



Travel Stories by Amaru & Suzanne



Cruising the Northland

by Amaru & Suzanne, March 17th 2007

Our first intentions for this weekend was to make it all the way to the northern tip of the North Island of New Zealand, to Cape Reinga, we were going to see the 90 mile beach and all that comes with it. After a bit of reading we realized that this should only be done with a 4x4. That meant that we would have to be on a big bus with lots of other people, just to see a beach?!?

We've seen a beach or two before so we decided not to stress and just relax during the weekend, and that's what we did.....

Just about a week or so before we headed out on our trip I recieved an email saying that a friend of mine, Beatrice, would be coming over to NZ from Australia to attend a wedding. After emailing back and forth for a while we found out that she was heading north to Whangarei for the wedding.....and she was going there the same day that we were, weird! Well, of course we teamed up and rode the car together to Whangarei where we dropped her off and told her that we would see her the next day when we returned.

We continued on towards Paihia and the Bay of Islands, but first we had to do a quick stop along the way and check out one thing that we had read about.....the public toilets of Kawakawa. These toilets were designed by an Austrian artist and are created from glass bottles and tiles. It was definately one of the weirdest toilets we've seen (weirdest ones are still the ones we saw in Austria though).



In Kawakawa
visiting their public toilets



Quite funky and "organic"
Designed by Hundertwasser

A short drive from Kawakawa and we arrived in Paihia, where we were to board a 24 hours cruise to take us around the Bay of Islands, but we still had a good few hours before it was time to board so we made a quick stop over to Waitangi. This is where the "Treaty of Waitangi" was signed by a representative of the British Crown and Maori chiefs from the North Island. This is considered to be the birth of New Zealand as a nation.

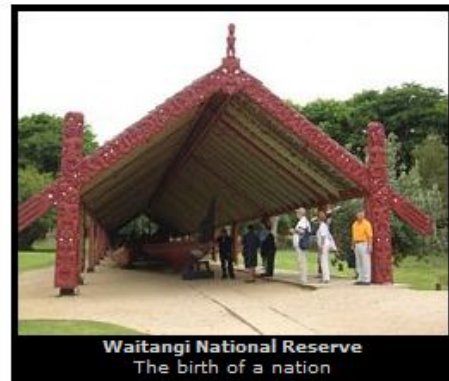
We walked around the area and the first stop on our list was the "Ngatokimatawhaorua", the largest war canoe in the world. This is a 30-metre-long canoe that was launched in 1940 for the centennial celebration of the treaty signing.

We moved on and also got to see the "Treaty House" with its flagpole carrying the flags of New Zealand, UK and the Maori flag and finished up with a visit to the "Te Whare Runanga" (Maori Meeting House). The meeting house was a real treat, it was great to just walk along its walls and see the amazing carvings that it offers.

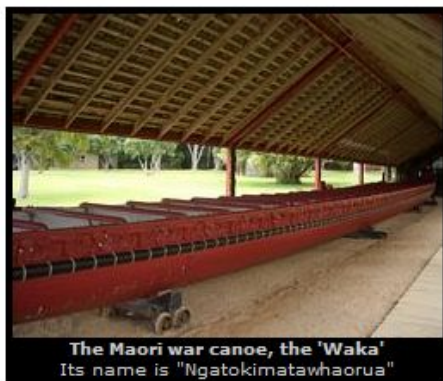
The area is also supposed to be a breeding ground for Kiwi birds, but to this date.....we haven't seen one and we don't think we will.

After our history lesson of New Zealand the time had come for some lunch. So we drove the lengthy trip over to Paihia (about 3 min in our car) and found some fish & chips which we devoured while catching up on the latest gossip from some magazines..... Well, what can I say, we had some time to kill (that's my excuse at least ;)).

After we managed to find a parking where we could leave our rental car and feel safe about it (parking it in front of the local police station felt good to us) we strolled down to the pier where we were picked up and transferred to our home for the next 24 hours, "The Rock".



The Rock used to be an old car ferry, but it's been modified to a nice, relaxed boat in which you get to explore the Bay of Islands.



We were introduced to the crew and barely had time to set off before the guys announced that we were going to have a shooting competition. The target was a plastic duck that was trailing the boat attached to a string. We all got three shots with a BB gun. I shot and missed with all my shots but Suz actually hit the duck once and got to participate in the final with 3 other girls (the winner got a free drink at the bar). Suz fought well but in the end lost to one of the other girls.

Ah well, we went to the bar and got ourselves a drink anyway and were then informed that the bar runs on a tab and that we pay at the end of the cruise (tabs are always a bit dangerous....hehe).

After we'd been cruising for a little while we arrived at Robertson Island, our stop for the evening. We were given fishing rods and were all trying to catch some Snappers. I managed to catch three pathetic excuses for a Snapper which I had to throw back in, but hey.....it was a lot of fun catching them anyway =))

Soon afterwards it was time for a BBQ dinner (no Snapper though I'm afraid) and we were asked if we wanted to tag along on the Night Kajaking later that evening. Suz wasn't sure - considering it was 10:30pm and the water was freezing...but I jumped straight into it. While we waited for our turn to go Kajaking we sat there talking to some of the other guests onboard.



There were around 30 customers on the boat in total and you never got the feeling that it was overcrowded in any way. Some people sat on the very comfy sofas, other sat by the bar and played cards or other games and some people were over by the pool table.... Yup that's right, a pool table on a boat. Most of the time it worked fine, but it did get a bit interesting when the boat started rocking (The Rock started rocking, yeah!!.....hmmmm.... even I thought that was bad).

The time was getting near when we were to experience some night kajaking and just before it was time Suz and I sat on the outside of the boat and just stared at the stars, and what a view!! Neither Suz or I have ever seen such a clear sky or been able to make out so many stars (it really helps when there's no ozone layer in the way).



The previous group came back with the canoes and I jumped in and off we went.....and it was amazing! It's very cool to be surrounded by darkness and the only light that's coming to you is from the fluorescent algae in the water. Every paddle we took sparkled some of it and when we moved ahead the fishes moved out of our way and left trails in the water.....like small lightning strikes in the water.

While I was doing this I couldn't help getting a feeling of Deja Vu, during my time in Thailand when I worked on a boat I took people with me to do some night snorkeling. There was always the chance to see some sharks, Moray Eels, Barracudas etc. But the best thing to show people was just the fluorescent algae, it keeps on amazing me every time I see it!

After around 30min we returned to the boat, had a very quick hot shower, grabbed a drink and sat ourselves in front of the open fire (yup, this boat has it all).

There was around 5-6 of us sitting around the fire chatting for a while, the rest of the boat was dark since the generator had been turned off. One after one everybody started to drift off towards bed and we followed them eventually.

Our sleeping arrangements on this trip was on bunkbeds in a room that held 6 people, we saw another room that had a double bed and 2 bunk beds, but I guess we were not lucky enough to get it... Well, can't get it all ;)

We had a few issues when we tried to fall asleep, most of it because of our neighbors next door, they were a group of kids (well, they were between 19-20 ;)) and while they were drinking they were quite noisy, and unfortunately we hadn't brought any earplugs with us, another lesson learned huh?!?



The next morning the boat moved to a new location where we could snorkel if we wanted to, Suz and I decided not to, we had breakfast, read some magazines and stayed behind playing some pool. The weather at this stage was cloudy and a bit chilli so we didn't feel like getting wet...

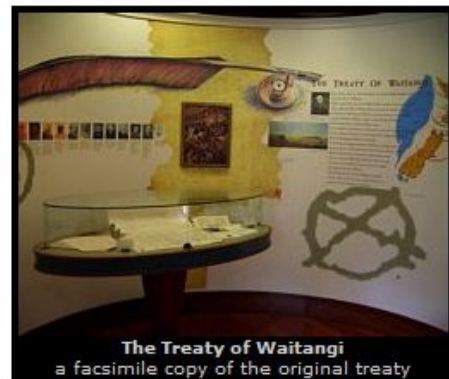
We spent a while playing boat pool and "Connect 4" (Suz was confident at first but didn't want to play it after a while since I kept winning....hehe) until the frozen snorkellers came back and the boat started moving again...

All of a sudden the boat engines were turned off and the skipper shouted "Dolphins". We all dropped everything, and hurried to the bow of the boat where we all crowded together snapping photos of the

playing Dolphins.....quite a nice bonus on our trip!

The skipper later took us back to Roberton Island where we landed and climbed up to the viewpoint (another Deja Vu for me, guiding people up a hill) where we had an awesome view of the islands, it really is a beautiful area!! We now had a bit of free time to do what we wanted so we had our lunch and I decided to try out the water and have short swim.....and yes, it was a very short swim, the water was quite cold!!

We had a blast on this tour, it was one of the best experiences we've had here in NZ so far. And to top it all off we were given quite a treat on our return journey.....sea urchins, yum!! It was supposed to be a first time experience for most people and some were quite sceptical to try it (I went back for seconds....hehe).



Once back in Paihia we found our car still parked where we left it and headed back down to Whangarei where we picked up Beatrice. That night we stayed at a place called Whangarei Falls Holiday Park & Backpackers where we took care of our own dinner, BBQ...Yum!!



I was up with early the next morning and left the girls sleeping in, it was time for me to go diving at New Zealand's best dive site (and one of the 10th best dive sites in the world), The Poor Knight Islands.

These islands are located approximately 25km of the Tutukaka coast and they are the remains of lava domes from ancient volcanoes. The islands are the sea surrounding them are protected so you are not allowed to step on the islands or fish in the waters surrounding them.... This has allowed life underwater to increase dramatically!!

The tropical current that sweeps down from Australia to the islands brings a variety of marine life that you normally wouldn't find in these waters. Have you seen the movie "Finding Nemo", do you remember the "East Australian Current", "EAC" they were travelling on? Well, this is

the current I'm talking about, the only difference is that they've changed the name to "East Auckland Current".....(couldn't keep the Aussie name now could they....hehe)

I went diving with the dive shop Dive! Tutukaka and they were very professional and had a great boat, one of the better ones I've been to. The trip to the islands took around an hour and the sea was nice and calm so we had a smooth ride out there.

After a short introduction to the islands and a dive briefing we jumped in the water. I was expecting the water to be cold but it was actually around 20C so it wasn't too bad.

So how were the dives? They were awesome, both of them!!

We dived at "The Gentle Forrest" and "The Gardens" and both sites contains lots of Kelp, Wrasse, Snappers, Scorpion fishes, Octopus, Moray eels and many different Stingrays. On the first dive we were also able to see a John Dory fish, a very cool fish that came within touching distance before he saw me and swam away.



On the second dive we were seeing Stingrays all over the place and we even managed to get close enough to pet one special Eagle Ray, quite interesting!

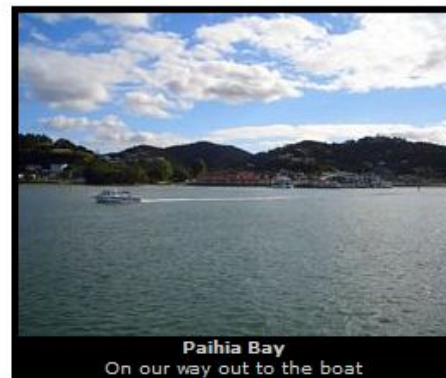
In between the dives we were driven inside the "Riko Riko" cave, the largest sea cave in the world. This is a massive cave and we were told that six boats can be moored at the same time inside it.

The drive back to shore in the afternoon was a bit more choppy and I almost got a bit queezy.

I met up with the girls in Tutukaka and asked them what they had been up to, they told me they had a look at the Whangarei Falls which they found to be very pretty and then just strolled around in Whangarei and later on in Tutukaka waiting for me to return.

With nothing more to do or see, we headed back to Auckland.

This was a very cool weekend where we managed to see and do quite a lot, the boat tour around the Bay of Islands was great and very relaxing and the dives at the Poor Knight Islands were awesome, I must say that of all the dives I've done, this is in my top five!!





Suz did well and proceeded to the final
where she was finally beaten



Sailing out onto the
Bay of Islands



Our location for the evening
A very nice, flat bay



Time to go fishing
...we were chasing some Snappers



1 of my 3 caught fishes, all of them
too small and had to be thrown back in



Night Kayaking
One of the highlights of the trip!



"Polly wants a cracker"
The boats mascot



A pool table on a boat?!?
... interesting when it's rocking!



Dolphins!!
A nice bonus for us...



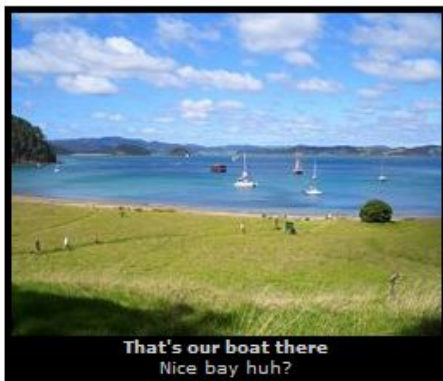
Loads of Dolphins
And everybody on the boat is happy!!



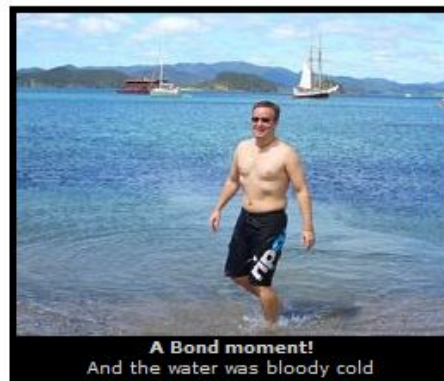
Suz's landing
on Robertson Island



Suz and I
On top of the island



That's our boat there
Nice bay huh?



A Bond moment!
And the water was bloody cold



Sea urchins sampling
They are very nice!



All of us on
"The Rock"



Suz and Beatrice
in Whangarei



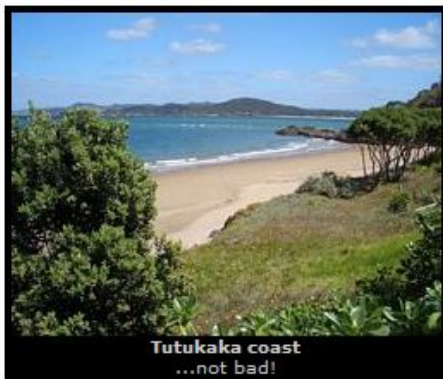
Whangarei basin
A nice place to spend some hours in



Whangarei Falls
A beautiful 26m-high fall



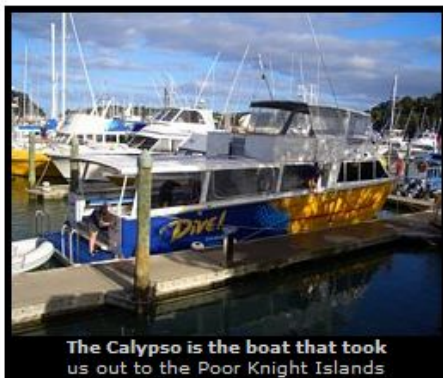
The falls were located
about 5 min from where we stayed



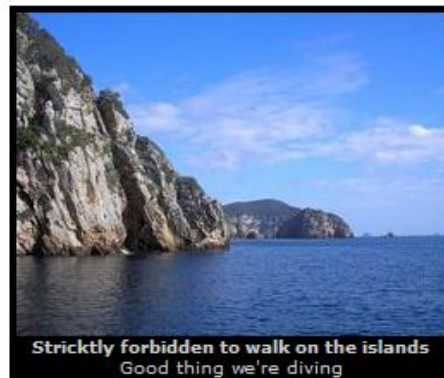
Tutukaka coast
...not bad!



Dive! Tutukaka
Time to go diving!



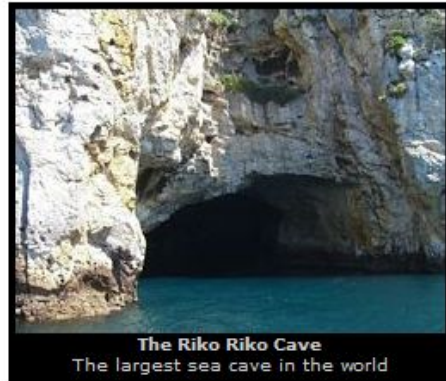
The Calypso is the boat that took
us out to the Poor Knight Islands



Strictly forbidden to walk on the islands
Good thing we're diving



Another boat from our dive shop
in front of the massive cliffs



The Riko Riko Cave
The largest sea cave in the world



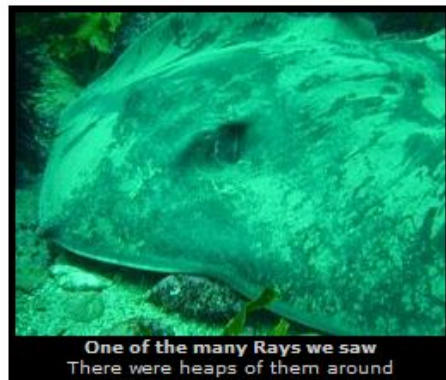
It's a lot bigger
than what it looks like



Loads and loads of Kelp
...and fishes of course



A Stonefish
Don't want to touch him



One of the many Rays we saw
There were heaps of them around



Moray Eel
Also plenty of them in the area



Found some beautiful nudiebranch
in this section



Sneaky little Ray
Trying to hide from me...



Cute little fish
in the mids of everything else

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