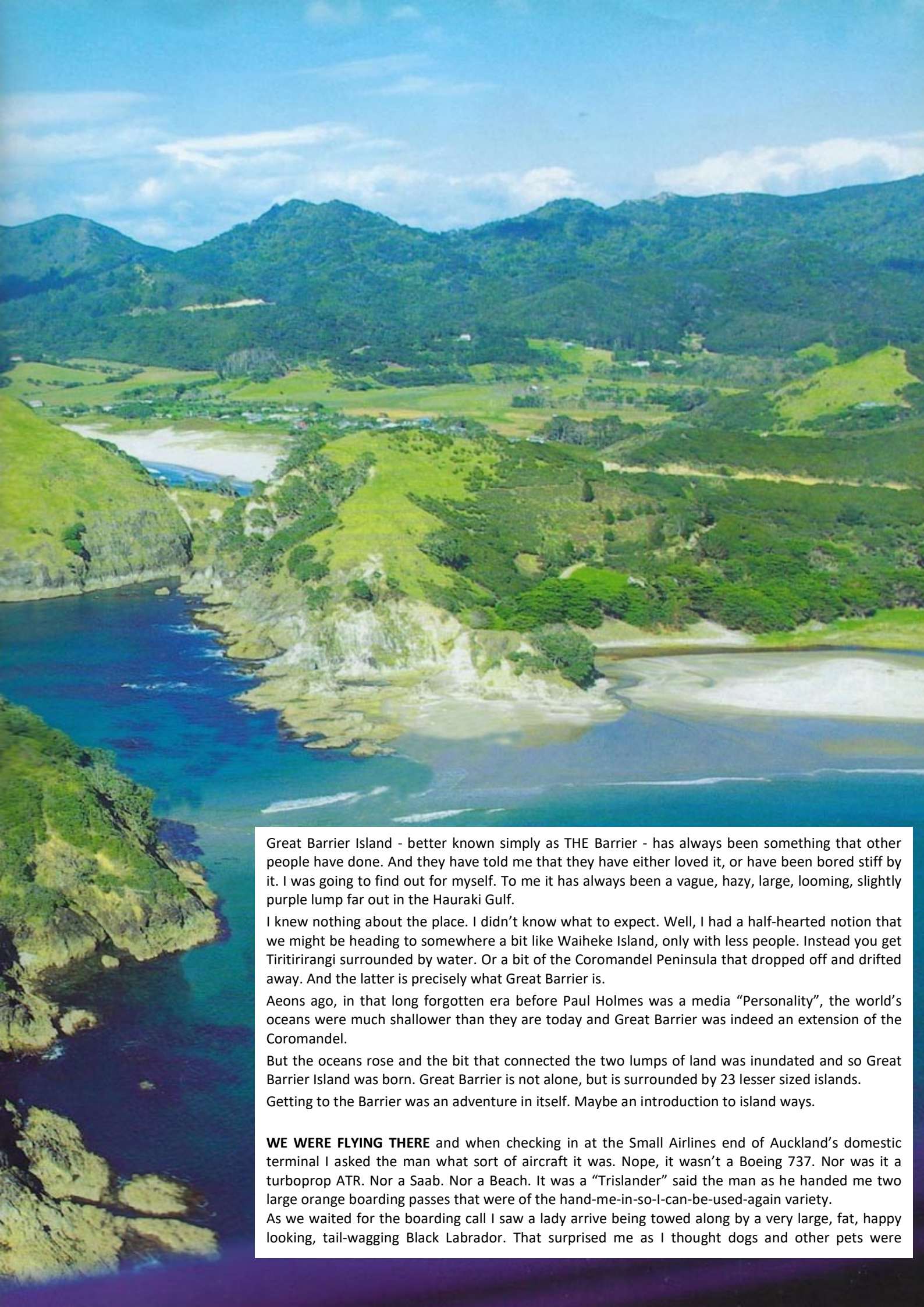


Another Country



Great Barrier Island is just 30 minutes by air from Auckland, yet in many ways it's half a century away. And that's what makes it so special.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLAN DICK



Great Barrier Island - better known simply as THE Barrier - has always been something that other people have done. And they have told me that they have either loved it, or have been bored stiff by it. I was going to find out for myself. To me it has always been a vague, hazy, large, looming, slightly purple lump far out in the Hauraki Gulf.

I knew nothing about the place. I didn't know what to expect. Well, I had a half-hearted notion that we might be heading to somewhere a bit like Waiheke Island, only with less people. Instead you get Tiritirangi surrounded by water. Or a bit of the Coromandel Peninsula that dropped off and drifted away. And the latter is precisely what Great Barrier is.

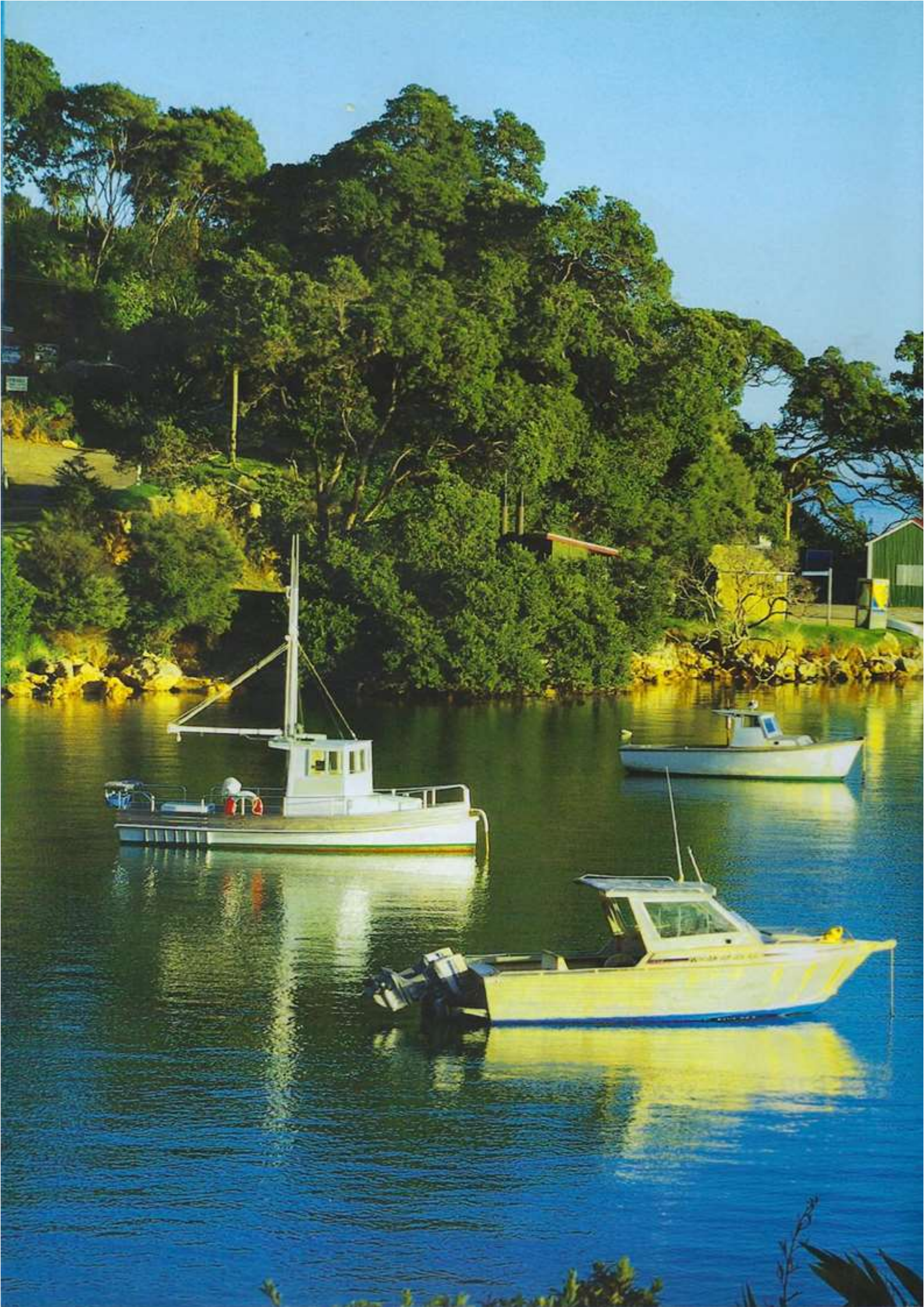
Aeons ago, in that long forgotten era before Paul Holmes was a media "Personality", the world's oceans were much shallower than they are today and Great Barrier was indeed an extension of the Coromandel.

But the oceans rose and the bit that connected the two lumps of land was inundated and so Great Barrier Island was born. Great Barrier is not alone, but is surrounded by 23 lesser sized islands.

Getting to the Barrier was an adventure in itself. Maybe an introduction to island ways.

WE WERE FLYING THERE and when checking in at the Small Airlines end of Auckland's domestic terminal I asked the man what sort of aircraft it was. Nope, it wasn't a Boeing 737. Nor was it a turboprop ATR. Nor a Saab. Nor a Beach. It was a "Trislander" said the man as he handed me two large orange boarding passes that were of the hand-me-in-so-I-can-be-used-again variety.

As we waited for the boarding call I saw a lady arrive being towed along by a very large, fat, happy looking, tail-wagging Black Labrador. That surprised me as I thought dogs and other pets were



Late afternoon at Whangaparapara, could there be any more placid small harbour scene than this?



verboden at the airport unless being consigned in a cage as freight. The lady also held an orange boarding pass just like the two I had.

Hmmnn

Then a black Doberman arrived accompanied by a second lady who also carried an orange boarding pass.

Hmmnn again.

The Doberman didn't look happy. He had a thin muzzle strap around his biting end and he was covered in shave marks and stitches, indicating either a fight, or a visit to the dog doctor to have lumps and other nasties removed. The latter, I learned later.

The two ladies were on either side of the passenger hall and neither they, nor the dogs, had spotted on another.

Abstractly I thought that they would be put into cages before they got onto the plane, probably out on the tarmac. But I knew the Trislander was a small plane. A small, old plane. A twin-engined Britten Norman Islander with a third engine attached to the tail. But there was obviously room for two dogs in cages, along with the rest of the luggage.

The Trislander was parked on the far side of the small airlines apron and obviously Auckland Airport rules forbid

walking the 100 metres to the plane, so we had to catch a small bus. And that was when the two dogs saw each other.

The happy, fat, tail-wagging Black Lab stopped smiling, stopped wagging his tail and looked as though he wanted to be about a million miles away. The Doberman had perked up considerably and seemed to want to eat the Black Lab.

The decision was made not to transport the two dogs at the same time in the bus. So the bus came back for the Doberman and his lady.

I was still thinking, abstractly, that the cages would be over by the plane. Wrong, the ladies took their seats in the last two rows of the plane with their respective dogs sitting on the seat alongside, sitting up like jackie!

As we taxied out for takeoff, eight of us and two large dogs crammed into this small fuselage, I had visions of the Trislander spiralling out of control, to splash into the sea after the two dogs started fighting, leaping about the cabin and making the pilot crash. The pilot incidentally, was the same man who checked us in and then boarded us. I even dreamed up a name for the disaster movie that would surely follow - "Dogfight over Hauraki Gulf"!

While there is no reticulated electricity on the island, there is a very good telephone network that goes into every nook and cranny of the place. And like in England, you find public phone boxes in the most unusual places.



But the dogs behaved impeccably, apart from a few huffs and puffs and muted growls. And the flight was awesome. Far lower over Auckland city than in bigger aircraft and then out over Rangitoto and the other islands of the gulf on our way to THE Barrier.

Yes, the island is different.

THIS WAS ONE of the most organised trips I have ever made. Before we headed to the airport we not only had flights booked, but also the two nights accommodation AND a rental car. But it was no thanks at all to the official organisation that looks after tourist affairs on Great Barrier.

Because I knew nothing about the place I went googling and came up with the Great Barrier link of the Tourism Auckland website. Since the madness of local government amalgamation, Great Barrier administration has been swallowed up and is now part of Auckland City. And Auckland City's promotional wing, Tourism Auckland is charged with looking after Great Barrier. But there was nothing on the website that actually told me anything about THE Barrier - where to go, what was there, what to see, how to get about, where to stay, where to eat etcetera. Or if this information was there, it was buried.

So I phoned and got a young woman. I told her what I wanted- to go to Great Barrier Island to do a story, but I

needed some advice on how best to get there, if I needed a car, where to stay, things to do and see and so forth. But the young lady was simply a blank wall. "I can't tell you anything like that. But I can make the bookings for you." But I didn't know what I wanted to book. She wasn't even apologetic. Should I bring a car from Auckland and catch the ferry? Would I need a car over there? Where should I stay? She had no idea. "When you make up your mind, ring back and I can book for you:'

Useless. Totally useless.

There used to be an official Great Barrier Information Office on the island with its own website, but that was closed some time ago as a cost-saving measure, but after a lot of searching I stumbled on a website where I could get the sort of information I wanted. This is operated by Fiona Green and her husband Lloyd who operate Great Barrier Island Rent-A-Car and who also act as an unofficial Information Office.

Fiona is a Scots lass who came to THE Barrier as part of a global working holiday and found employment at the Irish Pub. But also found Lloyd and married him. Lloyd had previously run a Mazda dealership with his father Jack in Papakura. They moved to THE Barrier where Fiona detected a serious gap in the availability



The Trislander casts a fleeting shadow on the Sand as it comes in to land at Claris "International" airport.



of quality tourist information - as opposed to a booking service - and has maintained a good website.

Fiona is a human dynamo, full of information, suggestions and help and it was through her I worked out basically what I needed to see and experience on the island and how long I needed to be there. Without Fiona's assistance I would have blundered my way around and probably needed another day or two. Tourism Auckland need a rocket from the islanders who are involved in tourism because they're not doing the job.

With a clearer idea of what I was going to do I made the decision to fly and rent a car, rather than take my own car

over on the ferry. There's the time factor alone - 35 minutes flight as opposed to four and a half hours on the ferry - and the Colville Channel can be unpleasant without warning.

And I decided to try both ends of the accommodation scale - well almost two ends. Our first night would be at Earthsong Lodge where the tariff was going to be around the thousand dollar mark, but promised a sensational meal and the second would be at Tipi and Bob's Waterfront Lodge at Tryphena, where the tariff ranges from \$170 to \$250 - still expensive, but modest by standards on the island where everything is 20 - 40% more expensive than on the mainland.

There are probably cheaper places to stay and there are an impressive number of DOC and privately owned camping grounds, but the end of autumn is not camping weather.

RIGHT, THE BARRIER IN A NUTSHELL. The first thing that struck me is that there is no major settlement and no major "centre". There are several small, scattered settlements - Tryphena, Port FitzRoy and Claris are the three major settlements. But even within these, there is no "shopping centre" - except maybe at

Great Barrier was almost clear-felled for its timber in the early days of European settlement. But it is rapidly being reforested and in many places it is lush again.

Claris where there is one of the three or four service stations of fuel outlets on the island. Here is something akin to a "mall", albeit small, that includes a post office and the excellent Claris Texas Café.

For the rest, most houses are scattered over the island, some are deep in bush, others on beaches. Most houses are modest, there is a handful that are grand and there's a surprising number of new and architecturally designed homes. But this is no Paunani or Whitianga. For the most, it's good old-fashioned, modest -New Zealand.

There are some wealthy absentee property owners.

The island obviously has a Maori history, but it's confusing with invasions, take-overs and intermarriages. There is a sizeable Maori population with most living in the northernmost and heavily wooded area (mostly manuka) where there are no shops or amenities.

There's about 120km of roading - tarsealed in the communities, gravelled for the rest of it and always tight, narrow and twisting. The locals say tourists are an issue on the roads through failing to keep left, tourists say locals are the issue for driving too fast.

The horror stories of THE Barrier's car wreck parade are long gone. The bureaucrats discovered a financial gold mine in keeping the island's car owners on their toes. Most cars on the island are of the 4WD variety and most are as good as you get in similar communities on the mainland.

There is a hard core who prefer to drive unregistered, unwarranted wrecks and won't pay their diesel road user tax, but most locals now regard these people as antisocial who aren't paying their share.



Few, if any, residents could be considered wealthy even though there are a number of long-established pioneer families. Farming on the island exists, but it's difficult as the soil is trace element deficient and not conducive to growing grass,

The period from 1920 to 1940 was a golden era for dairying, but farming is definitely on the decline across the island.

And fishing is the faintest shadow of what it used to be. But there are now nine commercial mussel farms around the island and honey has long been one of the few consistent industries.

There was also whaling from Whangaparapara where the wharf was quarter of a mile long. It was started in 1956 using ex-navy Fairmile high speed boats for the chase and about 150 whales a year ended up in the whaling pots. Whaling ended in 1963.

The growth industries appear to be tourism - despite the best efforts of Tourism Auckland - and DOC who exert a strong and growing force on the island.

Property prices are high. Surprisingly so given the practical difficulties that there are in living on THE Barrier.

Locals tend to live apart - it's the holiday homes that nestle side by side.

The island population is about 800 and is eclectic. There are the pioneer families and the Maori families. Then there are those who have arrived genuinely for the beauty, the solitude and the different pace of life. The latter include retirees. But there are those who have personal issues and are escaping - these tend to be alcoholics and/or people with drug problems.

There is no reticulated electricity, water or sewerage.

Property owners who have electricity, and that's most, generate their own using solar, windpower or diesel generators to supplement banks of batteries. Bottled gas is used for cooking, heating and refrigeration in most cases.

Tony and Mal Bouzaid (right) are relocated Aucklanders who are dedicated to the cause of Great Barrier.

Top: FitzRoy House overlooking Port FitzRoy with the purple milking shed to the left being where Mal spends her working days painting.



There's no apparent shortage of power and at night you can hear the muffled boomp, boomp, boomp of the individual diesel generators.

Tank water and septic tanks take care of the other.

Islanders have learned how to cope with all of this and conservation is a natural instinct.

There is a very effective phone system. When it came time to replace the aged partyline system, Telecom obviously decided to do it properly and phone lines appear to stretch to every corner of the island, no matter how remote.

And when you say remote, you mean remote.

Great Barrier is more remote in its attitude and its facilities than Stewart Island - even though you can easily see the glow of Auckland at nights. And that is both a large part of the charm of the place as well as the difficulties, or differences, that must require adapting to.

There are a couple of small airlines servicing the island with Great Barrier Airlines the biggest and most regular. The main airport is at Claris.



It's a sealed strip, but there is also a grass strip north at Okiwi that's used to bring holiday makers and campers in over summer.

Great Barrier fly in several times each day and have a mixed fleet of aircraft. The flight is spectacular, short and comparatively inexpensive - \$76 - \$96 each way with flights from either Auckland or North Shore airports.

There are also flights from Whangarei and Whitianga.

Remarkably, the first regular airmail system, maybe in the world, but certainly in NZ was established from THE Barrier to Auckland and return. This ran from 1894 to 1908 using homing pigeons! Mr Fricker and Mr Parker operated competing Pigeon Post services and each bird would carry up to five "letters" written on fragile paper.

The record for a one way trip was held jointly by two birds - Velocity and Te Ura at just 50 minutes. One bird, Ginger, did a return trip in one day

THERE IS NO PUBLIC TRANSPORT on the island, but Fiona and her husband, the unofficial island PR team, have a whopping fleet of 80 vehicles from small Mazda 121 Funtops to big Mazda 4WDs with an MX5 sports car thrown in as well.

The Greens are entrepreneurs and passionate about the island. They have some of their rental fleet scattered at strategic locations across the island -like at the wharves and outside the major lodges - for people who arrive thinking they don't need a rental car, but then find there is no public transport and distances are too far to walk easily.

The alternative to flying is to catch the ferry- and the frequency is seasonal. Sea-Link operate year round carrying freight, supplies, vehicles and passengers. It's a 4.5 hour trip - weather dependent - and the cost is \$110 return and a car is \$330 return.

Fullers Ferry operates only in the summer, it's a two hour journey at \$130 return.

There are wharves at Tryphena and Port FitzRoy.

Mark Storey is a hard case who is determined to break what he says is a transport monopoly to the island. His boat, the Golden Rose, is an ex Bluff fishing boat.

THE FLIGHT OVER was calm and uneventful and we were met at Claris by Fiona who handed us the keys to our Mazda Proceed 4WD and we said we'd see her in a couple of days.

Trevor and Carol Rendle at Earthsong Lodge weren't expecting us until later in the day and our arrival was going to be something of a novelty. We were only the second guests ever to have driven ourselves to the lodge which is at the end of a spectacularly steep and difficult 4WD track - the others had either been picked up at Claris by the hosts, or had arrived by helicopter.

So, until our arrival at the lodge we set out to explore as much of the island as we could and our initial feeling, not to be changed after almost three days there, was that this is a spectacular unspoiled place for which there is a grand plan to have it slowly revert back to the way it was before the arrival of the white man.

The island was given its European name by Captain Cook who thought it was a barrier to the Hauraki Gulf that lies behind - the traditional name is Aotea. And its position means the beaches on the eastern coast are vast, sandy affairs with a long way out to the water at low tide.

On the opposite coast, there are few sandy beaches, but several deep water ports and bays.

Mid-way up the eastern coast is a navy listening post that can hear shipping movements all the way to Hawaii.

A legacy of WW2 are giant steel balls that are to be found serving all sorts of purposes all over the island. These were floats used to suspend an anti-submarine net that was strung across the Colville Channel. The net had a "gate" in it that could be opened and closed for friendly ships.

After the war the floats - about 1.5 metres in diameter, were sold for a ridiculously small amount of money each and they are used for diesel tanks, BBQs and floats for a house boat or two.



Top left: Store at Tryphena where Crocs seems to be the favourite footwear of the locals. Top right: Malcolm and Trish Zuppichich gave up on

Auckland to buy the Claris Texas cafe

Lower left: Typical of the regenerating bush on the island. Lower right: the buoys that were used as part of WW2 harbour defences for Auckland now have a wide range of uses on the island.



Next day was more of the same, driving every inch of every public roads on the island, visiting beaches, harbours and taking easy walks to places like the spectacular Windy Canyon.

Because it is so rugged and mountainous, the weather was changeable. When clouds gathered around the peaks, it rained shortly afterwards.

Great Barrier was pretty much logged bare after the arrival of the Pakeha and while there still are stands of untouched, virgin bush, it's difficult to get to without tramping.

But vast areas are being rehabilitated and manuka and kanuka grows first and through this will grow the more exotic species.

Logging began as early as 1794 with kauri being taken for ship's spars and by 1900 the timber mill at Whangaparapara was the biggest in the Southern Hemisphere. As with the rest of the country, logging began being phased out in the 1960s as (a) the timber started to run out and (b) we, as a nation, decided that we needed to start saving our natural heritage.

AFTER OUR SUMPTUOUS MEAL the night before, we had a light breakfast at Earthsong Lodge the next morning and set out for another day's exploration.

On the wharf at Tryphena that day we met Mark Storey, skipper of the good ship Golden Rose and his deckhand Jason with "Night Prowler" tattooed across his chest.

Jason is one of those people who have come to the island to reestablish their lives, while Mark Storey is a hard case.

The Golden Rose is a former Foveaux Strait fishing boat and Mark says it's unsinkable. He says she's been to the Antarctic and the Chathams, now she plows through the Colville Channel to Auckland and back, carrying general freight as well as gas bottles in opposition to Sea Link. He says the island is being held to ransom by the monopolies and he's doing something about it. Each trip he tops the Rose's fuel tanks up with diesel

in Auckland which he took to one of the retailers at a far cheaper price than anyone else on the island. And he says he can deliver gas bottles at 60% of the price charged by the others.

Like everywhere else, the price of fuel is a hot subject on the island.

But Mark finishes with a statement that surprises me - "There are big changes taking place on the island and eventually the entire place will be a nature reserve."

BEING AN ISLAND, Great Barrier has seen its share of ship and boat wrecks - the most tragic being the the foundering of the SS Wairarapa in 1894 with the loss of 140 lives. Some of the victims are buried at quite remote beaches in the north of the island. The SS Wiltshire was wrecked on the southern coast without a loss of life.

In more modern times it was on Great Barrier that the pirate radio ship, Tiri, from which Radio Hauraki began broadcasting, was also wrecked. Tiri was a regular visitor to the island for supplies.

Shipping and boats have always been important to the island and in the early days there was a boat building industry that used the complex shape of the branches from the many pohutukawa trees for ribs of the boats.

BECAUSE WE WERE on the island during the off season, we had been the only guests at Earthsong Lodge the night before and we were the only guests at Tipi and Bob's the second night.

Tipi and Bob Whitmore established the motel complex with six large units, but Tipi has since died and Bob's gone into retirement and the place is now run for Bob by Margery and Pete Harris. But Pete was away fishing in Australia with a big Barrier contingent, so Margery's sister Pauline was on hand to help run the motel.

We had the choice of walking 200 metres down the road to the Irish pub for a meal, or staying with Margery and Pauline.



- we chose the latter and they put together a simple, hearty, delicious meal after the abundance of the night before.

They joined us after we'd eaten, for a glass or two of wine and Keri and I then decided to walk to the pub for a nightcap.

Here we stood at the bar and chatted with Barry and Pam Kearney who share their time between the Island and Auckland. On the island they run a fishing charter business and this was their last night on the island before heading back to Auckland for the winter.

We also yarned to a real local who worked on one of the two road gangs and he'd been out fishing after work and caught a bunch of snapper. As we left he said - do you want some snapper" - an offer that fair blew our socks off.

GREAT BREAKFAST NEXT MORNING and off for something really special. We'd saved the best for the last. We went to visit Tony and Mal Bouzaid back up at Port FitzRoy where they have restored the 100 year old FitzRoy House and have established the Glenfern Sanctuary Trust. Everyone I had spoken to on the island had told me of the enormous job that Tony is doing.

This is the first time I have met Tony, but my earliest years were "spent living at 67 Francis Street, Grey Lynn Auckland, before the Dick family moved to Dunedin.

Our across-the-road neighbours in Francis Street with the Mackie family and we were family friends. The oldest child, Graeme Mackie was my first real chum.

He had two younger sisters and the oldest of these was Marilyn - now Mal Bouzaid and a highly successful and accomplished artist.

It was just lovely seeing her again after so many years.

Tony is of the famous yachting family and he, Mal and the children sailed to Great Barrier for many, many summers. One

Port FitzRoy is one of the main shipping wharves on the island. There's also a hamburger bar here that's open when the ferries arrive.

day, when the children had grown up, Tony said to Mal, "You know, we should really buy some land here."

Mal responded that if that's what he wanted, then he should do so.

So Tony sold his company that had moved from making sails to making folding sides for trucks and bought FitzRoy House and put in place extensive plans to restore the house, create a significant nature reserve and get into the adventure tourism business. He'd done all three.

Mal paints almost every day, walking 100 odd metres up a path from the house to a restored milking shed where she emerges to prepare meals.

Apart from restoring the home, Tony is also restoring the land around the property and by the time you read this, a protective fence to keep unwanted animals out will have been completed, sealing off 150 acres where more than 9000 native trees have been planted over the past ten years, as well as an extensive network of walking tracks completed.

The fence will keep out feral cats, rats, mice, rabbits and pigs and provide a sanctuary for the native species that breed here including the very rare giant skink as well as birds.

On their website - www.glenfern.org.nz - Tony says - "Glenfern Sanctuary is an attempt to redress the balance over a small but significant ecosystem which may act as an incentive to others to do likewise."

When I tell Tony what Mark Storey had told me the day before about him believing that Great Barrier would eventually become all sanctuary or reserve, he's surprised. "It won't be in our lifetime, but I sincerely hope he's right."

Tony and Mal also offer tourist accommodation and there is a well-appointed cottage close to the main home



"We also organise tramps - we have a number of these where we drop the people off at the top of a track and meet them at the bottom in the yacht and sail them back to Port FitzRoy."

And there's plenty to see in the regenerating bush. Apart from an abundant bird life there are still the remains of the logging and mining industries

Over the hill from Port FitzRoy is the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre on the edge of Karaka Bay and it's situated in isolated splendour.

OPC Great Barrier, as it's known, offers courses to allow young people and adults to experience a life of adventure and success outdoors, while developing in a personal sense. There are also extensive conference facilities and accommodation here.

OUR VISIT TO GREAT BARRIER is nearly over. Our flight back is scheduled to 'depart' at 5:30. We trickle back to Claris. Taking our time and really enjoying the magnificence of the place and the isolation. We check the map to make sure there is no road or destination left undone. There doesn't seem to be. We have a last coffee at Claris Texas Cafe, drop the Mazda back to Fiona and walk to the airport. Auckland's been fogbound most of the day while the islands basked in autumn sun. Aircraft couldn't get in or out until mid afternoon and they've been flat out trying to catch up since - there's a smaller aircraft than the Trislander waiting to go, 20 minutes earlier. It has two seats and room for our bags. Do we want it? Not really, we like it here. But we go anyway.

The flight back is with low sun striking the sea and the islands below us, then the buildings of Auckland city.

A perfect, lyrical way to finish an idyllic three days. Great Barrier is not Las Vegas. It's not even Waiohuru. It's just THE Barrier and it's perfect.

Top left: A "fashion" on the island is to have great stone gate posts flanking driveways. These are very ornate examples. Top right: Windy Canyon is worth the five minute walk in.

Lower left: Margery and Pauline who looked after us at Tipi and Bob's. Lower right: Boating is a major activity on the island. House boat in the distance also used the former harbour defence buoys.

