



Great Barrier Island – a hidden gem

Stuart and Margaret Slade (#34283) reckon Great Barrier Island is the perfect destination for anyone looking for a motorhoming holiday 'with an overseas feel' that doesn't cost an arm and a leg. Read their account of and excursion they took in February.



First page: Picturesque views of the island's many inlets and bays from Port Fitzroy. **Left:** A native Kaka, as seen in many of the campsites on the island. **Above:** The art gallery at Claris features a great selection of quality art and crafts.

It was an early start to be at the Sea Link Ferry by 6am but we certainly got a full day as a result. There are later sailing times available for those who would prefer a not-so-early start. The ferry crossing took nearly five hours, and we were lucky that the sea was calm. We enjoyed watching Auckland disappear into the distance.

There were two other motorhomes on the same ferry and all of us had our kayaks on top. Also on board was a group of Australian trampers so it was a lovely social crossing. We were able to access our vehicle throughout the crossing (handy when we needed another layer of clothing) and there is a small cafe on the ferry.

A dreamy reality

Arriving at Tryphena was the start of what would be a dream holiday. The ferry was unloaded in a very efficient manner, just as it had been loaded at Wynyard Wharf back in Auckland. The ferry staff were efficient and friendly, helping to direct us in driving on and off.

Not far from the wharf was an interesting pottery which we had a look at. Afterwards we checked out what supplies were available at the local store at Tryphena. It was then a short drive over the hill to the DOC camp at Medlands Beach, on the eastern side of the island.

The westerly wind didn't stop us having some lovely swims in the crystal clear blue water (which felt about 25 degrees). The sand was pristine and white, and oyster catchers strutted their stuff with their demanding offspring.

Midway along the beach we discovered the spot where a kind local had told us we'd easily get mussels at low tide ... so it was mussels for tea the first night and mussel fritters the next!

From Medlands we drove north, enjoying

the views down the expansive white sands of Kaitoke Beach. At Claris, there's an airport, another well stocked store, postal facilities and a medical centre. The art gallery and craft shop had great displays of top quality art. The Milk, Honey & Grain museum is a must visit - you can really sense the passion the owner has.

Abundant wildlife

The next DOC camp we called into was Awana. A word of warning: insect repellent is essential here. We noticed that there were no shady trees here but it was an interesting walk down the stream to the river mouth and bay, where frothy rollers were crashing in on the beach.

A drive up and over the next hill- with many spectacular lookouts - took us to the turn off for Harataonga DOC camp. This is a narrow, mainly one-way road, but it is well worth the trip. The other two motorhomes were already there when we arrived.

There are some beautiful, mature trees here with nesting tuls, banded rail trotting by and kaka flying around as they came in to eat the very unripe pears off trees on the old house sites. A pateke wandered past, as did a mother duck and her eight ducklings. They weren't fazed by our bread which had gone mouldy by this stage, eating it as if they were half starved - they weren't, none of the campers could resist feeding them! As at Medlands there were dotterel on the beach, some with fluffy chicks and not too shy of humans either.

We tried out our just-add-water Bin Inn pikelet mix and the result was large pikelets, easily cooked in the pan. These made wonderful salad sandwiches for lunch and the mixture was so soft, we will definitely use it again - beats mouldy

bread any day!

Again the water was crystal clear, warm, and superb for swimming. It was even calm enough for several paddles in our kayak. On one morning in particular it was especially calm, so we quickly organised ourselves to paddle out to Rakitu, or Arid Island. It is 3.5 kilometres out from the shore, and took us 35 minutes to paddle. We spent two hours paddling around, exploring the island as we went. The Cathedral Coves were really spectacular, and the rock formations were also very interesting. The polished gemstones along the beach were so varied in colours, we couldn't resist taking a few back for our granddaughters. It was calm enough for us to paddle through the hole in the rock where we saw gannets dive-bombing, Caspian terns fishing, and little blue penguins swimming. We also came across some DOC guys who were spraying pampas.

Island life

On our last morning at Harataonga the surf got up, so it was out with the boogie boards for a great time. We took another drive over the hills to Port Fitzroy and the DOC camp of Akapoua, on the water's edge. The western side of the island is not sandy like the eastern side, but the inlets and bays with deep, clear water make for great kayaking - probably in most conditions as it is very sheltered. We paddled around to explore many of the bays.

The range of frozen food is really good and The New Zealand Herald is flown in daily, arriving at about 11am. Fresh produce comes in on Wednesday mornings - we splashed out on sweetcorn and bananas that day!

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We made arrangements to be collected at 7.30am and dropped off at the Windy Canyon track, which we'd driven past two days before. What a knowledgeable, friendly operator Mike Newman is and we were pleasantly surprised at his low charges. Windy Canyon is a spectacular series of huge rocks and is a must for anyone visiting, taking about 15 minutes on an easy track.

We carried on walking up to Mt Hirakimata (Mt Hobson), over about two kilometres of new steps and boardwalk which have been put in to protect petrel nesting sites and 'Kauri. It wasn't the clear sunny day that had been forecast,

but the passing clouds and mist gave us tantalising views to both sides of the island. We waited by the trig for half an hour or so hoping it would clear. The bush there is lush, with lots of regenerating Kauri.

From here we walked downhill over another few thousand new steps to Mt Heale and the brand new DOC hut. What a site! What a view! Then it was down through a variety of bush back to the Kaiaarara Hut and along the Forest Road for the last few kilometres back to the DOC camp. This was about an eight hour day, with plenty of stops to enjoy the views and plants.

Later on it was more swimming, more kayaking and more fishing! This time we struck the mussel dredge harvesting. They beckoned us over and it was well worth doing - we caught six snapper, which was all that we felt we could cope with.

A short drive saw us over at Whangaparapara. There used to be a whaling station in the bay and a local told us it was worth a paddle out of the bay and around to Cliff Island. A cruising shark did a double-take, but decided he wasn't interested in us! The breeze got up so we couldn't see the wonderful undersea world we'd been told about. The walk to the Kaitoke Hot Springs was worth the effort. After some really hot days it was cloudy and a bit cooler, so along with several others we had a soak in the springs. The 'swamp' there is huge, with many interesting ferns to look at. Te Ahumata, or Whitecliffs, was the next

attraction. Much of the track is an old coach road. The soil here is extremely poor and the plants that thrive are bonsai and even pohutukawa. It took about an hour to get to the top and the clouds prevented a full view, but the white sands of the east coast beaches stood out from afar. The plant life is something special so we felt really glad that the idea to mine for silver here has been abandoned.

We left for Auckland from Port Fitzroy- where there is a really superb mural- and sailed out through the very narrow Man of War passage. It was a calm sailing back to Auckland, and a real thrill to see a whale on this leg of the journey.

Apparently it's not uncommon to see dolphins and whales on this passage. If we were doing Great Barrier Island again we'd take the ferry from Auckland to Port Fitzroy as it calls in at Tryphena first, where you can drive off for the couple of hours while they unload. It also means you get to sail past the Broken Islands on the way. It should be noted that on Great Barrier the roads are narrow in places, but much better than we expected - although 50km was considered fast! There are lots of places for traffic to pass and drivers are considerate.

Great Barrier Island is like a different world. It is a dream destination for kayakers, swimmers and trampers alike. It is also reputed to be a fisherman's dream - but for the hours that we trolled and fished we couldn't quite agree with that!

The Great Barrier Island community wants to welcome motorhomers to the island, but advises the following:

- Beware of narrow, winding roads
- There are limited facilities on the island with regard to sewage management
- There are plans to install a dump station later this year
- Freedom camping is not allowed
- There are six DOC campsites available across the island as well as private camping
- The summer months are the best time to visit Great Barrier
- For more information visit the DOC website: www.doc.govt.nz