

From Mud to Marae – Historic Hokianga

By Ruth E. Henderson



Sunset on the Hokianga
from Rawene Motor camp.

Approaching Kohukohu Cafe on
the Hokianga Harbour.

About four hours drive North West of Auckland lies the Hokianga Harbour. It is steeped in both Maori and early colonial settlers' history. Once you pass through Dargaville and wind thru the Waipoua forest, home of New Zealand's largest kauri Tane Mahuta, there seems to be a quaint wee church and marae on every hillside adjacent to a stream, inlet or estuary. Although our visit was primarily for the kayaking (and sand dunes) eventually we couldn't help but get caught up in its history.

Early arrivals Greg and I, had Good Friday morning to ourselves and poked about the harbour mouth for a smell of the Tasman Sea, then tried our luck boogie boarding down the steepest sand dunes. Tip: old polystyrene boards do not slide on sand. Opposite Opononi we met the rest of the Yakity Yak group who had similar tales to tell. But they had borrowed a sleek and shiny hire board and were taking turns and bets on who could hurtle downhill fast enough to splash into the sea.

Congregating that evening over a drink and nibbles at Rawene Motor Camp (very spick and span these days) trip leader Nick outlined the options, travelling with the tide up the Mangamuka River to the bridge (45 km return) or a more leisurely café and history cruise. The majority chose to cruise!

Everyone had to contend with the mud! Like most harbours the Hokianga is very tidal and sensible people do not just go with the tidal flow, but also wait for the water. Tip – if necessary, have a little sleep-in and launch above the mud-line.

Booties retrieved or washed, within an hour we were at Kohukohu on the northern shore, where the Mangamuka River and the Waihou River

enter the harbour. In the 1830's the town was the centre of N.Z.'s flax and timber industry and a bustling port. After the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) and when the capital had shifted from the Bay of Islands to Auckland this industry declined, but by 1888 it was again busy and had the largest mill in the Southern Hemisphere. By 1900 there was a population of over 1000. The mill closed in 1909, dairying replaced the timber industry and the Hokianga Co-Operative Dairy Co opened its factory in nearby Motukaraka.

Today the town (pop. 150) has a school, general store, art gallery and accommodation. It relies on people like us for the tourism dollar. Whereas in 925 Kupe gave the place its name, cursing "kohu", on being

A central fireplace and shelves bulging with books make it a snug place for a winter's eve.

given under-cooked hangi food, we had only praise for the café's coffee and cakes. Across the road the art gallery had an intriguing exhibition of ukuleles, each a work of art (www.villagearts.co.nz).

Too soon it was time for those who had exited on the muddy and slippery boat ramp to gingerly carry their boats back to the water and those who had climbed out at the wharf's pontoon to walk back under the Hokianga Arch of Remembrance. It commemorates the 84 WW1 soldiers who did not return.

We paddled for an hour up the Waihou River and landed at the Horeke Hotel, the oldest standing pub still in operation in New Zealand. It was closed so we ate our own lunch while waiting for it to open and provide a drink and a tour. A central fireplace and shelves bulging with books



Sand dunes near the harbour entrance are a breath taking sight.

make it a snug place for a winter's eve (accommodation available at \$85 dble.) Large photo reproductions depicting early settlers felling timber and bullock teams carting logs out of the bush hang on the walls.

However, this settlement was founded before the timber era in 1826, around a shipyard. It was the second N.Z. settlement after Russell and is famous for hosting the biggest gathering of Ngapuhi Maori to sign the Treaty of Waitangi.

When the rising tide covered the beach, jostling the boats, we headed

for 'home' going with the tide, sidling past mangroves. The Celtic cross of the Mangunga Wesleyan Chapel and Mission House built in 1839 stood out against the skyline. We passed the Kohukohu car ferry ramp and crossed the harbour to Rawene.

Over drinkie poohs that night, many paddle proposals were aired. The next morning, Easter Sunday, they were rejected in favour of paddling to 'Our Lady of Assumption Church' and celebrating its centenary. The proposal for classification to the Historic Places Trust described it as

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We were privileged to visit Motukaraka church on its centenary celebration and be welcomed onto the marae.



“An excellent example of the timber tradition of building essentially simple country churches in the neo-gothic manner.” Its 50 ft (15m) steeple and bell tower standing high on Motukaraka Point command attention. The story of why and how Nui Harre built it makes a fascinating read. He is buried in the churchyard, as is Father Becker who translated the New Testament into the Maori language.

We paddled for less than 30 minutes, plodded in the mud and tied our boats together by an old shed below the marae, peeled off our neoprene shorts and changed into whatever we had for ‘Sunday best’. Tip: a silk sarong is a very handy object: You can change behind it, under it, and even wear it!

The marae was a hive of activity preparing a post ceremony buffet. A tent did a steady trade in commemorative T-shirts, postcards and books. The bell tolled, the dignitaries and elders in all their finery and robes filed into the church, and then a lucky 100 (including five kayakers) filled the pews. Outside there were chairs and loud-speakers for the 400 overflow.

Bishop Patrick Dunn, the 11th Bishop of Auckland, led the Centennial celebration Mass in Te reo: difficult for some of us to follow or find the right place in the hymns, but there is no mistaking ‘Hallelujah’ in any language. ‘Aruia!’ What a privilege it was to be a part of the celebrations and later to be welcomed on the marae.

Later that afternoon, outside the Copthorne Hotel, Omapere, we shared stories with those who had spent the day playing in the surf at the harbour entrance and watched the sun sink over the sand dunes before it fell into the Tasman Sea.

Motukaraka wharf



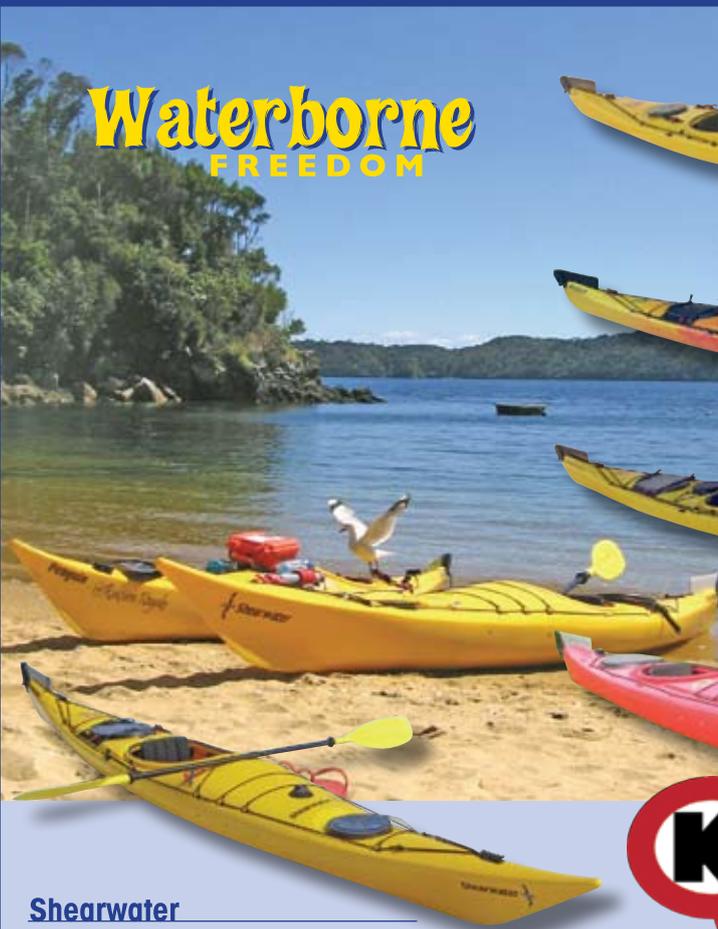
Dignitaries in their finery aren't something you see on just any club trip.



Motukaraka Church built in 1910, has a fascinating history.



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