



GRAND TOUR
New Zealand



TOTAL DISTANCE
1350 miles



MAUI
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DURATION
21 days



Explore geothermal landscapes of hot
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Take the Kelburn Cable Car
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views over North Island's
city of Wellington



Wellington hoots, good geysers and a right pa-lava...

As they continue on their trip of a lifetime, **Gary Blake** and **Wendy Johnson** find that New Zealand's North Island offers plenty of scope for adventure



GARY BLAKE and **WENDY JOHNSON** are avid travellers. Gary is an ex-pat Kiwi who has toured in every corner of this fantastic country



Left, clockwise from top Ready for adventure, arriving on the inter-island ferry; Wellington waterfront motorhome site; Petone Settlers Museum; the Gold Coast outside Wellington Inset below Gollum from the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* at the Weta Workshop, Wellington Below right Wellington harbour



Within 30 minutes of rolling down the ramp of the inter-island ferry we were hooked up in our air-type central **Wellington** dockside motorhome park on New Zealand's North Island.

Gary knows the area well: he worked here as a part-time 'wharfie' when he was an art student funding his course.

The regeneration of the waterfront has hugely benefited the area and the site's unbeatable location right beside vibrant waterside cafés, restored heritage buildings, national and maritime museums, art galleries and within a five-minute walk of the bustling shopping district could not be bettered.

Wellington's U-shaped harbour, with its sandy bays and green hills dotted with pile houses clinging to the slopes, is ranked as one of the most beautiful in the world. As New Zealand's seat of Government, the city wears the aura of a place of special interest.

We had turned the 'van's sharp end to face the southerly winds and with warm clothes at the ready, we set off to the i-SITE (visitor information) office and joined a 'hop-on hop-off' tour to get an overview of the city. From the look-out on Mount Victoria, east of the city centre, we had a superb view of the harbour to get our bearings. On a clear day you can see the South Island, from where we had just travelled (see *Practical Motorhome*, February 2016, p28).

Hopping off our tour bus, we jumped on another, which took us to Zealandia, a superb nature reserve situated in a wooded valley just outside the city. With endless walking trails to explore it's possible to see some of New Zealand's rarest flora and fauna, including hihi, saddleback, kaka (birds) and tuatara (lizard). You have to visit at night to spot the elusive kiwi.

On Wellington's Miramar Peninsula we found ourselves in a land of make believe at the famous Peter Jackson's Weta Workshops. Here you get an insight into filmmaking on the 45-minute behind-the-scenes tour, viewing and handling movie props,



artefacts and costumes used for *Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *Avatar*.

We chose a sunny day to ride the funicular railway. At the top are great views of the city and harbour, and the downhill walk through the 64-acre Botanical Gardens showcases the native flora. We wondered how such a magnificent garden could be built on such a steep a slope. After a stop at the Begonia house and café we meandered through Bolton Street Memorial Park at the bottom of the gardens. Many past notable people of the town are buried there, including Wellington's founder, William Wakefield.

At Wellington's Maritime Museum and the fascinating Te Papa (National

Museum, both are located on the docks, we were able to piece together the story of the Māori – the Polynesian sea migration and discovery of Aotearoa (New Zealand), the Land of the Long White Cloud, the cloud being the sign of landfall.

In the beginning

The Māoris originated with settlers from eastern Polynesia, who arrived in New Zealand in several waves of canoe voyages at some time between 1250 and 1300. Currently, there are around 600,000 Māoris in New Zealand, roughly 15% of the population.

Wellington lies on several fault lines, so its terrain is the result of earthquake

thrusts. New buildings must meet certain earthquake-proof coding, and their rubber foundations can be seen at the Te Papa museum, where there's an 'earthquake room', which replicates what an earthquake feels like. We had no need of it – in Christchurch, on South Island, we experienced a real earthquake at 3am. The quake only measured 3.8 on the Richter scale but was quite alarming, as it shook the hotel's rubber foundations.

The story of the first English settlers, who arrived in six ships in 1840, is told at the

Settlers Museum on Petone's promenade (Pito-one in Māori). Wellington, being in the middle of the country, was well placed for trade and was chosen by the New Zealand

Company, a British concern, as the ideal place for the new settlers, but problems ensued with flooding in the Hutt Valley and Māori tribes, who were not aware of the British annexation and that English colonisation had begun.

The art, coffee-bar and micro-brewery culture all add to today's laid-back vibe of the city, but our five-day 'reminiscing' tour of Wellington had come

to an end and we made our Hutt Valley exit over the Rimutaka Hills. The highway is a hill-hugging road carved out of the bush-clad ranges.

Huntin', shootin', fishin'

An hour later we were down on level ground in the Wairarapas, a rural area with an off-the-beaten-track charm, and Martinborough, famous for its wines, in particular the production of some fine Pinot Noirs.

Our first stop was **Greytown**, a delightful, small, heritage town, to visit an old friend and deer hunter, who topped up our 'van's fridge with venison sausages that his wife had made from one of his kills. Hunting, shooting





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and fishing are all national sports, with deer heads proudly displayed.

About 1.5 hours' drive north from Greytown is the **Pukaha Mount Bruce Wildlife Centre** where it is possible to see the nocturnal Kiwi, which had been no more than a shadow in the dark at the various zoos we had visited so far and really not worth the high entry costs. This one is easily seen – it is white.

Art Deco and wine

Heading north-east we moved on to the famous wine district of Hawkes Bay and the Art Deco coastal town of **Napier**. We began the following day with lunch and a wine tasting at Church Road Vineyard close to our site.

Captain Cook was one of the first Europeans to chart this area when he sailed down the east coast in October 1769.

We joined a guided walk and heard how after the city was razed by an earthquake in 1931 it was rebuilt in the style of the times and today is celebrated for its Art Deco splendour.

On the wine front, this area is known for its Cabernet Sauvignons and Merlots and if staying for two days, it's worth hiring bikes and cycling along one of the Hawkes Bay trails, which include a seaside pathway and a 'winery' ride.

Our normal travel habit on both islands was to explore a new location in the morning and then travel on to the night's destination arriving early evening, normally in the dark – one of the downsides of autumn travel.

Crossing three more ranges of hills, we covered the thinly populated and apparently scenic route between Napier and Lake Taupō in darkness – we saw only two lamp posts, 100 miles apart! Be sure to refuel before leaving Napier.

Lake Taupō, formed following intense volcanic activity nearly 2000 years ago, is 25 miles long and is popular for water-skiing, sailing, kayaking and fishing, while the local town of Turangi offers the largest natural trout fishery in the world.

For adrenaline junkies Taupō Bungy NZ (www.taupobungy.co.nz) offers the North Island's highest and most popular bungy jump. Set on the steep banks of the mighty Waikato River, jumpers stand 47 metres above the river below.

Just north of Lake Taupō we saw the magnificent Huka Falls, where more than 220,000 litres of ice-blue water

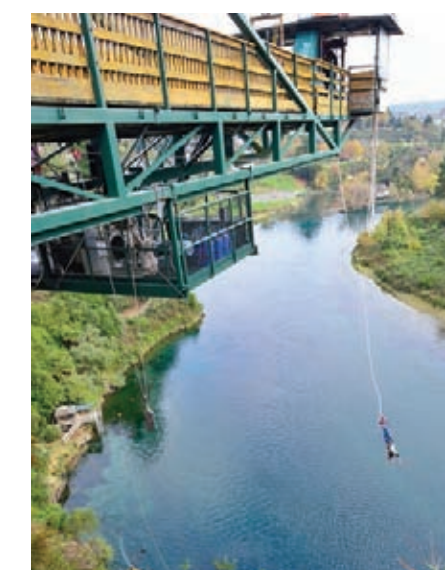


plunges through a ravine and thunders over the cliff face every second.

We were now entering an area full of volcanoes, with hot pools being a very pleasant feature of this geothermal region. Venturing off State Highway 1 (SH1) we came across an extraordinary and very photogenic landscape with vivid-green, oddly shaped volcanic hills and mountaineering cows. We were on our way to the **Orakei Korako** (The Hidden Valley) Thermal Park, 25 miles north of Taupō.

The Hidden Valley is reached by a short boat ride across the Waikato River to land at the foot of a large silica terrace, tinged orange, pink and green by heat-loving algae. The self-guided hour's walk on well-maintained boardwalks and paths took us through beautiful native bush interspersed with gushing geysers, hot springs and bubbling mud pools. Here, scenes from the BBC's *Walking with Dinosaurs* were filmed and we could see why. 🦖

Top The Art Deco town of Napier
Inset The not-so-elusive white kiwi at Pukaha Mount Bruce Wildlife Centre
Above Orakei Korako Geothermal Park
Below Bungy jumping at Lake Taupō





The Te Puia cultural attraction at Rotorua depicts Maori history and culture. With a day pass you get to experience the singing and dancing and can visit the National Carving and Weaving Schools. Don't miss the Pohutu Geyser's fine display

On the way to **Rotorua** on State Highway 5 another sign took our eye, pointing us towards a bush area where we saw campervanners taking a dip in a hot pool in a stream. Some pools have been developed, which means you pay admission fees, but others are still ‘wild’ and entirely free of charge.

It should be noted that when swimming in natural hot pools, you must keep your head above water because there is a small risk of contracting amoebic meningitis. While very rare, this illness is serious.

Enjoying the Māori ways

We finally arrived at the centrally located TOP 10 holiday park in Rotorua. Rotorua is the heartland of New Zealand’s Māori culture and Whakarewarewa its most famous thermal valley. Here, we visited the Te Puia cultural attraction, our day pass covering a performance of singing

and dancing, including the Haka, and visits to the National Carving School and National Weaving School, where we watched craftspeople at work using traditional Māori methods.

The site also contains the famous and impressive Pohutu Geyser, which erupts up to 20 times a day and blew its top for us on the hour as predicted.

Probably the most enjoyable thing we saw was the evening cultural show at Te Puia, combined with a ‘Hangi’ feast – a traditional Māori style of cooking where natural steam is used to cook food underground. The dinner was delicious and was finished off with New Zealand’s national dessert – pavlova. As a finale we took a small train to see the geyser gush at 10pm, while our guide sang Māori love songs – a truly memorable evening.

Setting off at a brisk pace, the very interesting two-hour ‘Kia Ora’ guided walk from Rotorua’s i-SITE centre gave

us an insight into the history of the area. The town of Rotorua was built in the early 1880s as a place for tourists to stay while visiting the ‘hot lakes’ for cures for numerous ailments. We passed the historic Blue Baths, which are still open for bathing in their thermally heated waters, and the Museum, which occupies a grand Tudor-style building that in 1908 was originally a spa called the Bath House.

Arriving in **Ohinemutu** – home to the Ngati Whakaue branch of the Arawa tribe, who arrived in New Zealand around 500 years ago – we were handed over to a Māori guide who took us around the village of small houses, most with original hot pools in the back garden. Many villagers still cook using hot steam.

We admired the elaborately carved Māori marae (meeting house) and visited St Faith’s Anglican Church with its intricate Māori carvings and

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Parked at Hot Water Beach on the Coromandel Peninsula



Left Dig your own hot water pool in the sand at Hot Water Beach
Right Busy Auckland city from the North Shore



unusual etched window where Jesus appears to walk on the water wearing a Māori cloak.

Getting into Hot Water

With the songs and rhythms of cultural performances still in our heads it seemed feasible to make the three-hour drive to reach Hot Water Beach for the night. It's where hot water bubbles up through the sand down the coast from **Whitianga** on the stunning Coromandel Peninsula.

A couple of hours either side of high tide, you can dig your own spa pool then lie back and watch the waves breaking on the beach. Amazing! This hot soak is totally free unless you need to rent a spade from the campsite a five-minute walk from the beach.

Long gone is the 'goat track' I took to reach the area, which still has its surf beaches, art scene and laid-back vibe.

The city of **Auckland** is far from laid back. With an urban sprawl to match Los Angeles, Auckland has a population of 1,413,700 and the largest Polynesian population of any city in the world, not forgetting its Chinese and Indian new settlers. Named the 'city of sails' it also has more boats per person than anywhere else in the world.

Taking the short ferry ride from the Victorian seaside village of Devonport to the centre we made our way to the Auckland Museum, which boasts the largest collection of Māori and Polynesian artefacts.

Venturing into the wild north

A part-Māori school friend planned the next phase of our trip to Northland. New Zealanders often call it the 'far north' or because of its mild climate the

'winterless north'. "Go to Paihia (Bay of Islands) via the Russell Peninsula to see the ethnic Māori way of life - they have their own schools." And so we did.

"Northland is a story of two coastlines - the west coast is rugged and soulful, while the east coast is more sophisticated and urbane."

En route to the Russell Peninsula, were they rustlers butchering a pile of dead sheep beside the road, we asked ourselves: "Bound to be," said the 'All Black'-sized campsite owner in **Paihia**. It's a free-for-all land with horses running wild, but as in all of New Zealand that's the magic - unspoilt country, spectacular scenery, lush vegetation, unique wildlife and a pleasant climate.

The Bay of Islands Explore Group's cruise to view and possibly swim with



dolphins, via Red Head Passage to Cape Brett and through the famous Hole in the Rock, delivered what was promised.

And so did **Russell**. Once known as the 'hell hole' of the South Pacific it is now a charming and picturesque coastal town. Big-game fishing is a Kiwi sport and we ate alongside the trophies at Russell's Bay of Islands Swordfish Club, which opens its restaurant to tourists, before returning by ferry to Paihia, then back to our site on the beach.

We had decided to visit **Cape Reinga** and drive along Ninety Mile Beach to see where the Tasman and Pacific oceans collide, but could not do it in our camper. First, the 180-miles round trip couldn't be achieved in a day because of the 90kph motorhome speed limit, plus our insurance would be nullified driving on beaches, let alone getting through the 'sand blows'.

Explore Group's 4x4 Dune Rider coach trip gave us all the thrills we needed. The Ninety Mile Beach (it's actually 60) is part of the New Zealand Te Araroa walking trail. Passing only a few people along this stretch, our guide told us that the 1860-mile trail stretches from Cape Reinga in the north to Bluff in the south.

After surfing down sand dunes on body boards we arrived at the iconic Cape's lighthouse just as the heavens opened, but when the sun came out the views of the coastline were magnificent.

A relaxing morning walk the next day took us around the **Waitangi Treaty Grounds**. This is New Zealand's most important historic site, where in 1840 Māori chiefs first signed their accord with the British Crown – the Treaty of Waitangi (*Te Tiriti of Waitangi*) – New Zealand's founding document drawn up to ensure national harmony.

Local reverence for dolphins

Before returning to Auckland we followed State Highway 1 northbound to Kohukohu before turning south to cross the Hokianga Harbour by car ferry to Rawene, a small waterfront town, and then on to **Opononi**.

Remoteness came to mind at Opononi, looking across the harbour entrance to the endless sand blows. Gary had been here before and seen the statue of Opo, a playful Bottlenose dolphin who drew thousands of people to the town in the 1950s. Her death was reported nationwide, and she was buried with full Māori honours in a special plot next to the town hall.

Our mission was to get through the Waipoua rainforest before nightfall. ☺



Above Hole in the Rock, Bay of Islands *Right* The Bay of Islands Swordfish Club at Russell – big-game fishing is a national sport *Right below* Bottlenose dolphins are a fairly common sight around the Bay of Islands *Below* Matakohē post and telegraph office in Northland



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*Above Cape Reinga in Northland Right Trounson Kauri Park bush walk
Below The House of Assembly where the Treaty of Waitangi was signed*



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Although unsealed roads are a thing of the past, State Highway 12 winds its way up and down through the forest.

Here the Kauri trees reign supreme, none more so than the 2000-year-old giant named *Tāne Mahuta* or 'Lord of the Forest'. With a girth of 45ft and height to the first branches at 58ft, the tree has the 'wow' factor and is only a few minutes' walk from the road.

We had just cleared the dark forest when the rain came down and the sat-nav guided us to the stop for the night at Kauri Coast TOP 10 Holiday Park, run by Chris and Jane McComb, an English couple from Yorkshire. They had won 2015's top award from TOP 10 for their site, which they bought two years ago. It was immaculate – a small river ran around the edge and it had every conceivable amenity possible.

Although it was pouring with rain it didn't take much to persuade Chris to take us on his 'guided night walk' to

try, again, to spot a nocturnal, shy kiwi. Donning as much foul-weather gear as we could find we set off in the mini-bus for Trounson Kauri Park to walk the boardwalk trail and, with a powerful torch with red filter, we managed to get glimpses of a possum, an Australian rat, glow worms, and several weta (a sort of grasshopper) but again Kiwis eluded us.

It's worth returning to walk through the Kauri park in daylight to view many more mighty Kauri trees.

We were on the last run, returning to Auckland, but stopped en route at **Matakohe** to visit the Kauri Museum, which warranted more time than we could give it. Kauri is a strong durable timber prized for furniture, and once used for the decks of English 120ft J-Class yachts, as well as the valuable Kauri gum, a fossilised resin that was used commercially for varnish.

The museum's main focus is on the history of logging the Kauri,

but it also had lots of machinery, beautiful furniture and mocked-up rooms from the early 1900s.

Time was against us for exploring any further along the western coast so we detoured along State Highway 12 to join State Highway 1 in order to reach our site that evening. It was south of Auckland Harbour bridge so we didn't have to join the morning traffic jam and need only drive 15 minutes to reach the Maui depot at the airport for 11am.

On day 41 we departed on Air New Zealand for a week's stopover on Rarotonga and Aitutaki in the Cook Islands. We felt our itinerary worked very well for our trip of a lifetime to this incredible country.

** Gary and Wendy travelled to New Zealand with the Camping & Caravanning Club's Travel Service. The Club runs two escorted tours, or can arrange bespoke travel. Visit www.worldwidemh.co.uk/newzealand or call 024 7647 5340. 📞*



i Our route and stops

We mainly used TOP 10 sites; bookings can be made at www.top10.co.nz. The average nightly cost for a pitch with electric hook-up was \$NZ30-50 (£12.80-£21.50).

Wellington Waterfront

Address 28 Waterloo Quay, Pipitea, Wellington 6011 **Web** www.wvmp.co.nz
An aire-type motorhome park in an ideal spot for exploring Wellington on foot.

Wellington TOP 10

Tel 00 64 4 568 5913
Web www.top10.co.nz/parks/wellington
A quieter site with full facilities but 10 miles from Wellington.

Napier Beach Kiwi Holiday Park

Tel 00 64 6 836 7084
Web www.napierbeach.co.nz
A great beach location, plus good facilities and bike hire to the Art Deco town of Napier.

Lake Taupō TOP 10

Tel 00 64 7 378 6860
Web www.top10.co.nz/parks/lake-taupo
This is the perfect base for exploring the beautiful and versatile Lake Taupō area.

Rotorua TOP 10

Tel 00 64 7 348 1886
Web www.top10.co.nz/parks/rotorua
A five-star site in central Rotorua, with spa facilities. Te Puia Tours pick up from here.

We rented our 'van from Maui New Zealand (www.maui.co.nz). Maui motorhomes and Kea Motorhomes are part of Tourism Holdings (THL)



Hot Water Beach TOP 10

Tel 00 64 3 752 0735
Web www.top10.co.nz/parks/hot-water-beach/
Perfect for walking to the hot salt water beach pools and for day trips to vineyards.

Takapuna Beach Holiday Park

Tel 00 64 9 489 7909
Web www.takapunabeachholidaypark.co.nz/
Superb location on the shores of Takapuna Beach. Bus or drive to park in Devonport for ferry to Auckland City.

Beachside Holiday Park

Tel 00 64 9 402 7678

Web www.beachsideholiday.co.nz

Terrace grounds located in Paihia on the water's edge in the Bay of Islands.

Kauri Coast TOP 10

Tel 00 64 9 439 0621
Web www.kauricoasttop10.co.nz
Site owned by an amicable English couple. Owner does Kiwi night walks.

Manukau Holiday Park

Tel 00 64 9 266 8016
Web www.manukauhpn.co.nz
Convenient for the Maui motorhome handover at its airport base.

i Find out more

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- **Wellington City Tours**
Web www.hoponhopoff.co.nz
Charges \$45 (£20)
- **Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa**
Web www.tepapa.govt.nz
Charges Free
- **Zealandia**
Web www.visitzealandia.com
Charges \$17.50 (£7.80)
- **Weta Workshop**
Web www.wetanz.com
Charges Standard tour \$25 (£11)
- **Museum of Wellington**
Web www.museumswellington.org.nz
Charges Free
- **Wellington Cable Car**
Web www.wellingtoncablecar.co.nz
Charges \$4 single \$7.50 return

• **Petone Settlers Museum**

Web www.petonesettlers.org.nz
Charges Free

• **Pukaha Mount Bruce National Wildlife Center**

Web www.pukaha.org.nz
Charges \$20 (£8.90)

NAPIER

- **Guided walks**
Web www.artdeconapier.com
Charges \$20 (£8.90)
- **Church Road Winery**
Web www.churchroad.co.nz
Charges \$17.50-\$35 (£7.80-£15.60)

ROTORUA

- **Te Puia**
Web www.tepuia.com
Charges \$99 (£44.15)
- **Kia Ora Guided Walks**
Web nzmaoritourism.com/listing/kiaora-walks
Charges \$23 (£10.25)

AUCKLAND

- **Hop-on, hop-off bus**
Web www.explorerbus.co.nz
Charges \$45 (£20)

• **Auckland War Memorial Museum**

www.aucklandmuseum.com **Charges** Free

BAY OF ISLANDS

- **Bay of Islands twin tour**
Web www.exploregroup.co.nz
Charges \$210 (£93.62)
- **The Waitangi Treaty Grounds**
Web www.waitangi.org.nz/visit-waitangi
Charges \$25 (£11.14) Tour \$25 (£15.60)
- **Kauri Museum**
Web www.kauri-museum.com
Charges \$25 (£11.14)

i Special thanks to...

Gary and Wendy's Icebreaker merino woollen clothes were invaluable on this trip – warm for the South Island yet cooling for the North Island (www.icebreaker.com).

£ Costs

Ferry.....	£468
Diesel.....	£160
Groceries.....	£225
Site fees.....	£340
Attraction fees.....	£540
Motorhome hire.....	£1503
TOTAL.....	£3236