

travel

by Pamela Wilson

Still

waters

Pamela Wilson avoids the crowds in an untouched corner of New Zealand's North Island.

IBELIEVE there's no point vacationing during the school holidays. If we wanted to sit in traffic queues, press ourselves against masses of the great frustrated and be forced to pounce on diners' tables as they prepared to leave, we'd just go to a shopping mall on Boxing Day.

Imagine my horror, then, when I realised I had inadvertently booked a holiday to New Zealand's beachside destination, the Coromandel Peninsula, that coincided with the New Zealand spring school holidays.

In a desperate bid to secure accommodation, I fired off a dozen emails to websites advertising *baches* (pronounced 'batches', which is kiwi-speak for beach house).

Astonishingly, within hours I was pelted with 12 return emails offering me houses, apartments, baches and family rooms at the shoulder rate.

I was soon to discover that the Coromandel Peninsula, on the North Island's northeast coast, has largely survived the commercialism that plagues many of the world's wondrous destinations.

Kiwis tend to holiday en masse here only in January, meaning the peninsula retains its charm and peacefulness most of the year round.

Besides the man and two kids walking their goat, we were alone

Coromandel Peninsula has many stunning beaches to rival those we proudly showcase in Australia, a beach that spouts hot water for visitors to loll about in, quaint towns and even a quirky tourist train that skirts the side of a mountain.

We picked up the necessities – locally produced sauvignon blanc and Monteith's beer, plus brie and crackers – in Thames, which is a bustling town of 7000 at the base of the peninsula, an easy 90-minute drive from Auckland.

We had decided to stay at Cooks Beach, an hour's drive northeast of Thames near Whitianga (pronounced 'fit-ee-unga'), as it's fairly central to the attractions the peninsula has to offer and is a beautiful haven in its own right.

UNEXPECTED BLISS

A don't-blink-or-you'll-miss-it kind of town, Cooks Beach boasts half a dozen streets dotted with baches.

After an hour's stroll around the township, I came to the conclusion that besides the man and two kids out walking their goat (yep, on a dog lead) and the young girl riding bareback along the shoreline, we were about the only folk staying at Cooks Beach.

It was bliss, to say the least.

After unpacking our bags and putting the Monteith's and wine on ice, we decided to explore beyond the backyard of the bach.

Taking an easy, albeit slightly steep, saunter up to Shakespeare Cliff, we were struck by the view that sprawled beneath us.

To our right was the tiny, deserted beach of Lonely Bay tucked in between Shakespeare Cliff and the 3 km long Cooks Beach.

"Look," I yelled, shattering the peace with my noxious sound waves, "People!"

Yep, there was a whole family of four playing in the distance in the sand at Lonely Bay.

So that took my count of Cooks Beach residents to eight, plus us, the goat and the horse.

To our left was Whitianga, which looked glorious with the sun gleaming off the surrounding bays, Flaxmill and Mercury.

The ranges of the Coromandel State Forest in the background served to round off the picturesque view nicely.

I've seen many an ocean vista before, but I was captivated by the region's beauty, as no doubt Captain Cook had been when he berthed his boat at Mercury Bay almost 240 years before in 1769.

Although Whitianga is one of the other major towns on this peninsula, it is home to a population of less than



Above left: Tourists dig above the hot springs on Hot Water Beach to create their own natural spa bath; left, looking down to Lonely Bay (in the foreground) and Cooks Beach (in the background); far left, Cathedral Cove strikes a magnificent pose; above, the lush rolling valleys of the Coromandel Peninsula.



Please note a health warning that is not in any of the brochures: the spring bubbles forth boiling water, so be prepared to be scalded if you don't give your hole an inlet to allow the cool ocean waves to wash in.

Back at the bach, finishing the day off sipping beers and glasses of sav blanc and listening to the whoosh of tiny waves breaking on the shoreline of Cooks Beach, I realised I could get very used to the peninsula lifestyle.

While Coromandel Town is the quintessential small country town, oozing colonial charm left over from its mining days, Whitianga is the more modern cousin, with its stylish restaurants, coffee shops and boutique-style souvenir shops.

I lament the overuse of adjectives like 'stunning' and 'breathtaking' because it diminishes their effect, but in their true context they perfectly describe the final attraction on our Coromandel itinerary, Cathedral Cove.

Officially named the Te Whanganui-A-Hei Marine Reserve, the cove is accessible by a well-maintained walking track that weaves through some magnificent lush green bush.

About 30 minutes after setting off from the main car park, we were greeted with the stunning sight of the cove and its small, deserted beach beyond.

On a perfect sunny day with the temperature hovering at a lovely 22 degrees, we had found the ideal spot for swimming, taking photographs, picnicking and general frolicking to end our peninsula holiday.

So, having redeemed myself with my family for bringing them to such a great holiday destination, I was given the task of re-booking again for next year – on the proviso that I booked the spring or autumn holidays again, and not the summer break with everyone else.

4000. It is a 30-minute trip by car to Whitianga from Cooks Beach, but it is only a five-minute drive to the ferry terminal and then a one-minute journey on a small passenger ferry across Mercury Bay if you access Whitianga from the south.

Here, the ferry landing on the Cooks Beach side is the oldest stone wharf in Australasia, built in 1837.

The following day we planned our next tourist stop. Since seeing pictures of Hot Water Beach in a brochure a month before, our three-year-old son had talked of little else.

So, we packed the car with towels, swimmers and a shovel we'd found in the bach's shed and drove the 15 minutes to Hot Water Beach.

It was here that we found other tourists, all 50 of them vying for a spot in the shallows that lie above a natural spring.

If you can imagine a school of fish left in a tiny tidal pool after high tide, you can grasp the idea of what we were seeing, only it was people, not fish, that were flapping about.

With just a few investigative prods of our shovel we soon found an outlet of the hot spring and dug a hole wide enough so that we could all lie shoulder-to-shoulder relaxing in our own strange, natural bath.

RIGHT ON TRACK

The following day, with the clouds threatening to release some of the peninsula's annual rainfall, we jumped in the car and headed to Coromandel Town to ride the Driving Creek Railway.

(A note about that average rainfall: while it is substantial at 404 mm, all of it comes down in only about 37 days, so with another 328 days on the calendar, visitors are almost guaranteed some fine weather during their stay.)

Almost 30 years ago, local potter Barry Brickell had the crazy idea to build a narrow railway into the side of his 22 ha hillside block while also embarking on a plan to rejuvenate the bushland that had been ravished by early colonists.

Now the track – complete with retaining walls made from hundreds of thousands of empty wine and beer bottles – zigzags its way through tunnels, spirals, reversing points and over bridges to take passengers to the Eye-ful Tower.

With quirky commentary and extraordinary views over Coromandel Town and the surrounding countryside, it is clear to see why it is one of the Coromandel's most popular attractions.

