

Great Barrier Island: The joys of a guided tour with the locals

Brett Atkinson. 12 Sep 2020



Photos: Mark Russell - Great Barrier Island has been recognised for its stunning starry vistas.

Friday morning in central Auckland has never felt so serene.

Courtesy of New Zealand's most idiosyncratic electoral boundary, I'm discovering getting an early start in the Auckland Central catchment can also include zipping across the glassy waters of Whangaparapara Harbour on Great Barrier Island.



Photo: Guy Mac - Tony Litherland has lived on the harbour surrounding Great Barrier Island since the early 1980s.

Wispy curtains of mist remain welded to the harbour's forest-shrouded valley, the site of New Zealand's biggest sawmill just over a century ago, while morning sunshine peeps tentatively above a verdant ridge to the east.

My guide for the morning is Benny Bellerby, born and bred on the island also known as Aotea, and a man with serious Barrier credibility. Between forest hikes with Star Treks, Bellerby works as an arborist and track maintenance whizz with the Department of Conservation, and shares an off-the-grid home with wife Eve and their home-schooled children. Factor in a passion for protecting Aotea's natural and cultural heritage, and he's the perfect guide to his island home.



Photo: Guy Mac

Also knowledgeable about educating kids on a remote island are Tony and Carol Litherland. Since the early 1980s, they've lived on the harbour in their ocean-going steel catamaran dubbed the Argo, and soon after Tony eases his tender up to the 15-metre home-built vessel, it's obvious it's also a comfortable live-aboard houseboat. Ensconced in a cosy combination of cabin, lounge and library, coffee and banana cake provide sustenance as Tony and Carol recount changes in Barrier life across the last four decades.

Educating their family was done by mail and radio with the Correspondence School, while grocery shopping was a major and infrequent exercise. Now Benny and Eve's children are linked to the world via the internet and Tony and Carol order online from a mainland supermarket and pick up boxes of supplies from Whangaparapara's nearby wharf.

Tucked into a compact cove on the harbour's western edge, the Argo is moored adjacent to the remains of New Zealand's last whaling station, operating for just six years from 1957 to 1963. A badminton net flutters incongruously in the morning breeze, a reminder the station's exposed platform also doubled as a harbourside backyard for the Litherland family in more recent decades. On the Argo's port side is the rusted pea-green skeleton of the M.V. Wanganui, a Scottish-built dredge beached in 2003 after decades working the Whanganui River and Milford Sound.



Photo: Guy Mac - The M.V. Wanganui is a Scottish-built dredge homed in the harbour since 2003.

From the Argo, Tony ferries us back to a sheltered bay, and it's a boots-off scramble in calf-high water into the beach. A forlorn phalanx of wooden poles is all that's left of a wharf that once served the biggest timber mill in the southern hemisphere. From 1908 to 1914, the Kauri Timber Company processed logs rafted from as far as Northland and the Coromandel Peninsula, while a tramline dragged newly-felled trees from the forests surrounding the harbour. A rusted steam traction engine provides decaying evidence of the industry from a century ago, and tracing the logs' original route, the island's Tramline Track is now a challenging 8km option for trampers.



Photo: Guy Mac - A rusted steam traction engine provides decaying evidence of the island's once thriving timber industry.

It's just one of the island tracks Benny knows incredibly well and, before setting off to tackle the easier but still spectacular Old Mill Track, he breaks out our beachside lunch. On an off-the-grid destination where Aotea Brewing's craft beer and award-winning Island Gin are both made sustainably, it's not surprising there's also a Barrier spin to our snacks. Wrapped in recyclable waxed paper, our scroggin is packed with organic nuts and carob-dipped fruit, while chunky sandwiches are made from Eve's homemade bread.

Weaving up and down a pair of bush spurs through regenerating forest, glimpses of the harbour are revealed through sylvan shade. Leading the way downhill to the track's conclusion at the Green Campsite, Benny recalls his work with DOC to gather precious rātā seeds to preserve the species from the ravages of the Myrtle rust fungus.

Late morning in Auckland Central, it's obvious the sustainable future of the city's farthest-flung island is in very safe hands.



Photo: Guy Mac

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