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UNLOCKING THE DOOR

WORDS: SARAH LANG

A new wave of Māori tourism entrepreneurs are telling their own stories in their own ways – and bringing fresh opportunities to Northland in the process

As he stands on a hill overlooking Kororāreka (Russell) in the Bay of Islands, Ngāpuhi rangatira Hone Mihaka is one striking figure. He has many moko – including a facial moko that represents his genealogy – and has the mana of his ancestors.

Rewind 200 years and that figure standing on the hill could be the famed Ngāpuhi rangatira Hongi Hika before he set out for a battle in the inter-iwi ‘Musket Wars’. Or it could be Hika’s adversary Hōne Heke, standing there in 1845 after once again chopping down the white man’s flagpole at Kororāreka.

Hone, 56, is a rangatira of Ngāpuhi’s Te Uri Taniwha and Ngāti Hineira hapū, from the upper reaches of the Waitangi River. As he retells oral histories passed down within Ngāpuhi for generations, I can see Kororāreka as it was before Māori witnessed it become a port full of sailors, whalers, grog-sellers, prostitutes, escaped convicts, merchants and missionaries.



1 Hone Mihaka makes an unscheduled stop at his father's ancestral pā on the Waitangi River, as Judy Mihaka (also from TaiaMai Tours) waits on the riverbank.

2 Outside the pā, Hone speaks about his family history to a group of Dutch tourists.

IMAGES: RICHARD MOORE



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“This is authentic Māori tourism where people experience our culture on our tribal marae amongst our communities”



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1 Hone Mihaka explains the history of Māori who lived along the Waitangi River.

2 Using hoe (paddles).

3 Dutch tourists try paddling.

4 Tāne Mahuta on Footprints Waipoua's Twilight Encounter.

5 Mervyn performs a traditional wero (challenge) before welcoming guests.

6 Rangimarie and Mervyn Harding from Tu Tika Tours prepare a hāngi.

IMAGES: JAMES HEREMIA

“Our oral histories aren’t written in history books, but that doesn’t make them untrue – and we can’t lose them,” says Hone.

A gifted storyteller, Hone has helped to put Northland on the tourism map internationally. In 1990, when he and his dad first saw a tourist bus drive past their homestead, they talked about how Māori should have a say in how tourists experience Aotearoa’s indigenous culture.

In 2001 he and then-wife (now business partner) Judy Mihaka started Taiaimai Tours Heritage Journeys, an award-winning waka taua (war canoe) and cultural experience. Taiaimai – also the Māori name for the area – attracts independent travellers, but its ‘bread and butter’ is the income from up to 70 cruise ships that visit each year.

I take a half-day tour with wide-eyed cruise ship passengers from the Netherlands. We paddle along the Waitangi River in two 12-metre waka taua as five Māori guides wearing traditional dress tell stories, sing songs, point out pā on the riverbank and crack a few jokes. Hone is with us today, but he doesn’t come on every tour, encouraging his guides (at least four, and more in the peak season) to lead and tell their own stories.

“The waka is the story not just of Māori but of humanity – of everyone working together,” he says.

Taiaimai Tours is a bastion of Northland’s Māori tourism industry, showing how visitors can experience much more than just hāngi and haka. It has also inspired other local Māori to set up tourism businesses drawing on Māori traditions, storytelling and the natural environment, and employing their people.

This is benefiting a region with high (but dropping) unemployment levels, and where one in every three people identifies as Māori.

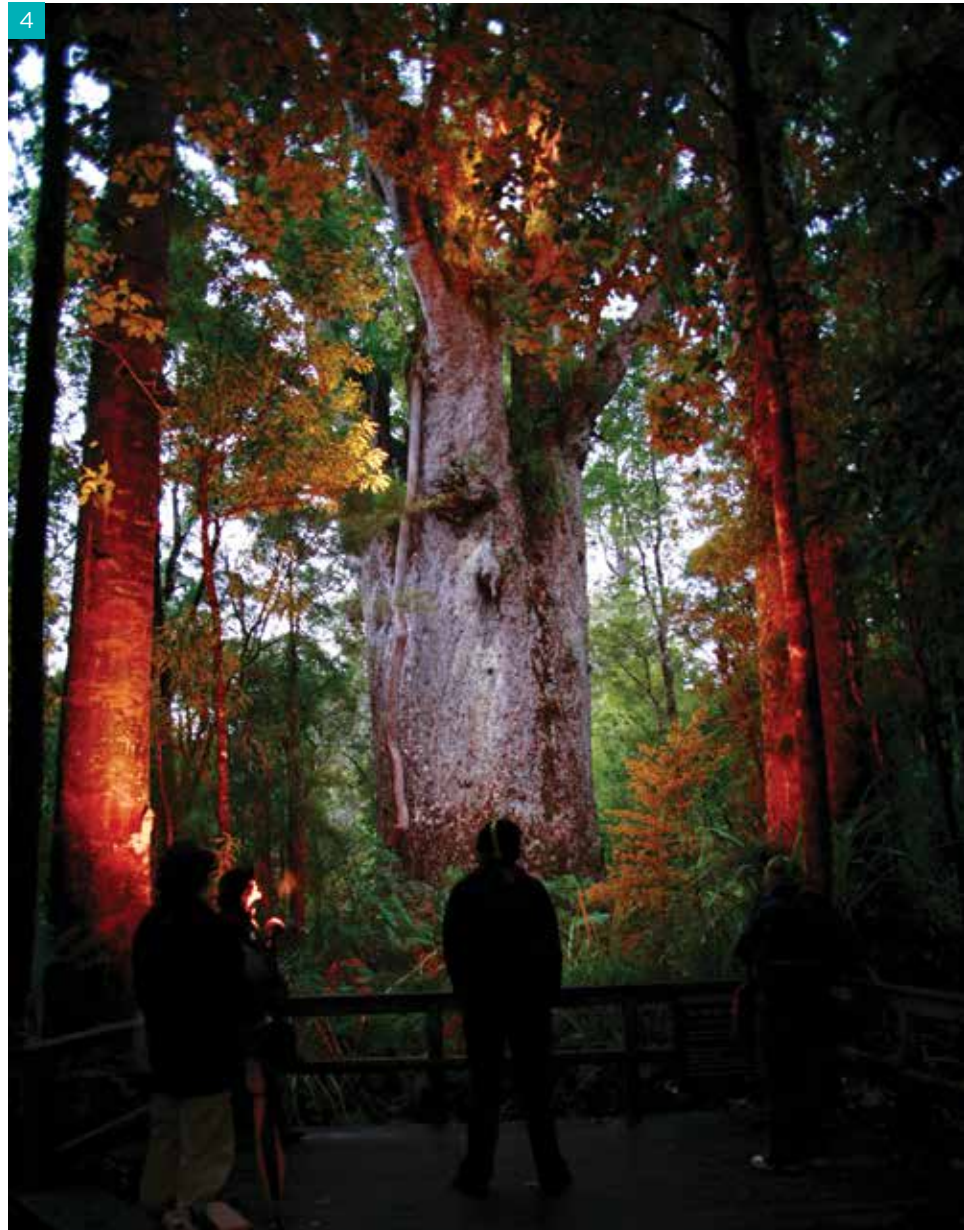
New Zealand Māori Tourism (NZMT), contracted by the Ministry of Māori Development Te Puni Kōkiri, creates opportunities for Māori tourism operators to gather, forge relationships and share their knowledge.

NZMT, which co-hosted the World Indigenous Tourism Summit held at Waitangi in April 2018, ensures Māori take a leadership role in tourism, with visitors hearing Māori stories, seeing significant sites, maybe even sharing kai. For instance, Rangimarie and Mervyn Harding and their five children from Tu Tika Tours welcome visitors into their Whāngārei home, where you learn a waiata, weave a flax 'flower', enjoy a hāngi, then visit pā sites.

Importantly, Māori tourism businesses in Northland are employing youth, giving them the chance to continue living in the region and connect with their culture. They no longer need to head to Auckland to train. With the support of NZMT, Queenstown Resort College opened its Tai Tokerau campus in Paihia in 2016, offering hospitality management and tourism courses. In 2017 QRC Culinary opened in Kerikeri, offering programmes covering cookery and commercial kitchen skills.

Currently 100 students live at on-site halls of residence to ease the transition from home. The first group of 15 hospitality and tourism students, who graduated in November 2018, had completed internships mainly in Northland, with many landing local jobs. Two, John Wells and Cheyenne Carman, work at the Copthorne Hotel and Resort Hokianga in Ōmāpere on Northland's west coast. Built in 1899 as a boarding house, it has affordable rooms with harbour views, and new five-star private villas.

Down the road, Koro Carman and two business partners run Footprints Waipoua, which guides





daytime and evening tours of the world's largest-known kauri trees Tāne Mahuta and Te Matua Ngahere. At the track entrance, our group uses DOC footwear-cleaning stations (a bit like a carwash, but on the ground) so that the deadly kauri dieback disease, which has infected parts of Waipoua Forest, doesn't spread to these trees. We also can't venture off the wooden boardwalks elevated above tree roots.

During our 'Twilight Encounter', Koro uses storytelling and waiata to create interactive, immersive cultural theatre that makes the trees look far more majestic – spiritual, even. Footprints, which employs six Māori guides, sent one young female employee, Kiani Naera, to the International Cultural Youth Exchange in Taiwan in November 2018.

Koro also mentors many local Māori tourism startups, both those already up and running and those yet to kick off. He's currently working with Te Hua o Te Kawariki Trust to develop the Manea Footprints of Kupe Cultural Heritage and Education Centre, in Opononi. The centre, which received \$4.6 million from

the Government's Provincial Growth Fund in 2018, will tell the stories of 10th-century Hawaiki chief Kupe's voyage to Hokianga and his journeys across Aotearoa, and chart a millennium of Māori history.

Another pioneering project is underway on Māori land at Te Aurere in Doubtless Bay, north of the Bay of Islands. Here, a team of waka builders, carvers and voyagers led by 86-year-old Sir Hekenukumai (Hector) Ngaiwi Puhipi Busby is fundraising and applying for grants to finish building the Kupe Waka Centre.

A wānanga (Māori tertiary institution) teaching waka building, carving, voyaging and celestial navigation will operate alongside a tourism centre where visitors will observe the building and carving of waka, paddle waka themselves, and learn about ocean voyages and celestial navigation.

For now, Sir Hector (who lives here) and his team are passing on their skills and knowledge to younger generations. Jack Thatcher and Piripi Evans are renowned waka navigators, while waka captain Stan Conrad has sailed the waka hourua (voyaging

1 Tour guide John Pānoho shows visitors a hoe (paddle) at Te Aurere's Kupe Waka Centre.

2 Sir Hekenukumai (Hector) Ngaiwi Puhipi Busby holds a celestial navigation map he used on his voyages.

3 The same celestial navigation map up close.

4 At Ninety Mile Beach, writer Sarah Lang (second from left) takes her first horse ride.

IMAGES: RICHARD MOORE

OTHER TOP SPOTS

- Visit the Matakōhe Kauri Museum, which tells the story of European settlers through the lens of the kauri industry.
- Ride a horse along Ninety Mile Beach with Ahipara Horse Treks.
- Tour the Waitangi Treaty Grounds and view the world's largest waka, Ngātōkimatawhaorua.
- Visit Whāngārei's Tuatara Design Store, which sells works including traditional Māori art by 240 Kiwi artists. ■



canoe) *Te Aurere* over 30,000 nautical miles. Stan and tour guide John Pānoho show me four intricately carved waka taua and, overlooking the bay, a circle of 32 pou whenua (carved pillars) that form a star compass, which was used to teach celestial navigation.

Sir Hector drives into the so-called 'celestial circle' on a golf cart to greet his Whāngārei-based grand-niece Jolene Busby, a waka captain, and four of her 12 children (biological and fostered), who run between the pou, telling me about celestial navigation.

"This place is about understanding who we are as a people and how we got here," says Stan.

That understanding helped to change Hone Mihaka's life. As a child he was a domestic violence victim and was abused in state care, eventually ending up in prison. He then perpetrated domestic violence himself, he says, when he was living with his previous partner and two daughters. "Connecting with my culture and the aroha from my people saved me 20 years ago."

Hone became a cornerstone of domestic violence and suicide prevention organisations before "passing

the baton". He now has two young children with a new partner, has raised his grandson, and is an international keynote speaker on indigenous issues.

Hone is also leading the Bay of Islands-Taiaimai hapū that in October 2018 partnered with world-leading Princess Cruises to launch the ongoing Waitangi Marae Māori Markets. Cruise ship passengers are shuttling to Te Tii Waitangi Marae to view and purchase Māori arts, crafts and taonga from around Northland.

"This is authentic Māori tourism, where people experience our culture on our tribal marae amongst our communities," says Hone.

"In 2000 there was no Māori cultural tourism in the Bay, or in Northland. No-one even thought it had potential. Some people are afraid that tourism will exploit our culture – but it won't if we do it right. As my elders said, if I look after our tikanga [customs] and taonga, they'll look after me."

As he stands on the hill overlooking Kororāreka, he adds: "In the past, you can find the keys that will unlock the door to the future." ■