

Lake Waikaremoana

(Sea of rippling waters) By Alan Clark

In Te Urewera National Park, 614 metres above sea-level, the 54 square kilometre Lake Waikaremoana drains a 427 square kilometre basin and empties into a tributary of the Wairoa. With a maximum depth of 256 m it is bounded on the west by the Huiarau Range and on the south by the sheer 610 m wall of Panekiri Bluff.

At 475 km north of Wellington and 385 km south of Auckland the roads are winding, unsealed and dusty for the last 30 km from Wairoa and 90 km from Murapara, excellent deterrents for latte drinkers from the two big smokes. The ranges cupping the lake are part of the spine of the North Island which runs down to Wellington. They were formed from mudstone and sandstone 10 to 15 million years ago, forced up from the seafloor a couple of million years ago and are now cloaked in dense forest, spared when it was realised that logging further north was causing some of New Zealand's worst soil erosion. To protect the landscape and the largest area of untouched native forest in the North Island,

Te Urewera National Park was established in 1954. Thank goodness for common sense.

There are at least two explanations on how Lake Waikaremoana was formed. (It seems dumb to preface a place name with a European title when the name itself suffices)

It is held that Mahu was angered by his daughter Haumapuhia (Hau). He asked her to perform a simple and very reasonable task, to collect some water from a nearby spring. She refused. Mahu flew into a rage, drowned his disobedient daughter and turned her spirit into a taniwha. Hau, longing to reach the sea, frantically thrashed around





gouging out land which filled with water. Her final effort formed the outlet to the lake at Onepoto. Here Hau was overtaken by daylight and remains to this day, a rock with the waters of the lake running through her body. Hau's restless, unhappy spirit keeps the waters stirred and rippling even on calm days.

A less romantic version is that 2,200 years ago a huge landslide blocked a narrow gorge along the Waikaretaheke River and created Lake Waikaremoana. Hydro electric development in 1946, lowered the original level by about 5 metres.

Whichever story you prefer, this is one excellent stretch of water which can be extremely challenging. A previous party from Wellington needed an unscheduled overnight camp when the stretch of water along Panekiri bluff was whipped into a screaming fury of willywaws by a sudden southerly cold front. This was not to be our misfortune.

We, a party of 10, left Wellington and arrived at the Waikaremoana Motor Camp ground about 9 hours later. This very pleasant spot alongside the lake, with a camp store in which to top up forgotten supplies, was our home for the first night.

We knew of the McCahon painting at the DOC visitors centre, and also needed to pay camp fees and check fire permits. So a few of us set off the next morning to view it. What a controversial piece of art this is. It has been dogged by controversy since its commission in 1975. The latest excitement was its hijack and return a few years ago. When the centre was closed for maintenance the art work was moved to Auckland. Now, due to leaky building syndrome and because it isn't up to earthquake regulations, it is operating in a side basement.

We packed gear for a four day three night paddle, parked vehicles and set off. In pouring rain, an exhilarating paddle into head winds brought us to our first campsite which, like other Waikaremoana campsites, has an excellent shelter, a central cooking bench, a large roof and seating



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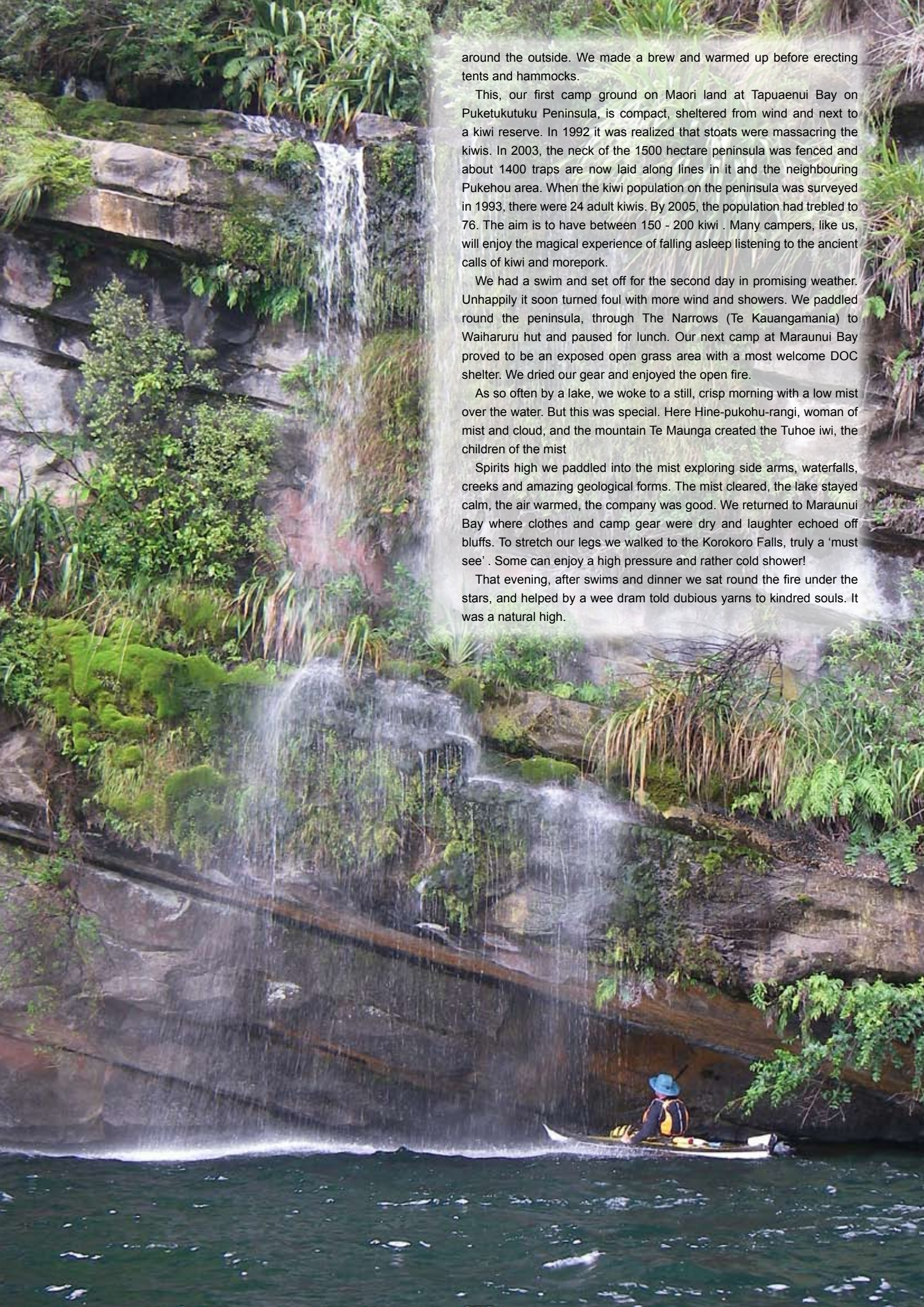
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around the outside. We made a brew and warmed up before erecting tents and hammocks.

This, our first camp ground on Maori land at Tapuaenui Bay on Puketukutuku Peninsula, is compact, sheltered from wind and next to a kiwi reserve. In 1992 it was realized that stoats were massacring the kiwis. In 2003, the neck of the 1500 hectare peninsula was fenced and about 1400 traps are now laid along lines in it and the neighbouring Pukehou area. When the kiwi population on the peninsula was surveyed in 1993, there were 24 adult kiwis. By 2005, the population had trebled to 76. The aim is to have between 150 - 200 kiwi. Many campers, like us, will enjoy the magical experience of falling asleep listening to the ancient calls of kiwi and morepork.

We had a swim and set off for the second day in promising weather. Unhappily it soon turned foul with more wind and showers. We paddled round the peninsula, through The Narrows (Te Kauangamania) to Waiharuru hut and paused for lunch. Our next camp at Maraunui Bay proved to be an exposed open grass area with a most welcome DOC shelter. We dried our gear and enjoyed the open fire.

As so often by a lake, we woke to a still, crisp morning with a low mist over the water. But this was special. Here Hine-pukohu-rangi, woman of mist and cloud, and the mountain Te Maunga created the Tuhoe iwi, the children of the mist

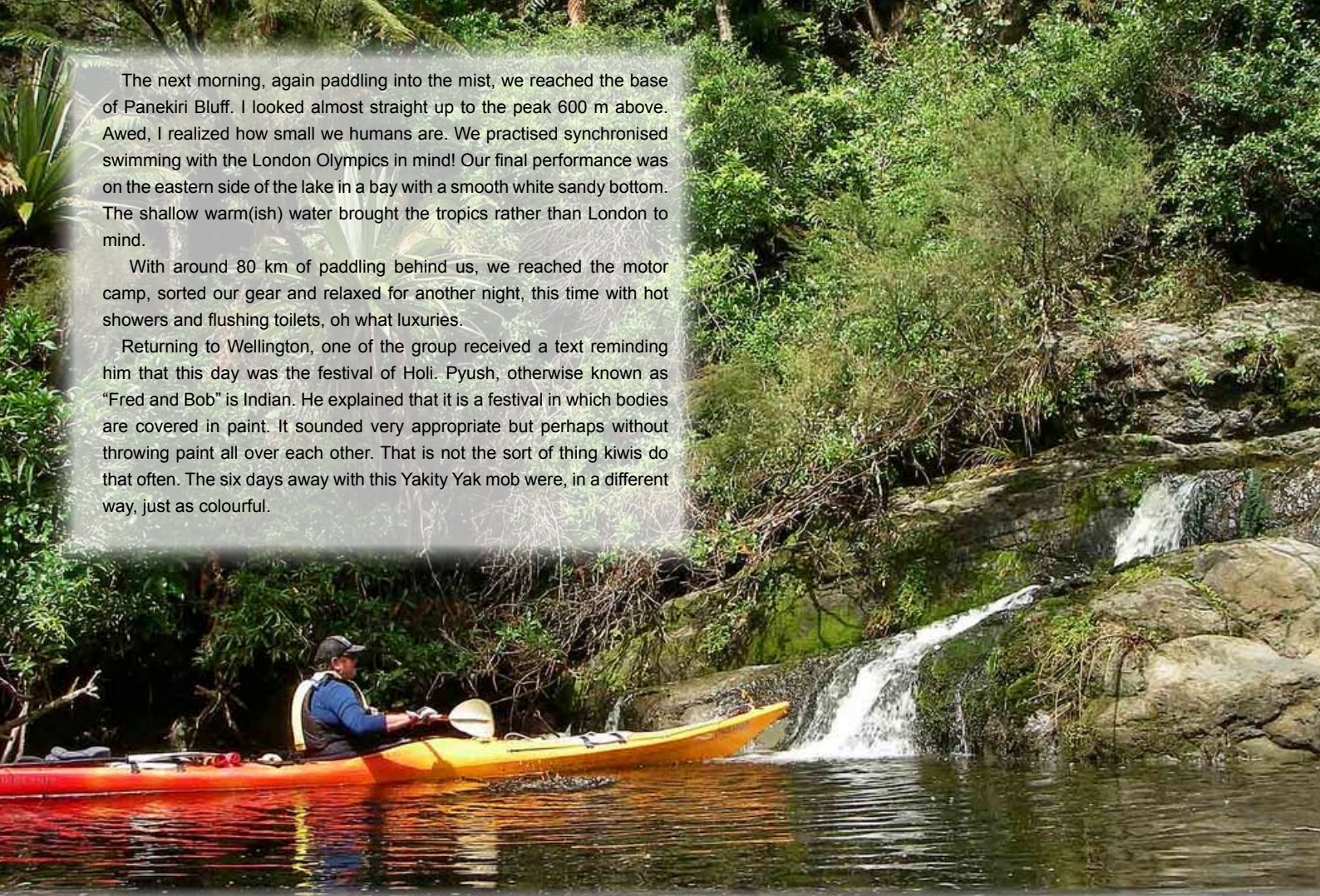
Spirits high we paddled into the mist exploring side arms, waterfalls, creeks and amazing geological forms. The mist cleared, the lake stayed calm, the air warmed, the company was good. We returned to Maraunui Bay where clothes and camp gear were dry and laughter echoed off bluffs. To stretch our legs we walked to the Korokoro Falls, truly a 'must see'. Some can enjoy a high pressure and rather cold shower!

That evening, after swims and dinner we sat round the fire under the stars, and helped by a wee dram told dubious yarns to kindred souls. It was a natural high.

The next morning, again paddling into the mist, we reached the base of Panekiri Bluff. I looked almost straight up to the peak 600 m above. Awed, I realized how small we humans are. We practised synchronised swimming with the London Olympics in mind! Our final performance was on the eastern side of the lake in a bay with a smooth white sandy bottom. The shallow warm(ish) water brought the tropics rather than London to mind.

With around 80 km of paddling behind us, we reached the motor camp, sorted our gear and relaxed for another night, this time with hot showers and flushing toilets, oh what luxuries.

Returning to Wellington, one of the group received a text reminding him that this day was the festival of Holi. Pyush, otherwise known as "Fred and Bob" is Indian. He explained that it is a festival in which bodies are covered in paint. It sounded very appropriate but perhaps without throwing paint all over each other. That is not the sort of thing kiwis do that often. The six days away with this Yakity Yak mob were, in a different way, just as colourful.



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