

NEW ZEALAND

The wild and beautiful Hauraki Gulf islands. Just short ferry ride from Auckland lies a string of islands rich in natural beauty, kooky creatures and solitude.

By Rosemary McClure, January 17, 2010

Reporting from Great Barrier Island, New Zealand - I walked along a wild, isolated beach, my bare feet sinking into damp sand as I listened to waves tumbling onto the shore. A lone surfer was catching foaming swells and then disappearing into the sea, popping up later in another place with his board. I had seen no one else in the two hours I'd been walking.

Earlier that day, a nine-passenger twin-engine Islander had deposited me here, bumping down on the grass runway at Great Barrier Island, 65 miles and a world away from Auckland, New Zealand. Great Barrier is part of the Hauraki Gulf islands, which dot the waters off eastern Auckland.

Some travelers crave cities; others love historical places. I'm obsessed with islands -- in the U.S., the South Pacific, the Indian Ocean, wherever. The Gulf islands are my latest find. They range from islets so small they're basically just rocks rising from the sea to others large enough to have communities of thousands of residents. Less well known than New Zealand's Bay of Islands to the north, they nonetheless would win a paradise-of-the-Pacific award for their balmy seas, beautiful coastlines and unique flora and fauna.

"Down under isn't like anywhere else," Steve Billington, my guide, said as we drove through a stand of gargantuan native trees on Great Barrier Island.

I didn't argue; the trees had unfamiliar names, such as kauri and pohutukawa, and their extreme height and girth left me nearly speechless. Other examples of the country's odd species are legendary, including goofy birds such as the kiwi -- a bird that doesn't fly -- and the kakapo, the world's heaviest parrot. Too fat to fly and too stupid to remember it can't, the kakapo spreads its wings and falls like a rock.

New Zealanders safeguard their odd birds, giant trees and wild and beautiful places. That's one reason 70% of Great Barrier Island is protected by the Department of Conservation.

The more than 50 Hauraki Gulf islands are part of a maritime park the agency administers. Some of the islands, such as Great Barrier, offer recreation and can be explored by visitors; others are off-limits.

The islands closest to Auckland can be reached by ferry in about half an hour. Before coming here, I had soaked up the ambience for a few days at Waiheke Island, the most popular -- and most populous -- of the Gulf islands. I walked a few blocks from my downtown Auckland hotel to Fullers Ferry Terminal, where I paid \$23 round-trip, hopped aboard a boat and eavesdropped as other travelers talked about their plans for the day. Most involved sipping a little -- or maybe even a lot -- of wine.

Waiheke, known for its wineries, galleries and gourmet cafes, is a million miles removed from the untamed beauty of Great Barrier. That's not to say I didn't enjoy it, especially the tasting rooms offering Cabernet Sauvignon.

Waiheke's scenery and laid-back vibe draw domestic and international visitors alike. The 36-square-mile island, once considered the outback, has turned into a pricey suburb of Auckland, with nearly 8,000 residents who commute to work by ferry.

But its green hills, white sandy beaches and stunning hilltop views of Auckland and the gulf make it a natural stop for visitors too. The bonus? It has become one of New Zealand's trendiest boutique wine regions, with more than two dozen wineries, many of which offer free tasting. I spent most of my time on the island enjoying the spirited ambience of places such as Mudbrick Vineyard &

Restaurant and Stonyridge Vineyard & Veranda Café.

But I also explored the sunny beaches between Oneroa and Onetangi bays and took a bush walk to photograph the Auckland skyline in the distance. Then I collapsed at the Boatshed, a Nantucket, Mass.-inspired lodge with a three-story lighthouse suite overlooking the sea. (Accommodations in Waiheke range from about \$22 a night for backpackers to high-end \$500-a-night luxury digs.)

The other Gulf Island on my itinerary was Rangitoto, site of the area's largest volcanic cone. (Despite its rep, I wasn't worried; the last eruption was 600 years ago.) Fullers ferry again offered transportation (\$18 round-trip), this time to a moonscape of rugged rock formations and lava tubes set off by 200 species of moss, plants and trees. The eerie landscape alone is worth the trip, and the steep, strenuous hour-plus hike to the summit (2,952-foot elevation gain) offers another spectacular view of the gulf and Auckland.

Back in the city, I stopped off to meet John Banks, Auckland's mayor, who described himself as "America's biggest booster in the city. I'm unashamedly pro-American," he said.

And he wouldn't mind seeing a few more U.S. and Canadian tourists spend time in his city -- or the nearby Gulf islands. "We don't have world-class nightclubs here, but we do have spectacular water and islands and offer open, fresh-air experiences."

New Zealand is a 13-hour flight from Los Angeles -- Banks calls it "only one-night's sleep away from LAX" and offers Americans a first-rate deal. Our dollar buys a lot; it's worth \$1.34 in New Zealand currency.

On to Barrier

Auckland, with more than 1.3 million residents, qualifies as New Zealand's largest city; nearly a third of the nation calls it home. But I'd come here to see misty mountains, rugged beaches and verdant rain forests, not city sights. Great Barrier Island was calling.

The flight (about \$70 each way), would take only about half an hour, we were told. The seats in front of me held a couple of college students:

"Oh, I've never been in a small plane before," she said, tittering nervously.

"I like turbulence," he said, putting his arm around her. She didn't seem comforted.

Soon we were airborne. I scanned the sky and water, hoping to see a pod of whales or dolphins. I'd read that the gulf is a busy highway for marine mammals, with orcas, sei, minke and Bryde's whales often seen sliding along with bottlenose dolphins.

The green, mountainous island of Great Barrier approached; cows grazed below but didn't look up as we buzzed over them. I could see a line of perfect Pacific swells sweeping onto an amazing crescent-shaped white beach. Then we were heading down the runway, scattering a flock of birds.

"You won't find street lights, an ATM or a bank on the Barrier," said another passenger, obviously a local. "But we do have two stop signs."

They also have a place that seems a million miles from reality. The kind of place you might expect to see a castaway living on a powdery white beach in a shack built from driftwood.

As a matter of fact, there were several castaways here a couple of years ago when the BBC reality television show "Castaway" stranded 13 Brits on an uninhabited part of the island and left them to fend for themselves.

Not a bad life, I thought to myself as I looked at towering sand dunes, steep, green rolling hills, and a seemingly endless number of beautiful, half-moon-shaped beaches.

At 110 square miles, the island is the largest in the gulf. It was named by explorer Capt. James Cook in 1769, and its history includes whaling, mining and logging. Today, its 1,500 residents depend on sheep and dairy farming, besides tourism.

During the peak summer season -- underway now -- visitors come to surf, mountain bike, swim, fish, kayak, explore the island's hot springs and hike its lush tramping trails. Guests camp, or stay in cabins, holiday houses or lodges, many of which also serve meals. (Accommodations range from about \$20 to \$550 per night.) Life slows down; things don't always happen on time -- they happen in "Barrier time." Friendliness comes with the territory, as does national pride.

"God spent five days making New Zealand and one day making everywhere else; then he rested," said a bearded Kiwi named John whom I met while tramping. (If I were in the U.S., I'd say hiking, but I'm not, so the word is tramping.) I could almost hear the national anthem playing in the background as my new friend continued, "We're a pretty nonconfrontational people. Our navy has no warships, our police don't carry guns, we have no poisonous spiders or natural predators. And if that isn't enough to make you wish you lived here," he said with a laugh, "we love our doggies."

Riding the waves

I spent much of the next day touring the island with Steve, of Great Barrier Island Tours. We drove along the western beaches, a favorite of surfers from around the world. Again, I could see a lone surfer riding the waves and I wondered idly if it was the same one I'd seen when I arrived.

A highlight of the day was a two-hour guided walk through Glenfern Sanctuary, a 150-acre wooded preserve near Port Fitzroy (\$55 for two).

I felt as though I were entering the forest primeval. After a hike along a ridge top, we started down a shady hillside; the farther we walked, the taller the trees and the darker the path. Light filtered through a forest of ancient kauri, New Zealand's largest and oldest trees. We walked along a boardwalk, enjoying the damp coolness of the woods. Birds sang.

I paused at a swinging suspension bridge, my fear of heights welling up. Holding my breath, I pushed ahead, walking quickly across the bouncing bridge. It led me into the crown of a massive 600-year-old kauri tree. Then I climbed a ladder to a platform more than 30 feet above the forest floor. I could see down the valley to the harbor at Port Fitzroy miles below.

"Yes!" I shouted, shattering the forest's stillness. I waved my hands high, flashing V for victory signs. OK, so it wasn't Mt. Everest. But I could pretend.

I kept on pretending that night, when I celebrated my feat with a dinner at Mount St. Paul Lodge, an opulent 19th century-style colonial manor house overlooking the sea. Manager Trish McManaway was up to the task, producing a four-course meal that included rock Cornish game hens with wild rice and grape stuffing.

Before dinner began, however, McManaway introduced me to my accidental dining companion for the evening, Ian Wilson, the Londoner who owns the lodge. He hadn't visited for more than a year.

"Why Mount St. Paul Lodge?" I asked him. "You live on the other side of the world."

He replied that the island's beauty drew him, especially its surf. Since arriving the day before, he'd surfed almost constantly.

"It was great, and there was no one else out there," he said.

I'd found my anonymous surfer.

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A toast to Auckland wines - New Zealand's largest city is an ideal jumping off point for sampling the country's growing reputation for wines

By Rosemary McClure, reporting from Auckland, New Zealand 05:55 PM PST, November 25, 2009

Bungee jump off a bridge, careen through wild rapids, float on a river through the blackness of a subterranean cave.

"If you can dream it, we have it," the Kiwis say.

There's no doubt about it: New Zealand offers a great escape, a misty dreamland of tranquil fiords, rugged peaks, frosty glaciers, turquoise alpine lakes and verdant rain forests.

But with its wines now ranked alongside some of the world's best, New Zealand also offers visitors a grape escape as well -- a first-class wine destination where travelers can find pleasure year-round in hundreds of tasting rooms. Given the choice of plunging off a cliff tethered by an elastic band or whiling away the day sipping fine wines, many people -- including me -- would choose the latter.

As a friend once said, "Wine is my favorite grown-up adventure."

Happily, that alternative is available and growing exponentially. New Zealand now has more than 540 wineries, some producing internationally known wines. Its Sauvignon Blanc has achieved worldwide acclaim, and its Pinot Noir is gaining ground in America and Britain.

When to go? Seasons are reversed Down Under, so it is now spring, heading for summer. Tasting rooms are open throughout the year, but warmer weather means you can taste at outdoor patios rather than indoor cellars.

The best place to start? Auckland, the arrival point for most visitors from the United States. It's an ideal place to get your bearings, adjust to the 21-hour time difference and learn to appreciate New Zealand wines before moving south to the country's better-known wine and tourist regions.

During a recent trip, I sampled Auckland's wines, met its people, admired its scenery and raised a toast to the city -- a toast that lasted five days.

With more than 1.3 million residents, Auckland qualifies as New Zealand's largest city; nearly one-third of the nation calls it home. But urban development hasn't diminished its charms.

It still has a small-town flavor, clean streets and a relatively low crime rate. Or, as Auckland Mayor John Banks told me, "We offer Midwestern friendliness with downtown U.S. sophistication."

That's not the only reason U.S. residents should visit Auckland, said Banks, a former radio talk-show host. "We offer great value for the money spent. And we're only one-night's sleep away from LAX."

I had to agree with him about value: The U.S. dollar buys a lot; it's worth \$1.34 in New Zealand currency. But I wasn't so sure about the one-night's sleep business. I stayed up watching movies most of the night on my 13-hour flight from LAX to Auckland.

When I emerged from the airport, I rushed to Viaduct Harbour, a snazzy downtown marina that was rebuilt for New Zealand's defense of the America's Cup race in 2000. I had booked a two-hour cruise with Sail NZ, which advertises "the ultimate sailing experience" aboard an America's Cup yacht. I didn't want to be late (www.sailnz.com).

As the sleek racer screamed across Auckland's Waitemata Harbour, I hung on tight. The yacht was heeling at a crazy angle and spraying saltwater in my face. But the trip did the two things I'd intended: It kept me from falling asleep and gave me a spectacular view of the city.

Set between two harbors, Auckland is built around volcanoes, with lava cones providing hilly green islands amid a concrete landscape. Striking views greet travelers, whether they're on land or sea. But the water offers more than photo opportunities here; it's the lifeblood of Auckland, which has been nicknamed the "City of Sails."

When they're not working, Kiwis go sailing; one out of five owns a boat. Auckland has one of the largest yacht marinas in the Southern Hemisphere: Westhaven, with 2,000 slips.

Boating isn't the only popular recreational activity here, however. Kiwis love the outdoors. Adventurous souls who don't like the water find plenty of other diversions to amuse them: rain forests, mountain ranges and the many islands of the Hauraki Gulf.

And, of course, there's always bungee jumping. As we raced through the harbor on the America's Cup yacht, I noticed jumpers flying off a bridge; they were bungee jumping, the captain said. They fall about 130 feet and can request an optional "water touch" element if they wish.

But my favorite Auckland bungee experience (and this is just watching from afar, you understand) occurred later that day at Sky Tower, which dominates the city's skyline. The iconic 1,076-foot tower and Sky City complex contains a casino, revolving restaurants and a Sky Deck that offers a 360-degree view of the region. I was standing at the edge of the deck admiring the view when a body shot by me headed straight down. A bungee jumper, I realized, getting a high-octane adrenaline fix by jumping from the tower. The fall: 630 feet; the speed: nearly 60 mph.

That night I collapsed in my bed and slept soundly with only a single falling-from-the-sky dream disrupting my sleep.

The next day, I made my way to Fullers Ferry Terminal, where I hopped aboard a boat for a 35-minute trip to Waiheke Island, known for its fine red wines and gallery-filled town.

Island vines

As the boat pulled up to the dock, I saw green hills, white sandy beaches and a small port. I'd arranged a winery tour and before long, I was delivered to the rambling, rustic tasting room at Stonyridge Vineyard and Cafe, a boutique winery known internationally for its Bordeaux-style reds.

Its Larose is legendary in New Zealand; six bottles sold at auction last spring for \$3,700. The winery also produces Fallen Angel wines (80 Onetangi Road, 011-64-9-372-8822, www.stonyridge.co.nz). Many tasting rooms here offer free sips; those that charge often deduct the price from any bottles you buy. Stonyridge had started my day off right; I was ready to taste more.

My next stop was Mudbrick Vineyard & Restaurant, where I paused in the tasting room before having lunch (126 Church Bay Road, Oneroa 011-64-9-372-9050, www.mudbrick.co.nz).

Some of the best chefs in New Zealand work their culinary magic at vineyard cafes. Mudbrick's Provence-style restaurant, set on a hilltop overlooking the sea, is one of these. I was tempted to stay all day. But tasting called, and I eventually departed to visit more cellars.

Known as the Island of Wine, Waiheke has more than a dozen wineries. Until recently, the island was populated mainly by artists, hippies and others pursuing alternative lifestyles. Now it draws wine growers, weekenders and commuters, who use it as a pricey suburb of Auckland. It's an ideal stop for international travelers before or after a long flight.

Accommodations range from about \$22 a night for backpackers to the high-end \$500-a-night luxury digs at the Boatshed, a Nantucket-inspired Down Under-style lodge with a three-story lighthouse suite overlooking the sea.

Back to Auckland

Much as I enjoyed Waiheke's slow pace, scenery and friendly tasting rooms, there were other areas to explore. So I hopped back on the ferry for the 11-mile return trip to Auckland.

Three of New Zealand's largest vintners -- Nobilo, Villa Maria and Montana -- are based in the Auckland area and export huge amounts of wine to the U.S.

Phil Parker of Fine Wine Tours was my guide for a one-day tour; his business, takes him to vineyards around the nation (011-64-9-5295-007, www.insidertouring.co.nz).

"You have a great job," I said. "You get to do a lot of tasting, I assume?"

"I do, but not while I'm doing tours," he said. "Somebody has to drive."

We headed for northwest Auckland, about 30 minutes down the highway. Warehouses, stores and fast-food restaurants finally disappeared, and we began seeing orchards, sheep and road side fruit stands. Most of the eight wineries in this region use grapes grown elsewhere in New Zealand, so there are few vines.

While we drove, Parker talked about his favorite subject: Kiwi wines. He wrote a book on wine weekend road trips last year. His favorite areas are the Marlborough region, known for its Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir; Hawke's Bay, where full-bodied reds such as Syrah, Merlot and Cabernets do well; central Otago, for Pinot Noir; and Waiheke.

"Many of our wines are only available here," he advised. "So drink heartily!"

I told him I'd try.

Our first stop was Nobile, New Zealand's second-largest exporter of wine. U.S. buyers can find the Nobile label on store shelves, as well as other company labels such as Kim Crawford and Monkey Bay -- what the wine industry calls a "critter label."

Inside the tasting room, I saw these, plus several other labels, and got to work, tasting my way through several whites.

While sipping, I learned a bit more about Nobile. It's not exactly a boutique vintner; in fact, it's part of Constellations Brands Inc., a New York-based company that markets 250 alcohol brands in nearly 150 countries. (Nobile Wine Group is at 46 Station Road, Huapai, 011-64-9-412-6666, www.nobile.co.nz.) We stopped at several other wineries, where I drank more whites, and became happier by the hour. Soon we reached West Brook, which wins my award for the prettiest grounds (215 Ararimu Valley Road, Kumeu, 011-64-9-411-9924, www.westbrook.co.nz).

The winery sits on a hilltop, with landscaped terraces leading down to a shady duck pond. I sipped a Sauvignon Blanc, then went outside.

Rows of vines shimmered in the late afternoon light as I walked to the pond. I stopped to say hello to a tin man, one of several imaginative scarecrows that decorated the property. A man sitting at a picnic table looked at me strangely, probably thinking I'd tasted too much wine that day. And who knows? Maybe I had.

The tin man didn't care. So I turned to him again and raised an imaginary toast. I think he smiled.

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