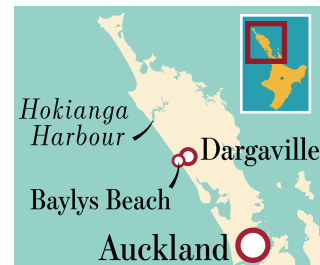


The west coast is generally seen as the poor cousin to the exotic east, with its \$5000 a night luxury retreats and helicopter pads. But they can keep them, because I'm smitten: west is best.



## Wicked long weekends . . .



Icons from Northland's west coast, the Hokianga sand dunes.

Next weekend is the first of our summer series of long weekends. Bonnie Sumner makes a head start and discovers a perfect getaway in Northland.

**ABOUT HALFWAY** through my first day travelling around Northland's west coast I rediscover my passion for New Zealand.

Ginn's Ngawha Springs, seven kilometres from Kaikohe down a metal road, sits next to a manky lake. It looks like the set of a horror film – the old homestead, which used to house mercury ore miners, is dilapidated and grimy, and quite possibly haunted. It was moved from the nearby mines in 1955 to provide accommodation for the growing number of visitors to the mineral pools.

There's room to park your campervan next to the lake, and then it's just a short skip, under a sagging husk of corrugated iron, to eight outdoor concrete and wood boxes filled with volcanic mud and bubbling spring water, big enough to hold a couple of people each.

There's a backpacker and three locals having a soak when I take a peek.

We advertise our country for its mountains and lakes and oversized scenery, but New Zealand resides more in the inelegant details. My favourite memories of growing up are terrifically

cheap visits to scratchy concrete hot pools – Miranda, Waiwera, Rotorua – with my mum and sisters. I take a deep breath and truck on.

Nostalgia rides in on the waves in Opononi. A friendly man called Pete will take us from the wooden jetty, where Opo the dolphin used to play (before he became the victim of a suspected accidental gelignite death in 1956), across the Hokianga Harbour to the sand dunes that sit quietly protecting the inhabitants from the wild west coast on the other side.

The ride is cheap – Pete charges a third of his local competitors. It's a good 90-minute hike to the top of the spit but it's worth the effort – the fierce wind has created alien formations from the hardened sand, and it feels like another planet. If walking isn't your thing, you can always sandboard into the inlet from the steep dunes.

My partner and I stay at the Copthorne in nearby Omapere, housed in a large colonial homestead near the water's edge. Like many of New Zealand's relics, it has been bastardised over the years. An unsympathetic renovation has left it with aluminium joinery and a tacky blue swimming pool, but it's all part of the charm.

The people, as always, are what make this place sing. Jamie, our waiter at the hotel restaurant, is friendlier and more knowledgeable than staff at my Auckland local, and the blue cod is seared to perfection.

But nothing could prepare us for the evening event: a

twilight "encounter" with 2000-year-old Tane Mahuta, the largest kauri tree in the world. Our guide, Koro, drives us to the nearby Waipoua Forest, one of the last remaining homes of kauri. There's just 4% left from the once densely populated kauri forest.

In the rapidly growing darkness Koro teaches us about the history of the kauri and the area, and how important it is that we look after what we have left. We stay for more than an hour – Bette Midler, apparently, stayed for four.

If there is a nicer way to wake up than hearing the ocean, I haven't found it. Breakfast at the Copthorne is the obligatory buffet, but in case anyone forgets where they are, there's feijoa juice on offer and a ramekin of golden syrup on every table.

After a daytime visit to the other great New Zealand kauri, Te Matua Ngahere, we stop in Waimamaku at Morrell's Cafe to grab a couple of fresh vegetarian wraps – for a picnic.

Kai Iwi lakes are like a magical secret, hidden in a pine plantation near Kaihu.

Ditch the tropical over-catered package deal to an overseas island, for just \$10 an adult and \$5 a child you can pull up the campervan to Lake Taharoa and rediscover what Kiwi summers are all about. Or you can sit in your

car and eat lunch while the wind howls around you, like we did. Either way, the scenery is stunning, and if you're lucky you might see some of the young Dargaville locals pulling up in their souped-up Skylines for a smoke.

Nearby Baylys Beach (on the Ripiro coast) is home to a small enclave of artists and farmers. It's a hilly area that winds down to a white sand beach which stretches all the way to the Kaipara harbour. Pam Sinclair and her husband, Neil, set up Sunset

### Nothing could prepare us for the evening event: a twilight 'encounter' with 2000-year-old Tane Mahuta.

View Lodge, the only luxury accommodation in the area, after giving up her life as a farmer.

Her accommodation is comfortable, with views of the beach and sunset (provincial New Zealand has a wonderful way with literal business names), and they have a new pool with all the mod-cons, in case the tide is going out ("Only swim when the tide is coming in," Pam tells us). Because the beach is so wide, horse-riding is a must. Pam takes us on two well-behaved horses, Abby and Henry, for an hour along the hard stretch – more experienced riders can venture into the canyons.

Dinner is five-minute walk to the Funky Fish Cafe, which, despite the outdated name, has some of the best service and food I've come across.

I then walked two doors up the road to Deborah Hambly's house. The Quebec native has built an observatory in her front yard, which has the largest telescope open to the public in the North Island. This means kids can learn all about the stars.

Deborah doesn't mind sticky little fingers either – she's also an apiarist and if you're lucky she will see you off with a jar of her honey.

The Ripiro coast is the longest driveable beach in New Zealand. Like 90 Mile Beach, it is a legal highway, which means Taylor Made Tours is the perfect way to grasp the history of New Zealand colonisation.

Owner Anthony takes us for a half-day trip down to the Pouto lighthouse and along the way we see a few of the 153 shipwrecks in the area.

The beach is forever changing and Anthony is careful to watch the tides (driving is recommended only two hours either side of low tide).

His bank of knowledge is fascinating and he will take you into the backcountry history of the kauri gum-diggers and some local Maori lore, too.

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### Fact file

**Where to stay:**  
**Copthorne Hokianga**, SH12, Omapere, www.millennium-hotels.co.nz Ph: (09) 405-8737.  
**Sunset View Lodge**, Ripiro Dr, Baylys Beach, www.sunsetview-lodge.co.nz. Ph: (09) 439-4342.  
**What to do**  
**Ginn's Ngawha Springs**. Ph: (09) 405-2599.  
**Hokianga Express**, Pete Clark. Ph: 021 405-872.  
**Footprints Waipoua**, www.footprints-waipoua.co.nz. Ph: (09) 405-8207.  
**Baylys Beach Horse Treks**, www.baylysbeach-horsetreks.co.nz. Ph: (09) 439-1576.  
**Astronomy Adventures**, www.skydome.org.nz. Ph: (09) 439-1856.  
**Taylor Made Tours**, www.taylormadetours.co.nz. Ph: (09) 439-1576.