

SUNSPOT

# View from the water

**Sarah Lang** takes a fresh look at Whitianga and finds much more than golden beaches.

**T**HE FISH of Te Whanganui-a-hei look remarkably relaxed given the many pairs of curious eyes peering down at them.

Of course it's pretty hard for anyone to get too stressed about anything in the warm waters of the Coromandel Peninsula in summer, but the casual behaviour of these finned folk is more likely to be attributable to the absence of fishing nets and hooks.

Te Whanganui-A-Hei is a 9ha marine reserve off Cathedral Cove, where visitors can observe the vibrant community of the seafloor without getting in the way. We're doing that, courtesy of an 8mm transparent panel in the floor of the aptly named Glass Bottom Boat.

Beneath us, snapper go about their business oblivious to our fascination. It's like bobbing around in an upturned aquarium.

We've just spent an hour motoring from Whitianga wharf out through the various hotspots of Mercury Bay (named by Captain Cook when he visited in 1769 to watch the transit of the planet Mercury). Unless you're up for a two-hour hike, this is the only other way to see this part of the Coromandel. As we go, our guide Scotty passes on titbits of local history and nature along with photographs of the headland in the days before all its kauri was logged away.

The craggy headland is stark naked now, with its white igneous rock — a mix of volcanic ash and pumice — carved over millennia by the elements into smooth, curvaceous lines. One edge of the rock-face resembles honeycomb with honey dripping off the bottom.

At Shakespeare Cliff it's time to spot the faces in the rock (apparently, the first person to spot a new one gets naming rights). After staring at what is apparently Shakespeare's nose, I can finally make out his nose and eye socket.

Further on, I eventually spot the horse's face, gorilla's face and the Sphinx profile at Champagne Bay, where the rockface is a giant champagne flute with a pink tinge.

Beneath it, teenagers are running through the rock "tunnel" on the beachfront of Cathedral Cove, the most photographed beach in New Zealand. This beautiful stretch of



Cathedral Cove and Hahei are among the prime places to visit in Mercury Bay.



The glass-bottom boat gets you close up and personal with the snapper.



Whitianga's new Lost Spring hot pools and spa complex is a tranquil oasis.

sand was the gateway to Narnia in the opening scenes of the film *Prince Caspian*, backgrounded by a hilltop castle. We pass around photos of the scenery both pre-castle and during the castle's three-month tenure during filming — all that work for 10 minutes of footage. To get a closer look we pull up alongside some teenagers scaling a big isolated chunk of rock that's seemingly stranded in the shallow

water. With telltale grins, they leap as far as they can, close to the boat, to splash us — with good natured yells of triumph and mock harrumphs.

Near Stingray Beach we spy a dolphin with a stingray in its mouth and nearby a jellyfish floats like a flower outstretched to the sun.

We're closing in on Orua Cave, where immediately above the cave's entrance what looks almost like a

waterfall — white streaks streaming straight as an arrow down the rockface — are actually the physical manifestation of an earthquake faultline.

A claustrophobic English tourist holds her hand nervously against her heart as Scotty steers the boat right into the cave's innards. We look up in the cavernous space where more streaming white lines mark the faultline, fading into rocks

"Stalagmites hang like icicles and, in the evening, reflections of lights dance on the water."

shading from purple to orange to brown. Back on dry land, we call on Whitianga's latest attraction, The Lost Spring hot pools and spa. A work-in-progress for 20 years before opening in December, it's now a geothermal oasis that salt-of-the-earth creator Alan Hopping hopes will draw not just domestic but international tourists. Designed as a microcosm of the peninsula's birth story — formed millennia ago by a smoking volcano — The Lost Spring mirrors a volcano belching steam and lava, or bubbling jets of water.

Above the sculpted pools, waterfalls stream and tui shrill among the bottlebrush and lush native bush.

You can almost imagine you've discovered hot pools in the Coromandel bush — like tribes long ago, who revered the warm waters that bubbled to the surface.

With all its unexpected nooks, The Lost Spring is a bit like exploring a secret garden. When you think you've seen it all, another section appears, such as the crater pool with a waterfall and the glow-worm-filled goldmine.

Crossing the swing rope bridge over the main pool gives an on-high perspective of the 3.5ha space; down low you can walk or swim into a crystal cave — known as The Grotto — where stalagmites hang like icicles and, in the evening, reflections of lights dance on the water.

Exploring is fine, but it's very tempting to just relax among the champagne bubbles of the water, which springs from a 600m well. Poolside there's a juice shack, sun loungers and Pacific-style pagodas. And should you get peckish you can have a bite at the 18sixtyfive restaurant or if there's a knot in your neck, you can opt for a massage or body treatment at the day spa.

Who says Whitianga is all about the beaches — although those stretches of Pohutakawa-fringed white sand aren't half bad either.