the town's original 940 settlers via Nova Scotia, and Waipu still proudly hosts New Zealand's biggest annual Highland Games.

Grab a meal at The Cove Restaurant, overlooking the ivory sands and booming Pacific surf, after soaking up the massive murals in honour of the waves of migrations.

Just 100m from the beach, I stayed a night at the beautifully landscaped Waipu Cove Resort, verdantly ablaze in sub-tropical gardens, through Booking.com.



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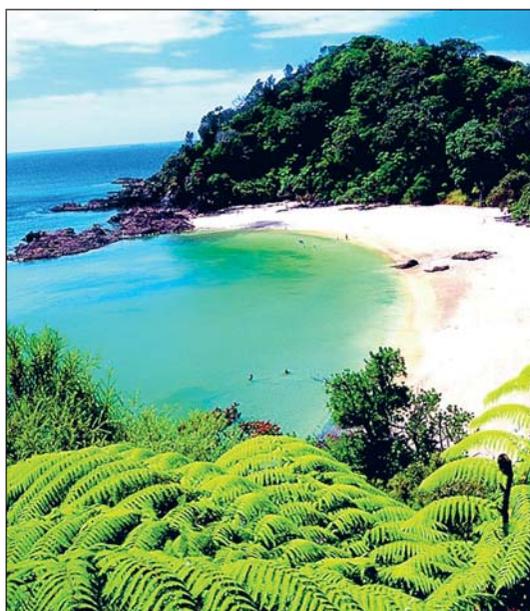
With nearly 6000 New Zealand accommodation options listed, the diverse array of options spans hotels, apartments, holiday homes and campsites.

Whether on the website or via the app, Booking.com is super easy to navigate with incredible deals and complete flexibility, if your travel plans change. www.booking.com

FAST FACTS:

- I zipped my way to Auckland with Jetstar. Score even sweeter deals with a Club Jetstar membership. The programme offers travellers access to special 'member only' fares, 20 per cent discount on baggage and seat selection products, and early access to the biggest sales. Bag a bargain fare deal and seat to suit at www.jetstar.com

- From Auckland, I picked up a trusty Avis rental car at the airport. Avis currently has the largest fleet of hybrid rental vehicles in New Zealand and is committed to expanding the range, as customer demand dictates. Avis' modern rental vehicle fleet is available at 40 locations spread throughout New Zealand. Sign up for Avis Preferred to skip the queue and get on the road faster. www.avis.co.nz



COLOUR: Sun-kissed beaches, like this at Whale Bay, are a feature of the Whangarei heads.

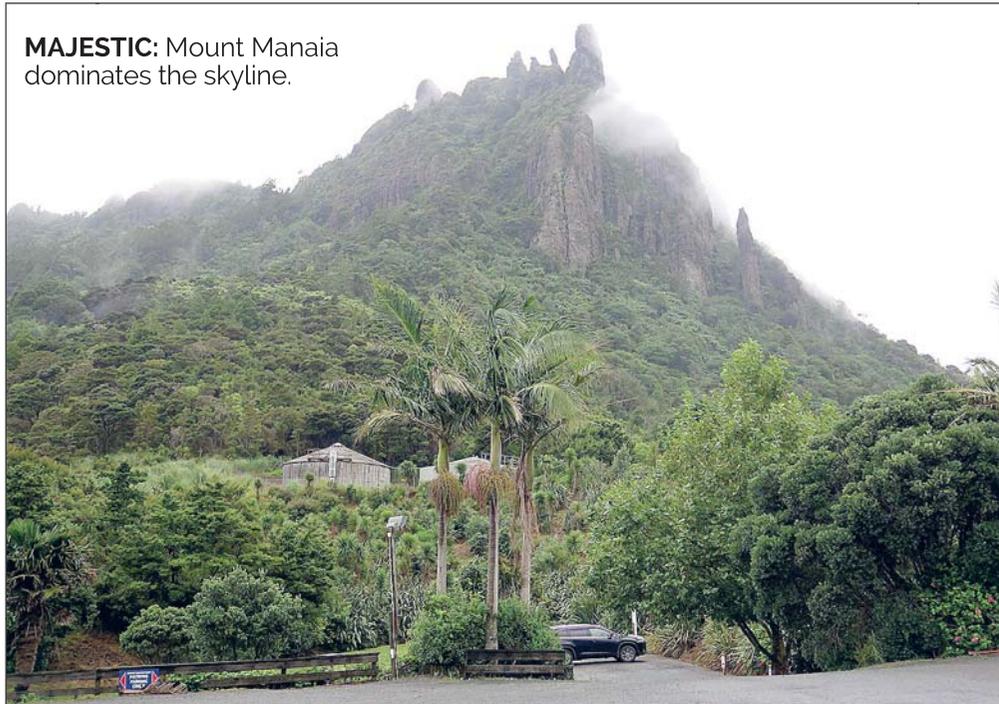


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MAJESTIC: Mount Manaia dominates the skyline.



DIVERSE: The Whangarei heads include dramatic scenic medleys of saw-toothed mountains, beaches and seaside homes.