

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

NEW ZEALAND

Spectators not allowed



In between cricket matches this month, sneak away for a walk—or more—on the wild side

BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Ruatahuna! It certainly has a war cry-like ring to it. But, in truth, Ruatahuna is the name of an unassuming little stop in between Rotorua and Lake Waikaremoana in North Island. The thought of it still makes my mouth water.

We walked in from the cold and light drizzle into this cozy village store that sold everything from petrol (via weather-beaten dispensers outside) to dairy products over the counter. The proprietress was expecting us and had laid out a neat little table with spotless white tea-cups, fine-grain snow-white sugar, and tea and coffee pots. And to complete the oh-so-Englishness of it all was a plate full of hot scones shot with raisins, accompanied by fresh cream and home-made strawberry jam.

Certainly the most sedate of my experiences so far in New Zealand. Which made for quite a laundry list, actually: Drive a hired Toyota Corolla to Paihia in Northland, a region of blue skies and windswept peninsulas. Check. Go on a full-day tour of Cape Reinga, the northernmost point of North Island, drive down the 90-mile

(around 145km) beach, whizz down humongous sand dunes at the Te Paki Reserves. Check, check and check.

Then drive to Waitomo, near Hamilton, to float in a rubber tube on a dark underground river—a unique-to-New Zealand activity called black-water rafting—move on to Rotorua, park the car, fly up 15,000ft and jump out of a perfectly sound plane in a thrilling tandem skydive. Check and check.

So I was quite looking forward to some simple adventure that involved putting one foot in front of the other. While most of my perambulation on holidays consists of walking from the car park to the view point, on a whim I had signed up for the Urewa Discovery Walk around Lake Waikaremoana, lured by the focus on “short walks” and “maximum personal comfort”. And the tea at Ruatahuna was affirming my presumptions.

There were six of us: Kevin and Petal from Auckland, Joan from Canberra, myself and Denise and Shona, our two guides from Walking Legends. Perhaps predictably, I had expected a strapping young man or woman to be escorting us and was more than a little surprised when Denise, a grandmother, approached me in Rotorua.

“Good morning, I’m your guide from Walking Legends. Are you ready?” she had asked brightly.

“Beauties!” I’d thought, “this is going to be a three-day stroll in the park.”

Of course, I was to be proved completely wrong. During the walk, I’d often find myself huffing and puffing up an incline while Denise and Shona—another grandmother—strode past me to set up lunch at the top, cheerily whistling *The Grand Old Duke of York*.

So, in retrospect, it was only fitting that I attacked the scones on offer at the café in Ruatahuna with full vigour. Our first walk to the Panekiri Bluffs, overlooking Lake Waikaremoana, more than burnt off my indulgence. It started innocuously, along a grassy walking path with steps on the inclines, but in the virgin forest—the



Slip and slide: (from above) The lighthouse at Cape Reinga; the stunning view from Lou’s Lookout; and speeding down dunes at Te Paki Reserves.



Lake Waikareiti and several lake-lets were born some 18,000 years ago, when a thick slab of 10km-wide country slid off the high rides in the north-west and finally came to rest as debris scattered over a vast area.

Over three days, I found myself getting more and more attuned to the basic rhythm of walking. Our trails ran through clusters of red and silver beech with the occasional rimu trees—a New Zealand native—pushing their heads past the canopy. We heard the kaka, the country’s most endangered native parrot, easily identifiable by its call, but didn’t see a single one. The air was like champagne, the lakes multiple shades of blue, the forests incredibly innocent—almost as touching, in fact, as our grandmom-guides.

“So how would you like to walk amongst trees and plants that were around when dinosaurs roamed the earth?” That was how Shona introduced our last walk through the Whirinaki forest. One of the most outstanding examples of ancient Podocarp forest in the world, it was saved from logging just in time in 1978, by environmentalists who protested by tying themselves to the trees in front of the lumbermen.

And so that was how we came to be walking through this quiet forest. With the still-unseen kakas and a gurgling stream for company, our disparate group, ranging in age from 35 to 65 and sharing varied backgrounds, felt a common sense of awe at the games nature plays.

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To land in North Island, fly to Wellington (round-trip fares on Qantas upwards of Rs70,000 from New Delhi, Rs62,000 from Mumbai) or Auckland (round-trip fares on Qantas upwards of Rs67,000 from New Delhi, Rs62,000 from Mumbai; on Singapore Airlines, upwards of Rs78,000 from Bangalore). Cathay Pacific also offers convenient connections via Hong Kong

Do Drive Stay

- Watch India take on New Zealand in ODIs at Christchurch (8 March), Hamilton (11 March), Auckland (14 March) and in Tests at Hamilton (18-22 March), Napier (26-30 March) and Wellington (3-7 April).
- New Zealand is a perfect destination for a driving holiday. Visit www.newzealand.com for details. Sign up for an adventure holiday. For the expeditions mentioned in the article, visit www.dunerider.co.nz, www.waitomo.com, www.nzone.biz, www.kaitaki.co.nz and www.walkinglegends.com.
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