

INSIDE NZ

# Water world

**Sarah Lang** finds Coromandel township has more to offer than just peace and quiet.

**A**LL ABOARD! is the booming call from the jolly train driver, who along with his dinky wee red-and-green railcar could be straight out of a page of *Thomas the Tank Engine*.

Designed and built at the Driving Creek Railway's own engineering workshop, this little locomotive is either The Possum or The Snake.

I don't know which, but I do know I'm taking a ride along an engineering marvel. The only one of its kind in New Zealand, this narrow-gauge railway takes travellers up a 3km mountain track, snaking along some seriously sharp turns. One bridge, which seems to hang in the air with just the tips of the tallest trees below, gives me a sharp rush of vertigo.

As the train zigzags ever higher over bridges and viaducts, through tunnels and spirals, the replanted kauri forest and fluttering native birds aren't the only eye candy. One barrier wall has been painstakingly made from hundreds of glass bottles, another comprises piled-up tyres and you can't turn a corner without a sculpture, like the cheery Buddha, lurching into view.

The train ride is the baby of potter- and sculptor-turned engineer and conservation guru Barry Brickell. Borrowing the idea from Andean mountain railways, Brickell started laying the tracks in 1975 to bring clay and pine down from the hills. It was a long labour of love: he didn't reach the apex until 2003.

Although 30,000 tourists take this train trip each year, it's no get-rich-quick scheme. Once Brickell's made enough to keep his station-side pottery business and the train running, the remaining proceeds fund his ongoing project to remove the invading pines and replace the native kauri that were decimated in pioneering days by land-clearing fires. The current tally's impressive: 10,000 seedlings and counting.

Pulling up at "stations" with names like Horopito, our driver pauses his commentary just long enough to jump out of one end of the train and into the other. Before



The Waterworks, just out of the main town, is a fun day out in Coromandel for all the family.

PHOTOS: SARAH LANG

the train chugs off in the other direction, the seats flip around so you're facing out front again. The view becomes increasingly panoramic as we reach ridge-top terminus the Eyefull Tower (geddit? I didn't until I said it out loud).

A hexagonal viewing room and platform offers vistas of the valley and the island-peppered Hauraki Gulf.

Exactly an hour after departure, the train chugs back into the station. Here at base, you can nose around the working pottery, which includes domestic stoneware and outdoor sculptures, browse for-sale pieces in the craft shop, check out a sculpture garden full of large terracotta pieces, or take a bush walk through the native wildlife sanctuary.

It was the discovery of gold under Driving Creek's lush hills in 1852 that gave rise to Coromandel Town, just 3km down the road. Named after the British Navy ship HMS Coromandel, you don't hear all that much about the town but that quietness was just what we were after.

Historic buildings from the 19th century, such as the old court house and an original miner's cottage, lend it the air of a shanty town, while you can learn about the area's gold-rush, kauri-felling history at the Mining and Historic Museum.

Lattes and brownies at the main drag's cafes are as good as you'll find in the big smoke, and

The Peppertree Restaurant with its bountiful seafood is a stalwart of the local restaurant scene.

On the other side of town from Driving Creek, "children up to the age of 80" will find something to intrigue them at The Waterworks (formerly Waiau Waterworks), a sort of water-powered outdoor amusement park. Showcasing Kiwi ingenuity, all its gadgets are powered by water, some in very elongated, roundabout ways.

Greeting us at the entrance is a skinny man (made of metal water pipes) wearing a helmet, goggles, gloves and shoes as he "turns" a wheel which, like a whirling octopus, spins around milk jugs, kettles, buckets, pots and the old gumboot.

Past the refurbished cafe is a sprawling garden peppered with 50 super-sized, often-interactive contraptions.

The non-engineers among us could while away hours trying to figure out exactly how they work. I won't hazard a guess as to what keeps the giant waterclock ticking or the pendulum swinging but I figured out what was going on with the giant music box — you pull a lever which spins a wheel which plays a tune on a row of knives. I think.

Squirting each other on the water guns is unmissable fun. But my favourite "exhibit" has to be the boat race: two of you "race" miniature boats which are pushed

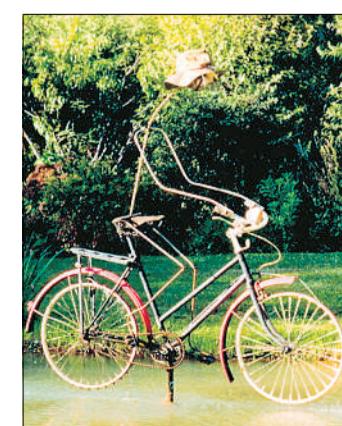


Driving Creek's single-gauge railway is an engineering marvel.

by a current along the twists and turns of wooden gutters. If you're quick enough, you can block your opponent's path with a bit of wood. Gadgets aside, the Waterworks is a lovely spot to spend the day. Among the trees, ponds and streams, there's a kids' playground, flying fox, tree swings, swimming hole, and a flock of timid alpacas.

Head further along 309 Rd to see the Waiau Falls, while up the hill you'll find Castle Rock, an ancient volcano core.

And after all that leg-stretching peace and quiet, I can hear The Peppertree's green-lipped mussels calling my name.



There are plenty of weird displays at The Waterworks.