

Waikato in the Wet

By Lois Nixon

Photo by Ruth E. Henderson







Friday, leaving Auckland. Jammed on the motorway, wet, feeling rushed, can't wait to get out. 10 paddlers make it through Friday evening from the bustle to a great welcome, a prepared meal and a comfortable hunker down at Peter and Hiroko's home on the banks of the Waikato River near Jones's Landing, Arapuni. For some, this is an annual journey, for me a first time, for Ruth our organiser, this is year 13.

The forecast is for rain, and more rain. So, what? We are paddling, so what does that matter? We have our gear, there is no wind, no tide and the current will be with us. Next morning, two groups set out. One group to paddle from the Tutukau Bridge, and one left earlier to travel further south to start at Mihi. Some keen to "join the dots" of previous trips or, like newbie to the Waikato me, simply to see what I hadn't seen before. Always that "what is around the next corner?" The plan was to all rendezvous at Orakei Korako thermal area, paddle on over to "the squeeze", tie up our kayaks, then enter a not so secret but tight passage following a stream through water carved sandstone to a waterfall and warm thermal pool.

However, what was around that corner? A slow meandering river, peaceful, quiet, still in the early morning light. Large areas of floating lily pads, sunken trees, watchful shags, wind carved sandstone cliffs home to darting kingfishers, farmland, harvested forest, scrub and long rows of tall poplars reminiscent of French canals. Always though, the water. The rain delineating the smooth current patterns, pattering on the hat, feeling cosy, secure, even with the trickle down the neck, down the arm. Damp, but warm, as everywhere in the country this weekend. Not everyone though witnessed bubbling thermal vents steaming through manuka scrub, nor wondered how did a bath get half way up a hill? And, is it still there? What is there, without doubt, is a very good back massage under the waterfall

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tuned to just that right pressure, warmth and volume to create a queue of happy campers awaiting a pummelling at the head of "the squeeze".

After a shared meal on Saturday night with our hosts Peter and Hiroko, and much appreciated portage driver, Ian, the next day it was a quiet pre-dawn rise and "on the water" at 6 am for a "float" down the river to the Arapuni Dam. Magic. The quiet stillness, the water dark and smooth, reflections, the raucous magpies, the melodious tui, time slowed, taking in the detail, swatting a mozzie. Funny how reality bites when you are trying to be spiritual. Then it was bacon 'n egg breakfast compliments of chef Greg with a side of wild blackberry.

To walk it all off, six of us went along the river bank following the Waikato River Trail to the Arapuni Dam to glimpse the river from a different angle. On one side turbines spilling out roiling white water, then across the suspension bridge a view of a river bed at the base of a gorge where once the river flowed. A journey of contrasts, a great weekend with plenty of wonderful memories to take home. Thank you all. 🌿



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