

Aotea Great Barrier - a world of its own

Great Barrier Island is a world apart from Auckland City - or any city for that matter.

It's the environment that most New Zealanders long for. Aotea is all about relaxation, renewal and regeneration. There's simply no need to rush anywhere on the Barrier. You can't help noticing this as soon as you venture out - no highways here. Just chill out and breathe.

Please take care, drive carefully, and trust the signs when they say '4WD only'. They mean it.



Photo: Rob Suisted.

The main centres

The main areas you are likely to see while cruising the island are:

Claris - the main facilities

Barrier's main airport, and centre of most things - Claris has the police station, council offices and the health centre. It would be the capital, if Aotea was a country.

This is where incoming aircraft passengers pick up rental cars, stock up on supplies, post a letter or take in the art gallery and museum. Its a hub for accommodation, food and nightlife as well.

After that, the rest of Great Barrier beckons. But before you hit the road, make sure you check with the Claris Airport i-Site, they can tell you the opening times (and location!) of cafes, eateries and lodges, as some places are not open all year round.



Claris has most of the island's public facilities.

Port FitzRoy - bays, boats and bush

Port FitzRoy Harbour ¹², a sheltered harbour, is best explored by boat. There are kayaks for hire at the Outdoor Pursuit Centre at Karaka Bay or at Glenfern Sanctuary.

But there is more - a charming village where you can shop, post a letter or access the library and information centre, eat at the boating club (site of the world famous annual mussel fest) or set off on a walk. Tracks for all levels of fitness start from the village.

Some Port FitzRoy highlights are listed in the 'Must Do' activities (right).

While there, book a guided tour through the Glenfern Sanctuary, and see what a New Zealand forest should be like. It's an inspiration, and only a minute's drive from Port FitzRoy.

Maps produced with support from the Ngāti Rehua Ngātiwai ki Aotea Trust Board.



The annual Okiwi School fundraising raft race, Port FitzRoy.

Tryphena - civilisation, Barrier style

² The first port of call for many people coming by ferry. First rules, put your watch in the glove box and toss away the events diary of your otherwise hectic life. Take a deep breath. You've arrived.

Take it easy on the coastal road and enjoy lovely beaches, good eateries and artist studios.

Cape Barrier Road ¹ leads you to some fine views. But no rush, remember. Likewise along Pūriri Bay Road and Schooner Bay Road.

Look for seabirds, schools of fish, dolphins and Brydes whales in and around the harbour.



Pou (Māori marker) along the road to Kawa and Motairehe Marae.

Must Do activities

OK, what to do when faced with so much choice? Here's a short list.

Harataonga Bay ⁹ Possibly the most beautiful campsite in the world. With lovely historic trees, and a beach to die for.

Medlands Beach ⁴ The ultimate white sand surf beach, with rocks and a wee island to explore. A perfect spot for a stroll, holding hands...

Okupu Bay ⁵ Giant magic pohutukawa trees, a picnic heaven, and a drive across historic bridges to a lovely jetty. Chill out. Spot dolphins.



Many western beaches are lined with Pohutukawa. Photo: John Kjargaard.

Port FitzRoy ¹² Every Auckland boatie's favourite landfall, and the best harbour anywhere. Sit and watch things happen (or not), explore the local walks. Find out what's on offer at the information office next to the local shop.

Tryphena ² An easy coastal road takes in top views, waterfront accommodation, stores and cafes. If you slow down to appropriate Barrier speed, you could lose a lovely day right here.

Whangaparapara ⁷ Where the history of Barrier is alive, and your imagination is engaged. A place worth loitering at, a wharf where time ticks slowly, and some great short walks.

Windy Canyon ¹⁰ The kind of lookout that leaves you gasping for superlatives. Views to the far side of the world.

Okiwi Park - A charming picnic spot with a special relationship to the neighbouring primary school.

Whaler's Lookout ¹ Look across the Colville Channel to the Coromandel, and maybe spy a whale. A fine meditation spot.

Ko Aotea te moutere rongonui
Ko Hirakimatā te maunga tapu
Ko te Moananui o Toi te huatahi te moana
Ko Rehua rāua ko Te Rangitūangahuru ngā tūpuna
Ko Ngāti Rehua te hapu
Ko Ngātiwai te iwi
Ko Te Tuatara, Te Mauri me Tūkaiaia ngā Kaitikaki

Aotea is the renowned Island
Hirakimatā is the sacred mountain
The great sea of Toi is the sea
Rehua and Te Rangitūangahuru are the ancestors
Ngāti Rehua are the people (sub-tribe)
Ngātiwai are the people (tribe)
The Tuatara, Te Mauri and Tūkaiaia are the guardians

Photo: Andris Apse.

History

On the road to, and in the quiet bay of Whangaparapara, ⁷ you'll be surprised at the scale of previous industry on the Barrier - gold mining, kauri felling and whaling. Now mere remnants remain, but tantalising tales still simmer in the air. The tangata whenua (original Māori settlers) had the right idea - protecting the area with a number of fortified Pā. But it was a slow and peaceful place even with the trade in obsidian, a valuable commodity.

Whaling stopped here in the 1960s, and the remains of the whaling station can be seen across Whangaparapara Bay.

Also on that shore was a huge timber mill and wharf, connected to the forest with tramlines. Only the foundation piles are there now. Barrier was a source of beautiful kauri timber.

A short-lived gold rush happened here, as well as copper mining. A surprising early export was honey - shipped to Europe in the 1880s.

Barrier has also had its share of famous shipwrecks. ¹⁶

This is just a hint at the Barrier's rich history. Now Barrier mostly exports good memories and relaxed visitors...



The SS Wairarapa sunk off Great Barrier, 1894. Photo: Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 581-6927.

Toi: Art and culture

The Art Gallery at Claris shows the work of local artists, and is well worth seeing.

Elsewhere you may also find other art studios, and even an 'honesty box' gallery with no-one around - just take your painting and leave your money (Rosalie Bay Road). Only on the Barrier...

The Milk, Honey & Grain museum just south of Claris is a charming stop, that breaks all the rules of ordinary museums - yet will leave you enchanted, entertained and informed.

For more culture, history and stories, talk to your accommodation hosts - or check with one of the information offices.

Hīkoi: Venturing out

The best short walks must end in a reward, right? Any beach, any wharf is lovely - see the Must Do's on the left.

And venturing further, try the stroll to Kaitoke Hot Springs ⁶ off the Whangaparapara road.

A meander along lonely Whangapoua Beach ¹⁶ is to experience calmness and quietude. And to reflect on the fate of those who died in the 1894 wreck of the SS Wairarapa. Head out to Kawa (in Katherine Bay) to see some graves from this tragedy. If you're lucky, local Māori will tell you of their ancestors' role in the rescue.

Haerenga: For the fit

For a stunning day trip, walk up to Hirakimatā (Mt Hobson) from Windy Canyon. Or, if you have the time, walk the three day DOC Aotea Track starting near the Kaitoke Hot Pools, through the forested heart of the island. The Info Centres on the island have good maps and brochures, produced by the Department of Conservation. Do take their advice, especially on trip times.

Kaitiaki: Wildlife

Animals are significant to Māori, often viewed as kaitiaki or guardians of people and places.

Aotea has the biggest population of pāteke (brown teal, a rare native duck), plenty of noisy, cheeky kākā parrots, and many other birds and lizards. We also have one of the few nesting places for tāiko (black petrels) - spectacular seabirds that roam as far as Australia and Ecuador.

The waters around Great Barrier abound in dolphins and Brydes whales. Sit long enough on a rock anywhere on the coast and you might spot them. Tar she blows!

Great Barrier Island is fortunate not to have pest ferrets, hedgehogs, Norway rats, possums, stoats or weasels - we do however have a vast number ship rats and feral cats filling the gap.

Please help us protect our biodiversity: do whatever you can not to import pests; wash footwear to guard against kauri dieback disease and stay on tracks and boardwalks.



Art inspired by Aotea wildlife in local school bus shelters.

Driving on the island

The island roads do double duty. They are real roads to locals - that is, routes to get places effectively in a car or ute on a working day. For visitors, the roads are walkways, bike trails, resting places, viewing sites, as well as spots for a little reverie.

Great Barrier's roads are not wide and never straight. Tear your eyes away from the view, and look out for walkers, cyclists, ducks, stock and other vehicles.

In short, be careful; it's still a road.

Campervans are welcome, but please note: you can only stay at designated campsites. Look for the campervan icons on the map to locate them.

No open fires on Great Barrier.