

KAYAKING THE COROMANDEL

Island hopping on the western side of the peninsula

By Phillip Donnell



Three significant island groups dot the eastern side of the Firth of Thames. The northernmost (Motukawao) cluster lies between Papa Aroha and Colville. The middle group envelops the entrance to Coromandel Harbour and its adjacent bays.

The southernmost group guards Te Kouma and Manaia Harbours and environs. Each group makes an ideal day trip if the conditions are favourable. We decided to tackle them in three separate excursions, leaving early each morning, since the wind tends to rise after noon.

The *islands off Coromandel Harbour* were our initial focus. Leaving from Oamaru Bay, we headed west across the Hautapu Channel to the rocky beach on the southern side of bush-clad Motuoruhi (Goat) Island. Paddling south, we then traversed the maze of oyster lines nestled between Motukopaka and Waimate Islands. The latter is farmed and has clean sandy beaches on both eastern and western sides.

We crossed the Waimate Channel to the cone-shaped Motutapere, the highest point in the vicinity (175 m). From here it was a short distance to the steep western flanks of Whanganui Island, which contrast with the many small bays on its harbour side. It too is farmed, with few trees and numerous signs to discourage camping. At its northern tip a small but welcome beach ushered us into the narrow channel separating the island from the mainland, before we continued north along the coast to complete our circuit.

Papa Aroha is 10 km north of Coromandel



township by road. Its seaside motor camp is an ideal base from which to explore the **Motukawao Group**, comprising four main islands plus several rocky outcrops. We paddled north-west to Motuwi or Double Island, so named because of a low narrow shelf in its centre which is submerged at high tide. Rocky ledges surround the island, but a stony beach on its southern end allowed us to catch our breath.

Motukahaua (Happy Jack) Island, 2.5 kms further north, was the highlight of this trip. Its steep sides indicate an ancient volcanic cone, since eroded and flooded by the sea. We aimed for the left headland, which marks the entrance to the famous Elephant Cove, one of the most beautiful locations in the area. Inside, the right shoreline drops to a narrow isthmus, the only landing place and an excellent (albeit small) campsite for a stopover. However, beware of the rats and the large ants.

Rangipukea Island and entrance to Te Kouma Harbour (Top left)

Squadron Bay, Te Kouma Harbour (Bottom left)

Right: Pause in the narrow channel separating Whanganui Is from the mainland



Moving south, we paused at Motukaramarama (Bush) Island, notable for its cliff-top gannet colonies and strangely-carved rock formations. Fish and seabirds frolicked around us. We spent a pleasant afternoon exploring the marine farms of Moturua (Rabbit) Island, followed by the fascinating nooks and crannies of the Three Kings (Ngamotukaraka) complex, before heading east back to our starting point.

Several islands stand as sentinels at the entrances to Te Kouma and Manaia Harbours. They were an excellent choice for a third day on the waves. We drove to the end of Te Kouma Road, on the southern side of Coromandel Harbour, to begin our trip. From this point we

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paddled along the coast, pausing at a pristine beach, until it turned south around Te Kouma Head into the elongated harbour of the same name. Squadron Bay, the second cove on its northern side, was a great place to lunch beneath the pohutukawas, before weaving our way through the pleasure craft to the notable pink cliffs opposite. There are a number of coves on both sides of this pretty harbour, and it is worth venturing into its upper reaches.

Don't bother to do this at Manaia. It is shallow, muddy and fairly uninteresting. Skirt its entrance, then head 2 km south to explore the caves at the northern end of Kirita Bay, accessible by kayak. Pause at Wekarua Island on your way back as the prelude to a more extended stop in the lovely sheltered bay on the eastern side of Rangipukea Island. After climbing to the top of a nearby hill for panoramic views, we descended to sunbathe and swim, gathering energy for the final burst back to our vehicle.

This tripartite archipelago is a kayaker's paradise. The islands are in easy striking distance of the shore. You can vary the length by making up your own route. If sea conditions become too exposed, more protected waters are near at hand. There are many idyllic spots. Fishing reaps rich rewards. And you have all this with the added benefits of returning to a hot shower and a comfortable bed each night! What more could you want?

Unusual rock on west side of Motukuramarama (Bush) Island. (Right)
The entrance to Elephant Cove, Motukahaua (Happy Jack) Island (Below)





ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Access: SH 25 and Te Kouma Road (just south of Coromandel township)

Maps and Charts: NZMS 260 series T10 Coromandel or the new map series Topo 50:BA34 Coromandel Marine Chart NZ533 Firth of Thames.

Note: 1 sea mile = 1.853 kms; 1 km = 0.54 sea miles.

Grade: Rating for sea conditions is moderate to exposed for Motukawao Group, protected to moderate for the other two trips.

Times: 6-8 hours per trip using sit-on-top kayaks, quicker in sea kayaks!

Further Information:

Websites: www.kayaknz.co.nz; www.kask.co.nz; www.nzcoastguard.gen.nz

Contacts: DoC Hauraki Area Office at Thames, ph. 07 867 9180; Coromandel Information Centre, 355 Kapanga Road, ph. 07 866 8598, coroinfo@ihug.co.nz.



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