

North Star

See the best of New Zealand's North Island, writes David Whitley

New Zealand's South Island tends to be the one that visitors get most excited about – it's the one with the most impressive wildlife encounters, mountain scenery and dazzling fiords. But it's a mistake to think the North Island is something to be tagged on as an hors d'oeuvre.

It's culturally the more interesting of the two islands, it has better beaches, more impressive volcanoes and more interesting cities. Not to mention a fantastic range of occasionally rather odd activities.

▶ AUCKLAND

Why go: By far New Zealand's largest city, and usually the entry point, Auckland's downtown

doesn't exactly thrill. But it's a good base for exploring the islands in the Hauraki Gulf. And the city boundaries incorporate some magnificently wild spots. **What to do:** Heading out on a boat is a fail-safe option. Fullers offers a range of ferry services and cruises, with destinations including the harshly volcanic Rangitoto Island and winery-dotted idyll, Waiheke Island. **fullers.co.nz**

Head west, though, and the Waitakere Ranges turn out to be Auckland's highlight. This ancient rainforest – some of the trees here were standing before humans arrived in New Zealand – has some tremendous walking tracks, waterfalls and gorgeous lookouts. And the black-sand



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beaches at Piha and Kerikeri on the other side are magnificently moody. Bush and Beach runs half-day tours to the region from about £84.

bushandbeach.co.nz

Stay: The Waldorf Stadium Apartment Hotel is a great bet for families, with spacious apartments kitted out with full kitchens and washing machines.

Two-bedroom family apartments cost from £122 a night.

stadium-apartments-hotel.co.nz

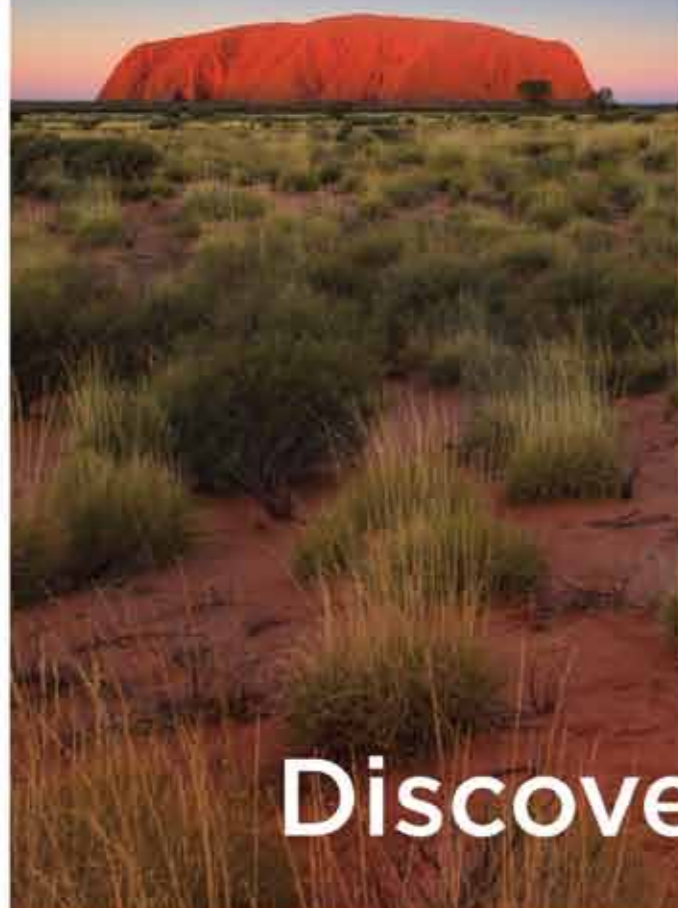
▶ THE BAY OF ISLANDS

Why go: It's not just a clever name – there are hundreds of islands in the bay near Waitangi, the place where the treaty that created modern New Zealand was signed. It's the highlight of the Northland region, which usually



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→ gets great weather, and is home to some world-class wreck diving.

What to do: A boat trip around the islands is pretty much essential, and Fuller's Great Sights offers several options, from fast-paced speedboat rides to dolphin watching and tall-ship sailing. Prices start at £59.

dolphincruises.co.nz

G Adventures offers something slightly different on its 10-day North Island Encompassed escorted tour – one night is spent on a houseboat in the Bay of Islands, giving extra time for snorkelling and kayaking. The budget tour, which involves shared backpacker accommodation, costs from £899.

▶ **COROMANDEL & BAY OF PLENTY**

Why go: Close to Auckland, the mountain-spined Coromandel Peninsula juts out into the ocean, and its craggy coastline provides some of New Zealand's most adorable beaches, as well as some rather marvellous caves and rock formations. The neighbouring Bay of Plenty is all about carefree-living – beaches, sunshine and seaside towns.

What to do: Hot Water Beach on the Coromandel is the traditional whizz-through stop. Dig holes, then yelp when your feet meet the rising thermal water. If staying longer, there are several boat tours operating from Whitianga, but kayaking is the memorable option here. Cathedral Cove Kayaking tours hug the photogenic coast, then stop for snacks on a white-sand beach (from £59).

seakayaktours.co.nz

The Bay of Plenty offers swimming with dolphins at Tauranga – Dolphin Seafaris is among the operators offering trips, with prices from about £84. But the real highlight is White Island, an active offshore volcano that you can head up to in a boat, then walk around its bubbling mud and steam vents (from £111).



LEFT: Cathedral Cove, Coromandel Peninsula

whiteisland.co.nz

The Coromandel is often skipped on shorter North Island itineraries, but Anzcro offers a nine-day self-drive Northern Odyssey Tour, which focuses heavily on the area. Prices start at £1,275, which includes a rigid inflatable boat trip along the Coromandel coast and a visit to White Island.

▶ **ROTORUA**

Why go: No one can argue that Rotorua isn't distinctive. It is riddled

with geothermic activity, meaning steam vents hiss in parks and spas harness the natural waters. It's also the North Island's adventure-sports capital. The downside? A permanent stink of sulphur.

What to do: Thrill-seekers can choose from a wide range of activities at Agroventures, including bungee jumping, jet boating and pedalling a weird human-powered monorail car around a track.

agroventures.co.nz

Then there's white-water rafting. Kaitiaki Adventures takes willing guinea pigs over the highest commercially rafted waterfall in the world, in between some serious buffetings from fierce rapids. And it's only £53 for the pleasure.

kaitiaki.co.nz

Culturally inclined visitors will be more interested in the Maori concert and hangi, which involve a visit to a Maori village, a greeting ceremony, war dance performances and traditional →

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▶ TAUPO

Why go: Taupo is a good alternative spot for action-man heroics – skydiving, bungee jumping and more can be tried here. But the Singapore-sized lake that the town gets its name from is the real star here – and south of it is one of the world’s great day walks.

What to do: Chris Jolly Outdoors runs boat trips out on the lake from about £25, heading towards the staggering Maori rock carvings that have been painstakingly cut into a cliff.

chrisjolly.co.nz

The Tongariro Alpine Crossing is rather harder work – a 12-mile hike across an awe-inspiring volcanic landscape, through craters, along ridges and in the shadow of Ngauruhoe – better known as Mount Doom from *The Lord of the Rings* films. Adrift offers guided hikes for those uncomfortable tackling it alone from about £143.

adriftnz.co.nz

Stay: The riverside Huka Lodge is arguably the pinnacle of New Zealand’s luxury lodge accommodation. It’s one for romantic treats if the budget can handle a serious splurge, from £888 a night.

hukalodge.co.nz

BELOW:
Wellington



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▶ NAPIER

Why go: Fans of architecture will adore Napier, which was rebuilt after an earthquake almost entirely in art deco style. It’s also the gateway to the Hawkes Bay wine region – home to some seriously good sauvignon blancs.

What to do: The Napier Art Deco Trust runs walking and bus tours of the city’s architectural highlights, with prices starting at £10. Grape Escape is one of several wine-tour operators, and for £45, it will take you round four or five of the region’s best wineries, with sampling sessions at each.

grapeescape.net.nz

▶ WELLINGTON

Why go: New Zealand’s capital is also the country’s most likeable city. It’s small, scenic, has a fabulous food and drink

scene, and a strong cultural energy.

What to do: On the city outskirts, Zealandia is a remarkable project that aims to return a valley to the state it was in before humans arrived in New Zealand. It is also acting as a fenced-off wildlife refuge, allowing creatures wiped out elsewhere on the mainland to survive. These include the little spotted kiwi – which can be seen on the £44 night tours.

Culturally, the national museum Te Papa is the best in the country. The sections on New Zealand’s brutal tectonics and the migrations of Pacific Islanders are particularly fascinating.

tepapa.govt.nz

Then there’s the Weta Cave (£14), which should be riveting for movie lovers. Weta is the company that made all the props and costumes for *The Lord of the Rings* films (among many others), and the workshop tours go into how everything is created in a movie universe – and there’s a fair bit of cunning trickery.

wetaworkshop.com

Stay: The Museum Hotel is tremendous fun. The lobby is a flamboyant art gallery, while the apartment-style rooms at the back have complimentary bath fizzers and harbour views. Studio apartments cost from £134.

museumhotel.co.nz

