

Tiki Tour

A JOURNEY THROUGH NEW ZEALAND



I was nearly three when I decided to touch the sky. My parents, older sister and I were driving from our home in Whanganui to my grandparents' house in the Wairarapa when – unusually for us – we took a detour down a side road. I can't remember why, but I remember the clouds hung so low that I asked Dad to stand me on his shoulders so I could touch the sky. At the time, this seemed both perfectly reasonable and very pressing.



To my annoyance I couldn't quite reach, but I got a memory, a photo and a story I could keep forever. I also got an ice-cream. This tiny dairy in Masterton had double-scoop cones for 50 cents, and I must have amused my parents enough to earn one. Mum says I used to savour my ice-cream lick by lick with my eyes closed, just as I dissolve chocolate on my tongue today. Why rush enjoyable moments? You should see me when it's time to open the Christmas presents. Slow down, everyone! Make it last!

That's why I like the tiki tour: that quintessentially Kiwi piece of slang for a sight-seeing journey along a scenic route with no particular destination in mind. When I go away, I like to take my time, savour the moment. Often the best bits of a trip aren't on the itinerary – they're the places you don't expect to stop, the people you don't expect to meet, the things you don't expect to do.

In my teens, a trip to the great metropolis of Palmerston North was a thrilling event, mainly because it had a Glassons. Whanganui only had a Shanton. But the wonders of Palmy soon paled in comparison with Wellington, which cast its spell on me on weekend trips there with friends or family. We'd often stop in Bulls to count up the 'a-bull' signs (hospit-a-bull, eat-a-bull, const-a-bull), in Foxton for a bottle of the locally made soda Foxton Fizz, in Otaki and Levin to rummage through the opshops. Soon you'd hit the home stretch, drive down the

Ngauranga Gorge and suddenly see the Wellington bays, hills and high-rises spread before you like a buffet.

I never considered going to university anywhere else. One day, I took a tiki tour on foot around the far end of the campus and popped out in the suburb of Aro Valley, where bright licorice-all-sort houses clung tenaciously to the steep streets like a frozen cascade of dominoes. It sounds corny but it felt like home, and soon it was.

As students, my friends and I were poor. Very poor. We couldn't afford to go overseas, so we figured why not travel around our own backyard? After all, foreigners fly thousands of kilometres and spend thousands of dollars to see this country which we're lucky enough to live in. We'd seen quite a bit of the North Island already, so the South beckoned.

Carving out some time between uni exams and summer jobs, we chose an area on the map, strapped on our packs, caught the ferry, and hitchhiked there (in pairs or threes, only taking rides from women or couples for safety). No, we couldn't afford to own a car, visit vineyards, go scuba diving or eat out, but that didn't matter. We were young and healthy, full of pluck and promise, with a borrowed gas stove and plenty of two-minute noodles.

To me, these trips embody the tiki tour. Rather than going from A to B, we just had a few possible stops in mind – and didn't much mind where we ended up.

“A Tiki Tour of New Zealand – We couldn’t afford to go overseas, so we figured why not travel around our own backyard? After all, foreigners fly thousands of kilometres and spend thousands of dollars to see this country which we’re lucky enough to live in.”





It was all about the detours and the surprises. When we spied a flat patch of grass up a track by a river, we pitched our tent there. When someone told us that the village of Kaiteriteri, near Motueka, had a seaside strip that looked straight out of a storybook, we headed that way.

Kaiteriteri is also the gateway to the Abel Tasman National Park, which my friend and I decided to tramp on a whim one summer. Now, while I'm a great believer in detours, I think a three-day tramp through a national park demands tramping boots, or at least decent walking shoes. My friend still teases me that I tramped in high heels - an exaggeration, but not much of one. At the time, though, I barely noticed my chafing sandals, so immersed was I in the postcard surroundings: sheltered bays, golden-sand beaches, granite cliffs, marble formations and forested headlands. The blisters were worth it.

We walked out of the Park and into Golden Bay, my favourite part of the South. What's so special about it? The relaxed vibe. Lots of sunshine. Beautiful beaches. Great cafes. Lots on. A special kind of magic that's more than the sum of its parts.

The people there treated us like friends-in-the-making. At the Mussel Inn, the famed music venue/eatery near Takaka, we got chatting to farmers who invited us to camp beside their farmhouse and eat their figs. We did so for three summers running.

The West Coast was different. Frontier country. Mining country, with straight-talking, salty, number-eight-wire types. I took a liking to Hokitika, with its art-deco movie theatre, its greenstone carving, and its imaginative events. We ate fish'n'chips on the black-sand beach beside the spoils of the annual driftwood-and-sand sculpture competition.

A few days later we stopped, further north, at Punakaiki's Pancake Rocks - so called because the limestone formations look like super-sized layers of pancakes. At high tide the waves crash and spray skyward through the blowholes with the West Coast fierceness and determination that have been dearly needed in the wake of the Pike River mining disaster.





"We ate fish'n'chips on the black-sand beach beside the spoils of the annual driftwood-and-sand sculpture competition."



On those trips, I felt like part of a community of New Zealanders. A community that cared. We met dozens of people from all walks of life, from priests to farmers, retirees to hippies. They gave us insider tips on the area, where to camp, what to do on the cheap.

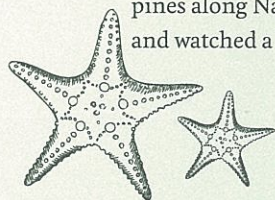
Time and again we were amazed and humbled by the random acts of kindness. Once, we just missed the Picton ferry, only to discover there were no rooms or campsites available in the whole town, you could no longer wait at the terminal overnight, and the rain had turned into hail.

Finishing her shift at the terminal, a woman who could have rushed past us instead took us to her home, made hot drinks, blew up airbeds, and dropped us back at the terminal at 6am. I'll never forget that, or those summer tiki tours. The people we met and the experiences we had helped shape me and one of my life philosophies: giving and receiving help is how the world goes round.

As a working woman, I've shared my tiki tours, time-worn tent and memories with my now-husband Michael. Our rusty but trusty Toyota Corolla transports us to a new place every Christmas break. We've sand-boarded down 300-metre-high dunes in the Hokianga, and watched waves crashing where the Tasman meets the Pacific at Cape Reinga. We've strolled past the Norfolk pines along Napier's Marine Parade, and watched a black-and-white

movie at Black Barn Vineyards' outdoor amphitheatre, carved into a hill near Havelock North. We've been freedom camping at beaches and reserves along the East Cape, enjoying the beauty, remoteness and peacefulness. We've picnicked alongside pohutukawa-shaded beaches in the Coromandel and watched the fish off Whitianga harbour through a glass-bottomed boat. We've slept on a heated tent site in a Rotorua campground, listening to the plop, plop of the mud pools boiling beside us. But nothing can top swimming with the dolphins at Kaikoura, where we quickly learned to be entertaining - wildly waving our arms, swimming in circles - or else the dolphins looked elsewhere for entertainment, like a bored child.

I like to take a break from work in cold weather, too. Winters have seen us jetboat up the Whanganui River (incredible), stroll through the historic hamlet of Arrowtown, and admire the heritage buildings in Christchurch, many sadly now gone. The best winter tiki tour, though, was in and around Dunedin. We rugged up in in coats, scarves and hats, our breath making clouds of steam in the air as we explored the city and beyond. An icy road that hugged the harbour took us along the Otago Peninsula, past the aquamarine sea, hills shading from green, and the sleepy villages to the magnificent Larnach Castle, still said to house the ghosts of the ill-fated William Larnach and his family. At the tip of the Peninsula, Taiaroa Heads, we



"I'll never forget... those summer tiki tours. The people we met and the experiences we had helped shape me and one of my life philosophies: giving and receiving help is how the world goes round."



peered through telescopes at the Royal Albatross Centre to watch the world's largest seabirds nesting, swooping and soaring at speeds of 120 kilometres per hour. I return from these trips refreshed, with a clear mind.

After spending my 20s in Auckland, exploring the city and its environs - the wild west coast beaches, chilled-out Waiheke Island - I now call Wellington home again. It's the city where I feel most like me.

A city with a palpable community and heart. A city with the most cafes per capita in the world, and fine dining to match. I'm scribbling these words over a soy latte at the Wellington cafe institution that is

Fidel's, trying and failing to resist the brioche. I'm typing this up in my office at the Toi Poneke Arts Centre, where artists and creatives share studios and ideas. I walk home back down Cuba Street, with its colourful melting pot of hippies, Goths, suits, students and buskers and its bucket fountain that sometimes startles me with a splash. I take the long way home along the waterfront, past Te Papa and on to Oriental Parade, past the boat houses, the fountain in the bay, the mums pushing prams, the squealing kids dipping their toes in the sea, the old folk holding hands.

I'm heading for home, but like any good tiki tour, it's as much about the journey as it is the destination.



Author: Sarah Lang

An award-winning feature writer and *North & South* alumna, Sarah has written freelance articles for more than 20 stand-alone and newspaper-insert magazines, including *NZ House & Garden*, *Next*, *Canvas*, *Good*, *Sunday*, *Alive*, *Viva* and *Unlimited*. You may have read her TV previews, film reviews and entertainment stories in the *Herald on Sunday's View* magazine, or her book reviews in *North & South*. Sarah, 32, is also a contributing editor for the *Reader's Digest NZ* and a magazine-journalism tutor for the NZ Writers' College and does a bit of copywriting and book editing. She lives in Wellington with her husband.



Assignment

Designer: Assignment

This series of stamps is the sixth issue to be created by Assignment Group, New Zealand's most sought after creative and brand communications company.

Art Director Chris Bleackley of Assignment worked with fellow, long-time collaborators - designer Geoff Francis and illustrator Evan Purdie.

Together, this is the same team that produced the highly successful 'Tiki Tour of New Zealand' as well as 'A Slice of Heaven' and the 'A-Z of New Zealand' issues.

