

Great Barrier's stairway to heaven: NZ's best short walk

Brook Sabin (Stuff) 9 Oct 2020

A steep staircase weaves through jagged rocks, past canyons, to reveal the Jurassic heart of Great Barrier Island.

Support our coverage of the best - and safest - ways to explore New Zealand and our new world by making a contribution.

We're all taught that effort equals reward, so how good can a 15-minute walk really be? It turns out, rather incredible. In the last 900 seconds, I've walked past canyons, climbed staircases wedged between giant rock faces, and emerged at the Jurassic heart of Great Barrier Island.

There is no shortage of spectacular short walks in New Zealand – but one of the best has kept a very low profile. And that's surprising when it's found within the boundaries of our biggest city.

You may have heard of Hawaii's 'Stairway to Heaven', the walk with spectacular bird's eye views over Oahu. The enormous staircase was originally installed to a top-secret naval communication tower but has since been closed after being deemed too risky for the public to use.



Brook Sabin/Stuff

The Windy Canyon walk is one of the best short walks in New Zealand.

Half a world away, on Great Barrier Island, I've come across a miniature version - and this one doesn't have the safety issues.



Brook Sabin/Stuff

The Windy Canyon walk is found on the hilly interior of the island.

Great Barrier Island is one of those places that many of us had on our bucket list, but with the lure of international travel, never quite got around to. With Covid-19 grounding overseas holidays, 'The Barrier' is one of the few islands we can travel to.

The flights are cheap, and the best attractions on the island are free: walks through primeval bush and magnificent beaches.



Brook Sabin/Stuff

It takes just 15 minutes to reach the peak.

The island is 60 per cent Department of Conservation (DOC) land, meaning the choice of walks is overwhelming. The most coveted is the Aotea Track, a two to three-day trek around the mountainous interior of the island, along boardwalks, steep tracks, stairways and bridges.

The most popular walk is the gentle 45 minute stroll to the Kaitoke Hot Springs, where you'll find a series of free geothermal pools hidden in native bush. But the most spectacular, in my eye, was a visit to Windy Canyon.

Most of the hard work for this walk is done by your car, weaving high into the hinterland where the start of the track begins.



Brook Sabin/Stuff

The Windy Canyon is New Zealand's version of 'The Stairway to Heaven'.

The first few minutes pass through thick native bush before you arrive at a series of jagged rock faces, where a steep staircase disappears around a corner. The spectacular track continues past a canyon, along the side of another towering rock face, before the stairs once again ascend a small gap in the rocks.

By the time you've reached the top, there's no room for the view to take your breath away - as the stairs have taken care of that.

When you do regain your composure, you're left with 360-degree views of the vast interior of the island, much of which was inaccessible to early Kauri loggers. The result is a landscape that feels like it's so remote, you should have trekked days to find it - yet you can get there in just 15 minutes. That's my idea of heaven.

If you can walk up 150 stairs, you'll be fit enough to walk the Windy Canyon.