

WAIHI BEACH

By Gayle Dickson

Most of us are aware of Waihi, the Coromandel town famous for its open pit mine. Few, however, have ventured to Waihi Beach, just a few kilometres down the road ... and, boy, are they missing out!

A few weeks back, I hesitantly accepted an invitation to visit. It was winter and icy cold – how would I fill a weekend in a seaside resort in this weather? I tossed an unusually large bag for a weekend trip into the boot of the car and set off on the short drive. The bag was so large as I'd packed every conceivable item of clothing I could think of for winter adventures - Ugg boots, parkas and all manner of thermal and woollen clothing.

Having endured squalls of driving rain and fairly high winds on the short 2 hour drive, I was astonished to clear the Karangahake Gorge and encounter bright sunshine. Some fifteen minutes later, I turned off my ignition at Waihi Beach Lodge and that sun was still shining. A brisk wind was whipping along the nearby beach, white horses prancing vigorously as the gusts stripped them of their dignity. Out of the wind, it was relatively warm.

My hosts, Ali and Greg, greeted me with a warmth that matched the sunshine. I was shown to my suite while a fresh coffee brewed. We sat chatting in the guest lounge for ages and it was with great

effort that I excused myself to go off and explore the beach and town.

The seagulls swooped playfully, dipping and diving gleefully in the brisk breeze as I made my way along a short stretch of the 9km shoreline. Families were out and about, flying kites, collecting driftwood and shells and generally having a great time. I made my way over the sand dunes to the Flat White Café where the aromas were just too good to pass by. My hot chocolate was rich and creamy and just what the doctor ordered. Tables were packed – this was obviously a very popular spot!

I had never visited the Martha Mine in Waihi Township, so headed off to catch the afternoon tour. I joined a group of Australians who hailed from a mining town and we were escorted from point to point on the mine in a mini van, complete with running commentary from our driver, an onboard DVD and, of course, the requisite neon safety gear and hardhats when we ventured on foot. The two hour tour was an eye opener into the workings of an open pit mine ... I honestly hadn't realised just how much gold and silver lay beneath the surface in NZ!

As the afternoon progressed, the wind speed increased and the temperature dropped. On my way back to Waihi Beach, I made the important decision to stop and soak at Athenree Hot Springs. At a constant 35 degrees, the larger pool was too mild for me in this weather, but the adult relaxing pool was just the ticket at a

soul warming 39 degrees. This is a real family getaway spot on the northern end of Tauranga Harbour and only a few minutes drive from Waihi Beach. Accommodation ranges from campsites and chalets to motel or studio units. There's a communal BBQ area and well-fitted kitchen, laundry, games room, library and playground area ... showers are free and there are hairdryers!

I popped into historic Athenree House which was built in 1878 – the perfect spot for a sedate afternoon tea. Run by the Athenree Homestead Trust, the homestead evokes a sense of peace and tranquility that I'm sure weren't part of the harsh existence its original owners would have endured ... no insulation, running water or flushing toilets. Whilst most of the original furnishings were sold off many years ago, the Trust has been lucky enough to have found relics here and there, topped off with kind donations. What's seen today is a pretty damn good replica and the restoration work continues. You can support them by purchasing some of the merchandise on offer (on site and on their website) or by taking a Friend of the Homestead membership.

That night I dined at the award winning The Porch Kitchen & Bar, owned and operated by Riaan and Carla Botha. It pays to book – the place was humming! My table beside the roaring fire provided a great vantage point to people watch and it didn't take long to realise that the locals loved the owners, the staff and the atmosphere. You know a place is great when the locals frequent it! I wasn't to be disappointed ... my starter of pear, watercress and blue cheese salad was delightful, and I followed this with a porcini and Portobello mushroom risotto. Well sated, Riaan twisted my arm into a vanilla and Bayleys crème brulee with lemon sorbet ... oh my!

The following morning, the wind had abated and the sun was out in full force. After a sumptuous hot breakfast prepared by Greg and Ali, I donned a trendy leather jacket, gloves and helmet and set off on the back of Baz's gleaming Harley Davidson. Baz and Ali Howie offer the tours in conjunction with motorbike rentals, with depots in Auckland, Coromandel and Christchurch, as well as here in their base of Waihi Beach. Whether you prefer to be chauffeured as I was or prefer a self-ride option, they have packages to suit. This entrepreneurial couple also offer holiday accommodation in both NZ and Fiji, as well as guided fly-fishing in the rivers around Waihi.



By now I'd built up an appetite again, so snuck into The Deli for a scrumptious Panini and long black. Owner Nicky served me personally, and is on hand daily to ensure that her motto of "maximum flavour, minimum fuss" is adhered to. Having cooked for Peter Gordon at Sugar Club in Wellington, Nicky knows her flavours – and the locals flock in here in droves.

That afternoon, while Greg prepared for a fishing trip with the boys, Ali and I took the scenic coastal walk to Orakawa Bay. I'd been told to allow about 35 minutes each way but, in reality, you need a little longer ... not because it's difficult terrain, but because there are so many beautiful spots along the way to stop and gaze in awe at the beauty surrounding you. On this perfect afternoon,





the blue waters stretched out for miles and miles meeting the near cloudless sky on the distant horizon, interrupted only by a few islands ... Mayor, Motiti Island, Slipper.

My last stop before the drive back to Auckland simply had to be the Karangahake Gorge. Taking about an hour to complete, this scenic walk gets started with a suspension bridge over the Ohinemuri River. Up the stairs, through abandoned buildings, along gold mining tunnels, past cliffs and you can even explore an old pumphouse. Take a good torch, wear sensible shoes and remember your camera!

On the drive back to Auckland, I couldn't help wishing I'd discovered Waihi Beach a long time ago ... while owning a property in this seaside haven might be out of reach of many, it's still extremely affordable in terms of rentals and holiday accommodation. It's a secret little gem that I'm so glad I discovered. 🇳🇿

FACTS:

Getting there:

From Auckland, drive along SH1 to the SH2 turn off at Pokeno. Follow SH2 through Waihi onto Tauranga Road, then take a left turn onto Waihi Beach Road. From Tauranga region, take SH2 (Katikati North Road) and veer right at Athenree Road (just before Athenree Gorge).

Where to stay:

Waihi Beach Lodge, www.waihibeachlodge.co.nz
Athenree Hot Springs & Holiday Park:
www.athenreehotsprings.co.nz

Food & Drink:

Flat White Café for snacks, lunch and amazing hot chocolate - www.flatwhitecafe.co.nz
Porch Café Kitchen & Bar for dinner and excellent coffee - www.theporch.co.nz
The Deli for the best baguettes and fabulous pastries - www.waihibeachdeli.co.nz

What to do:

Take the Windows walk through Karangahake Gorge
Take the coastal walk to Orakawa Bay - about 35 mins each way
Tour the town with Bulurangi Harley Tours, www.bularangi.com
Have afternoon tea at Athenree House - www.athenreehomstead.org.nz



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