

# Is this New Zealand's Ultimate Cruising Destination?

PART 1 OF A 3 PART SERIES BY PHIL GILBERT  
IMAGES BY PHIL GILBERT & KAY STOWELL

AOTEA, GT BARRIER ISLAND, OR JUST 'THE BARRIER' IS TO MANY BOATIES THE EPITOME OF BOATING PLEASURE. LYING AROUND 45NM FROM AUCKLAND CITY SHE STRETCHES 43KM FROM TIP TO TOE ON A NW/SE TANGENT. TOGETHER WITH COROMANDEL, A MERE 8NM OFF HER SOUTHERN SHORE, AOTEA PROVIDES A SOLID IMPEDIMENT TO THE OCEAN WAVES OF THE PACIFIC ENTERING THE HAURAKI GULF PLAYGROUND, AND HELPS CREATE A CRUISING GROUND TO RIVAL ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE BARRIER BY SCRIBES FAR MORE EDUCATED AND LITERATE THAN I, BUT FOR THOSE THAT CAN BE BOTHERED TO READ ON I SHALL ENDEAVOUR TO SHARE AN OVERVIEW OF THE POSSIBLE PITFALLS, PERILS AND PLEASURES OF CRUISING 'THE BARRIER' I HAVE LEARNT OVER 45 YEARS OF ASSAILING HER SHORES.





## GETTING THERE:

Aotea could not be more centrally located. She is almost equidistant from Whitianga, Pine Harbour, Half Moon Bay, Westhaven and Marsden Cove. From these marinas it is about 45nm to the Broken Islands or False Head. Gulf Harbour is a wee bit closer at 37nm, and Tutukaka is @ 52nm to Wellington Head. For most displacement launches this equates at 5 to 6 hours travel time, and 2 to 3 hours for their high speed cousins. For the purist, or wind bludger, travel time and distance is irrelevant as the heading achieved in the wind prevailing on the day dictates how far it is. We are fortunate that the Gulf has mainly NE or SW winds for 90% of the year and wisdom, learned of bitter experience, has taught this writer how best to use these to advantage.

For the majority of our family cruising craft The Barrier is a 20-25kt Island. This means if it is blowing much more than 20kts NE, or 25kts SW, don't bother going all the way in one hit, unless you really need to get there promptly, or you have a masochistic streak. Staging at Kawau, Rakino, Waiheke or the Happy Jacks has much merit for peace and comfort aboard, and can be used to wait for the tide to assist the rest of the voyage. Barrier has a number of defenses against casual attack from the weekend boatie, foremost amongst them her two channels. In the South she has the Colville Channel.

A significant proportion of all the water in the Hauraki Gulf flows through this 8 nm wide stretch of water twice a day, squeezed between The Barrier and the Coromandel.

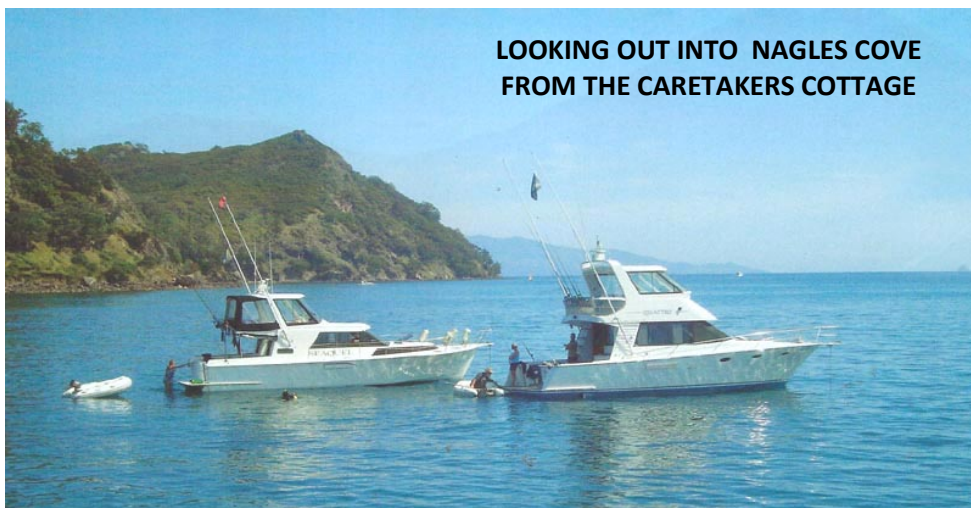


## PORT ABERCROMBIE OFFERS SOME IDYLIC ANCHORAGES

The other, less known but just as influential, is the Craddock Channel. This runs between Gt Barrier and Little Barrier Islands, and the waters running down this channel intersect with the Colville tide flow in an area starting about 4 nm off the Pigeon Islands, extending its influence for about 8 nm Sth and West. The wave pattern in this area can be very interesting when the wind is over the tide.

captain feel like he/she is in a washing machine. Many navigators either cut close to Coromandel and Channel Island, or take a big sweep out towards Little Barrier to avoid this area on the worst days.

The wind is Barriers second line of defense. At least twice a day the wind prevailing will be against the tide flow, often creating the infamous Hauraki Gulf 3 x 3s'. That



## LOOKING OUT INTO NAGLES COVE FROM THE CARETAKERS COTTAGE

Put a good NE or SE ground swell into that mix as well, compressed through either channel, combine the Barriers second defense mechanism (below) and the result is a body of water that can make a

is a wave 3 ft (1m) high, 3 ft wide, and with 3 ft between them. About 15kts of breeze is the kick off point for these phenomena and is best avoided by shorter waterline craft. The wise

displacement launch owner will time his run so as to have the tide pushing him in the direction he wants to go, preferably with the wind behind them, just go with the flow .. easy. The ideal being to pass over the tidal convergence zone at slack tide if possible.

The Colville Channel can create truly horrendous waves with a good wind against a big tide. I once passed the same coastal freighter three times in this area, on a yacht race to Tauranga. It was essentially hove to in disgusting conditions, and we sailed in front of it, then behind it, and then across in front of it again, in the space of two hours. Vessels from Whitianga and points Sth and East have their own issues. A SW wind is behind them until they get to the Hole in the Wall, when it becomes a headwind, and a NE wind with any strength is just ugly.

Those from Marsden Cove and North usually have a beam sea either way. Combine those two items with the often large NE to SE swell associated with the outer Gulf and the Barrier is sometimes a right bitch to get to. To be fair, the majority of crossings are casual and trouble free. To show the true contrariness of Mother Nature a passage from Auckland or Gulf Harbour to the Fitzroy area takes the unwary or over casual very close to Horn Rock sited in the middle of nowhere. Do not forget this at your peril. It is a big area, and can be hit in the right conditions.

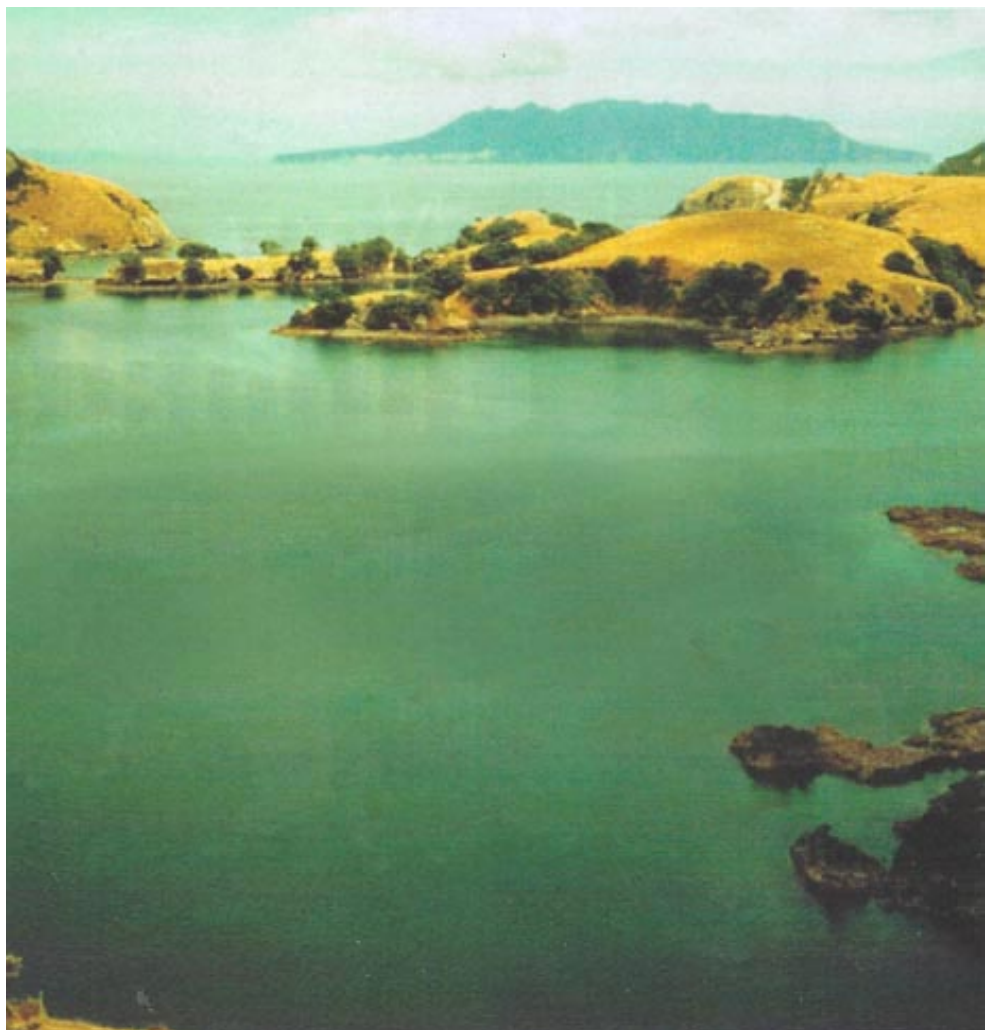
**SOME OF THE BEST DIVING AND FISHING AROUND THE BARRIER CAN BE FOUND AT THE BROKEN ISLANDS**

### **Got There .. Now What?**

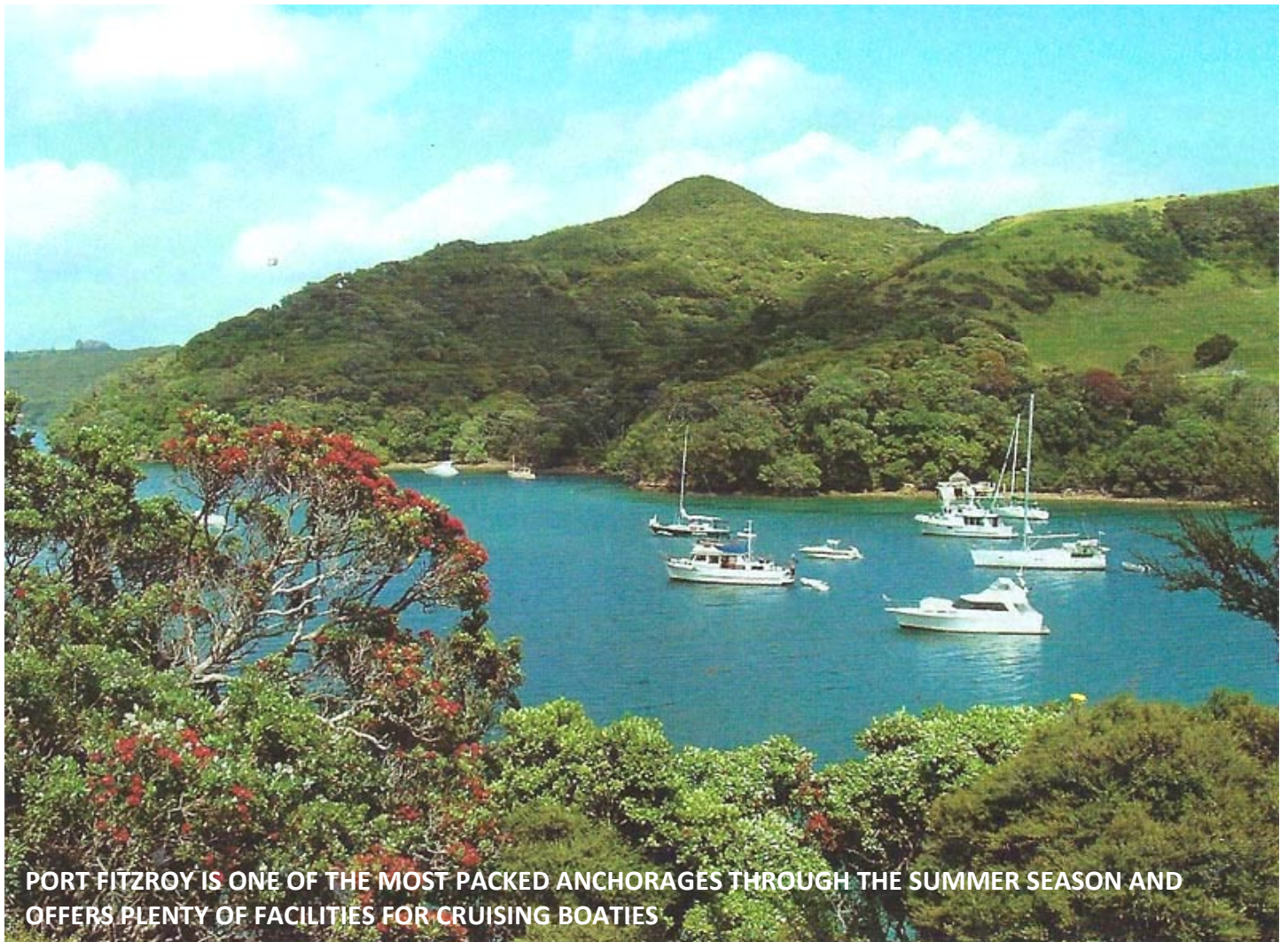
Having braved the run across the millpond, the choices available to that brave crew are fourfold. Many, including me, use the Broken Islands as the default waypoint. Firstly, navigation is easy, just aim for the highest craggy point visible from Auckland (Mt Hobson) and you will hit the Broken Islands. These also provide the first bit of shelter after a boisterous crossing, or are just simply stunning and welcoming after a cakewalk. The area, from Blind Bay and Whangaparapara in the Sth, up to Katherine Bay and Miners Head in the Nth, is the most commonly utilized cruising ground, affording maximum shelter on the 'unpleasant days and unrivalled snugs, nooks and crannies for R&R on the great

days. Call this 'Area One'. Others may opt to go right a bit to Area Two. This area, roughly from Shag Point at the bottom of Blind Bay, around the southern shoreline to Cape Barrier and up as far as Rosalie Bay on the SE coastline has superb anchorages and is too often ignored, or by passed on the way to 'Area Three'. Area Two is also known as 'The Bottom of the Barrier' which is a cruel reference for an area that offers visual beauty and bounty not often associated with that terminology.

Moving on round, one enters 'Area Three'. Considered by many to be the Holy Grail, frequent member/users of the privately run Gt. Barrier Radio (Ch 01; vhf) will often hear intrepid cruisers talking about 'Going round the Back', in hushed and reverent tones. This







**PORT FITZROY IS ONE OF THE MOST PACKED ANCHORAGES THROUGH THE SUMMER SEASON AND OFFERS PLENTY OF FACILITIES FOR CRUISING BOATIES**

area from Rosalie Bay up to Waikaro Point, at the top of Whangapoua Beach is simply dramatic, rugged coastline and long white sandy beaches combine to offer alluring stopovers, especially to the family that have younger members with cabin fever. It has its limitations which will be described later.

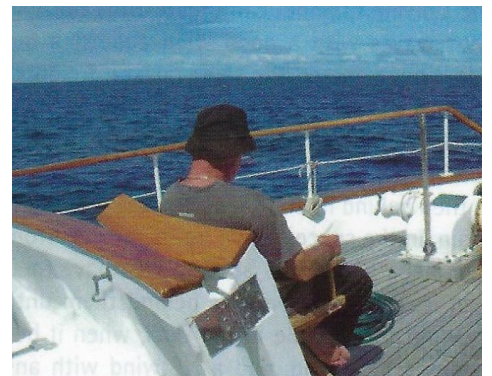
Area 4 is the balance of Barriers Coastline, from Waikaro Point, around the Needles to Miners Head. Often referred to as 'Going round the Top' by those intent only on Area Three, this area offers amazing fishing and diving but not too many overnight spots unless in a long spell of very settled weather.

#### **Playing around the Bottom!**

Area 2 is not a long coastline, with Tryphena as its focal point and

bolt hole. This area -is exposed along its entire length to any wind direction with an S in it, so needs extended Northerly aspect winds to fully utilize her treasures. Tryphena Harbor is wide and open to the SW but does afford some shelter in her Easterly quarter, near the wharf if a midnight dash has been called for. Beware the ferry lane to the wharf, as the skippers of those large commercial vessels justifiably get quite miffed if the lane is impeded. Any sort of heavy SW wind makes their approach to the wharf a committed one.

Entering Tryphena is easy in any condition, as the wave pattern is nearly always in the stern. Leaving can be a different manner. Any strong SE to W blow causes a large swell, which becomes quite steep especially when the tide is



**THE AUTHOR SPENDING SOME QUIET TIME ON A CALM CRUISE ACROSS TO GREAT BARRIER**

ebbing. They can form into breakers and makes leaving uncomfortable at best, and at worst downright dangerous. Many years ago the 100' plus-wave piercing ferry 'Supaflight' went straight through a few of these, and blew out her windows; a good indication of the power in these waves.



The writer has a fond (?) memory of the legendary Bill Gibbs of Tryphena taking Len Gilberts Vindex, 'Valium' for a demo in a good SW blow, after a few glasses of aiming juice. We blasted out of Gibbs Landing across the bay, climbed the first few waves, steered off on a big breaker, whereupon Valium promptly steered herself across the face of this coamer, then

down it lay on her side, and then snap hooked up and thru the white water. Gibbs, somehow still on the flybridge and wet as a shag could only say; 'mine doesn't do that'!! Dad cut the deep keel off Valium not long after that!

Leaving Tryphena to port, care must be taken to avoid the two submerged rocks just offshore past Celia Sudden Bay. They are well marked on all charts. They are very hittable, being almost dead in line with the direct course from Shag Point to Cape Barrier. The deep bay West of Sandy Bay and Sandy Bay itself offer excellent shelter in close. Great diving too. I have never been through the narrow passage inside Rabbit



**PORT FITZROY IS HUGE AND WELL PROTECTED, MAKING IT AN IDEAL LOCATION FOR VISITING BOATS.**

Island (how many Rabbit Islands are there??) but I've seen locals do it in small boats.

The open bay inside of Cape Barrier is another great place to stay when the weather lets you. Swell movement along this coast is not too bad. Careful attention to the forecasts is needed, as this area quickly becomes untenable when the wind goes to the SW. This generally occurs about 1.00am, give or take 5 minutes, and brings the aforementioned midnight dash to Tryphena into

play. You can do figure 8s around the two large rocks NE from Cape Barrier, and the fishing is superb, with every variety of fish seemingly living around these two bricks. Further round past Cape Barrier is Waterfall Bay with its delightful Swiss style hermit's cottage. This is a great place for R&R with good shelter, handy points for dedicated rock fishermen and affords some shelter from the SW'ers.

When it blows hard though, the SW wind funnels around the Barrier and straight into the bay. If the dash to Tryphena is not an option, then you can move past the large dome island into Rosalie Bay, which will do until morning. The passage between Barrier and the Dome Is easy and deep. Beware the rock fisherman casting onto your boat as you disturb his three hours of quiet burleying though. Also the reef to port after pass-ing N thru this narrow passage, don't turn too quickly. Settled Northerly aspect winds or preferably no wind at all are requirements to best enjoy this area, but grab it when you can.

In Part 2 of this three part series we go around the back, The Holy Grail of the Barrier.



**THE GREAT BARRIER IS KNOWN FOR ITS STUNNING SUNSETS**