

Holidays the way they used to be

The Waitomo/King Country region is being rediscovered by Kiwis yearning for a nostalgic break.

Along with the resurgence of baking, knitting and other pastimes of yesteryear has come a longing for good old-fashioned holidays the way they used to be; a few days away from the rat race enjoying leisurely country and coastal drives, connecting with the things that make New Zealand unique and special. You want to see the sights, but not have to walk for a day to get to them. You don't want to spend a fortune and you most definitely do not want to compromise on good food, coffee and accommodation.

Just three hours from Auckland, two hours from Rotorua and an hour from Hamilton, the Waitomo and King Country region is the perfect location for a true Kiwi experience.

Otorohanga is a great place to start. Known for many years as the 'Kiwiana Capital', the town continues to find new ways for visitors to celebrate all things Kiwi. The newest of these, opened late last year, is the Ed Hillary Walkway which houses 14 Kiwiana display cases, informative Kiwiana poster panels and a series of giant Kiwiana photo murals and sculptures. From the Buzzy Bee to Ches 'n' Dale, No.8 Wire and School Milk, the walkway is a fabulous blast from the past.

As nature intended

The Otorohanga Kiwi House and Native Bird Park is the country's original kiwi house and a fantastic opportunity to get a good look at kiwis, other rare native birds and tuatara. You can even adopt your own kiwi!

There are lots of other easily accessible 'must sees' near Otorohanga. Just a few kilometres south are the world famous Waitomo Caves where, of course, you'll want to take one of the tours to see the magnificent glow worms. Allow extra time to enjoy the marvellous bush drives and walks through this classic limestone country with its sculptured rocks, fluted outcrops, gorges, arches and tunnels. The Waitomo Walkway meanders alongside the Waitomo River, though a canopy of native forest to the Ruakuri Scenic Reserve.

Driving north-east you'll find the Maungatautari Restoration Project, New Zealand's largest ecological restoration project. More than 3,000ha of forest has been completely enclosed by a 50km pest-exclusion fence to eradicate all non-native pest mammals and predators and restore endangered native flora and fauna to healthy

populations. Kiwi, takahe, kaka and kokako are among the bird species that have been successfully reintroduced to the forest in recent years, along with whitebait, frogs and native trout. The Rata Track features an aviary and a 16m viewing tower for viewing the forest canopy.

Pureora Forest Park is one of the finest rainforests in the world – a hidden wonderland of tall trees, clear rivers and rare wildlife easily accessed by SH30 and SH32. It is a remnant of the forests that once covered the country and the perfect place to visualise primeval New Zealand, with giant totara, rimu, matai, miro and kahikatea trees. The easy, 30-minute Totara Walk, which starts at the Pureora visitor centre, provides an ideal introduction to the park, and the 12m high forest tower is a great spot to observe the rich native bird life, including the rare kokako, kereru, kaka, kakariki and North Island robin.

The centre will also direct you to a remarkable part of the forest buried by seven metres of volcanic ash and pumice during the eruption of Lake Taupo 1800 years ago, and only accidentally discovered in 1983.

Pirongia Forest Park includes three extinct volcanoes, now eroded into steep broken hills which form an impressive backdrop to the lush green farmlands of the Waikato basin. Mt Pirongia is visible from much of the Waikato region rising abruptly out of the lowland forest. Explore its bush-clad slopes and enjoy the expansive views via the park's many walking tracks. The easy, one-hour Mangakara Nature Walk meanders through an ancient forest to the beautiful Mangakara Stream before looping back.

Just 25 km west of Otorohanga, on the road to Marakopa, an easy, 20-minute return walk will take you to the stunning Mangapohue Natural Bridge, a 17m high limestone arch which is all that remains of an ancient cave system.

Continuing west, near Te Anga, are the Marakopa Falls which range from six metres to a massive 36 metres in height. You can view them from a road lookout or take the 30-minute return walk to the viewing platform.

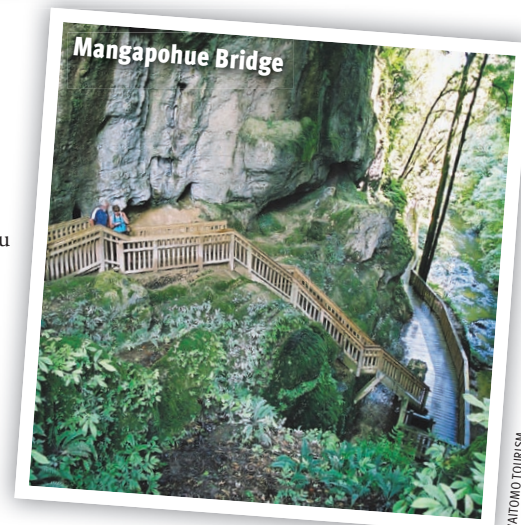
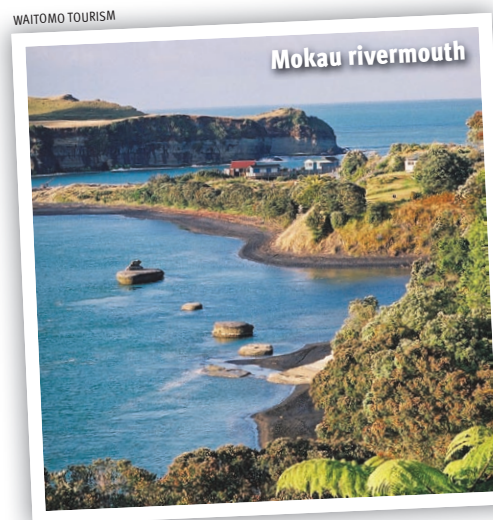
Beach bound

Why not take a drive all the way to charming Kawhia on the coast, with its laid-back 1960s appeal and placid, unspoiled harbour? Steeped in ancient history, this historic eco-wonderland is the spiritual and

ancestral home of the Tainui people. Here you can still walk for miles on an isolated beach without seeing another footprint. Eat fish and chips on the wharf and dig your own hot pool in the black sand of Ocean Beach.

In fact, the King Country coastline is a destination in itself. Follow the harbour around through coastal settlements of Rakanui, Te Mania and all the way to Taharoa. Stroll along the beach at Kiritehere – south of the Kiritehere Stream to see fossilised clams, mussels and scallops. Walk through the Waikawau Beach tunnel, which was formed by three men using picks and shovels in 1911 so that the beach could be used as a stock route. From here you can drive to Awakino and on south to Mokau at the mouth of the mighty Mokau River.

■ For more information on everything the area has to offer, check out www.waitomo.org.nz



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Hidden Gems

Ruakuri walk

Minutes from the caves, this easy, 30-minute loop walk travels through a forest-covered gorge alongside the Waitomo Stream, passing through small caves including the Ruakuri Natural Tunnel, a spectacular high-ceilinged cave.

Kiwi Watch

From the comfort of a hide, spend a unique, magical evening viewing kiwi at eye level and watching them feed amongst the leaf litter. 2 – 6 people only. Bookings essential.

Coastal/forest drive from Kawhia to Mokau

Explore the King Country coastline with its ironsand beaches and quaint coastal settlements. Scenic driving on quiet roads. Hunt for fossils, dig for kai moana and take in the views.

■ Check out Great Kiwi Escape holiday ideas at www.aatravel.co.nz/great-kiwi-escapes



Waitomo Event Calendar

Kawhia Traditional Maori Kai Festival
February 6, 2010
Kawhia

Kiwiana Festival
March 6, 2010
Otorohanga

Great New Zealand Muster
April 10, 2010
Te Kuiti

Waitomo Sports Day
March 27, 2010
Waitomo