

THE COAST IS CLEAR

Stretching from Paekākāriki in the south to Ōtaki in the north, the Kāpiti Coast was once called the “Golden Coast” – an area that both winged and non-winged visitors have flocked to for years.

STORY SHARON STEPHENSON

Kāpiti Island viewed from Paraparaumu Beach.

“STICK TO THE marked tracks, take your rubbish with you and keep your bags closed because inquisitive weka and kākā will try to get into them.”

It’s a crisp Thursday morning, the sort that makes you wish you’d packed a scarf, and Manaaki Barrett of Kāpiti Island Nature Tours is sharing the rules of engagement for this muscular, forest-clad island that rises out of the Tasman Sea.

A handful of us have made the 20-minute boat ride from Paraparaumu Beach to Kāpiti Island, through the Kāpiti Marine Sanctuary, which is home to whales and coastal birds such as gannets, penguins, terns, shearwaters and albatross.

Visitors have flocked here for years, keen to explore one of New Zealand’s most accessible nature reserves. I wasn’t one of them: despite living not too far away, it’s taken a few decades for me to tick this off my bucket list. It’s easy to see why they come: thanks to more than a century of protection – it’s been entirely pest-free for the past 20 years – Kāpiti Island is a deep dive into a world where native birds such as kākā, kiwi, kōkako, takahē and hihī once roamed free in lush green hills.

We clamber off the boat and are welcomed with a 30-minute presentation at the Department of Conservation Centre where Barrett shares stories of the island’s history, ecology and the fact that sustainability is more than a buzzword here.

We’re free to wander tracks carved into



the dense forest and climb the 521m peak for amazing views of the island and the Kāpiti Coast spread beneath us like a blanket, before lunch at the lodge.

You’d expect a reserve like this to be strictly protected and it is, with only two companies permitted to run day tours to the island – Kāpiti Island Eco and the Barrett’s Kāpiti Island Nature Tours, which also hosts guests overnight on private land at the northern tip of the island. A maximum of 20 visitors a night can stay in the rustic baches, cabins and glamping tents, sharing meals at the lodge where you’ll make friends with the sometimes overly friendly kākā, which will try to steal food from your plate. Tip: don’t leave without buying a jar of Kāpiti Island Honey, the creamy organic honey harvested from 30 hives of carniolan hybrid bees established by the Barrett family in 2014.

Roll the name Kāpiti around on your tongue, stressing the “a”. It sounds like sunshine and holidays. Even early settlers thought so: in the 1800s, Wellingtonians

would spend at least a day making their way across the hills to breathe in the briny air. Today, this collection of townships that stretch from Paekākāriki to Ōtaki is an easy 50-minute drive from the capital (expect this to be less once Transmission Gully opens some time next year).

Kāpiti certainly delivers when it comes to sunshine, fresh air and spectacular views. Like the ones from the Paekākāriki Escarpment Track, a 10km path carved into the hills 200m above the Tasman Sea. Part of the Te Araroa Trail, which winds its way along the length of New Zealand, this section runs from Paekākāriki to Pukerua Bay, and can be walked in either direction. Be prepared to stop often because the views across the water and, on a good day, to the South Island in one direction and Mt Taranaki in the other, give new meaning to the word photogenic.

You’ll learn that green is more than just a section of the colour wheel in Kāpiti. The locals like their parks big and beautiful, such



4. Paraparaumu Beach.
5. 50-50’s sweetcorn okonomiyaki with fried quails’ eggs, nasturtiums and gruyere cheese.
6. The ruru/morepork has a distinctive call.
7. A warm welcome from Helen Turnbull of 50-50.



1. Paddle around the marine reserve with Kāpiti Island Eco Experience.
2. The kākā on Kāpiti Island can be overly friendly.
3. Feel at home in nature in a cosy cabin on the island.

as Queen Elizabeth Park in Paekākāriki, the Kāpiti Coast’s last relatively untouched area of dunes and wetland. Named for Queen Elizabeth II before her coronation, this 650ha park was opened during the 1953 royal tour. Today, it offers swimming, walking, cycling, horse riding and ample opportunities to enjoy a picnic, along with a tram museum, access to several wetlands and the remains of an original kahikatea forest. If you prefer your beaches deserted, you’re in luck: you might have this stretch of sand to yourself.

In Waikanae, it started with a simple idea – create a place to preserve New Zealand’s native flora and fauna – and ended with the jewel in Kāpiti’s crown, Ngā Manu Nature Reserve, 14ha of native forest and wetlands that are home to around 40 species of birds and more than 200 species of native fauna. If you time your visit for 2pm, you’ll be able to see the reserve’s endangered long-fin eels being fed, while guided bird-feeding tours are run slightly earlier.

But the real attraction is Ngā Manu’s Kiwi Night Encounter, where you’ll be able to see our native bird without any glass or barriers obstructing the view. We meet just before 9pm and, after a briefing, file into the nocturnal house to watch a pair of rowi/ brown kiwi shuffle their way around the enclosure, holding our breath so as not to disturb them. I’ve never been this close to kiwi, and certainly never without any barriers between me and them, so it’s an experience I’m still raving about.

Kāpiti probably isn’t the first place you think of as hosting one of Australasia’s largest collections of antique and rare vehicles. But it’s where the late Sir Len Southward chose to site his renowned museum, not far from the roundabout at Otaihangā. He started in 1956 with a Ford Model T and a dream to share his love of fast, shiny objects with others, something

8. The Sunday Cantina. 9, 10. If you want to see a world-class collection of vehicles, then steer yourself into the Southward Car Museum.



Southward knew all about: in 1953, the pioneering marine engineer became the first man in Australasia to travel at over 100mph on water.

His dream eventually morphed into a \$20million museum filled with highly covetable vehicles such as the 1895-built Benz Velo (the first car imported into New Zealand), a Stutz Indianapolis Racer and a DeLorean. Yes, just like the one used in the *Back to the Future* movies.

If that doesn’t grab you, there’s also a 1950 gangster Cadillac complete with actual bullet holes, the space-age bubble car from Woody Allen’s 60s sci-fi comedy, *The Sleeper*, and a sexy red Ferrari worth around \$5million.

You’ll wish you had a second stomach when you visit Kāpiti. That’s because this coastal stretch has been blessed with a microclimate and nutrient-rich soils that produce a bounty of produce. Thanks to clever locals, that produce finds its way into everything from cheese and olive

oil to beer, chocolate and ice cream.

One of the best places to sample the latter is at Koru Ice, a small yellow shed just off State Highway One. This is home to some of New Zealand’s best fresh-fruit ice creams, sorbets and gelatos. Koru Ice specialises in unusual flavours such as kūmara-caramel ice cream and ginger gelato, but if your tastes veer more towards chocolate and vanilla flavours, don’t worry, they also get the love they deserve.

A couple of leaps south is Paraparaumu Beach, where chef/owner Helen Turnbull has been turning out innovative cuisine from her



compact eatery 50-50 since 2017. Working for Gordon Ramsay in Tokyo, as well as in the UK, Queenstown and on super-yachts, helped fine-tune Turnbull’s creative take on food. This is local with a capital L, in part due to the innovative chef’s use of a local forager who finds unusual greens that make their way into dishes such as citrus-cured salmon with sorrel sauce and pikopiko, pork loin with green-lipped mussels and magnolia relish, and sweetcorn okonomiyaki with quails’ eggs, gruyere and nasturtiums.

If you fancy something a bit more casual, then Sunday Cantina has your back. Owner Fi Greig has recently expanded her fun, colourful cafe concept from Waikanae to another branch in Raumati South. Both are ground zero for local, healthy food – raw vegan cakes, veggie broths and bowls that take the 5+ a day fruit and veg thing seriously. If you fall in love with the food, and there’s every chance you will, then Greig also runs cooking classes.

But if you’d prefer to keep your system spiked with chocolate, then you need to visit the Kāpiti Chocolate Factory. They’ve been keeping the coast in dark, milk and flavoured chocolate from their Raumati Beach headquarters for 25 years, so have pretty much nailed it. Breathe in the delicious goodness, sample as much as you can handle and, if you’re lucky, they’ll give you a guided tour, let you try your hand at making chocolate and send you home with more. kapiticoastnz.com



11, 12, 13. Atahuri lodge is located close to Peka Peka Beach, but there’s also a pool and spa to relax in and enjoy the sunset. 14. A Kāpiti Island Nature Lodge glamping tent.

Sleep

ATAHURI

Nestled into the sand dunes at Peka Peka, this exclusive bolthole wraps you in luxurious comfort. There are only four suites, private courtyards, large bathrooms and a short stroll to the beach. atahuri.co.nz

KAPITI ISLAND NATURE LODGE

Up to 20 people a night can stay in the rustic cabins, baches and glamping tents. Communal kai is taken at the lodge where you’ll be so taken with the view you might forget to eat. kapitiislandnaturetours.co.nz

Play

TE RAUKURA KI KĀPITI

They’ve just taken the bubble wrap off the new performing arts centre in Paraparaumu. The \$12million centre features theatres, dance studios, a music room, sound recording studio, practice rooms, as well as public performances. teraukura.nz

Eat

THE SURFER’S MISTRESS

Owner Stefano Ratti from Lake Como met his Kiwi partner Jason Hyde in London where the couple spent 20 years working as accountants. In 2018 they opened this Italian eatery, which is big on authenticity. My top pick would be the crispy pizzas. thesurfersmistress.com

COFFEE & FLOWERS

Shop for flowers, plants and candles while sipping coffee? Don’t mind if I do. This collaboration between florist Rowan Cotterill, who owns Love Stomp Floral, and Matt Payne from Kāpiti coffee roastery Dark Horse Coffee, opened in Paraparaumu Beach in February and is homage to all things floral and caffeine-based.

Getting there

WELLINGTON

Kāpiti Coast is a 45-minute drive from Wellington. Air New Zealand operates flights to Wellington from Auckland and Christchurch with connections across the domestic network.

Contact Centre
0800 737 000
Holidays Travel Brokers
0800 737 767
airnewzealand.co.nz

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