Searching Great Barrier Island for the meaning of life

By Joanna Wane
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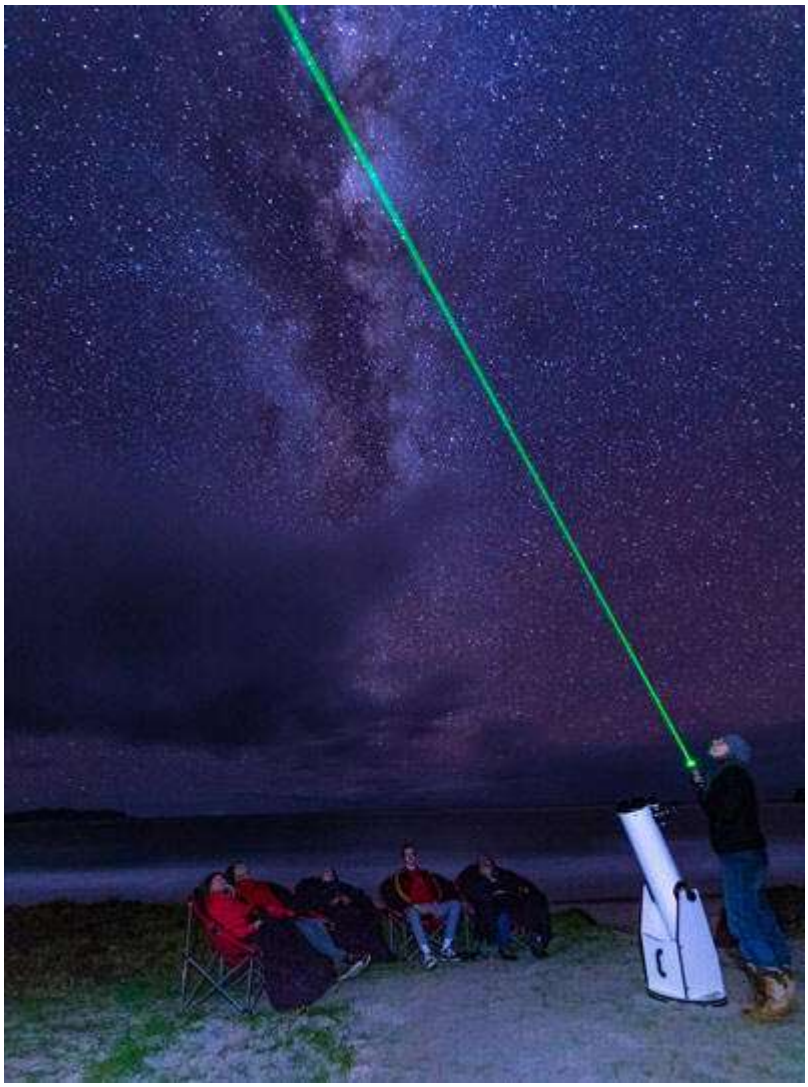
Joanna Wane goes to Great Barrier Island in search of the answer to life, the universe and everything.



"Time is an illusion," wrote the great philosopher Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. "Lunchtime doubly so."

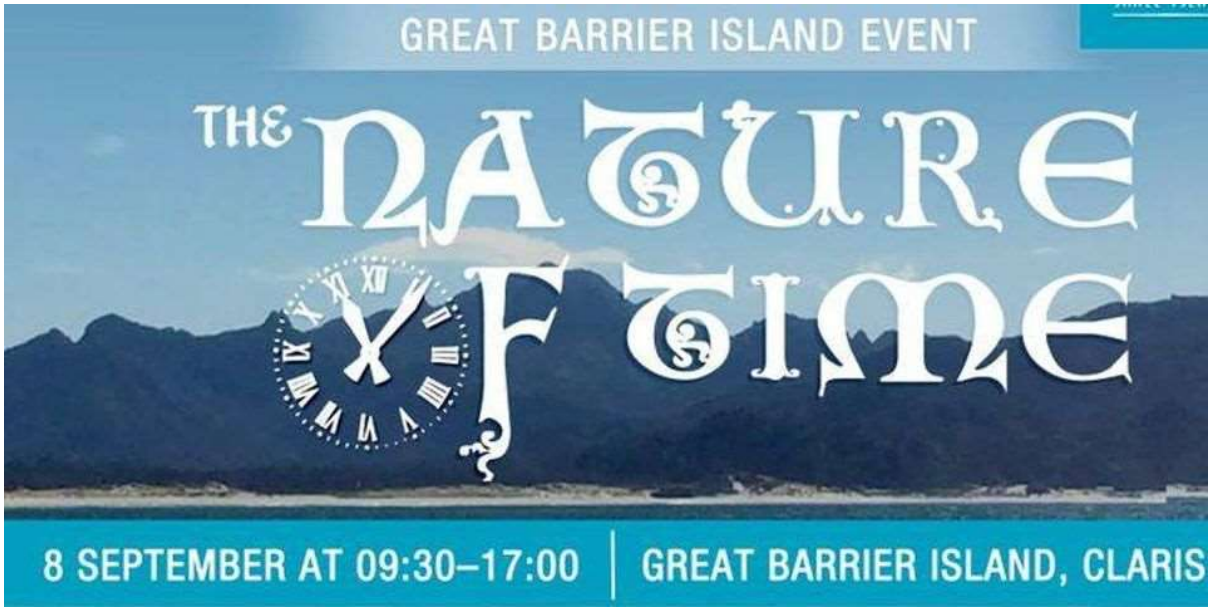
I'd have happily eaten eggs for breakfast, lunch and dinner during the 50 hours and 35 minutes I spent on Great Barrier Island, where I learnt there's not only a cellular "body clock" in my brain, but also in my liver, kidney, stomach and fatty tissue.

The eggs, like everything on the island, came with a story. In April, 200 chickens were released to snack on a colony of Australian "plague skinks", which are driving out Barrier's endangered native species. The eradication trial is a world first (you hear *that* a lot on the island, too), and each week, hundreds of eggs laid by these killer chicks are collected and ferried across to the Auckland City Mission. A dozen were diverted to our doorstep; they tasted delicious.

"I get so bored with the idea that the Barrier is full of marijuana-smoking hippies sitting around doing nothing," says Orla Cumisky, who's from Dublin and dropped off the eggs along with a home-baked loaf of Irish soda bread. "It's full of all sorts; it's a multicultural, multi-opinionated place."

Fewer than a thousand people live on Great Barrier (Aotea), off-grid and only 100km but a world away from Auckland. It's the kind of place where you can settle your bill in crayfish down at the pub, and where the islands only vet remembers performing her first caesarean on a cow 30 years ago, with a scalpel in one hand and a textbook in the other. It's also a community of curious, inquiring minds.

For the past four years, the Awana Rural Women group has been running its free “No Barriers: Small Island, Big Ideas” weekend as a sort of festival for the brain, bringing together a panel of experts to debate everything from human versus artificial intelligence to how the island could survive a pandemic that’s wiped out the rest of the world (send out the elderly to forage for supplies, apparently, because they’d be the most expendable). The group really does think big: in 2016, the Pope’s astronomer, Guy Consolmagno, flew over from the Vatican to debate the possibility of life existing beyond Earth. And, like all the guest panellists, he had to stump up for his own fare.



This year’s theme was “The Nature of Time”, and the organisers had landed another big kahuna in Craig Callender, a professor of science and philosophy at California University in San Diego and the author of such books as *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*.

Time really is an illusion, according to some physicists. But Callender, who also teaches environmental ethics, left that for later, exploring the concept of biodiversity in his solo session – and the price we’re prepared to pay for it. If gene-editing technology meant we could save the rhino by breeding out its horn, or protect the grévy’s zebra by eliminating its stripes, would something be lost or gained?

Poet Bryan Walpert mused on roads less travelled; GNS Science’s Hamish Campbell (Te Papa’s geologist-in-residence) spoke about measuring time in the millions of years, reading the runes in our rocks. Massey University sleep scientist Philippa Gander, who’s done research for NASA, described sleep as the “missing third” of our mental and physical health: “I’m not wasting a second of my time [when I’m] asleep.” On Saturday afternoon, a crowd packed into the Claris social club for the keynote panel, moderated by RNZ doyenne Kim Hill.

The day had been brilliantly sunny but by nightfall, ferocious winds churned a thunderous surf at Medlands Beach, on the east coast. Clutching blankets and hot-water bottles, a group of us sat on the sand in utter darkness and gawped at the sky, heavy and hooded with stars.

In 2017, Great Barrier became one of only four places in the world to be recognised as an International Dark Sky Sanctuary, with minimal light pollution (the Mackenzie Basin, home to the St John Observatory, is a Dark Sky Reserve).

Good Heavens guides Hilde Hoven and Deborah Kilgallon began running “dark sky experiences” late last year and say the island’s sanctuary status is already making it a destination for stargazers from Europe, the US and Asia.

Kilgallon’s son, Art, has been able to pick out Jupiter since he was 18 months old. She remembers the first time she looked through a telescope and saw Omega Centauri, a globular cluster of 10 million stars almost 15,000 light years from Earth. “It was one of those lightbulb moments; we really are such a tiny blip.”

Time is thrown into disarray when you contemplate the stars. Their light comes from the past, travelling years through space before becoming visible in our skies. At the same time, the universe is tearing itself apart, expanding so rapidly that eventually those stars will be so distant their glow never reaches us. And, one by one, they’ll all be snuffed out. There’s a terrible beauty in that.

Back on the mainland, I went to a yoga class one night after work. “It’s important to be in the now,” said the instructor. But all I could think of was egg yolks the colour of sunshine, and the stillness on Medlands Beach as the winds raged around us and we turned our eyes to the sky, looking into the past, looking into the future, and finding a moment in time somewhere in between.

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