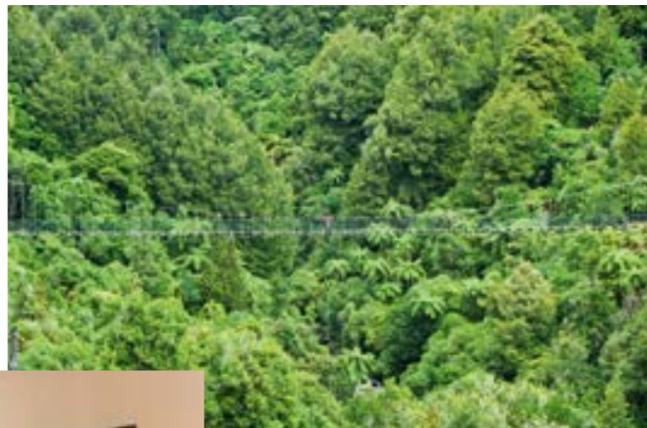


Treasure island

Hip hotels, sensational scenery and amazing food and wine make New Zealand's North Island well worth the trip (all 27 hours of it), says *Nigel Tisdall*



Mount Ngauruhoe
in Tongariro National
Park - the gateway to a
thoroughly wild time



Auckland's buzzy harbour (top left), stylish hotels (Hotel DeBrett, above) and cool eateries (Fed's Deli, left) are a complete contrast to the remote Timber Trail (top right)

'WE'RE UPSIDE DOWN AND IN THE FUTURE,' explains Ceillhe Sperath, a cheery Irish-Maori guide who leads sightseeing tours of Auckland. I get her point. After the 27 hours it takes to fly here from the UK, New Zealand certainly feels like the other side of the world – and confusingly, the Kiwis are also 11 hours ahead of GMT.

Once you arrive, the old clichés about the country being full of sheep and stuck in the 50s are soon exploded. Remember those glamorous shots of Kate Middleton at the helm of an America's Cup yacht during April's royal visit? It's this luxe lifestyle – all intense wines, life-enhancing manuka honey and soft merino wool, along with the All Blacks, who add their own testosterone-fuelled allure – that gives a better idea of the new New Zealand, which not only has a thriving economy but is now an impressively cool place to explore.

Down on the Auckland waterfront, the designer shops of Britomart sparkle with bold NZ fashion labels such as Zambesi and Kate Sylvester, while the trendy eateries of the upcoming Wynyard Quarter serve tantalising plates of Coromandel mussels and white peaches with Serbian prosciutto. Fast ferries speed across Waitemata Harbour, while a seaplane service whizzes guests over to the beaches, art galleries and wineries of Waiheke Island.

Kiwis are well travelled and they cherry-pick the world. At Hotel DeBrett, owner Michelle Deery uses vintage lights, boldly striped carpets and mid-century furnishings to create a sassy city-centre bolthole. Up on the 53rd floor of the Sky Tower, which pierces the Auckland skyline like a futuristic needle, star chef Peter Gordon's

The Sugar Club serves palate-wowing small plates using global ingredients, from pecan nuts to goji berries. Of course, there are some very only-in-NZ things, too. Walking through downtown, I find a huge purple contraption in between the office blocks offering reverse bungee jumps. While most of us are happy to pop out for a sandwich at lunchtime, in Auckland you can catapult yourself to 124mph in two seconds.

It's difficult to leave such a vibrant city, but we've planned a fortnight's tour of North Island based around the 284-mile Thermal Explorer Highway that runs south-east to the idyllic shores of Hawke's Bay. There's a clue in that name. This country is one great steaming, towering mass of volcanic turmoil, and you can smell the sulphur as soon as you near the historic spa town of Rotorua.

An hour's drive south, Taupo is the region's adrenaline capital, home to a vast blue lake adorned with black swans with scarlet beaks. Here the locals sit around in thermal pools – '34°C or 39°C, darling?' – discussing how far they kayaked before breakfast and the chances of eight-year-old Zac winning his next mini-triathlon.

Everyone is super-active. Skydiving, river-rafting, quad-biking, zorbing – goodness, I'm exhausted just reading the options. One must-do, though, is to get on a bike. Last year, bang on time to catch the current global cycling craze, the Kiwis launched Nga Haerenga – the New Zealand Cycle Trail. This is a nationwide network of 23 routes covering 1,500 miles that showcases some of the most beautiful parts of the country. When I tackle a chunk of The Timber Trail, a 30-mile, off-road ride through the Pureora Forest Park that follows old railway lines, I'm astonished to find it includes eight suspension bridges, costing as much as £237,000 each, that were built solely for the pleasure of cyclists.

It's the same when you go 'tramping', as hiking is known here. (They also call shopping trolleys 'trundlers' and flip-flops 'jandals', but otherwise you'll fit in just fine.) Exploring Tongariro National Park, we find well-maintained gravel paths leading into the wilds. The most famous tramp here is the seven-hour Alpine Crossing, which passes through the burnt-out lavascapes of Mt Tongariro, which erupted in 2012 and is still steaming away like a kettle to prove it.

The day we're there the weather isn't cooperating, so we settle for



After hiking in Tongariro National Park (top right), kick back in stunning Hawke's Bay (top), home to luxury lodges, such as The Farm at Cape Kidnappers (far right), as well as the cheery art deco town of Napier (right and above)



a five-hour hike across a landscape reminiscent of the Scottish moors. Halfway round, I notice we're being stalked by two young women who turn out to be Chinese tourists – Joyce and Jane from Guangzhou. Unsettled by this raw wilderness, they ask to stick with us, and we do our bit for Anglo-Sino accord with a formal swap of bananas and digestive biscuits. Miraculously, a gap appears in the clouds so we can behold the magnificent scenery enveloping us. 'Look!!! Mordor!!!' Joyce screams with glee as we behold Mt Ngauruhoe, aka Mt Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* films. The euphoria is genuine – a recent tourism survey found that one in ten Brits visit New Zealand because of all those Middle-earth movies.

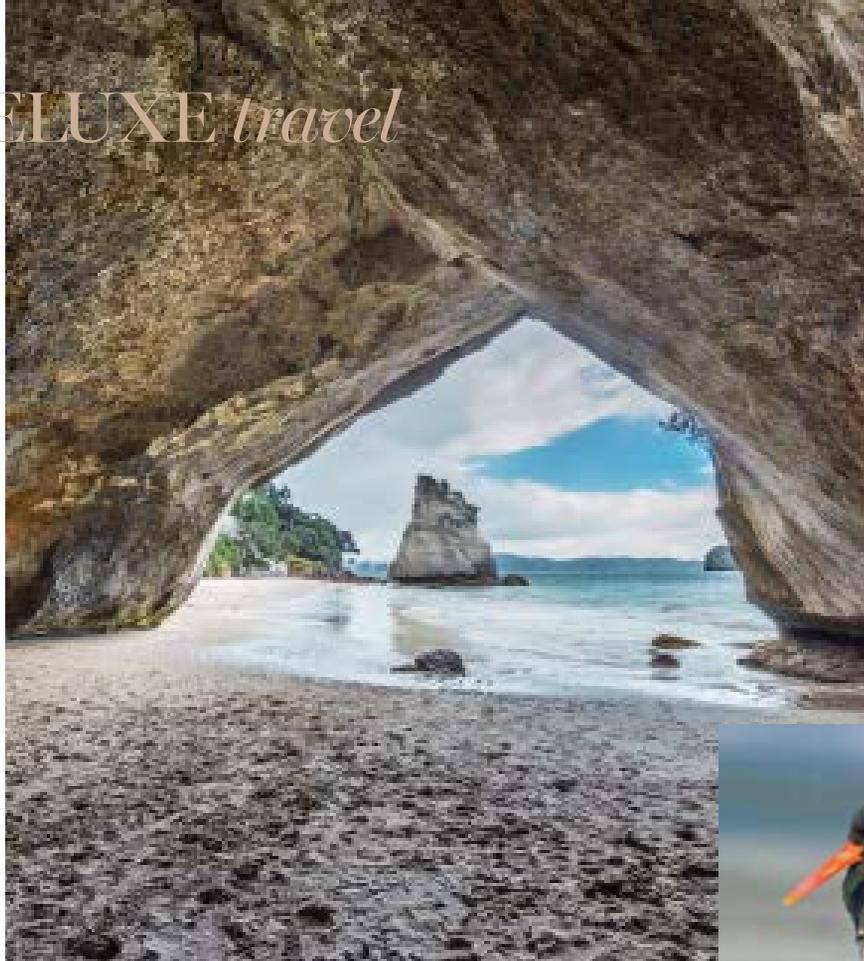
After that, we deserve some down time. A star feature of holidays to New Zealand is its network of luxury lodges, and it's worth finding the time (and money) for at least one or two on a trip. The usual form is to spend the day doing mad things outdoors, such as jet-boating, mountain-biking or heli-fishing, then return to your five-star base for divine spa moments and gourmet dining. At The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, set at the southern end of Hawke's Bay, the thrills include a cliff-top golf course, the world's largest mainland colony of gannets – all 20,000 of them – 6,000 acres of



working farm, and exhilarating 'natural' horse riding using rope reins rather than a metal bit. After a night out on this heavenly headland, it's hard not to be quietly envious of all those friends and relatives who emigrate to the Land of the Long White Cloud.

Hawke's Bay is renowned for its food and wine scene, and there's a sense of Mediterranean bounty to the many orchards, wineries, delis and small producers that border the coast – all tied together with nice level cycle trails perfect for a boozy tour. Honey, olives, asparagus, pears, artisan breads – this is the Garden of Eden with 'chilly bins' (as coolboxes are known here). Allow time for Napier, too, which has joyful art-deco architecture – following an earthquake in 1931, this pretty seaside town was rebuilt in a whirl of streamlined buildings adorned with sunbursts, ziggurats and Maori motifs. The story is well told at the Art Deco Centre and, if you like dressing up, get there for the Art Deco Weekend held every February, which last year drew some 35,000 fans for a cavalcade of classic cars, fashion shows, vintage markets and jazz performances.

There's more epic scenery to be admired when we head north to the mountainous Coromandel peninsula. Here you can feel the hippy, homesteader side to the country, with its winding rural ►



Gastronomic delights can be found all over North Island: sample local wines at some of Hawke's Bay's vineyards (top) or fresh fish on the Coromandel peninsula (far left). Also discover scenic beaches such as Cathedral Cove Marine Reserve (top left) and birdlife, including oystercatchers (left)



Book now

Air New Zealand (0800 028 4149; airnewzealand.co.uk) flies from London Heathrow via Los Angeles to Auckland, from £1,279 return in November.

Recommended places to stay are: **Hotel DeBrett** (hoteldebrett.com); **Chateau Tongariro Hotel** (chateau.co.nz); **The Farm at Cape Kidnappers** (capekidnappers.com); **The Dome** apartments (thedome.co.nz); **Manawa Ridge** (manawaridge.co.nz) and **970 Lonely Bay Lodge** (970lonelybay.com).

TIME Unlimited (newzealandtours.travel) offers Auckland tours. See nzcyclenr.com for the new national cycle routes, and adriftnz.co.nz for adventures in Tongariro National Park.

New Zealand (£16.99, Rough Guides) is an up-to-date guide. Useful websites include aucklandnz.com, greatlaketaupo.com, hawkesbaynz.com, thecoromandel.com and newzealand.com.

roads and single-lane bridges. Every town seems to have an organic food stop, and there are stalls with honesty boxes selling luscious figs and fresh-from-the-garden tomatoes. The Coromandel is dotted with romantic places to hide away, such as Manawa Ridge, a bohemian, three-suite luxury lodge on a remote hilltop near Waihi. Self-built from straw bales and recycled wood by an enterprising Dutch couple, Willem and Carla, it's worthy of *Grand Designs*. Over dinner, they enthuse about New Zealand's incredible light and the lack of pollution. Then, as the Pinot Gris flows, we move on to apple-cake recipes, Balinese art and, er, artificial insemination.

Further north lie revered stands of mighty kauri trees, New Zealand's answer to California's redwoods. Just 170 years ago they covered this entire peninsula – a reminder that this is a very young country. A little larger than the UK, it has a mere 4.5 million people, which means you have every chance of finding quiet scenic roads, panoramic picnic spots and deserted beaches to hold hands on.

At Whitianga, though, the sands come with a surprise. Thanks to all that volcanic activity, streams of CO₂ percolate up to the shore to create a novel form of free, under-beach heating. Dig a hole, and the sea water that floods in is invigoratingly warm, offering the chance to luxuriate in a homemade spa that's known, funnily enough, as Hot Water Beach.

When the tide is right, grown men can be seen digging impromptu bathing holes for their loved ones to wallow in like muddy queens. It's a laugh, and part of the pleasure is how laid-back everything is. In other countries this would be a major attraction, but here there's no admission fee, no parking charge, no vendors. It's safe to leave your bag on the sand, and everyone, Kiwis and visitors alike, is utterly happy and friendly. And in my book, such moments are worth flying halfway round the world for. ■