





Road Trips

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Northland on a Harley

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"It's a beaut day for a ride." The laconic chap leaning against the 'Welcome to Omapere/Opononi' sign nods at the Harley. "That's a beaut bike, too. Someone takes good care of that one."

Wish I could say that someone is me, or better yet my bikie husband Ken, but it's not. For our ride to Cape Reinga we've left the show pony Kawasaki, the BMW bronco and the knackered Royal Enfield nags at home, opting instead for a thoroughbred-for-hire: a pearly-white and cobalt-blue Harley Davidson Road King.

Of the two routes to the Cape, it's no contest on a motorbike: the Hokianga's less trafficked roads win over the busier Bay of Islands route.

This is a ride on the quiet side.

The Hokianga's days as a rollicking kauri shipping port are long gone, wrecked on the notorious Hokianga bar that sunk so many sailing ships the entire industry upped logs and moved to Russell.

It's a short cruise from the Omapere lookout around the gentle bends to Rawene and the Hokianga ferry. In Rawene there is scarcely a soul stirring, save for an old black dog twitching in a sun puddle by a fish shop.

The Hokianga has a Cinderella feel: a little cinder-smudged from the ashes of past industry, but still lovely enough to attract some future prince of fortune. Seen from the ferry, Rawene is a panorama of genteel weatherboard buildings above a sea as glittery as smashed glass.

When the ferry docks, Ken rides up the road straight through Kohukohu. A row of historic homesteads along the waterfront are undergoing rebirth as trendy galleries. A revival is afoot, but a town with a "Lost Pig Dog" sign posted in the general store is still country at heart.

North of Kohukohu, the road to Ahipara slings itself over hills so neon green they seem lit from within. The adventure town of Ahipara marks the start of 90-Mile Beach.

If Ahipara was ever a secret it isn't any more, judging by the number of tourists snapping shots of this landmark beach and the new designer homes nudging out weary old baches. Ahipara's future, it seems, is overtaking its past

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at a cracking pace.



Stunning view from the Hokianga coastline

We whisk through Kaitaia in search of a legendary wall made of glass bottles. "It fell down," says the lady in the information centre.

Near Awanui we fill the Harley with petrol, then refuel ourselves with thick seafood chowder at the Ancient Kauri Kingdom café and woodworking shop. If kauri was king of this land, then gumdiggers were the worker ants - and what a rough life they led. At leafy and lovely

Gumdiggers Park off Kaimaumau Road, gumdiggers' shacks cobbled together from jute sacking and ponga logs tell a cold, impoverished tale. I'm delighted to find that gumboots - like the ones line-dancing on the park fence - are named after the gumdiggers' footwear.

As daylight wanes, we climb out of the saddle at Pukenui overlooking the Houhora Harbour, trade dusty riding gear for clean clothes and wander down to the sea.

The wharf is busy with children playing hopscotch, fishermen casting lines and gulls screeching for scraps. At the café across the road we demolish a whale-sized platter of cod in delicate batter garnished with fresh salad.

"You must have liked that," grins the waiter, whisking away the licked-clean plate.

Under a morning sky smudged with clouds the Harley rumbles north, into bucolic scenes. The further north we ride, the more windblown the hills and the fewer the signs of man, but for the straggling barbed-wire fences.

Views up this skinny neck of New Zealand are surprisingly landlocked until we pull in at the Paua Station lookout on the Pacific Ocean side. The wind chases us down Te Paki Stream Road to one of the Far North's truly unmissable natural oddities - the Te Paki dunes, a vast sea of sand 100 metres high. In this land of ferny greenery, they're as astonishing as finding a meteorite in your back garden.

I shed bike gear and boots, wade across the stream and dig my bare feet into the ribbed dunes. Up and up and up I climb, huff puff, keeping an eye out for the sandblasted bones of previous climbers.

A youngster carrying a toboggan up the dunes yells, "It doesn't get hard til halfway!"

At the top I get my reward - more dunes! - and far, far beyond, a green sliver of Tasman Sea.

Back on the road there's a cow/Harley stand-off with an Aberdeen Angus steer.

Ken nudges the Harley forward, slowly, slowly, until the cranky beast moos off into the paddock.

After the turnoff to Te Paki Stream, the road to Cape Reinga disintegrates into chunky gravel.

Mysteriously dead trees stand like scarecrows along the roadside, scattered amongst live trees hanging limp under layers of dirt thrown up by passing cars. Grey clouds slink in with ill intent.

The makeshift car park is the end of the Cape Reinga road. Ken stays behind to curry dust off himself and the thoroughbred. As I'm plodding down the track in my bike boots, an elderly gent stops to catch his breath.

"I couldn't make it all the way down," he huffs. "I'm too old."

I'm not feeling too spry myself. But the first glimpse of Cape Reinga, though, snatches the breath away all on its own. The sun shines a thin slice of silver on the horizon, beyond the lighthouse standing alone on the cliff's edge. Far below, the Pacific Ocean roils against the Tasman Sea in a battle neither of them will ever win.

Story by Karen Goa