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Escape to Aotea Great Barrier Island

Back in 2007 our family became immersed in the lives of a disparate bunch of people who had been ‘shipwrecked’ on Aotea Great Barrier Island. These ‘castaways’, all from the UK, had been ordered off their boat by a BBC TV production crew and told to swim ashore in lonely Harataonga Bay on the Island’s Pacific coast.

The 13 dripping wet Brits struggled up the sand dunes to their shack where they would have to survive for three months, foraging for food, scrabbling after freshwater eels and crabs, every move followed by cameras for the *Castaway* series.

The show piqued my interest in the island. I’d often sit on our local North Shore beach idly gazing past Tiritiri Matangi to that faint smudge sitting on the hazy horizon, so near yet so far – until one afternoon in late March. Summer was drawing to a close and we’d been wondering how to make the most of its last days, when Great Barrier called to me. It looked so clear and distinct, a revelation, its familiar silhouette beckoning.



Incredible aerial views of Aotea Great Barrier Island. Photo by Mark Meredith.

Just days later we were soaring over the sparkling, island-studded Hauraki Gulf on the 30-minute flight from the North Shore. The gulf and islands are often referred to as the jewels in Auckland’s crown. In which case Great Barrier Island must be its Cullinan Diamond.

First impressions matter, like the stunning expanse of deserted, gleaming sand we saw as we swept in low over Kaitoke to land at Claris’s small airport. As for Medlands, the next beach south and the island’s most popular, its long arc of white sand and surf had us swooning.

Our second impression of Great Barrier was overwhelming peace. At our rented bach overlooking Medlands Beach that night there was absolute silence save the occasional squawk of kākā, the lilting coo of ruru and the hum of breaking waves carried on the breeze.



Great Barrier Island is a Dark Sky Sanctuary. Photo by Mark Meredith.

And it was dark. Ink-black dark. Great Barrier is famously an [International Dark Sky Sanctuary](#), with no ugly power lines or street lighting. The effect is astonishing; on a clear night it’s like being inside a giant planetarium with a stupendous line of sight into the distant reaches of the cosmos.

Many visitors to Great Barrier explore by walking its numerous tracks, but we only had four days, so rented a car; besides, our daughters would have rebelled. Getting from one coastline to another involves crossing the hilly divide on tricky, winding roads, both sealed and unsealed.

I quickly got used to the idea of always keeping hard left at the ubiquitous bends but we felt welcome as oncoming drivers almost invariably waved, or acknowledged us with a friendly wag of the finger over their steering wheel. It summed up the congenial, laid-back atmosphere of the island where, we were told, everything moves along on ‘island time’. You, the visitor, go with the flow. Slowly.



The pace is slower on Great Barrier Island – for locals and visitors. Photo by Mark Meredith.

We crept cautiously along the Hauraki Gulf side of the island, which is chocolate-box pretty. We found half-moon bays with moored boats beneath steeply forested hills in places like Tryphena, Okupu and Port Fitzroy. Houses tucked between gnarled pōhutukawa looked out over glassy waters where carefree people frolicked, swam and kayaked.

At Ōkupu, which has a lovely, sheltered sandy beach, we discovered a creepy cave. Inside the narrow tunnel, an old, sealed-off goldmine, the roof and walls were festooned with long-legged cave wētā, hundreds of them, inches from our heads.

Our most exerting effort was a 15-minute, [must-do walk to Windy Canyon](#) on the way to the summit of Hirakamata, Mt Hobson. The canyon is reached via a forest pathway and a brisk climb up 100 steps between two narrow rock faces. The views of the rock pinnacles and outlook to Whangapoua Bay and distant Medlands are sensational.



Windy Canyon is a short, must-do walk on Great Barrier Island. Photo by Mark Meredith.

But it was the Pacific coast that hypnotised me: a wondrous landscape of white-sand surf beaches and bays where the mighty ocean rolled in beneath cliffs and rock stacks. Unspoiled wetlands and rivers spread outwards towards the sea from a hilly interior dominated by dense mānuka forest. It was like visiting an untainted past.

The island was never more beautiful than in the early morning when mist hung low over wetlands and the breaking surf steamed in the clear, cool air. Long grasses on rolling white sand dunes and fluffy pampas glowed like beacons.

In the gorgeous, unblemished countryside, sunlight and shadows swept low over cattle grazing by farmhouses dwarfed beneath towering mānuka-clad hills. Hidden away in the bush, remote homes with solar panels on their roofs speak to the solitude and appeal of an alternative lifestyle.



Misty morning views on Great Barrier Island. Photo by Mark Meredith.

Before leaving Great Barrier, I had to see Harataonga Bay where the castaways were set adrift all those years ago. It is still lonely and lovely, a wide sweep of sand with ancient pōhutukawa scattered alongside swaying grasses. Behind the beach is a stream where herons stare into the water and paradise ducks waddle along the banks.

The 13 Brits in *Castaway* were whittled down to just one, the shipwrecked survivor winning a bounty of cash. But to my mind each one was a winner: spending 12 weeks on Aotea Great Barrier Island was the greatest prize of all.

Story by and photos by Mark Meredith for the Winter 2023 issue of AA Directions magazine.

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